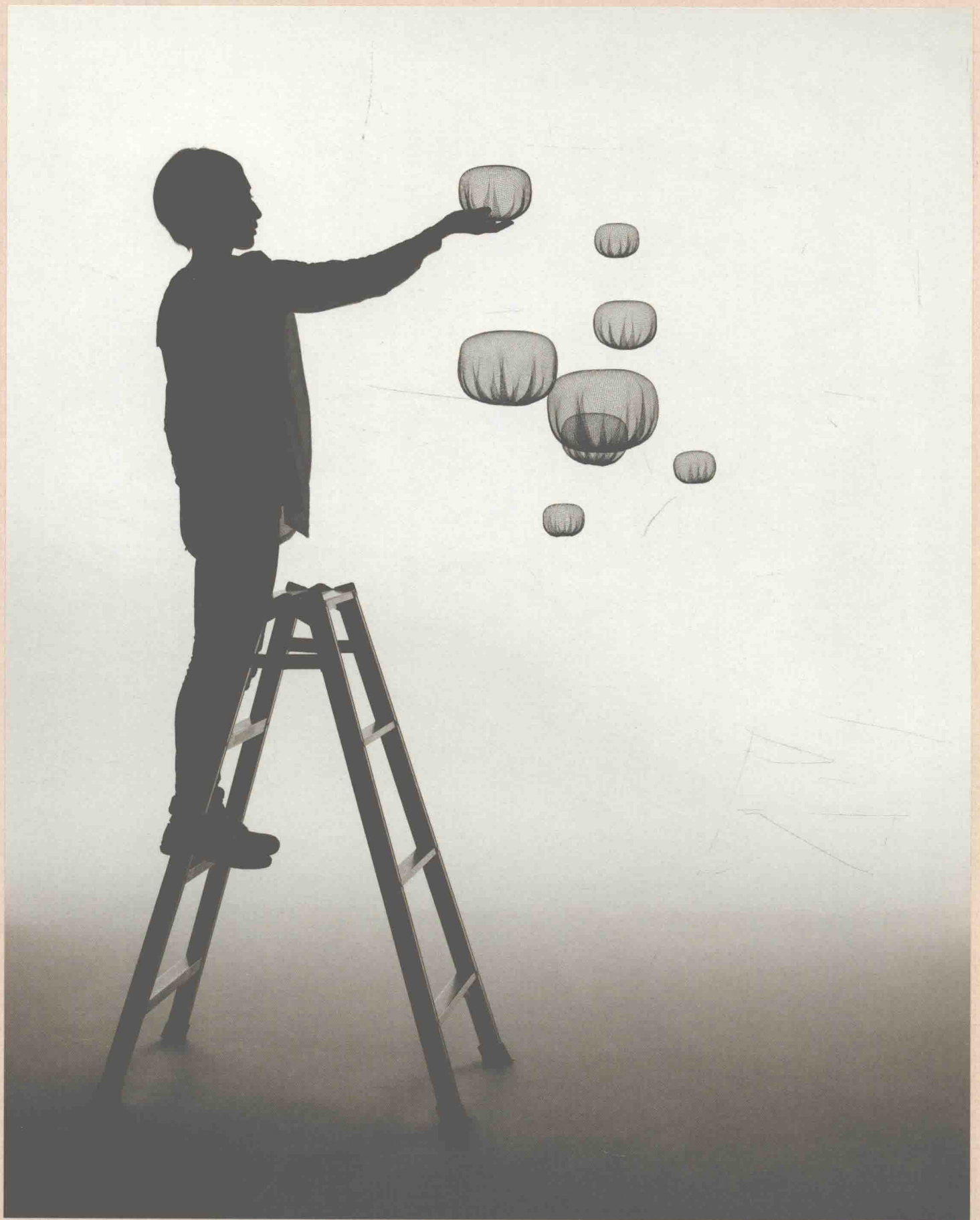


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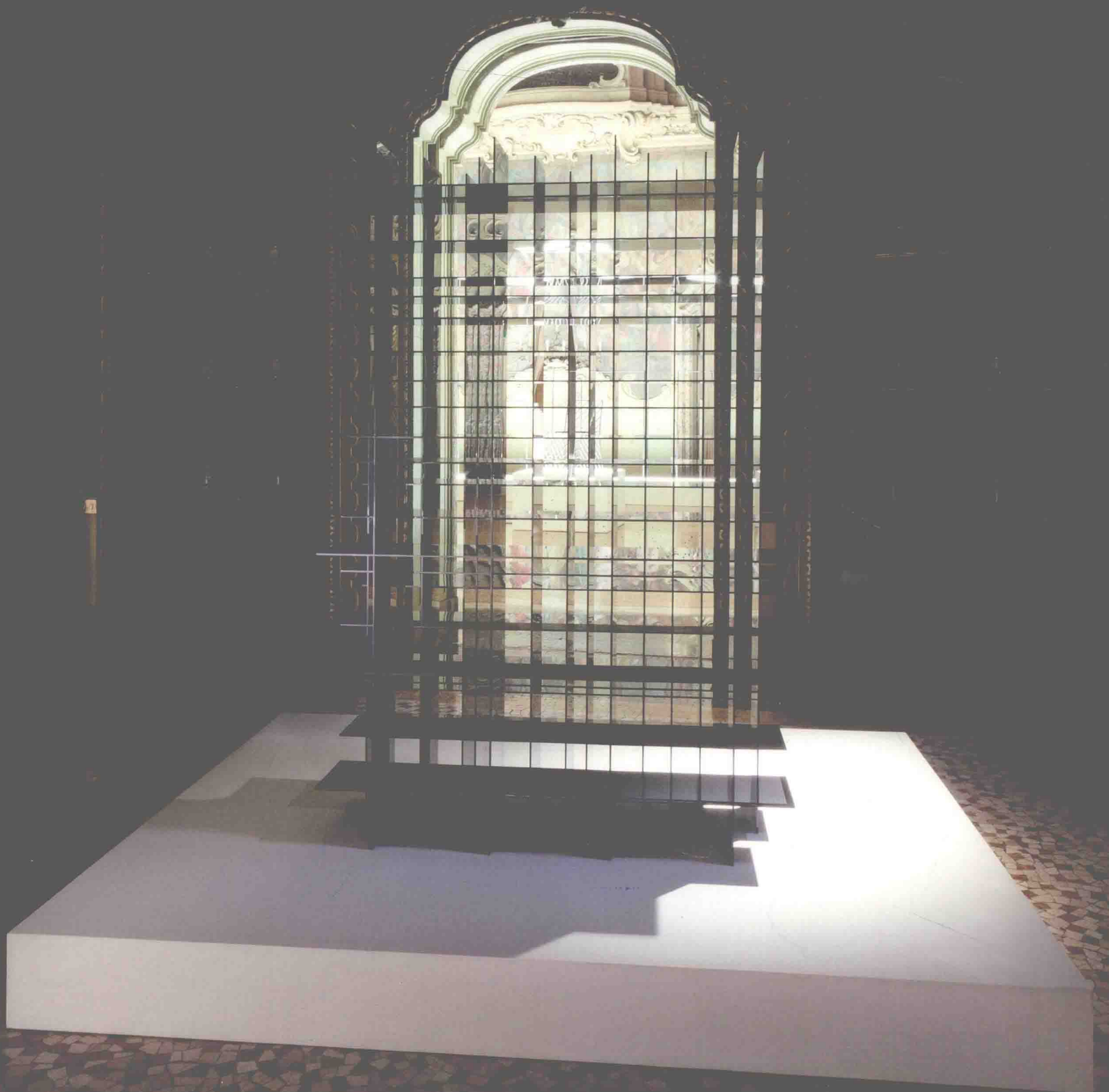
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Storytelling: The Universe of Oki Sato

Anna Carnick

Oki Sato is a storyteller. Transforming everyday objects and spaces into unexpected, poetic moments—what he calls “aha” or “!” moments—he uses design to elevate and inspire.

“It’s not the object itself that’s important,” the Japanese designer says. “I really don’t care about colors or materials or the form itself, but it has to have a really nice story behind it. The story is what moves people.”

Sato, Cofounder and Chief Designer of Nendo since 2002, sees opportunities for storytelling all around him. Through careful observation, he captures small, surprising moments in the day-to-day world, and recreates and shares them with others through his work. As a result, in Nendo’s world, furniture blooms from flowerpots, and simple metal rods or stone tabletops join forces to form floating, interior gardens. A chair changes volume before our eyes, becoming, morphing, and collapsing in form depending on our relevant position. A fine-dining dessert course is an opportunity to play with one’s food. A gym’s rock-climbing wall is transformed into a scene from a modern interior design magazine, replacing the typical, rugged climbers’ grips and holds with romantic picture frames, mirrors, and birdcages. And a series of furniture—composed of simple, square planes—dances and topples before us, without ever really moving at all.

Every one of his designs begins with a small, even humble idea, which Sato cultivates and grows into a larger concept to which observers can genuinely connect. “Simplified things are easier to communicate to people,” Sato says.

His definition of a “good design” is, plainly, one that can be successfully described to a design novice— one’s grandmother or a small child, for instance—over the phone. If a simple verbal description excites one’s grandmother, who does not know the first thing about design, then there must be a nice story at the heart of that design. Accessibility is key.

“Design,” he notes, “is always about communicating, and considering how a composition may af-

fect people’s emotions. This is what makes it different from art.”

And so he strives, through his pieces’ form and structure, to evoke genuine and empathetic responses from observers. At times, his work takes advantage of our inherently curious natures, demanding further interaction and even investigation; on other occasions, through charmingly unexpected exteriors, shapes, or juxtapositions, it cries out to be touched; and sometimes it just guilelessly offers a moment of laughter and surprise.

At each turn, Nendo’s work combines the minimalism, subtlety, and functional grace characteristic of traditional Japanese design with a lightheartedness and—at times—almost childlike humor that reflects the country’s current pop culture, as well as more Western influences. “When minimalism goes too far,” Sato explains, “it gets cold. I would like my designs to be friendly. Humor is like a pinch of spice.”

The results, as one can see throughout the pages of this book, are playfully elegant—making the work simultaneously multi-layered and accessible.

Describing Nendo’s chief designer (and offering context for his approach), Zoë Ryan, Curator of Architecture and Design at The Art Institute of Chicago, says: “Oki Sato thrives on creating thoughtful, whimsical, yet provocative work. His interest in creating work with an integral logic, developed with an acute attention to striking the right balance between the formal and functional elements of a design—yet with an interest in rethinking typologies of form and function with work that at the same time confounds expectation—aligns him with some of the great designers from Japan, including Shiro Kuramata and Naoto Fukasawa.”

“Yet,” she goes on, “the playful quality of his work and his interest in connecting with the user through his designs is reminiscent of designers such as Piero and Achille Castiglioni, as well as the witty designs produced by Droog that seek to respond to the time and place in which they were made.”

That fluid design signature, combined with the firm's narrative-driven approach and diverse portfolio, has established Nendo as one of the most sought-after and dynamic young design studios working today. It's client list reads like a who's who list of the world's most respected brands, across a spectrum of industries: from Cappellini, Bisazza, and Swarovski to Issey Miyake, Hermès, Louis Vuitton, and Camper; Häagen-Dazs and Starbucks to Lexus and beyond.

As Giulio Cappellini—the renowned Creative Director of Cappellini and one of the world's most esteemed design talent scouts—puts it, “With his curiosity and intuition, Oki creates objects of great commercial success without losing creativity.”

Almost shockingly prolific, at any given time, Nendo's team of approximately 35 designers (most in their late twenties) is working on 220-plus projects, each a cooperative effort between Sato and one other designer. The studio's work spans and, sometimes, even overlaps the arenas of interiors, architecture, and installation, as well as furniture, products, and graphic design.

In Japanese, the word Nendo means “clay,” and the studio has embraced its namesake, with Play-Doh-like flexibility and freedom in not just the types of projects it takes on, but also in their execution, which ranges from handmade pieces celebrating artisan crafts to 3D printed objects and environments.

Beyond the obvious elbow grease involved, the real magic in Sato's “!” moments is the hard-won fruit of a lifestyle devoted to careful, constant observation. He is inspired by quiet, everyday moments, and the subtle yet impactful differences that can occur from one day to the next. So despite circling the globe approximately two weeks out of every month (Sato insists on seeing every Nendo-related prototype and construction site himself, and prefers to meet with clients face to face whenever possible), he is committed to routine.

When he is home in Tokyo, for example, he walks to work the same way each morning, eats the same lunch at the same restaurant, and visits a Starbucks three times a day. Half-jokingly referring to himself as “boring,” Sato asserts that this routine is at the heart of Nendo's design paradigm. Through it, he continually monitors his environment, looking for patterns and anomalies.

When he comes across a simple, yet evocative instance (say, the uneasiness one feels when a glass of water rests at the edge of a table, versus the relative comfort one experiences when that same glass sits safely at the table's center—an oft-cited Sato example and the potential moment of inception for a series such as *Dancing Squares*), he dissects it, so that he may conjure it anew for the rest of us to enjoy in more permanent, solid forms.

Accordingly, Nendo may freeze the moment in time when a glass blower's breath has filled a molten form (*Growing Vases*), or find that a gesture as simple as rolling or folding a sheet of paper can inspire, respectively, an elegant lamp (*Maki*) and a futuristic computer mouse (*Orime*). The studio may reappropriate the strength, flexibility, and surprising sculptural beauty of agricultural netting for a furniture and accessories series that calls to mind the beauty and movement of underwater plants (*Farming-Net*), or even capture the artistry of a dragonfly's wing, when magnified, applying it as a patterned textile befitting any interior (*Butterfly & Dragonfly*).

And then, as happens so often with Nendo's work, we begin to consider the world around us with fresh eyes, reinterpreting both everyday objects as well as our relationships to them.

Sato credits some of his acutely observant nature to a major, formative childhood move. He was born in Canada in 1977, and spent his first decade in Toronto. When he was 10, his parents decided to return to Japan, and the cultural shift left Sato feeling like “a kid out of place.” As a result, from an early age, he saw things slightly differently than those around him. Sato believes that the experience helped shape him as a designer, encouraging him to find joy in life's everyday little differences.¹

Sato also happily acknowledges the impact that the Japanese culture he grew up in has had on his design approach. For example, he consistently points to the abounding similarities between, say, Japanese design and Japanese food—for instance, tofu and sashimi's formal simplicity and beauty, which can belie expert selection and precise, technique-driven preparation—as well as haiku poetry, with its deceptively small number of words that reveal often complex concepts.² Likewise, Nendo's work is not about adding; it is about celebrating the beauty and narrative that exist in a thoughtfully executed process, the notion of respecting one's materials, and an aesthetic marked by subtraction and simplicity—all culminating in a singular design expression or moment.

1 Oki Sato of Nendo at IDS 2013, YouTube video, 10:12, posted by Richelle Sibolboro, January 30, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDmnRK6yJOU>

2 Nendo and the Essence of Absence, Vimeo video, 22:02, posted by Luminaire, June 2012, <http://vimeo.com/44544752>

And the Nendo team knows firsthand the potential power that exists in a single moment. The firm itself was born of one of these unexpected, pivotal instances. After graduating with a Masters degree in architecture from Waseda University in 2002, Sato, along with a handful of friends—including Nendo Managing Director Akihiro Ito and Chief Director/Architect Koichiro Oniki, both of whom Sato has known since high school—decided to attend the Milan Furniture Fair.

Immediately upon arriving at the fair, Sato and his cohorts were moved by the energy that surrounded the event: “My first impression was that everyone seemed really excited about design,” Sato says. In contrast to the rigidity of his architectural experiences, he recognized a great freedom in design here. “Architects were designing tea cups and interior designers were making cars, and I was quite shocked because I thought that architects must only design architecture, and furniture designers were supposed to stick to furniture design.”

That creative fluidity—as well as the simple fact that the designers seem to be really enjoying themselves—captivated him. In that moment, he has said, “I saw the future of design, and that was the moment I wanted to become a designer.”³

And so Nendo was born.

That same year, the firm launched its Tokyo office, and within three years, Nendo Milan had opened. A third location in Singapore was established in 2012.

Early on, there was not much work for the studio, so they began by applying to numerous competitions, sustaining themselves with design competition award money. After winning a few competitions, in 2003, an old junior-high friend called and hired them to transform an older house into a Tokyo restaurant. Driven by the client’s limited budget, Nendo chose to wrap the entire building, inside and out—tables, chairs, and more—in sheets of canvas. The remaining fabric pieces were stamped with the restaurant’s logo and turned into business cards and matchboxes, adding to the cohesive brand image. The restaurant’s design turned quite a few heads, and helped put Nendo on the map.

Notably, Canvas also perfectly represented the bottom-up approach to design that Nendo continues to embrace to this day. In direct opposition to the top-down method he was taught in architecture school—first imagine the city, then the streets, then the buildings, then interiors, and so on—Sato prefers to begin with the simplest pieces first, and to let them grow.⁴ In this case, canvas was the most affordable and broadly applicable material for the space; as the concept grew,

however, and Nendo chose to swathe the entire space in the textile, the overall design became more cohesive, dramatic, and playful.

As fate would have it, one of Canvas’s early patrons was famed fashion designer Issey Miyake. According to Sato, Miyake was a big fan of the restaurant, often visiting a few times a month, and frequently hosting guests from abroad in its space. That connection eventually led, a handful of years later, to a collaboration between Nendo and Miyake.⁵

Commissioned for the Miyake-curated *XXIst Century Man* exhibition, the duo’s first cooperative project, the *Cabbage Chair*, transformed a roll of pleated paper (a discarded by-product of Miyake’s popular Pleats Please fashion line) into a small chair. As one peels away the upright roll’s outer layers, like an onion, a gorgeous (and comfortable) chair is revealed.

Describing the opportunity to work with Miyake, Sato recalls, “I was trying to make the chair more functional, but Miyake stopped us and told us that sometimes it is better to stop [a piece] if it is very beautiful and powerful, even if it does not look finished. This was very inspiring advice to me.”

The *Cabbage Chair*, arguably Nendo’s most famous piece to date, drew widespread attention within the design community. As curator Zoë Ryan notes, “Nendo’s furniture and objects are always more than the sum of their component parts.” With this piece, “Sato sought to overturn convention by creating a design that investigates how pleated paper can perform under new circumstances—a concept that is so simple, yet results in a work that has a lightness and poetry of form that incites user interaction.”

Also in 2003, Nendo was back at Salone, but this time as an exhibitor. Over the course of their first few years, the studio met and began to collaborate with design legends Giulio Cappellini and Maddalena De Padova, who Sato and Ito describe as “our Italian father and mother.”

“They were our first clients in Europe,” Sato says, “and we learned everything about designing furniture and how to collaborate with Italian companies from them.”

3 *ibid.*

4 Oki Sato of Nendo at IDS 2013 – Why small?, YouTube video, 10:09, posted by Richelle Sibolboro, January 31, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hyq2QhGHlI0>

5 Oki Sato of Nendo at IDS 2013, YouTube video, 10:12, posted by Richelle Sibolboro, January 30, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDmnRK6yJOU>

Asked what initially drew him to the Nendo booth at the 2004 Salone, Giulio Cappellini replies, "From the outset, I was struck by the overall lightness of Nendo's work, as well as their attentive and respectful use of materials—related to a good dose of irony—within the design process. Nendo's projects are simple and poetic, but never dull."

He goes on: "Nendo is definitely one of the best examples of contemporary Japanese design and architecture. While Sato's designs make his historical roots very clear, what differentiates him most from other important modern Japanese creatives is his hyperbolic quest for both synthesis and overall project simplification. Nendo creates pieces that are often a real challenge to produce, objects that almost vanish into immateriality, but still always manage to surprise us and make us laugh."

Those relationships—which the firm continues to cultivate, alongside so many others—were instrumental in the studio's early success. They also allowed Sato the opportunity to develop his own style—one which critics and clients alike are happy to describe using the types of words already included here: *elegant*, *minimalistic*, *playful*, *clever*, and so on. But more than anything, regardless of genre—or, rather, because of Nendo's dynamism across so many arenas—*malleability* may be the key to Nendo's design signature.

Asked how he sees Nendo's approach relative to other young, successful designers working today, Sato responds, "I feel like the younger generation has less iconic signatures [than its predecessors], but a more flexible way of approaching design. They (we) try to communicate with clients as much as possible, and to solve problems as a team."

In Sato's eyes, in fact, there "is no Nendo style." As he explains it, "I try to be as flexible as possible. I try to be Nendo. I try to fit in to whatever they want us to be: I design for Cappellini in a very Cappellini style. I try to blend into the project."

"Whether I design packaging for a small piece of gum, whether it's a house, or it's a restaurant, I try to start with a very small story, which has maybe a surprise, or a small happiness, something that will influence people's feelings or emotions. It's not about forms, it's not about shapes or colors; it's about the story behind the object. That is the most important thing for me. I really get influenced by craftsmanship, by new techniques, new materials, and also I try to link them together with everyday life."

"Small surprises, small happenings that [relate] to everyone: That is the way I design."⁶

Perhaps not so surprisingly to anyone familiar with Nendo's work, one of Sato's favorite works of art is René Magritte's *Treachery of Images* (*La trahison des images*, 1928–29). This surrealist painting depicts a pipe above the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," or, "This is not a pipe." At first, the line seems a contradiction. However, on further reflection, one realizes that, in fact, the statement is actually true: this painting is no pipe; it is simply an image of a pipe.

Sato's affinity for Magritte's work makes quite a bit of sense given his own penchant for lending new meaning to familiar objects, thereby challenging observers' preconditioned notions of reality. As Sato has explained it, "If this is not a pipe, what is it? It's something that feels like a pipe. It generates your imagination, so that you're letting your mind go free in a way. You have all this freedom to think about what it is, and it creates space inside your mind. This is exactly the way I try to see things, and the way I try to design things."⁷

Over the past decade or so in which Nendo has existed, Sato and his team have created a remarkable amount of work, earning multiple honors along the way. In that time, they have developed a clear understanding of the conditions, concepts, and elements that help them best approach their work—with an awareness, as Ryan notes, that Sato's "careful thought process is often overt in his outcomes ... through their formal, material, and functional qualities."

Perhaps the most important concept, of course, is that of stories or *moments*—the beginning and the end of every Nendo project. The studio's designs are born of observation, and recreated for observers to appreciate on the other side. And in Sato's eyes, those small, emotional instances—the crux of his design approach—are what make everyday life rich and interesting. Through them, design can make others happy.

So once an instant is identified, how is it recreated?

Sato himself identifies a series of 10 integral rules, or design elements, that color Nendo's oeuvre.:

First, *outlines*. Sato believes the world is composed of borders—lines separating light from darkness, the private from the public, inside and outside. Once those lines are identified, the studio plays with them, shifting and blurring the expected ever so slightly to encourage observers' contemplation.

6 Nendo: How to design light bulb moments, Gestalten TV video, 5:17, posted by Gestalten, June 2009, <http://www.gestalten.tv/motion/nendo>

7 Oki Sato of Nendo at IDS 2013 – Why small?, YouTube video, 10:09, posted by Richelle Sibolboro, January 31, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hyq2QhGHlI0>

Take, for instance, Nendo's *Thin Black Lines* collection. Beginning each piece with a just simple line, like a sketch drawn in the air, Sato is able to compose both a silhouette that magically supports a flower as well as a chair that appears to change volume as we move around it, depending on our perspectives. A simple line shift can change one's entire experience of a space or object.

Second, *error*. Sometimes, in Sato's eyes, the best road to solution is to turn a problem on its head—in effect, “creating new problems” or “the wrong conditions.” Consider the studio's 2007 installation of *1% @ IL*, for example, for which Nendo literally turned an exhibition on its side, giving its observers no choice but to try a new perspective.

Set in an atrium, the show was visible from the building's second floor. So Nendo placed every element of the show, from plants to furniture to picture frames, on one wall, giving second-floor audiences the impression that they themselves were on the first floor. Guests on the actual atrium level appeared to walk on the walls, becoming a part of the installation themselves.

Next comes *process*, a logical ingredient given the studio's passion for experimentation. That fascination often results in celebrations and twists on traditional artisan handiwork processes as well as, say, the latest, high-tech, rapid prototyping 3D printing capabilities. In some cases, beyond dictating an object's form, a design technique can become a key factor in the finished items' aesthetic and worth.

The *Cabbage Chair* is an excellent example of a process-driven piece, as is the more recent *Nichetto=Nendo* collection. This series began when Sato met Italian designer Luca Nichetto in December 2012, and the two immediately hit it off. Soon after, Sato came upon a creative process in traditional Japanese poetry whereby one person composes the first three lines (*kami no ku*) of a poem called a *tanka*, and shares them with a second person, who then writes the final two lines (*shimo no ku*). Inspired by this collaborative process, Sato and Nichetto chose to partner on a collection: over the course of just a few days, Sato sent design ideas to Luca, which he completed, and vice versa. The resulting collection—imagined and produced in just four months—features seven co-conceived pieces, including a candleholder, glass shelves, a modular carpet, and paper lamps. The special process behind every piece elevates its value beyond any parallel physical or aesthetic value.

The fourth is *multiply*. Put simply, through repetition, Nendo redefines common objects, offering up new paradigms through which we may approach them. Case in point: *Bird Apartment*, a birdhouse/tree house designed for the nature-focused Ando Momofuku Cen-

ter that reimagines the practice of bird watching. On one side, it combines 78 different birdhouses, which cumulatively form a larger, unified birdhouse shape. On its other side, a long ladder leads up to a tree house entrance, inviting passers-by to climb up to bird level. Once inside, 78 small peepholes at the room's end allow a truly unique bird-watching experience.

Fifth: *link*. By recognizing and recreating the connections between pieces that at first appear unrelated, Nendo reveals often surprising, connective threads. Thanks to this approach, *Socket Deer*—a character-driven electrical outlet topped with antlers—comes to life and offers a place to rest one's mobile phone or keys. Likewise, *Karaoke Tub* unexpectedly blends two places we all love to sing: a bathroom and a karaoke room. Instead of a bathtub, however, patrons step down onto a low sofa; meanwhile, acoustically minded white tiles and walls (accented with showerhead coat hooks, of course) reinforce the washroom feel.

Sixth, Nendo likes to *conceal*. The very act of concealing something draws attention to it, piquing observers' curious natures and inspiring further investigation. Take, for example, Nendo's 2011 retrospective exhibition, *50 Projects: 25 Objects + 25 Spaces*. Using a stack of transparent, hollow carbonate sheets, the studio created a wall in front of each of the show's displays, causing a pixelated effect that encouraged viewers to move around the back of each wall in order to see the work clearly. As guests moved in relation to the wall, the degree of pixelation varied, so that the view of each piece changed again and again as spectators moved about the gallery.

The seventh ingredient is *skin*. According to the Nendo team, “Our philosophy of making isn't about covering the whole with the skin, but thinking through the skin to determine the whole. We want to add functional, affective value to our designs through thoughtfully constructed surface materials.”

With this in mind, and inspired by the moss growing on a neighboring riverbank, Nendo's *Moss House* renovation transformed an older home into a modern live-work space by applying linked curlicues of dried moss vines across the home's interior walls. This created an overlap between the home's indoor and outdoor spaces, introducing a striking texture and unifying, repeating pattern—and an ingenious alternative to traditional wallpaper. To lend cohesiveness to the dual-purpose building's office area, Nendo placed accents from the moss pattern onto the work area's doorframes and handles.

Number eight: *balance*. “Whatever you're designing,” Sato says, “it's crucial to displace the hierarchy of the elements that compose it, to rid it of the ancient preconceptions that cling to it like mud.” So with each new project, the studio dissects and reinterprets

objects by evaluating both a piece's ultimate role as well as the shape and relationships between its smaller, component parts. This way, the firm may approach a design with fresh eyes, opening up space to create *new* balances between structure and form.

In this vein, *Target* reimagines a traditional bookcase, trading in the standard horizontal shelves for a series of small, supportive crosses. Similarly, Nendo's *Stone Garden* installation features adjustable clusters of one-legged tables, which support one another by overlapping—no nails or screws required. The weighty tabletops are constructed of Caesarstone, a strong, scratchproof material made by resolidifying natural quartz that has been crushed into powder. Through these "tables that aren't quite tables," Nendo explores the lines between furniture and space, as these clusters collectively transform into a floating, furniture garden.

Magnify, or the art of manipulating scale, is number nine. "Every object has a name," Sato explains. "We're interested in the way that name changes as an object's scale is manipulated. There is a value here that clearly transcends color, material, and form."

Thus, both *Diamond Chair* and the *Lexus — Elastic Diamonds* installation were inspired by the atomic structure of a diamond. The almost-transparent *Diamond Chair* is produced by a type of 3D printing known as selective laser sintering (SLS), which allows the firm to add or subtract material at points throughout the design for comfort and flexibility. The chair is printed in two pieces and then snapped together. It quivers in response to touch or movement, giving the impression of breathing furniture.

The same diamond structural motif was expanded for the *Lexus — Elastic Diamonds* project in Milan. The show played off the union of seemingly contradictory characteristics—specifically, strength and flexibility in elastic yet durable crystalline forms. The dynamic, dreamlike space combined light, movement, and structure, for a near-transparent but tangible experience.

And finally, ten: *fold*. Describing this design principle, Sato says, "Start thinking from a two-dimensional perspective. Then turn your idea into three dimensions by bending, folding, twisting, and rolling it into a ball, like a child playing with a piece of paper. Things become simplified when they are transformed into two dimensions."

Consider, for example, the previously mentioned *Maki* lamp, inspired by the simple act of rolling a sheet of paper in on itself. Or (the appropriately named) *Fold*, a shelving unit for expert wood manufacturer Conde House. Inspired, of course, by a simple, folding gesture, the unit's interlocking wooden boards, which are bent and woven together like a textile, seem to melt into one another, making it hard to tell where one piece begins and the next ends.

Through these elements, both independently and in combination, Nendo adds to its ever-growing design universe. Every piece and place the firm conceives contributes a line to the larger Nendo story—a narrative that tells the tale of hundreds of emotionally driven moments.

At their finest, these instances connect us, inspire us, and make us more thoughtful participants in day-to-day life. And if we're lucky, we carry a bit of the magic we encounter in Nendo's world back into our own.

outline

