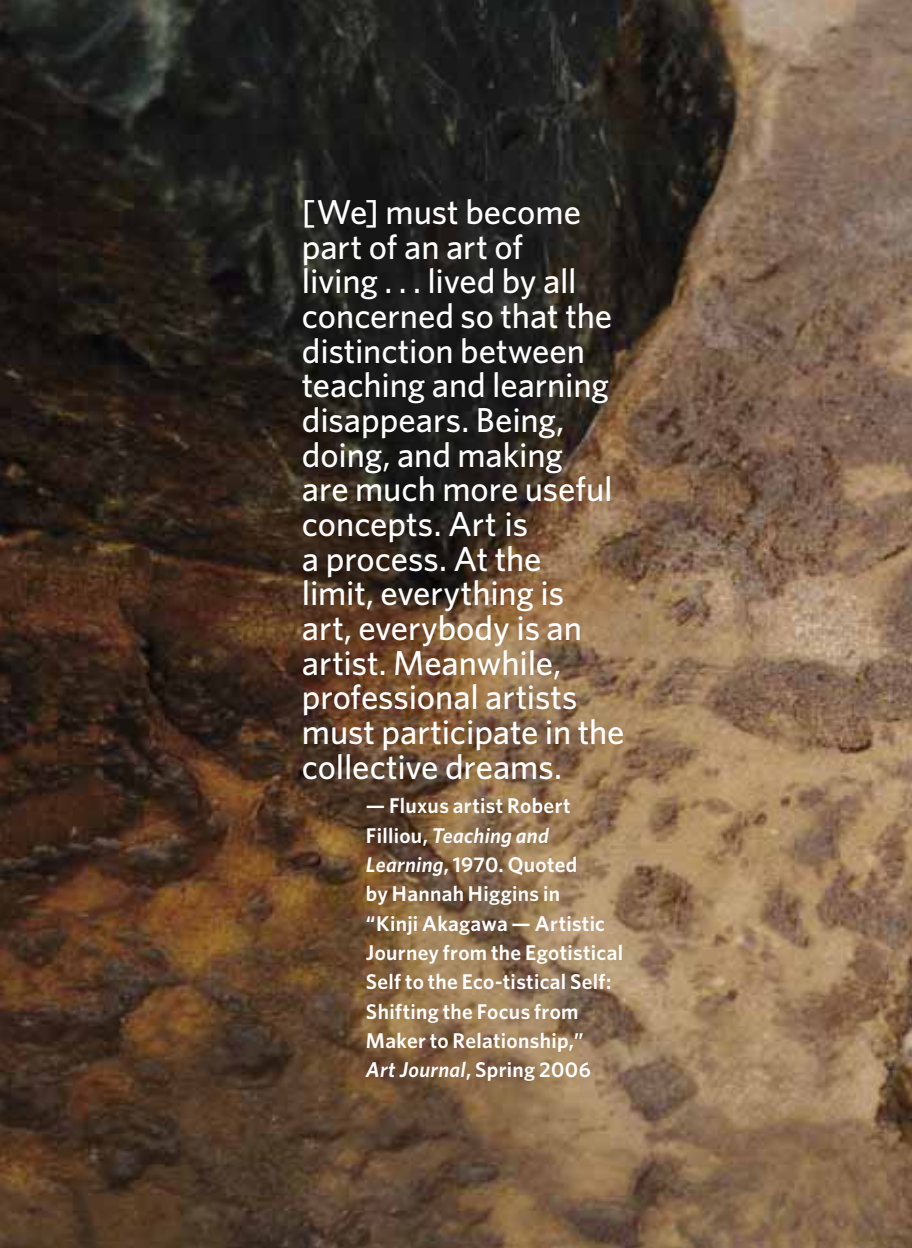




2007 McKnight Distinguished Artist Kinji Akagawa



[We] must become part of an art of living . . . lived by all concerned so that the distinction between teaching and learning disappears. Being, doing, and making are much more useful concepts. Art is a process. At the limit, everything is art, everybody is an artist. Meanwhile, professional artists must participate in the collective dreams.

— Fluxus artist Robert Filliou, *Teaching and Learning*, 1970. Quoted by Hannah Higgins in "Kinji Akagawa — Artistic Journey from the Egotistical Self to the Eco-tistical Self: Shifting the Focus from Maker to Relationship," *Art Journal*, Spring 2006

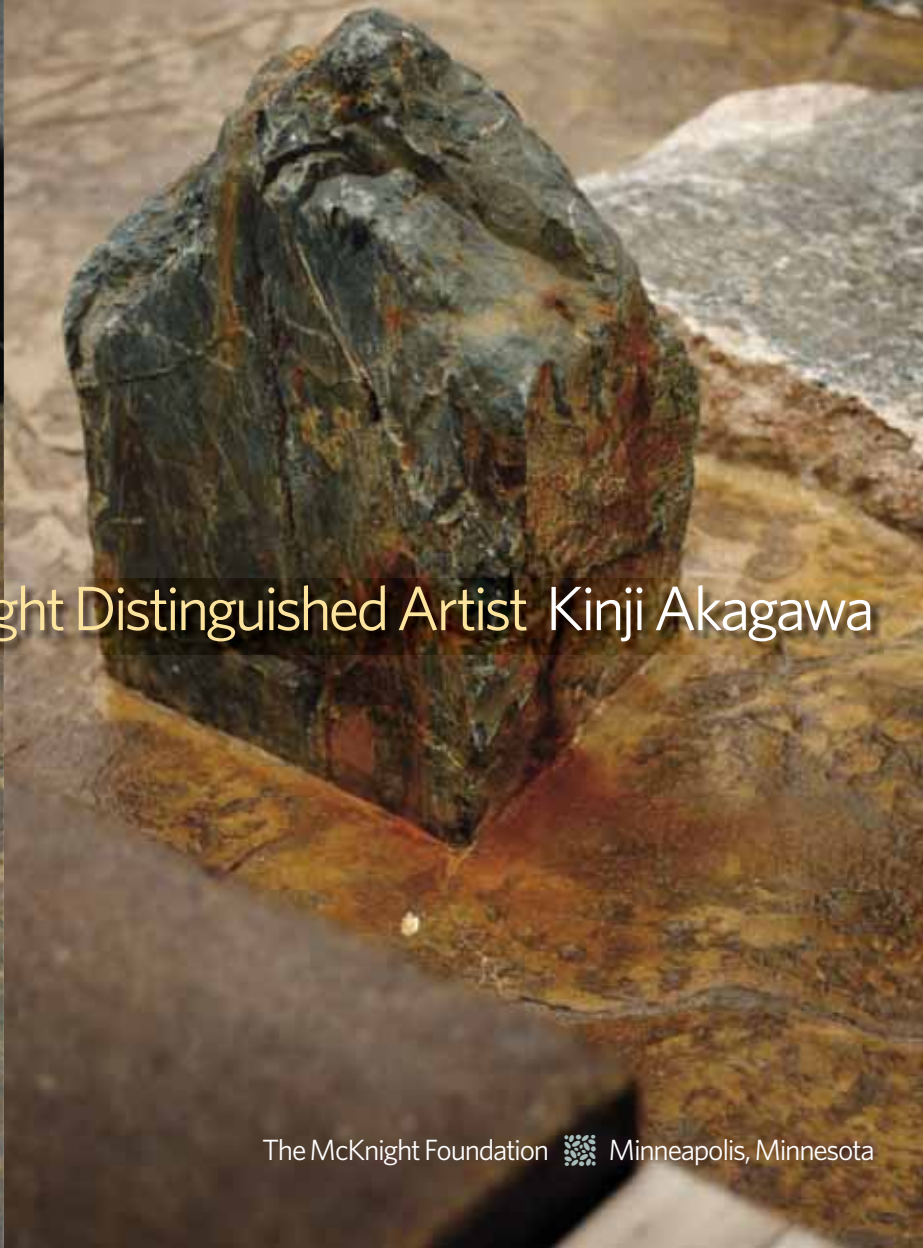




*Centroids Gathering Commons
(One, Two, and Three)*
Itasca Community College, Grand Rapids



2007 McKnight Distinguished Artist Kinji Akagawa



Introduction

KINJI AKAGAWA has always had some reservations about the phrase “public art.”

His unease with the term might seem ironic, since much of his work has been created specifically for public spaces as diverse as the Nicollet Mall in downtown Minneapolis and Lake Bronson State Park in Minnesota’s northwest corner. But Kinji believes that each of us perceives art, no matter how public its location, on a unique, personal level. For him, the aesthetic experience is at once communal and private.

What we need to do, Kinji argues, is to open up the landscape of art so we all have the chance to participate in both sides of the experience — not just through access to art in a general sense, but through access to art that invites thoughtful interaction between artist and viewer, viewer and art, viewer and place. In the work he creates, Kinji brings that interplay to life. His pieces demand that we do more than look. They call out to be touched, sat upon, put to use as places for contemplation of nature and of life.

In Kinji’s worldview, everybody needs this kind of art. And if he had his way, everybody would have access to it, every day.

While Kinji’s insistence on such a democracy in his art reflects a love for the pluralistic ideals of his adopted country, the traditions and values of his native Japan also color his work deeply. In Japan, says Kinji, art and craft are not separate. Rather, functional everyday objects are designed with care and meticulously crafted. Kinji learned this connection early from family members who were accomplished in both art and craft, from painting and calligraphy to blacksmithing and lanternmaking.

For Kinji, learning and teaching are as inseparable as art and craft. As a learner, he engages in constant dialogue with people, places, and ideas; as a teacher at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD), he has had an influence that is legendary. In these pages, you’ll read testimonials spanning several decades from students, colleagues, and friends who credit Kinji with helping them discover who they were meant to be, both as artists and as citizens of the world.

Over the past 40 years, the state of Minnesota has indeed been fortunate to call itself the home of distinguished artist — and citizen of the world — Kinji Akagawa.

Erika L. Binger
Chair, The McKnight Foundation





- 5 Artist's Statement
by Kinji Akagawa
- 7 *Genius Loci: The Nest of a Finch*
by Mason Riddle
- 20 Infinite Apprenticeship
by Kathleen M. Heideman
- 26 Listening Harder
by Michael Mercil
- 28 How Care Manifests the World
by Paul Schmelzer
- 30 Conversations with Kinji
by Aaron Van Dyke
- 32 Clearings
by Deborah Karasov
- 34 Friend, Brother, Mentor
by Tom Arndt
- 36 Student + Sensei, Sensei + Student
by Warren MacKenzie
- 38 Dialogue
Notes from friends and colleagues
- 48 An Artist's Life
- 50 Selected Commissions and Collections
- 52 Selected Exhibitions
- 54 About the Award

Contents

Friends, projects, influences: a selection of images from Kinji Akagawa's personal archives

- 1 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 1989
- 2 *Ballet Mechanical for Six Mechanical Sweepers* by Mierle Ukeles, part of the grand finale of the first New York City Art Parade, 1983

- 3 Installation of *Bayou Sculpture*, Houston, Texas, 1985
- 4 Detail, Sackett Park, St. Paul
- 5 Roof tiles at Todai Temple, Nara prefecture, Japan
- 6 *Building Minnesota*, Edgar Heap of Birds, 1980

- 7 Another view, installation of *Bayou Sculpture*
- 8 The Ise Grand Shrine, a Shinto temple in Japan's Mie prefecture
- 9 Bus station, Osaka, Japan

- 10 *Conditions of Memory: Passenger Pigeon-1914*, Mel Chin, 1989
- 11 Aerial view, *Bayou Sculpture*
- 12 Trees wrapped for winter, Kyoto, Japan





I am not a philosopher and I am not a politician. I work as an artist, craftsperson, teacher, learner, and researcher in this community, respecting those who are living and exchanging energies in the landscape of art and the ecology of life.

Artist's
Statement



But what is happiness except the simple harmony between a man and the life he leads? — Albert Camus

WHEN SPEAKING with Kinji Akagawa, one intuitively senses that he has found in his life the simple harmony to which Camus refers. At 67, Akagawa punctuates his conversation with smiles and laughter. His eyes and his carefully chosen words reveal a contentedness, perhaps even Camus's *happiness*, with being an artist. With modesty, Akagawa, a native of Japan, conveys that through years of purposeful study, conscientious teaching, and a concerned goodwill, he has found balance in the interdependent spheres of his life, most critical among them the coalescing of Eastern and Western cultural practices in his ideas and daily actions.

In a 21st-century world that seems determined to make a wreck of itself, Akagawa projects a profound hopefulness, a positivism that's notable. He sees this as necessary — as necessary to life as drinking water. "We think of an artist as a 'thing-maker,'" he says, "but to be an artist is really to be a 'quality-of-life-maker.' It is a dialectic. Being an artist is a pluralistic approach to life. Nobody is right. There is room for discussion. Klee is as good as Kandinsky and Gropius. An artist constructs a life, not a singular practice."

Akagawa's peripatetic path to becoming a "quality-of-life-maker" has wound its way through more than a few challenges. Not that he's complaining; regrets, if there are any, do not enter the conversation. Even when the topic is difficult, such as the plight of his family during and after World War II, he focuses on the lessons learned.

In 1944, when he was four, Akagawa, his mother, and his older brother evacuated Tokyo to live with relatives in Akita prefecture. His parents were both barbers and his father remained in Tokyo, working to provide for the family. The war destroyed the Akagawas' home, making their return to Tokyo in 1946 even more traumatic. A few years later, Akagawa's two-year-old sister died because of the harsh postwar conditions. Akagawa does not dwell on these tragedies but instead speaks about his supportive Akita relatives and what he gained from the experience of living there.

It was in Akita prefecture that Akagawa was introduced to the many artists and craftsmen in his family, a vivid childhood experience that would lay the philosophical foundation for the rest of his life. He no longer remembers a time without art. Two of his uncles were blacksmiths, another a lanternmaker; he produces a newspaper article with a large color photograph

Genius Loci:
The Nest
of a Finch



Akagawa's aunt, in whose house he and his family lived while in Akita prefecture, is still a practicing calligrapher at age 101. With a smile, he points to two works on paper she made when "only 100."

of one uncle, age 90, standing proudly among many beautiful temple lanterns. "Can you believe this?" laughs Akagawa. "This is amazing. Look at him."

A cousin drew a portrait in graphite of a four-year-old Kinji, fearlessly staring out at the viewer. Another cousin, a painter, worked in the traditional Japanese style, as a gouache of a farm girl in traditional rural Akita dress shows; his paintings are found in many government and institutional collections. Akagawa's aunt, in whose house he and his family lived while in Akita prefecture, is still a practicing calligrapher at age 101. With a smile, he points to two works on paper she made when "only 100." Akagawa notes that one of them depicts the Japanese character for "life." Art and craft were important to his parents, too; Akagawa's mother used her skills as a seamstress and a knitter to create clothes when materials were scarce, and his father played the *shakuhachi*, a traditional bamboo flute, in the evenings after returning home from work.

Akagawa speaks compellingly of his early baptism into the world of creativity. "I was fascinated by all of the craftspeople around me," he says. "It was magic, the making and building of things. We struggled to survive. But all of these people took care of us. I was given a pencil and a piece of paper. I worked along with them."

Postwar life back in Tokyo was acutely difficult, but Akagawa continued to draw the simple things around him — people's hands, the leg of a table. When he was a bit older, he discovered that he also liked to write. "I wrote silly little poems and stories," he says. "But I liked them." By junior high school, Akagawa was thoroughly immersed in art; he particularly liked the work of the novelist, poet, and still-life painter Saneatsu Mushanokoji, who founded a utopian farming community, started two art-theory magazines, and became a well-known critic and gallery owner. "I loved his life," he says. (Akagawa's life was well-rounded too: tall for his age, he was an avid basketball player.)

Most memorable about this time was a trip to the mountains with two other students, organized and paid for by his art teacher. "Yatsuda-sensei introduced us to Western-style

painting,” recalls Akagawa. “We went to the mountains and sensei gave us oil paint and canvas and said, ‘Go for it.’ It was unbelievable that someone cared so much about me, about us. Sensei was a traditional Japanese-style painter, but he wanted us to understand Western painting. He gave us an opportunity.” It was Yatsuda’s wife, an English teacher, who introduced Akagawa to the language. More than 50 years after that trip to the mountains, Akagawa remains in contact with Yatsuda (who still paints), and one of his fellow students, now a highly regarded graphic designer in Tokyo.

That experience was seminal in Akagawa’s artistic life — but it was the 16-year-old Akagawa’s meeting with Father Richard A. Merritt, an Episcopal missionary, that would truly direct his future. A cultured man from Boston who was a professor of human relations and religious studies, Merritt took Akagawa under his wing and encouraged him to pursue art. “Knowing Father Merritt became a foundation for me to be exposed to art and learn about other cultures,” he says. “He wanted me to go to art school in the United States and began saving money to send me.” Akagawa calls Merritt, who passed away in 2006, his “intellectual father.”

After graduating from high school, Akagawa worked at a printing company for a year before entering the Kuwazawa Design School in Tokyo, where the curriculum and philosophy were influenced by Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus. Like most parents, his were not keen that he was going to art school, but “no matter what, I always went back to studying art and poetry,” he says. A phalanx of architects, designers, painters, photographers, theorists, and textile artists taught the Kuwazawa curriculum, an interdisciplinary way of learning that would set the stage not only for Akagawa’s future artistic practice but also for his way of life. After he received his diploma from Kuwazawa, Akagawa and a group of fellow students formed a collaborative group that worked on interdisciplinary projects in Bauhaus fashion.

During this period, Akagawa helped out around Merritt’s home and sometimes the





homes of his friends, cooking and doing chores. He took no money for his work, but describes this time as an “incredible education” in the English language and American culture.

All the while, Merritt was saving money to send Akagawa to art school. Impressed by the Bauhaus, Akagawa wanted to study in Germany, but the fact that he didn’t speak the language made the idea prohibitive. As an alternative, Merritt suggested the highly regarded Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Akagawa applied and was accepted, becoming only the second Japanese student to attend Cranbrook.

In May of 1963, the 22-year-old Akagawa left Tokyo on a cargo ship, embarking on a plan to spend two years in America. He got off the ship in San Francisco and immediately hopped a Greyhound bus for a seven-day trip to the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts (co-founded by Merritt’s brother Francis) in Deer Isle, Maine. On a work-scholarship for three months, he studied painting, ceramics, and woodworking.

By the time Akagawa left Haystack for Cranbrook, he was interested in a range of disciplines from fine art to craft. At Cranbrook, he took courses in printmaking (at which he was particularly skilled), drawing, and design, and studied ceramics with the

legendary Finnish ceramist Maija Grotell. Instead of graduating from Cranbrook in the spring of 1965, after a holiday vacation in New York with his roommate he was back on the Greyhound — this time to Los Angeles, to work at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop on a Ford Foundation grant. Akagawa intended to stay for three months, working with master printmaker Ken Tyler and artists June Wayne, Herbert Beyer, George Sugarman, and Leon Golub before returning to Japan. So fruitful was the experience that three months turned into 18.

On a long shot, Akagawa applied for a job teaching printmaking at the Minneapolis School of Art (now the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, or MCAD). Then-president Arnold Herstand, familiar with Tamarind, hired Kinji to teach at MCAD and also ensured that he would be able to complete his BFA degree there. He graduated in 1968, the same year that he married fellow student Bonita Boettcher (they divorced in the 1980s) and was accepted into the University of Minnesota’s MFA program. During his year there, he studied mainly with respected printmaker Zigmunds Priede, and he received his MFA in 1969.

Following two months of travel in Europe and Japan, Akagawa taught printmaking, first in Nova Scotia and then in Atlanta. It was during this time that he realized he preferred a multidisciplinary approach to



Opposite, top: Installation
of *Garden Seating, Reading,
Thinking* in Minneapolis
Sculpture Garden, Walker Art
Center, 1987

Opposite, bottom, and this
page: *With Garden Seating,
Reading, Thinking*, 2007



“Saving the soul, the spirit of the idea of learning. It is beautiful to me. It is so democratic.”

making art, and in 1973 he was hired again by MCAD, where he agreed happily to teach foundation studies: not just drawing and printmaking, but also sculpture and three-dimensional work.

The 1970s were an intellectually fertile period for Akagawa, who had by then been in the U.S. for more than a decade. Fellow MCAD professors and conceptual artists Siah Armajani and Joe Breidel altered his artistic practice forever. “Siah and Joe were an incredible influence, philosophically, theoretically, and aesthetically. They gave me books to read and always challenged me,” recalls Akagawa. “They’d ask me questions like ‘What the hell does printmaking have to do with art?’ Can you believe it?” Liberal arts professor David Nye Brown also helped shape Akagawa’s path, particularly by showing confidence in his art and his teaching. “David taught me how to provide a safe place for students to learn,” he says. He talks of the good deeds of many MCAD students and graduates, calling the school “a record of what kind of human beings are needed to sustain a quality of life. I honor these students who work so hard. To learn what it is to be an artist. How to contribute. It is genuine and trusting.”

The philosophy of the Bauhaus artists, designers, and architects also continued to shape Akagawa’s teaching and artistic practice. “With a background in

craft and design, I was always mixing things up in the art world. I was a naïve kid when I came to the U.S. in 1963. I wanted to try everything before I went home to Japan,” he comments. “The thing is, I never went home.”



AKAGAWA’S STUDIO, designed by his friend and colleague, the architect Jerry Allan, is simple and open, stylistically echoing the vernacular architecture of the rural Midwest. “I wanted a big red doghouse, and now I have it,” he laughs. It is attached to a home in the wooded, hilly St. Croix River Valley that he and his second wife, textile artist Nancy Gipple, bought in 1987 just after they were married.

It is clear that the big red doghouse is a multipurpose space, sometimes enlivened by two very friendly dogs. There is a worn, black leather recliner, pottery, rocks, and bamboo. In the rear of the studio, the construction area, are old and new tools, beautiful levels and triangles, boxes of nails and screws, and several saws.

Akagawa’s current work in progress is a collaboration with potter Randy Johnston on an installation for “Eat With Your Eyes,” a fall 2007 exhibition at the Northern Clay Center in Minneapolis.

Akagawa is making a table and bench from two fallen trees found at Johnston's Wisconsin pottery. The table will be set with sushi plates, sake cups, and a flower vase made by Johnston.

On another table rest several of Akagawa's small, handcrafted reading and writing boxes, which hold a carefully designed array of objects. He brings out the body of a spectacular moth — orange and tan, with black lines suggesting the lead comes of a stained glass window — which he found only that morning. Nancy will use it as a model for her work before it finds a place in a new box. He calls these boxes self-portraits. "When I need to tell little stories, these are made," he says. One is reminded of the stories and poems he wrote as a child. Nearby, Akagawa has constructed a study desk, with a branch to hold down loose papers; the desk, not the chair, moves. He has also built an *irori*, a traditional Japanese table with a recessed center, which sits before a window.

The studio shelves are lined with books. Found close together: the *Nature Encyclopedia*, *Craftsman Homes* by Gustav Stickley, *Duchamp*, philosopher Gilles Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense* and *Two Regimes of Madness*, and *American Trees*. Akagawa brings to the table a small, thin book with a yellow cover written in Japanese. Passages are highlighted. It is *The Unknown Craftsman*, the bible of *mingei*, or Japanese folkcraft, authored by the writer-philosopher Yanagi Soetsu, the founder of the *mingei* movement. To see it in person is humbling. "It is Yanagi's revolutionary book," he states. "It is a guidebook to living life."

In the summer of 2007, Akagawa is in the process of

"reclaiming" familiar vintage school desks with attached chairs. "I have been collecting these. I want to give another life to the school chairs, refinish and give them a new function," he says. "I can use these. Saving the soul, the spirit of the idea of learning. It is beautiful to me. It is so democratic." These desks will find a home in his future study room/teahouse (a project to be funded by part of his Distinguished Artist Award cash prize), which he will soon build in his expansive backyard from logs culled from Lake Superior and his own property. "It will be a place for people, for oral culture, study, food, and moon watching. I need specific activities to occur," he explains. "All will have a story to tell. There may be something to catch rainwater."

It seems that this study room/teahouse will be the embodiment of Akagawa's artistic practice: experience-making, interdependent, intercultural, co-creative, ecologically conscious, democratic, and collaborative. "No one is a genius, really," he muses. "We are all workers."

Akagawa points out the exact site of the future study room/teahouse, then points to a baseball hat hanging from a nail on an entry post to the vegetable garden. "Look at this!" he exclaims. "Come here!" In the hat is a finch's nest. "This was not here a day or so ago. The idea of how natural it can be, all empirical design. I don't have a blueprint; I have stories. Who else but a finch wants to make a house in a baseball hat? What a beautiful surprise."





Working on sushi table for "Eat With Your Eyes" exhibition, Northern Clay Center, Minneapolis, 2007

THE ANCIENT term *genius loci* — “spirit of place” — perhaps best captures the abstract concept of place as art. In its purest interpretation, the term describes the character, meaning, function, and essence of place — its culture — both literally and metaphorically. It is the creation of *genius loci* that has dominated Akagawa’s artistic practice for more than two decades, largely in the form of public art projects. He designs and builds outdoor gathering spaces that invigorate this concept through physical form. For Akagawa, these works also connect the past to the future through the stone, wood, and metal from which they are made and the continuum of ideas that visitors bring. Now numbering more than a dozen, these oases comprise rustic wood benches, rocks and boulders, cast bronze elements such as a tree branch, and indigenous plant materials. Most incorporate a hollowed-out form of stone for catching rainwater. Welcoming places, they are intended to be spots of respite for interacting with nature and reassessing the soul.

To the uninitiated eye, Akagawa’s gathering spaces are ostensibly quite similar. They all inspire contemplation, conversation, study, and rest. Visitors can read or simply think and students can sit alone or study in groups; all are visited by nature as a bird comes to its bath.

But closer investigation reveals that though the works are outwardly simple in design, each is different and intellectually complex, the physical manifestation of the artist’s ideas about community, cultural responsibility, nature, and aesthetics. Each was created to emphasize the unique connections between work and site. Whenever possible he uses indigenous materials; the stone is often scavenged in adjacent fields or picked up from nearby quarries (Akagawa is a friend recognized by the workers at all of Minnesota’s stone quarries). Sometimes Akagawa uses wood from trees that have fallen in local forests, but most often he uses very hard woods such as ipe and jarrah from Australia, which won’t degrade in harsh climates. His gathering spaces are sited to maximize viewscales and to take advantage of cool breezes and the sun’s rays. These eco-friendly environments are created from Akagawa’s long-held personal philosophy of sustainability (a practice now popularized that he has embraced for more than two decades) and are respectful of their surroundings.

Akagawa’s interlocking stone and wood forms that are variously benches, tables, and platforms for speaking and performance are undeniably sculptural and crafted by the hand of an artist — but they are also about human interaction and self-reflection. Many were

commissioned by the Minnesota Percent for Art in Public Places program and are sited on locations across the state that range from college campuses and parks to highway rest stops and government buildings. One is found on the Nicollet Mall, and a single bench with lectern, titled *Garden Seating, Reading, Thinking*, is in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden. In collaboration with Jerry Allan, Akagawa has also redesigned the bridge for the Lyndale Park Peace Garden in Minneapolis.

Significantly, almost all of Akagawa's works are community-based. They have been designed and realized based on the input and needs of the community, a process of interaction and collaboration that is vital to Akagawa's philosophy. For him, working in the public realm without the ideas of community members would be impossible. For example, after the art selection committee at Northland Community and Technical College in Thief River Falls proffered its ideas, students helped him create and install much of the work. The college president was so pleased that he found a small pot of additional money for the completion of a few more project details.

Akagawa believes deeply in culturally and socially based art activities and aesthetic inquiry — more so than in the idea of authoritative art history and art-making. He likens the type of art he creates to democracy. In fact, he finds the term “democratic art” more appropriate than “public art.” He believes that all art is private in that we experience it on a personal level; what is needed, he says, is a democratization of the aesthetic experience so that people from

all cultures can cherish a place. “It is thinking globally and acting locally that are most important,” he says. “I stayed here to be a local artist. This was very important in the world that, as an artist, I am a community worker and teacher. The ideological part is not so big — the ‘thing-making.’ What is more important is the ‘site-making.’”

He raises the question of whether his gathering spaces are furniture, sculpture, or architecture. There is no clear answer. After all, he says, these “words are just definitions, just language.” Instead of focusing on definitions, Akagawa champions learning and understanding through empirical practice. While he has read countless books on philosophy and theory and lists the aesthetic studies of Leo Tolstoy and John Dewey and the writings of Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari as significant to his own understanding of the world, Akagawa believes more in the physical experience of things than in the words that describe them. “I love philosophers who support art,” he explains. “But I do not want to reflect upon the world, contemplate it, and then write about it. It is not just a philosophical world. I am not interested in describing a quality of life with words.”

For Akagawa, then, the aesthetic experience is pre-linguistic. “I work — but after the work, I discover the language,” he says. Artists, architects, and designers help him clarify his ideas, understand the world, and pass on to others what he has learned. He notes with admiration that Paul Klee was a violinist, Heidegger a poet, and Wittgenstein an architect. To be an artist, he says, “you must bring in non-artist stuff.” The aesthetic experience is found



Above: Installing *The Gathering Commons*, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources office, Windom, 2001

Opposite: Details from *The Gathering Commons*, with animals based on drawings by local children

in the materials and the process of making. “The more I make these things, it seems, the deeper their quality and the wider my ideas,” he muses.

In addition to Robert Smithson, whose writings on the need for artists to work with ecologists made a deep impression, Akagawa lists the artists, designers, and thinkers Buckminster Fuller, Isamu Noguchi, Constantin Brancusi, Scott Burton, Joseph Beuys, and Alvar Aalto as influential for their holistic, often collaborative, ways of working. He plans to use part of his Distinguished Artist Award cash prize to travel to Finland to physically experience Aalto’s libraries and sanatoriums, projects that further inspired the Finnish architect to design functional objects like furniture and glassware. He relates that Aalto designed his libraries so the natural light would be the same throughout the space. “There is a humanity to his designs; it is an egalitarian space, even for the light,” Akagawa says with a smile. “I love the poetry of designing buildings, light, and then furniture. With Aalto, all of the pleasures are satisfied.”

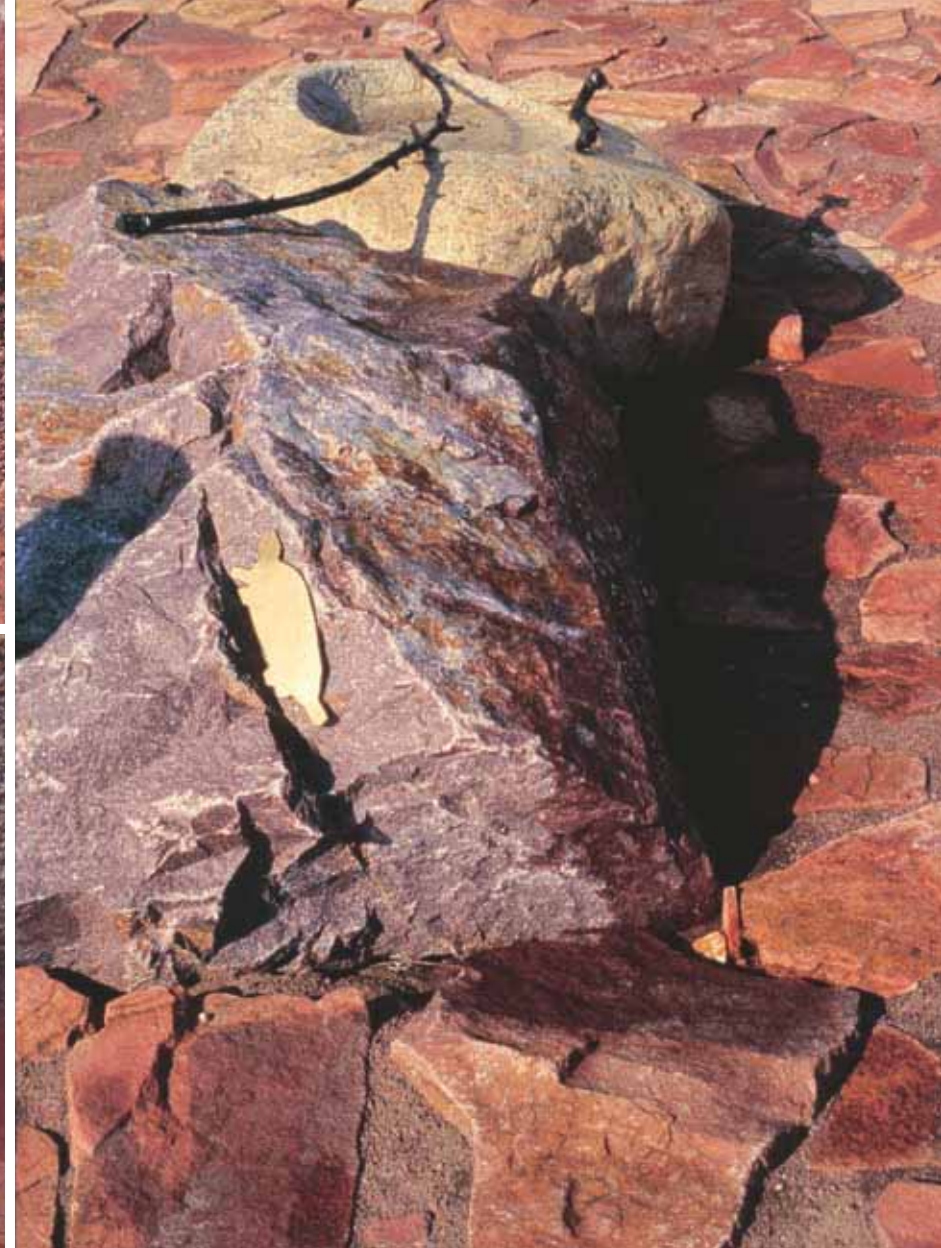
Akagawa’s public spaces are slow to reveal themselves. Although seductive enough on first viewing, they deliver their full visual, material, and aesthetic pleasure only after one spends more time in the space. With contemplation, variations in the wood grain and the mottling of the granite become

apparent. The relationship of the various wood, stone, and metal elements to one another and to their natural surroundings is understood. A bird alights on a cast bronze branch or takes a bath. Finally, it becomes clear that Akagawa’s works have their own internal logic, one that amplifies the intellectual, emotional, psychological, and functional pleasures of these spaces, one that creates *genius loci*.

The conceptual artist Walter De Maria, perhaps best known for his earthwork *The Lightning Field* (1977) in the New Mexico desert, said, “Every good work should have at least 10 meanings.” Akagawa’s works must be good, indeed.

Mason Riddle is a Twin Cities-based writer on the visual arts, architecture, and design. Her reviews and essays have been published in Metropolis, Architecture Minnesota, Architectural Record, Artforum, Sculpture Magazine, and Ceramics Monthly, among other publications. She was the director of the Minnesota Percent for Art in Public Places program from 1998 to 2003 and the interim director of the Goldstein Museum of Design from 2004 to 2005.







Model and completed sculpture,
Delighted Outdoors Together,
Minnesota Department of
Transportation office, St. Cloud,
2007

Bottom right: With Jim Povich,
Mn/DOT engineer





Every truth has four corners. As a teacher, I give you one corner. It is for you to find the other three. — Confucius

*For we should let everything human be spoken to us.
— Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics**

ACCORDING to my friend, the artist Jane Powers, everyone advised her to take a class with Kinji Akagawa. I tell her it was the same for me. We're thrilled that our teacher-turned-friend has been named The McKnight Foundation's Distinguished Artist. She's actually a bit embarrassed now, remembering how earnest she was — *sitting in the front row, taking detailed notes!* — the first time she heard Kinji lecture at MCAD. She grins, remembering that day 20 years ago. "So there he was, enthusiastically telling us about phenomenology, the struggle of meaning-making, making these triangular diagrams to illustrate the relationship between the artist/work/audience. He kept talking about paradigm shifts. And I wrote it all down. I still have the notebooks."

I remember. I was there, taking notes just like her. Jane remembers frustration, too. How did paradigm shifts relate to her desire to make sculpture? "But he was exuberant — it sucked me in! So honest as a person, as an artist, *an honest dog*. . . . There's no arrogance there, so even when he's quoting Heidegger

or something, it's clear that Kinji is totally in love with these concepts. It made me want to understand, reach for that passion — he put it all into the air, and these ideas drifted down on us, like music."

Jane and I both needed the conceptual framework he was providing.

Of course, it is possible for any student to get lost in language for a while. Kinji closed class meetings with a directive that reminded me (a farm girl) of the four sections of the 4-H Club's cloverleaf logo: head, heart, hands, and health. "Work with your head," he would say, "work with your heart, work with your hands. Work, work, work!" Waiting for inspiration to strike? He'd raise an eyebrow and splutter, with a comical, dour expression: "*What — you think angel's gonna fly down, kiss your butt?*"



Bumper sticker for former students of Kinji Akagawa: "*Paradigm Shift Happens.*"



When I learn that Kinji was completely shocked by the news of his award from The McKnight Foundation, I'm glad. It's not the sort of news you should be anticipating.



This kind of joy is akin to the excited internal dialogue between the viewer and a work of art, *ekphrasis*. As Gadamer wrote, “The work of art that says something confronts us itself. That is, it expresses something in such a way that what is said is like a discovery, a disclosure of something previously concealed. The element of surprise is based on this. ‘So true, so filled with being’ is not something one knows in any other way.”



Kinji Akagawa’s work is rooted in printmaking and philosophical hermeneutics, with an underlying foundation of humanism. Building a bench? *Well, who is it for? Where will it dwell? What is the history and future of that place? How do you select appropriate materials?* It is vital, in Akagawa’s worldview, to remember that your pending bench is not just an “aesthetic bench-object” but a “sitting-place” for humans, a place for the sacred tasks of interpretation, reflection, and meditation. On the most practical level, the artist must have an affinity for the need of the human: wood for the bench component, often bridging or marrying other elemental materials. “Metal or stone gets too hot in summer, too cold in winter,” Kinji would say. Wood was alive, once — wood is for humans.



A favorite memory wraps Kinji’s bench *Garden Seating, Reading,*

Thinking — that of the poet Bill Holm reading poetry at the bench in a dedication event at the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden. When he was a young man, Kinji used to think he’d become a poet.

From “To Continue Emerson’s Essays *Nature* and *The Poet*”
(from *Boxelder Bug Variations*):

Nature is thrifty; wastes nothing.
There is always the right number
of boxelder bugs, in the right
places. The poet’s eye should be
likewise economical. Let him
cease complaining that the world
is without objects fit to become
his subject. . . .



What is the footprint Kinji has made as an artist and a teacher? I find myself wishing we could analyze our various influences, maybe get a printed ingredients label showing the exact percentages lingering in our systems — each mentor, jazz recording, minerals inhaled in the dust of old road trips, ink under our fingernails rubbed off from books or intaglio plates. I want a road map of the Midwest with a special symbol marking all the locations of Kinji’s public artworks.

What are Kinji’s roots? His influences are complex: a pastiche of his childhood in Japan, a fragment of broken chalk left over from Joseph Beuys’s Minneapolis lecture, architectural drawings, an

appreciation for the massive planning process underpinning eco-sculptures like those of Helen and Newton Harrison, local quarry samples, rough-cut wood revealing grain lines, sap scent, concentric ring timelines, that special indentation pressed into a clay teacup (for grasping), lucky juxtapositions, the serene river-bluff landscape of his home near Afton State Park, wooded hills, clean rock cuts, and natural erosion — all of these at once. Kinji urges us to overcome what Fredric Jameson (in *The Prison-House of Language*) called our “stubborn will to isolate the object in question from everything else.”



Rebecca Alm, former Fine Arts chair and coordinator of foundation studies at MCAD, tries to explain what makes Kinji such a good artist, colleague, and teacher: “He comes from a really deep place, philosophically. And students *get it* in the end — through the emphasis on process. Kinji’s influences, aesthetically and materially, are Eastern.” Consider Kinji’s public artwork, *The Enjoyment of Nature*, on



Installing *The Enjoyment of Nature* on the Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis, 1992, with help from MCAD students Jay Stills and Rob Fischer and an unidentified assistant

the Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis. Compare it with that feeling you get when the first cool raindrop of a thunderstorm lands on your bare arm, the resulting sensory shiver, maybe a ripple of welcome relief. There is a discrete moment of transcendence — the paradox of stone reading as water, object as narrative. The concentric pattern carved into stone is time-bound (the moment just after a raindrop) but also phenomenological, hinting at timeless processes of precipitation and erosion or even the expansion of the universe — distant in origin to our own temporal being, yet central to our identities.



Kinji? He doesn’t sit down much, for a guy who makes benches.

Kathleen M. Heideman is a poet living in the Twin Cities and working at MCAD, where she is the college’s developer of online learning. Most recently, she went to Antarctica under the auspices of the National Science Foundation’s Artists and Writers Program.



“Pebble Splash,” detail of *The Enjoyment of Nature*



In the MCAD 3D shop with staff members
Don Myrhe, George Mahoney,
Leslie Kelman, and Matthew Sochocki





With MCAD librarians
Suzanne Degler, Amy Naughton,
Allan Kohl, and Gregg Zimmer

Listening Harder



Four Seasons with Sundial, one of the first works ever commissioned by the Minnesota State Arts Board, Tettegouche State Park, near Silver Bay, 1984

IN 1975, I transferred as a student from St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, to MCAD. I knew then I wanted most to be an artist, but I had no idea what an artist might be. During my first day, while standing near the staircase in the shiny white-brick and glass lobby of the college, I encountered Kinji Akagawa.

Smiling, he began speaking. But I could not understand a single thing Kinji was saying to me. The problem lay not in his (then still strong) Japanese accent, nor in the speed at which the words came spilling from his mouth. The real challenge lay within the person behind that smile. In this man Kinji I recognized what an artist might

be. Immediately I decided to become his student. And during our subsequent encounters I listened harder.

As a teacher, Kinji spoke straight from his heart while he worked to open up my mind and tried to clear my head. This was not easy to do. I was young, in art school, and quite sure that my mind (if not my heart) knew well enough almost all it needed. Kinji woke me up to show me differently.

“Showing differently” is an artist’s most remarkable skill. Through showing differently Kinji has brought generations of young artists to the understanding that they can see, think, feel, and do differently. This is no mere exercise in perceptual aesthetics. It is part of Kinji’s almost overwhelming social and ethical commitment to the community within which he has chosen to live. Art, for Kinji, is an act/ion of imagination. Art is a verb rather than a noun. With a kind of restless humility Kinji demonstrates through his lifework — “life” and “work” are for him always joined — not only that artists and artworks can change the world, but that as artists we *must* change the world. Here. Now. Kinji does not *always* smile. I am still listening hard to him.

In 1998 Kinji, together with Deborah Karasov, founded the MCAD Institute for Public Art and Design. Living evidence of his public leadership includes his participation in the programmatic foundation of Public Art Saint Paul, as well as his key role in planning the Lowertown Lofts artist-housing cooperative. Those places where we can encounter physical manifestations of his artwork include the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden at the Walker Art Center

in Minneapolis, Sackett Park in St. Paul, and Tettegouche State Park near Silver Bay. Each of these examples embodies the commitment Kinji has made to weaving real social and artistic ties within and across diverse Minnesota communities.

In the book *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Lewis Hyde describes the work of art as

a bond, a band, a link by which the several are knit into one. Men and women who dedicate their lives to the realization of their gifts tend the office of that communion by which we are joined to one another, to our times, to our generation, and to the race. Just as the artist’s imagination “has a gift” that brings the work to life, so in the realized gifts of the gifted the spirit of the group “has a gift.”

For many years Kinji has selflessly showered Minnesota with the generous spirit of his gift. No individual is more deserving of the recognition that the 2007 Distinguished Artist Award bestows.

Michael Mercil lives in Columbus, Ohio, with his wife, Ann Hamilton, and their son, Emmett. He teaches at The Ohio State University, where he is associate professor and chair of graduate studies in the Department of Art.

How Care Manifests the World



Detail of table built for "Eat With Your Eyes," Northern Clay Center, Minneapolis, 2007

IHAVE two images of Kinji Akagawa in my mind as I sit down to write this.

The first is a memory from my former job as editor of the Walker Art Center magazine. I'd interviewed Kinji, and to illustrate our conversation invited him in for a photo shoot. Our photographer had tracked down the scale model of *Garden Seating, Reading, Thinking*, the bench he was commissioned to create for the 1988 opening of the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden. In the photo, he appears gigantic, a smiling giant gently cradling the delicate bench in thick woodworker's hands.

The other is from a few weeks ago. In the MCAD 3D shop, he was showing me his half of a project that will be on view at the Northern Clay Center in fall 2007: an enormous sushi bar, with seating for two, that will eventually be set with ceramic sushi plates, sake cups, and a vase, all made by potter Randy Johnston. As we talked side-by-side on an oak-plank seat, I felt tiny: our feet dangled, unable to reach the ground, as if we were kids granted a spot at the grownup table.

I don't want to make too much of these mental images, except to say: with Kinji, everything shifts. The master artist becomes a humble servant; the monument is dwarfed by that which it celebrates; and the biggest truths can be found sometimes in small

worlds beneath your feet.

When I encounter Kinji's art, scale is what I notice first. His works are massive, heavy, eminently concrete in the claim they make on reality (rough-cut stone, wood slabs veined with grain along hand-waxed edges). But, unlike some of modern art's fabled builders of enormous structures, the magnitude of these monuments is not scaled to Kinji's ego. One who often points out the etymological roots shared by humus (soil) and humility, Kinji admits he'd be happy to see a family so involved with his work — having a picnic on it, say — that they completely ignore it. In his vision, the art and the artist are but two of many elements in what he calls the "ecology of human experience."

Of course, his materials could be seen as a monument of another sort — to nature. As he told me about the bench in the Walker's sculpture garden, the materials are familiar, the stuff we Midwesterners feel comfortable around. Made from St. Croix basalt, Minnesota's acclaimed granite, and locally sourced cedar, it offers both seating and a lectern for reading. "The bench provides psychological rest, intellectual rest, and physical rest," he said. But this belief suggests something else: that we are comfortable with the materials because we realize we, too, are nature.

This understanding of interconnectedness



Above left: Parking lot, Buddhist temple, Nara prefecture, Japan

Right: Children playing on discarded concrete culvert pipe at a south Minneapolis park



permeates much of Kinji's work. He says ecology can no longer be ignored by artists — or anyone else. "For the first time in Western culture, our survival is at stake," he says. "It's no longer philosophical. We have interdependent lives, interdependent nature of meanings: It's all codependent; we are co-creating."

Recently, Kinji was showing slides of his work to me and my wife, Julaporn (he played a big role in the first meeting between that Bauhaus-educated Thai artist and this Midwestern writer, but that's another story). Among photos of his installations at various parks and universities were images from his class presentations at MCAD, including examples of good and bad designs for public space. What does a playground constructed beside an interstate

highway sound barrier say about how we value children? Do state park trash cans made from 55-gallon oil drums reveal our aesthetic approach to green spaces?

It was a simple image that most affected me. It's telling that before entering one of Japan's most beautiful sites, the Buddhist temple in Nara, Kinji stopped to shoot photos of the parking lot. Given his beliefs about art, it makes sense: the surface was made from small pieces of stone, interlaced so moss could grow within the grid. Parking there, Kinji quipped, you'll be sure to make sure your car isn't leaking

oil. Then a comment slipped out of Kinji's mouth so easily, I almost missed it. "This is care," he said, "manifesting the world."

This handful of words did more to help me understand Kinji and his work than all the hours we'd spent discussing Buddhism and Beuys, Tiravanija, and Heidegger. Art or design or writing or business, in whatever endeavor we choose, we can create new, albeit sometimes small, worlds. We can manifest new ones.

*Paul Schmelzer is a writer based in Minneapolis. His interviews with artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, activist Winona LaDuke, and architect Cameron Sinclair appear in the Royal Society of Art's book *Land, Art: A Cultural Ecology Handbook* (Cornerhouse, 2006).*

WHEN I first heard about The McKnight Foundation Distinguished Artist Award, I knew that Kinji Akagawa would be chosen to receive this distinction, and probably sooner rather than later. This award seemed to be made for him. It's hard to imagine a more influential artist in Minnesota in the past 40 years than Kinji. This is not because of some celebrity status he has achieved, but because of his direct, personal

connections with thousands of people over the years.

I have known Kinji since the late 1980s, when, as a student at MCAD, I took several of his classes. He was a well-established teacher (one might even say "institution") by that time. When I say that I "took several of his classes," that is not the whole truth. He was far more than a typical teacher; he became an advisor and mentor to me, as he has to so many others.

Kinji's teaching and mentoring may indeed be his deepest and most broadly felt contribution to the culture. He has taught thousands of students, many of whom have gone on to become important artists and teachers, due in no small part to Kinji's guidance and support.

The things that set Kinji apart from other teachers are his approach and the depth of his commitment. He



Conversations with Kinji

engages students in dialogue — a conversation about how to become an artist, not just how to make some type of product called an artwork. Kinji's engagement in these dialogues is always intellectually rigorous, honest, open, intense, and serious, though this seriousness is often accompanied by laughter. (I doubt I have ever had a conversation with Kinji that didn't include laughter.) The lessons learned were, and are, always about how artistic practice affects life (and vice versa). Art has to mean something to matter, and it has to mean something to your life.

Kinji's commitment to artistic practice is well known, as are his unique and intelligent approach and his incredible generosity. He is often called on to speak about sculpture or public art, advise committees, serve on panels or granting juries, or supervise independent study projects, as he did for me when my schedule didn't allow me to take his sculpture class. At the time, he and Joe Breidel team-taught the class, so once a week I spent at least an hour in conversation with two faculty members (not a bad student-to-faculty ratio). They challenged me continuously. Every artwork or proposition or idea I brought to them was examined and interrogated. I usually left feeling drained, sometimes confused and empty, but it was always akin to the physical exhaustion of having completed a major

physical task; I could do no more, but had accomplished a lot and gained new strengths.

To this day, Kinji keeps up such rigor. He is on a continuous quest for new approaches and new understanding. He is well known at MCAD for his knowledge of modern philosophers and their thinking, and he has never stopped exploring new territory. A few years ago I was in a reading group that decided to tackle a tough reading by a philosopher who has been very influential recently. The next time I saw Kinji, what was he reading but Gilles Deleuze, the very same author being read by young artists around the world. Kinji is always involving himself in the important dialogues of the day.

I now teach at MCAD, where Kinji has spent many years influencing so many students. I am lucky enough, along with a few other faculty members, to share an office with him. It's the best office in the school, and I think everyone there knows it.

Aaron Van Dyke is an artist, teacher, gallerist, and writer living in St. Paul.

The things that set Kinji apart from other teachers are his approach and the depth of his commitment. He engages students in dialogue — a conversation about how to become an artist, not just how to make some type of product called an artwork.

Clearings



Access Sculpture Trail
by artist Don Rankin at
Yorkshire Sculpture Park,
Yorkshire, England

CLEARING a piece of land by hand is slow, exhausting, tedious work. For hundreds of years it was how people claimed a homestead or prepared the land for crops. As a metaphor it still has currency among many philosophers. Clearing space is making room in one's mind. And letting the openness hold sway can be hard but exhilarating.

"Clearing away" and "opening out" are phrases well used by Kinji Akagawa in his teaching, but what students may not realize is that these are real processes in how he conducts his life. Recently, he cleared an acre of land at his Afton home, ostensibly to build a structure that was both a thinking shed and a teahouse. His daughter's boyfriend came over and in the space of an entire summer, dug out and pushed over gnarly brush and weedy trees like box elder, green ash, and the invasive buckthorn. In addition to spreading dirt and filling holes, Kinji himself cut each tree into small burnable chunks. In the end, the pile was the size of a garage. Finally, he started burning the brush.

In July, when he began, the days were unseasonably cool; the weatherman said the temperatures were sure to cause farmers worry. By the time Kinji was a quarter into the pile, August had begun. The midday temperature was well over 90 degrees, and the humidity hung in the air so every fold of skin

harbored drops of sweat. Like many before him, Kinji left the burning to evening, and that is the image I have of him: for hours sitting at the fire pit, watching the fireflies, taking notes, and thinking, patient as a piano tuner must be patient, alert to every vibration in order to perfect the sound.

Burning the pile went well into winter, and Kinji was alive to every seasonal change. "I'm not the first person who lived here," he told me. "I wanted to be with history, to identify with those who have done that work before me."

Eventually he will come to use the ash, harvested logs, and found stone in artworks, but that is not the point. The goal is an aesthetically involved life. To be involved in art is to pay attention. As David Nye Brown, one of Kinji's teachers, said, making art and making life are the same thing.

Kinji wanted to create a space for many students to explore the interconnectedness of art and life, and that space was the Institute for Public Art and Design (IPAD) folded within the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. I was its co-director, but the institute was really Kinji's vision. For three wonderful years, we were able to host a wildly interdisciplinary program of studio and seminar — six weeks for undergraduates and graduate students, culminating in a one-week seminar for which

professionals could sign up separately.

Each week a different artist or writer would visit, people whom Kinji and I considered our own teachers in clearing our minds and hearts: Mel Chin, Suzanne Lacy, Dennis Adams, Ann Hamilton, and Daniel Martinez, to name only a very few of the nearly 20 who participated over the years. Mierle Ukeles told us, “My work is all about one question: Can we heal? Public art is a place where we can ask those questions.” The writer Scott Russell Sanders said he was moved to write “not because of any clear unambiguous vision — on the contrary, because of my bafflement. I have lived long enough not to have the answers, but to know the crucial questions.” And Vito Acconci implored the students, “Get rid of the masterpiece syndrome. You are not problem solvers, but problem finders. The best thing you can do for a community is to give them a problem to share.”

We also spent weekend retreats at the Blacklock Nature Sanctuary, where students created their own openings, making temporary works, using no power tools and only what they could find on-site. As with his experience at the fire pit, Kinji wanted the students to create their art by sensing life: the smell of burning, the freshness of trees, the sky opening up.

It may be years before the students fully absorb the experiences they had at IPAD. However, Kinji was *my* teacher too. And I know enough now to thank him for the remarkable gift of his art. When Kinji shares his artwork, he shares all the life that went into it. Martin Friedman, the former director of the Walker Art



Center, once said that the importance of a work of art is not the size of the commission but the scale of the experience. Kinji gave me, as he gave to the students, the scale of a deep and lasting clearing. He has opened up a region inside me, and I feel sometimes that the possibilities are as high as the smoke of his brush fire, rising and dispersing and spreading in the wind.

Deborah Karasov is editor of the visual arts attachment to Rain Taxi, a literary review publication, and is director of the conservation group Great River Greening.



Friend, Brother, Mentor

THIS is my essay about Kinji.

Kinji is my brother. He became so many years ago. He is a part of my soul. I have learned from him how to be a better human being and a more thoughtful artist. Kinji leads his life as a model for all of us who strive to understand the nature of the artistic journey through our time and space.

I would call Kinji every Saturday when I lived in Chicago and tell him what was on “Samurai Saturday” on the Independent Film Channel. It was a way to stay in touch. Sometimes we would compare Godzilla to Mothra. We talk about sumo. Last spring, we watched sumo together on Japanese television at four in the morning.

Kinji is my teacher. We went to art school together. I had so many questions about the nature of clear thought and preparation; Kinji was so patient to listen to my incantations and guide me through my own creative maze. He led me out of chaos into a world where I could develop my own method of inquiry. He taught me that being an artist is a form of worship, praise, contemplation, reflection, anticipation, resolution . . . sometimes. We attended classes every day, and then would have conversations long into the night about the ideas of Heidegger, Nietzsche, Sartre, Pollock, Rothko, etc. These conversations were more

like lectures that Kinji would lead. He guided me into a world of ideas and a methodology that has formed my life. I owe my integrity as an artist and my unwavering understanding of what it means to be part of the artistic family to Kinji.

I can call Kinji, as I did yesterday, and he will listen, always listen, and reflect and lead me back from my confusion. Other people can write about the beautiful work he makes, the materials he selects, the form they take. My love and respect for Kinji encompasses all those things, but it is what he does for me and so many other people that I am so grateful for. So many memories together we share, taking turns being student and teacher. My life is enriched by Kinji’s presence. He is my friend, my brother, my mentor. Thanks, Kinji.

Photographer Tom Arndt’s work is in many permanent collections, including those of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Walker Art Center.



Bookshelf in Akagawa's home studio, 2007. On the left is Akagawa's tribute to Joseph Beuys, 1986; on the right is a photo of Akagawa's mentor, Father Richard Merritt



Student + Sensei, Sensei + Student

MY RELATIONSHIP with Kinji has always been ambiguous. When we meet, he always calls me sensei (teacher), but as we talk I find that it is he who is the teacher and I the student learning from his broad approach to the discussion. For me, Kinji's approach to any problem is always challenging, while at the same time so basic that I wonder why everyone does not see it in that way. Although I have never been in his classes, I understand that this is the way that he teaches, questioning ideas and opening avenues of thought that are not obvious, but that lead to great depths and better solutions.

The potter Warren MacKenzie, who was The McKnight Foundation Distinguished Artist in 1999, lives and works in Stillwater.





Warren MacKenzie and
Kinji Akagawa
at MacKenzie's studio,
September 2007

Jack Becker
 Founder, FORECAST Public Art
 St. Paul

KINJI was one of my professors when I was a student at MCAD in 1975. He demanded full attention, partly because of his thick accent and partly due to the content of his talks, which combined philosophy, conceptualism, social action, democracy, and the pursuit of art as an intellectual and moral imperative. I left his lectures exhausted yet energized, like I'd just had a good workout.

Kinji brings an intimate and personal aesthetic to his work, whether it's in public or private spaces. His bold interventions in public, however, made a huge impact on me, demonstrating a profound connection to place and creating intimate dialogues. He brings a sincerity to his work — both his teaching and his art. His infectious smile and innocent laugh disarm and invite conversation.

Kinji's early influence on my work was significant, and I can only imagine how many others can say the same thing.

Joan Mondale
 Artist/Arts Advocate
 Minneapolis

KINJI'S broad smile is always a delight, and he has delighted his students, friends, and audiences ever since he joined our community of artists. He also delights the many of us who are thrilled by his lifetime devotion to public art. Now, it's almost as though we see Kinji everywhere!

All of us are honored that Kinji has received this Distinguished Artist Award. What a joy it is to celebrate this special recognition given by The McKnight Foundation.

Karen Wirth
 Artist/Chair of Fine Arts
 Minneapolis College of Art and Design

"YOU think because it's three-dimensional it's sculpture?" So goes one of Kinji's provocative questions to students: subtle yet challenging. His passion for art is infectious. His teaching philosophy of dialogue, openness, stimulation, and wonder is a daily practice. At the same time, he always reminds me of the importance of the individual humanity of each student. Kinji in action is equal parts heart, brain, and spirit. Working alongside him has been a gift.

Dialogue

Nancy MacKenzie
Artist
Stillwater

KINJI'S aesthetic sensibility is informed by his having grown up in Japan and matured in the United States with a discerning eye. His respect for materials and his concern for encouraging contemplation are evident in all his work.

Kinji is an artist/philosopher who wants his students to understand the cultural context of art and challenges them to investigate diverse points of view. Former students recall his advice on success: "Work, work, and work, continue to pursue your art, and don't worry about recognition."

Kinji's contagious enthusiasm for thoughtful creativity and his patience with the process of public art have brought us site-specific projects that continue to build community and enrich our environment.

Billy Weisman
Collector
Minneapolis

EVEN though it was almost 15 years ago, I clearly recall the emptiness I felt when I became aware that — despite our best efforts to save it — we were going to have to remove the magnificent giant elm tree that canopied our entire backyard.

Saddened, I called my friend Kinji. "We are going to lose the tree. Will you help us save its spirit?"

"What does it mean to you?" he asked. I told him it was a meeting and gathering place, and a place where the kids played.

That entire summer, Kinji worked with my kids and his students to design and build a playhouse for the kids and a gathering area for friends and family. It was a great lesson in transformation.

With Mark Knierim and
the Weisman family, 1991



Anne Sugnet
Artist/Affiliate Faculty
Department of Art, University of Minnesota

Mark Knierim
Artist/Facilities and Technical Coordinator
Department of Art, University of Minnesota

KINJI AKAGAWA is a gifted artist, an inspiring teacher, and an extraordinarily generous human being. We had the unbelievable good fortune to study with Kinji in MCAD's MFA program. We knew of Kinji's work long before we met him: it would be difficult to live in Minnesota and not have seen, rested on, or reflected in front of one of Kinji's pieces. His impact on the Minnesota artistic landscape is profound and far-reaching. Kinji's work and his building process embody the soul of public art, engaging all, not only those who go to galleries and museums.

Kinji is a legendary teacher: it's common to hear "you *have* to take a class from Kinji" if you are going to study at MCAD. He holds high expectations for his students and because of his zest, integrity, and the depth of his own commitment, you want to, you strive to, live up to these expectations. Kinji believes that art matters and, moreover, that people matter. He also believes that we as artists are morally obligated to engage with the broader world, that we are responsible to the world — and that belief is a gift to all his students.

Kinji always helps one remember that making art is both a very human process of "work, work, and more work" and a gift to the artist her/himself.

Stewart Turnquist
Artist/Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program Coordinator
The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

MINNESOTA being on the Mississippi Flyway, people here are used to seeing magnificent creatures alighting from afar.

Most of these beings have exquisite and chromatic feathers. But not Kinji. Instead, he has an imagination that flies. Usually, after a short stay, these friends from afar take to the air again, leaving for greener fields (or bigger cities). Not Kinji. He remains and has brought others together, in an ever-growing community of artists, creating an ever more beautiful region.



Detail, "The Once and Future Park,"
collaboration with Lance Neckar, Walker Art
Center and MCAD, 1992

Adam D. Weinberg
 Director, Whitney Museum of American Art
 New York, N.Y.

WORKING with Kinji Akagawa at the Walker was a profound pleasure. In 1986 we commissioned him to transform the Art Center's Art Lab into a Japanese studio in conjunction with the exhibition "Tokyo: Form and Spirit." The facts — that the budget was minuscule and the deadline short — were anything but a deterrent. Kinji, who fully embraced his Japanese artistic heritage, demonstrated how one could create a lot with very little, marrying a Zen spirit with minimalist structure (no doubt he and his students worked till all hours of the night to prove the point). Nevertheless, the simply crafted wooden worktables (one of which I still treasure today) and the delicate shoji screen pavilion created a transcendental air that beguiled each visitor upon entering the normally sterile environment of the Art Lab. This kind of project, like so much of Kinji's work, is like a haiku; modest, economic, and a starting point for one's own boundless associations.

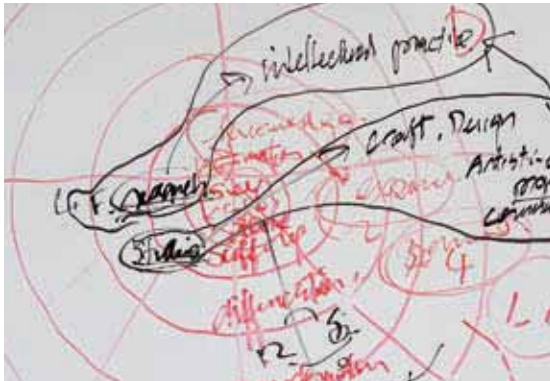


Above: Calligraphy class in the Walker Art Center's Art Lab during "Tokyo: Form and Spirit" exhibition, 1986

Right: "The Garden in the Galleries," Walker Art Center, 1994

Vince Leo
Artist/Vice President of Academic Affairs
Minneapolis College of Art and Design

IN MY MIND, Kinji exists as a never-ending discussion. Discussion isn't part of his practice; it *is* his practice. Whether the subject is an exhibition or a malfunctioning copy machine, all Kinji's conversations lead to one discussion: how a self becomes a new self and how new selves formulate more equitable social orders. I've watched Kinji bring this discussion to materials, locations, ideas, history, meetings, students, and other people; there doesn't seem to be any end to the talk or the possibilities. Sometimes I think that Kinji would like to include the whole world in his practice. I'm not sure how it would happen, but unless I'm seriously mistaken, the discussion has already begun.



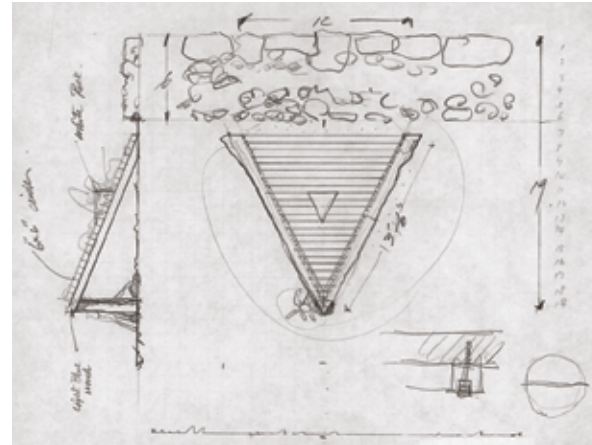
Left: Detail, whiteboard used by Akagawa during a 2005 MCAD faculty discussion about art students' integration of identity and work

Right: *Prairie Islands*, Anoka-Ramsey Community College, Cambridge campus, 1996



Susan Rappaport
Collector
Deephaven

WHEN Dutch elm disease claimed the last huge tree along our shoreline, I was so saddened by the loss that I felt I had to somehow preserve the tree in another form — so I called Kinji. He understood immediately, and designed a beautiful meditative seating piece, using the tree trunk as the base and many of the limbs in the structure. It was beautiful, and it had a magical energy. Kids and cats climbed on it, and when I sat on it I was always transported to a peaceful and calm place. Kinji's ability to enhance nature's beauty with his own creative artistic abilities is only one of the many things that make him such a gifted and wonderful artist and man.



Seating piece
on the property
of Susan and
Gary Rappaport,
Deephaven

Clarence Morgan
Artist/Chair
Department of Art, University of Minnesota

IT COMES as no surprise that Kinji Akagawa has been chosen to receive the 2007 Distinguished Artist Award. To say that Kinji is a remarkable artist fails to tell the entire story of this extraordinary individual. For those who know him, Kinji has always been more than an astounding visual artist and truth-seeker; he is also a very caring person. I initially became aware of Kinji's public sculptural projects, site-specific installations, and seating designs in the early '80s. That work was significant for making us attentive to a sense of space/place in the environment. His work and ideas have always questioned the obvious and pushed us to think beyond our pedestrian assumptions. A modern-day iconoclast, Kinji mingles the elegance and simplicity of traditional Japanese aesthetics with metaphysics to produce works of brilliance, function, and meaning.

Alexis Akagawa
International Student Advisor
Minneapolis College of Art and Design

DAD and I focus a lot on each other's hands and feet. When I was little, he massaged my hands before I went to bed and pulled wood splinters from summers running across the back deck. I walked up and down balancing on either side of his spine. Nowadays I sit in a wooden chair in the living room and he asks, "Can you step on me?" He uses his hands in the studio, taught me to use a hammer, and gave me a job working on his art projects in parks and on college campuses. Callused, gummed up with wood glue, gouged from nails, his hands are bigger than mine, but I still reach over to scratch his back, take his hand walking down the sidewalk. I am spoiled.



With Alexis Akagawa
at Osaka Castle, Osaka,
Japan, 2001

Rob Fischer
Artist
New York, N.Y.

WHEN I was a student of Kinji's, I was among a number of students who thought that we were of a unique group with a particularly strong connection to Kinji and to one another—that it was something of a zeitgeist. But I have since met many former students who say essentially the same thing about their experience with him. I realize that this is Kinji's gift: his ability to create an environment where students are at their intellectual, spiritual, and artistic best.

He has been a mentor and a friend to me and continues to influence my art practice in immeasurable ways.

J. Kevin Byrne
Artist/Professor
Minneapolis College of Art and Design

AS A FRIEND to Kinji, one is likely to benefit from gifts of the sort referred to by New Zealand Maori as *taonga*: treasures fashioned from the heart and by hand, acquirable only by giving, not buying (several surround me in my studio as I write, each carrying lovely, clear memories).

As for great experiences I have had with — or because of — Kinji, there are so many: think of a continuum, on one end the experience of an on-site installation of one of Kinji's outdoor, site-specific sculptures (you just *have* to be there!); at the other, coffee-shop conversations where we cover everything from neophenomenology to the remarkable properties of hardwood salvaged from Lake Superior deep-water logs that he (along with musical-instrument makers) seeks in order to incorporate them into his next piece!

Some will write that the Distinguished Artist Award is a capstone to Kinji Akagawa's career, but more likely it's one of many *cornerstones* to a life he will continue to sculpt — one that I guarantee will benefit all of us.




Top: Teaching sculpture students at MCAD, fall 2007

Bottom: A visiting faculty member and director of exhibitions Lisa Carlson return sawdust to the earth following "Remembering" installation at St. John's University, Collegeville, 1997



Sketches for Lyndale Park
Peace Garden, Minneapolis

<i>"Peace Bridge" HORB "Peace Garden Project"</i>		
SCALE: 1/2" = 1'-0"	APPROVED BY:	DRAWN BY: <i>Lang</i>
DATE: <i>March 2005</i>		REVISED:
<i>BY: KIM A. HANSEN, FWS, AIA</i>		
<i>1512 SOUTH 5TH ST. MINN. 55401</i>		
		
		DRAWING NUMBER:

Kinji Akagawa: An Artist's Life



1940

Born in Tokyo, Japan, to father Tomizo Akagawa and mother Setsu Bizen.

1944-49

Evacuates war-torn Tokyo with mother and older brother Hideo (b. 1937); after two years living with relatives in Akita prefecture, they return to the city. Sister Yukiko born, 1946; dies of malnutrition, 1948. Sister Mitsuko born, 1949.

1952

Joins junior high art club and is taken under the wing of the school's art teacher, who teaches Kinji and two fellow students to paint with oils; also joins theater club and learns to build sets and models.



1956

Meets Father Richard Merritt, Episcopal priest and missionary from Boston. Merritt becomes a pivotal figure in Kinji's life, teaching him English and encouraging him to teach drawing to neighbor children.

1961-63

Receives diploma from Kuwazawa Design School, Tokyo. Joins a loosely organized group of classmates — fellow devotees of Bauhaus style — in projects that range from teaching art to local children to designing store windows.

1963-65

Moves to the United States, sponsored by Father Merritt (who baptizes Kinji and gives him the middle name "Anthony"). Spends the summer of 1963 at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Maine. Beginning fall 1963, attends Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Studies include weaving, painting, woodworking, ceramics, printmaking, graphic design and sculpture.

1965-66

Receives Ford Foundation fellowship to attend Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles. Arnold Herstand, president of Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD), offers Kinji a job and the opportunity to finish his BFA.

1967-68

Moves to Minnesota and begins teaching printmaking at MCAD. Meets Siah Armajani, Joe Breidel, and David Nye Brown, all of whom become important teachers and friends. Receives BFA degree in 1968; marries Bonita Boettcher, a fellow MCAD student, the same year.

1969

Receives MFA in art from University of Minnesota. Travels around the world with Bonita, making a stop in Tokyo.

1970-72

Teaches at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and Atlanta College of Art and Design.

1973

Returns to Minneapolis to join MCAD faculty permanently. Becomes U.S. citizen and celebrates the birth of daughter Alexis Merritt Akagawa.

1975

Returns to Tokyo for father's funeral and meets another key figure: Kikuchi-roshi, who conducts the funeral and becomes a lifelong teacher and friend.

1976

Celebrates the birth of son Gabriel Bizen Akagawa. Invited to show work in a group exhibition at the Walker Art Center.

1982-83

Receives fellowships from the Bush Foundation and The McKnight Foundation. Before his separation from Bonita, which ultimately leads to divorce, spends four weeks at the Maryville treatment center (the former home of Vice President Hubert Humphrey) in Waverly, Minnesota, for treatment of alcoholism.

Far left: Paper cranes, Children's Peace Memorial, Hiroshima, Japan

Near left: At a *kawara-bei* — a wall built of old roof tiles set into an earthen wall — in Kyoto, Japan

1984

Visiting artist at Osaka University of Arts/ Osaka College of Arts, Osaka, Japan. Receives Faculty Enrichment Grant from Carnegie Mellon Foundation.

1985-1987

Works on multiple commissions, including pieces for the City of Houston, Texas; the Walker Art Center; East Carolina State University; and a proposal for the Metropolitan Airports Commission in the Twin Cities. Marries fiber artist Nancy Gipple, 1987.

1989

Judges St. Paul Winter Carnival snow-sculpting competition. Takes part in Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA) group exhibition, "Building Dialogue," with a work based on René Magritte's painting *Les Promenades d'Euclide*.

1991-93

Multiple projects in Minneapolis, including a stint as a visiting artist at the Walker Art Center, commissioned work for the renovation of the Nicollet Mall, and collaborations with fellow artists Lance Neckar ("The Once And Future Park," Walker Art Center) and David Mura ("Two Chapbooks," Minnesota Center for Book Arts).

1994

Guest curator of "Rivers Merging," a cross-cultural interdisciplinary exhibition with the Asian American Renaissance and the Minnesota Artists' Exhibition Program at the MIA. Exhibits work in "The Garden in the Galleries," Walker Art Center. Visiting artist at Minnesota State University Moorhead.

1995

Receives Alumnus of Notable Achievement Award from the University of Minnesota; also awarded a Minnesota State Arts Board Cultural Collaborations Grant. Collaborates with MCAD students and Boys & Girls Club members on Sackett Park in St. Paul, memorializing a St. Paul police officer killed in the line of duty. Visiting artist at St. Cloud State University.

1996

Lecturer at Osaka University of Arts, Osaka, Japan.

1998-2001

Co-director, Institute for Public Art and Design, MCAD.

2000

Visiting professor/artist, University of Minnesota School of Architecture. Presenter at National Association of Schools of Art and Design conference in Minneapolis.

2001

Serves as interpreter for Minneapolis visit by potter Tatsuzo Shimaoka, Living National Treasure of Japan. Recruited by Joan Mondale to serve on artists' selection board for Metro Transit public art commissions.

2001-07

Multiple commissions from Minnesota State Arts Board, Wisconsin State Arts Board, Cambridge Community College, St. Cloud State University, and private collectors.

2002

Juror for international design competition sponsored by St. Paul Riverfront Corporation. Presents public lecture, "Public Art, Public Spaces, Public Meanings," at North Dakota State University in Fargo.

2004

A longtime dream comes true when Kinji is invited to be a visiting professor at the Bauhaus University in Weimar, Germany. Also serves as a visiting artist at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, and is part of the "Looking Back and Moving Forward" exhibition at the Katherine E. Nash Gallery at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

2006-07

Collaborates with architect and fellow MCAD professor Jerry Allan on a Peace Bridge for the Lyndale Park Peace Garden near Lake Harriet in Minneapolis.

2007

"Eat With Your Eyes," group exhibition at Northern Clay Center in Minneapolis.



Detail of table built for "Eat With Your Eyes," Northern Clay Center, Minneapolis, 2007

Selected Commissions and Collections

Martha and Bruce
Atwater
Wayzata

Rusty and Burt Cohen
Minneapolis

Dolly Fiterman
Minneapolis

City of Houston
Houston, Texas
Bayou Sculpture
(1985)

Macalester College
St. Paul
Public art master plan
(1999)

City of Minneapolis
*The Enjoyment of
Nature* (1992)

Minneapolis Park &
Recreation Board
Lyndale Park Peace
Garden (2007)

Minnesota State Arts
Board

*Delighted Outdoors
Together* (2007)
Minnesota Department
of Transportation
St. Cloud

*Centroids Gathering
Commons (One, Two,
and Three)* (2004)
Itasca Community
College
Grand Rapids

*Northern Lights and
Blue Wave* (2002)
Northland Community
and Technical College
Thief River Falls

*The Gathering
Commons* (2001)
Minnesota Department
of Natural Resources
Windom

*Homage to WPA in
Nature* (2000)
Lake Bronson State Park

Prairie Islands (1996)
Anoka-Ramsey
Community College,
Cambridge campus

*Four Seasons with
Sundial* (1984)
Tettegouche State Park

Susan and Gary
Rappaport
Deephaven

St. Anthony Park
Community Council
St. Paul
Public space design
(1990-93)

St. Cloud State
University
World Commons
Garden (1997)

Walker Art Center
Minneapolis

*Garden Seating,
Reading, Thinking*
(1987)

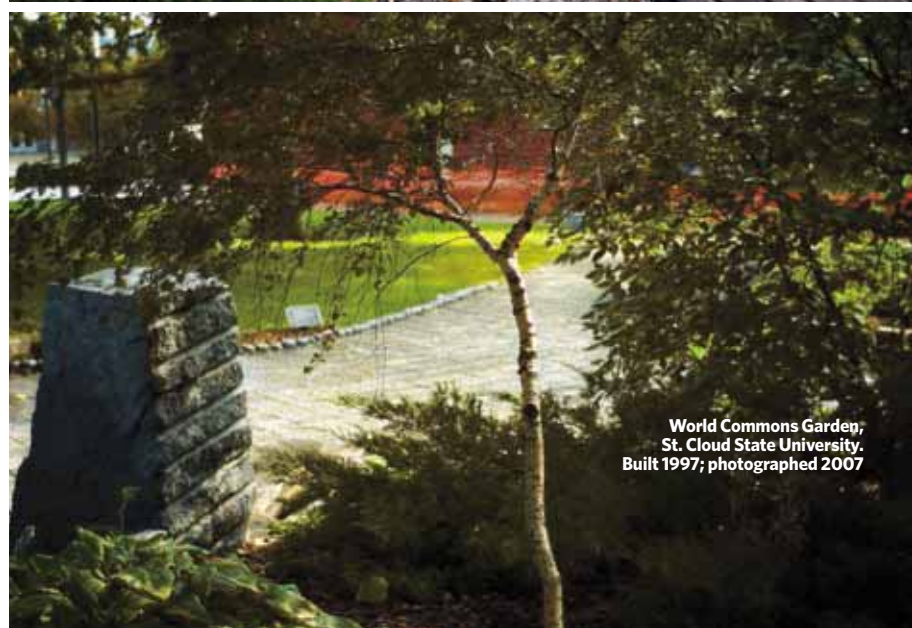
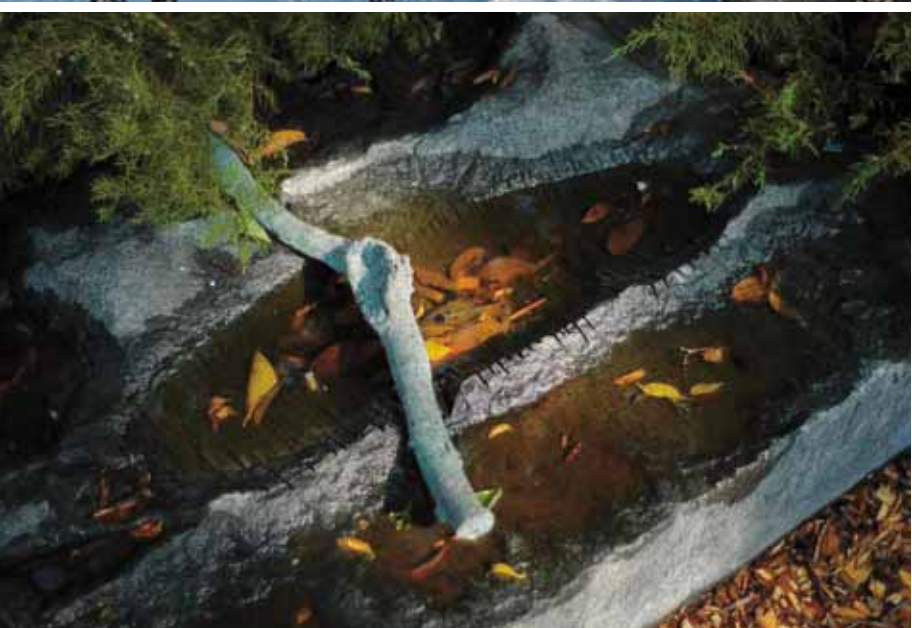
Table for Dialogue
(1995)
Study room for
"Tokyo: Form and
Spirit" (1986)

The Billy Weisman
Family
Minneapolis

Helen and J. Kimball
Whitney
Wayzata

Wisconsin State
Arts Board
University of Wisconsin
-Eau Claire
University of Wisconsin
-La Crosse





World Commons Garden,
St. Cloud State University.
Built 1997; photographed 2007

2007

Eat With Your Eyes
Northern Clay Center
Minneapolis

2006

Faculty exhibition
Minneapolis College of
Art and Design

2005

Looking Back and
Moving Forward
Katherine E. Nash Gallery,
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis

2000

Content in Context
Concordia College
Moorhead

1998

Beyond the Object
Milwaukee Institute of Art
and Design

Recognition of Three
Events

Frederick R. Weisman
Art Museum
Minneapolis

1997

Remembering
Public art installation,
St. John's University
Art Center
Collegeville

1996

Works from the Walker
Art Center
Group exhibition,
Carolyn Ruff Gallery
Minneapolis

1994-95

Guest curator:
Rivers Merging
Minneapolis Institute
of Arts

1995

Garden Party
Group exhibition,
Carolyn Ruff Gallery

1994

The Garden in the
Galleries
Walker Art Center
Minneapolis

1992

The Once and Future
Park
Walker Art Center and
Minneapolis College of
Art and Design

1991

A Benefit Art Auction
Minneapolis College of
Art and Design

1990

The Archaeology
of Form
Katherine E. Nash Gallery,
University of Minnesota

1989

Building Dialogue
Minneapolis Institute
of Arts

1988

Contemporary
Functional Art
Thompson Gallery
Minneapolis

1985

Public art group
exhibition
City of Houston
Houston, Texas

1984

Public art group
exhibition
East Carolina University
Greenville, North Carolina

1983

McKnight Artists
group exhibition
Minneapolis College of
Art and Design

1982

Public art group
exhibition
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis

Selected Exhibitions





Sushi table built for "Eat With Your Eyes" exhibition at Northern Clay Center in Minneapolis, fall 2007, set with pottery by Randy Johnston

IT'S NO exaggeration to say that Kinji Akagawa has changed the landscape of Minnesota. The outdoor sculptures that he crafts from native materials have become part of the scenery in settings that range from Thief River Falls in the north to Windom in the south. And as a teacher and arts advocate, he has had a profound effect on our state's artistic landscape: over and over, Kinji's students and colleagues testify to the ways in which he thoughtfully challenges them to consider the impact that they and their art can have on the world. Kinji is truly one of Minnesota's living treasures.

The McKnight Foundation Distinguished Artist Award, now in its 10th year, recognizes artists who have chosen, like Kinji, to make their lives and careers in Minnesota, thereby making our state a more culturally vibrant place. Although they had the talent and the opportunity to pursue their work elsewhere, these artists chose to stay — and by staying, they have made a difference. They have founded and strengthened arts organizations, inspired younger artists, attracted audiences and patrons. Best of all, they have made wonderful, thought-provoking art.


The award, which includes a \$40,000 stipend, goes to one Minnesota artist each year. Nominations are open to everyone, and those received by March 31 are considered the same year. The panel that selects the recipient is made up of three people who have longtime familiarity with the Minnesota arts community.

Our thanks go to panelists Linda Hoeschler, former executive director of the American Composers Forum; Linda Myers, executive director of the Loft Literary Center; and Stewart Turnquist, coordinator of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Their high standards and thoughtful consideration make this award a truly meaningful tribute to Minnesota's most influential artists.

Vickie Benson
Arts program director
The McKnight Foundation

Neal Cuthbert
Vice president of program
The McKnight Foundation

About the Award



2006 Lou Bellamy

2005 Judy Onofrio

2004 Stanislaw Skrowaczewski

2003 Mike Lynch

2002 Emilie Buchwald

2001 Dale Warland

2000 Robert Bly

1999 Warren MacKenzie

1998 Dominick Argento

McKnight
Distinguished
Artists



With Nancy Gipple, Momo, and Taro





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The McKnight Foundation seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations through grantmaking, coalition-building, and encouragement of strategic policy reform. Founded in 1953 and independently endowed by William L. McKnight and Maude L. McKnight, the Minnesota-based Foundation has assets of approximately \$2.2 billion and granted about \$93 million in 2006, of which about 13% was directed to improve the quality of and access to the arts. In Minnesota, the Foundation also makes grants to support children and families, our region and communities, and the environment.

The McKnight Foundation is committed to the protection of our environment, a philosophy that underlies our practice of using paper with postconsumer waste content and, wherever possible, environmentally friendly inks. Additionally, we partner with printers who participate in the PIM Great Printer Environmental Initiative. This book was printed with soy-based inks on recycled paper containing 30% postconsumer waste.

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Detail, World Commons Garden



Locations of selected public art projects by Kinji Akagawa





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