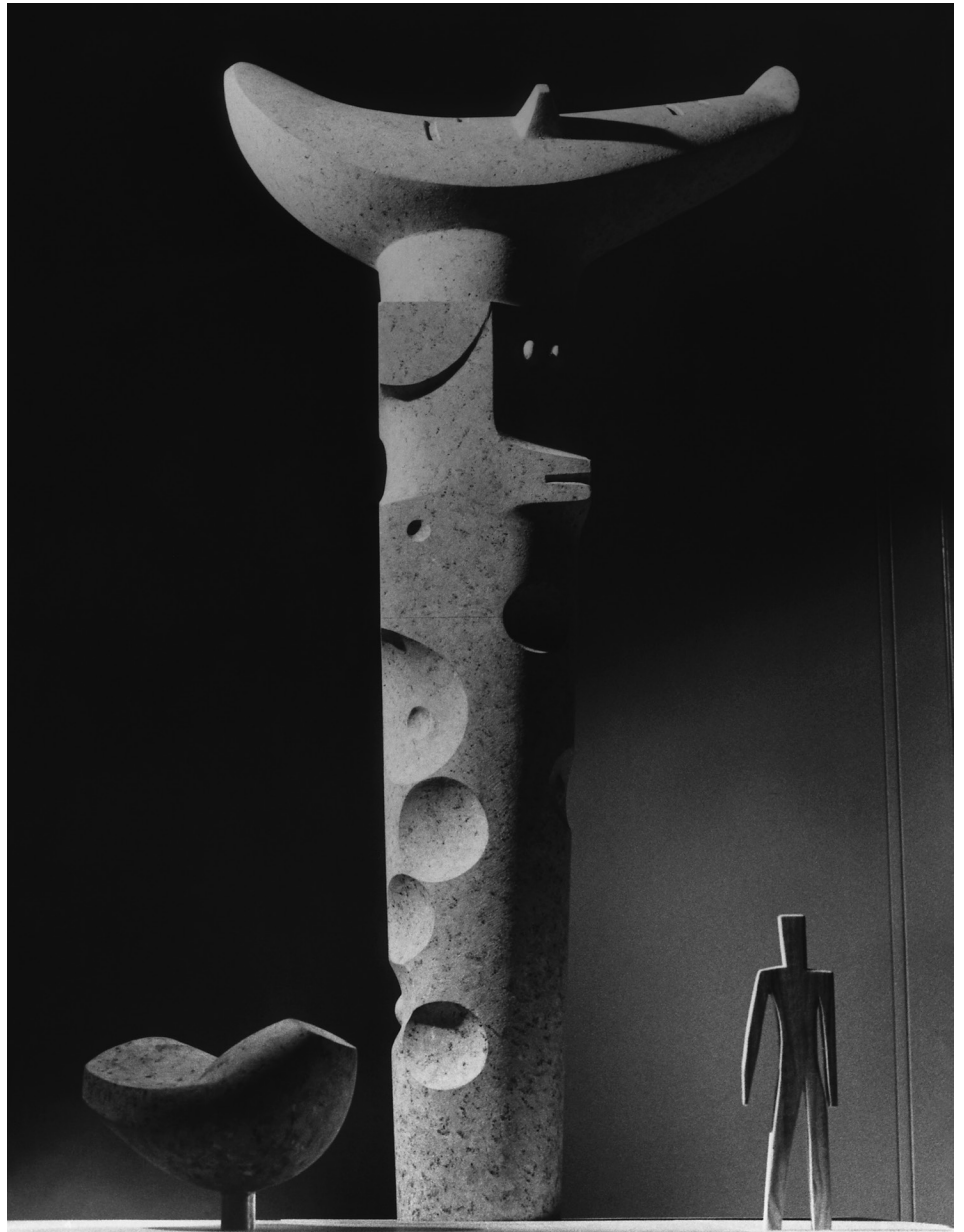
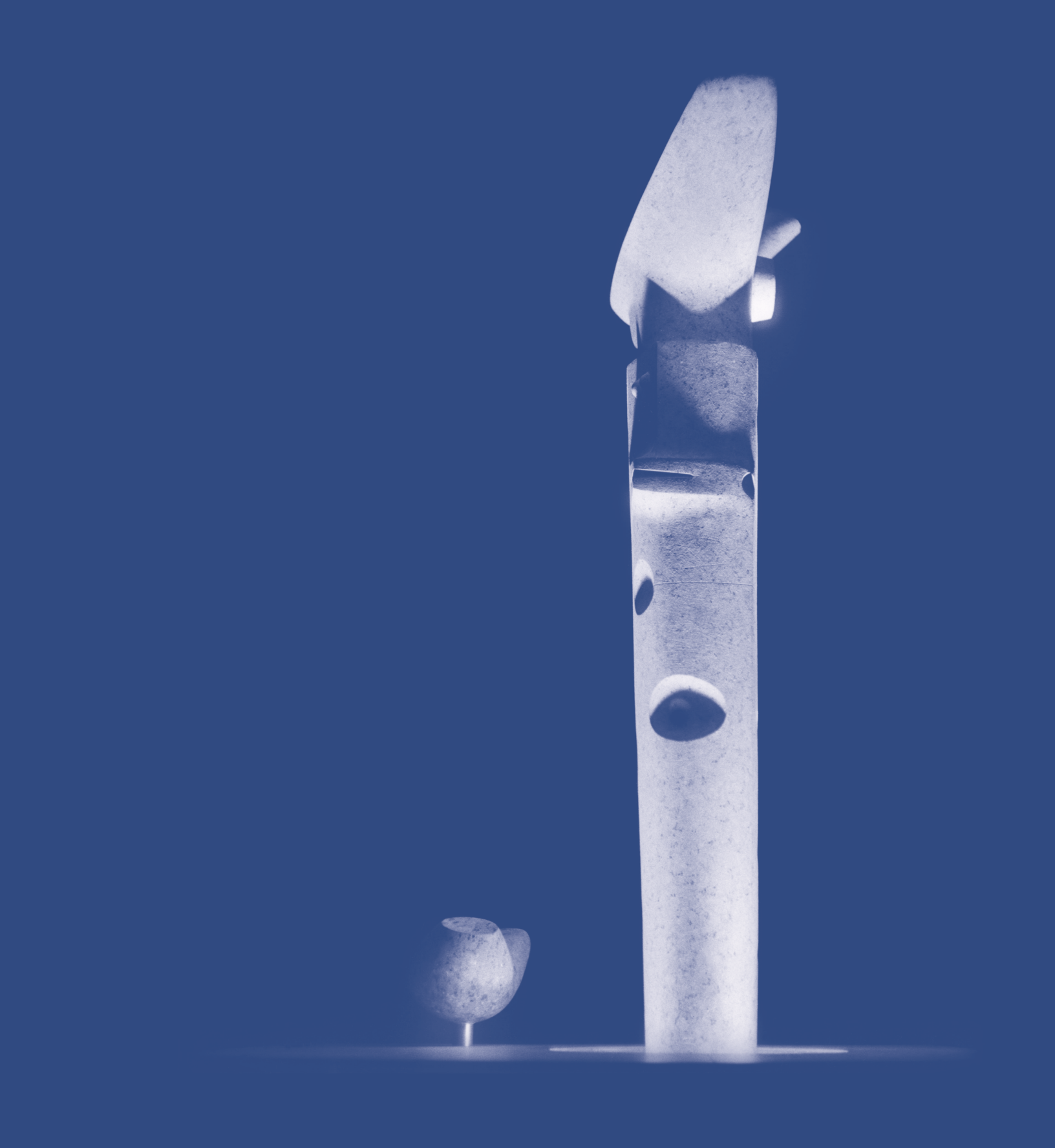


Isamu Noguchi's mid-century plans for "furnishing" the "imaginary abode" of America reached from the domestic scale of the modern hearth—an ideal ashtray—to our symbolic modern front door—a welcoming sculpture for what is now JFK Airport.



Noguchi's little-known proposal for a monumental work for New York City's Idlewild (now John F. Kennedy) Airport lost out to a mobile by Alexander Calder. This exhibition focuses on two recently conserved works relating to the commission: an original model in plaster and a column derived from it, both examples of Noguchi's search for metaphors for connective aspiration.



← Isamu Noguchi  
*Composition for  
Arrivals Building,  
Idlewild Airport, 1956*  
Unrealized model  
Commissioned by  
Skidmore, Owings  
& Merrill

→ Skidmore, Owings  
& Merrill (SOM)  
*International Arrivals  
Building, Idlewild  
Airport, with Alexander  
Calder's .125, 1958*  
Courtesy of the  
Queens Borough  
Public Library,  
Long Island Division,  
Chamber of Commerce  
of the Borough of  
Queens Records



In 1956, the architecture firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) invited Isamu Noguchi to propose a sculpture for the main hall of the new International Arrivals Building (IAB) for New York International Airport at Idlewild (known then simply as Idlewild Airport, and since 1963 as John F. Kennedy International Airport). He leapt at the chance. As he wrote in a letter confirming his interest, he recognized “the significance of its proposed situation in a location which [would], for many new arrivals or returning Americans, constitute a gateway to the United States of America.”<sup>1</sup>

Noguchi submitted a plan for a two-element space-age totem to be made of granite. A 25-foot-tall bioarchitectonic column, suggesting an alien order of architecture and topped by a upturned crescent featuring a three-dimensionalized version of the parabolic, cometary swoop that would soon become a trope of aerospace logos, was to be flanked by a five-foot-high horizontal element hovering just off of the ground.<sup>2</sup> The monument was to sit uplit at the center of a recessed light well as if lifting off. The proposal went no further than a scale model Noguchi made in plaster and painted to look like stone. The commission was given to Alexander Calder. Calder's .125—named for the gauge of aluminum used in the 45-foot-long mobile—hung in the IAB from 1957 to 2000, when the building was demolished and replaced by Terminal 4, where .125—now known as *Flight*—hangs in the departures hall, arrival spaces having become hallways.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from a series of contemporaneous photographs of the

model showing it from all sides, with different base and lighting schemes, and a human figure for scale, we have little direct evidence of Noguchi's intentions. What we can say is that the Idlewild proposal was part of a long lineage of works in which Noguchi sought to connect earth and sky by way of recalibrating our aspirations to the environment of our universe. Early examples in this vein include *Miss Expanding Universe* (1932), a figurative cast-aluminum hood ornament as spaceship cum nebula, biomorphic and amorphous with outstretched arms, that hangs from the ceiling; and *Man Aviator* (1939), a human-aircraft hybrid in stainless steel poised in vertical liftoff. Such explicit aeronautically inspired vehicles were gradually replaced by more abstract and conceptual celestially oriented objects such as Noguchi's light sculptures (Lunars and Akari) and monuments based on trees, totems, and columns for gardens and plazas conceived in the orbit of Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*.

Related public projects that preceded and followed the Idlewild proposal include *Project for Lever Brothers Building, New York* (1952), a garden of columns and earth forms that went unbuilt but became an important source of ideas; *The Family*, a three-piece group that was part of a larger commission, *Gardens for Connecticut General Life Insurance Company* (1956–57); and *Mississippi Fountain* (1961–62), which also features an upward-reaching crescent. All three of these projects were also collaborations with SOM.

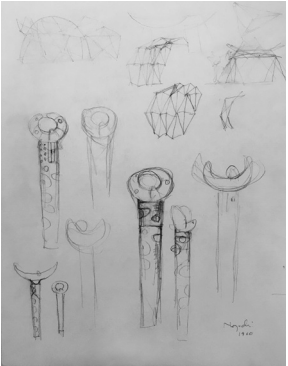
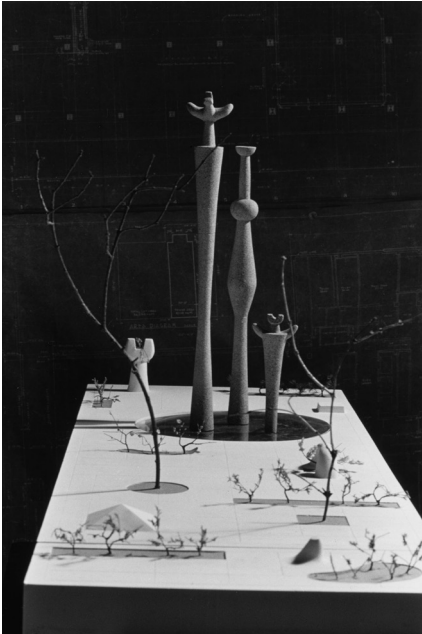


In a profile of Noguchi written in 1960, in the midst of this busy stretch, the futurist R. Buckminster “Bucky” Fuller, compared his friend to airplanes and identified him as “the unpremeditated prototype artist of a one-world-town cosmos.” “Isamu,” Fuller wrote, “has to-and-froed in his great back and front yards whose eastward and westward extensions finally merged in world encirclement ... World airlines pilots at present hold history’s travel records. But it is safe to say that Isamu Noguchi is history’s most traveled artist.”<sup>4</sup> Noguchi’s proposal for Idlewild, however, with its man-in-the-moon face, appears to aim a bit higher than horizontal, atmospheric flight. It more clearly resembles a symbolic abstraction of a rocket set to carry man into space. This impression is heightened by the seemingly purposeful mismatch between the two parts of the column.

The crescent top is detachable, which suggests that Noguchi was experimenting with different ideas. Sketchbooks from the time show similar columns topped by a variety of forms, and a host of unfinished bits and pieces speak to other visual metaphors for giving the column a skyward thrust. In a number of other sculptures from the period immediately following the failed Idlewild proposal, Noguchi repurposed its parts—in a similarly pockmarked column suggesting an asteroidal order of architecture, *Figure Portion of Composition for Arrivals Building, Idlewild Airport* (1958),<sup>5</sup> and a bird in flight, *Bird B* (1958). These appear on either side of the original Idlewild model here in the exhibition. This modularity of conception, the idea of ascension by stacking—related to his ongoing deconstruction and reconceptualizations of Constantin Brancusi’s *Endless Column*—fits with Noguchi’s concepts for *Project for Lever Brothers Building*, *The Family*, and *Mississippi Fountain*. All three projects feature stacked elements that can be simultaneously regarded as real-world representations of bases surmounted by sculptures, birds in trees, or the flame atop a burning torch.

In a 1965 letter to Noguchi, the director of the National Historic Shrines Foundation referred to the bronze cast of *Figure Portion of Composition for Arrivals Building, Idlewild Airport* (c. 1962) as an abstract interpretation of the Statue of Liberty.<sup>6</sup> Whether Noguchi endorsed or encouraged this interpretation is not known. But he did agree to donate the piece to raise funds to build a National Museum of Immigration on Ellis Island—at Lady Liberty’s feet.

This later association with the 150-foot-tall symbol of our national ideals neatly demonstrates that on some level the basic thrust of Noguchi’s search for contemporary plastic expressions of human aspiration was a success, even if his proposal for Idlewild Airport was not.



↑ Isamu Noguchi  
Sketchbook with  
sculpture studies, 1960  
Pencil on paper

← View of Noguchi’s  
*First Proposal for Lever  
Brothers Building*,  
*New York* (1952), n.d.  
Photographic print

← Isamu Noguchi  
*The Family*, part  
of *Gardens for  
Connecticut General  
Life Insurance  
Company*, 1956–58  
Photograph by  
Ezra Stoller/Esto

→ Isamu Noguchi  
*Figure Portion  
of Composition for  
Arrivals Building*,  
*Idlewild Airport*, 1958  
Greek marble  
Photograph by  
Isamu Noguchi



1 Typescript copy of a letter to the Port of New York Authority, September 17, 1956. The Noguchi Museum Archives. MS\_PROJ\_091\_002. There is a second copy to Skidmore, Owings & Merrill dated November 1, 1956. The Noguchi Museum Archives. MS\_PROJ\_091\_006.  
2 The NASA “meatball” logo dates to 1959.  
3 In an interview at the time, Calder remarked, “People think monuments should come out of the ground, never out of the ceiling, but mobiles can be monumental too.” Robert Osborn, “Calder’s International Monuments,” *Art in America* 57, no. 2 (March–April 1969): 37.  
4 R. Buckminster Fuller, “Isamu Noguchi,” *The Palette* (Winter 1960): 4.  
5 It is unclear exactly when and under what circumstances the piece was broken. It has been cleaned and reassembled for this exhibition.  
6 Gerald Kearney, letter to Isamu Noguchi, July 17, 1965. The Noguchi Museum Archives. LBD\_60S\_089\_003.





← Soichi Sunami  
View of *Man Aviator*  
(1939) at Noguchi's  
MacDougal Alley  
studio, c. 1944  
Photographic print



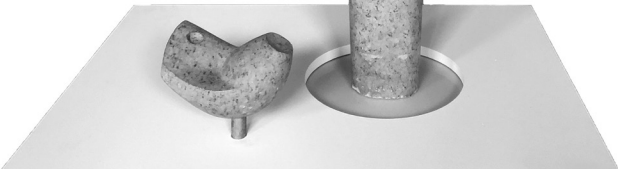
← Isamu Noguchi  
*Untitled*, n.d.  
Marble



← Isamu Noguchi  
*Bird B*, 1958  
Greek marble



↑ Isamu Noguchi  
*Figure Portion  
of Composition for  
Arrivals Building*,  
*Idlewild Airport*, 1958  
Greek marble



↑ Attributed to  
Isamu Noguchi  
*Perfume Bottle  
Prototypes*  
c. 1940-41  
Plaster

↘ Isamu Noguchi  
*Bird Song*, 1952  
(cast 1985)  
Fabricated by  
Tallix Foundry  
Bronze



↖ Isamu Noguchi  
*Bird Song*, 1952  
Plaster, metal



COVER View of  
*Composition for  
Arrivals Building*,  
*Idlewild Airport*  
model (1956), 1956  
Photographic print



12 View of Noguchi's  
*First Proposal for  
Lever Brothers  
Building*, New York  
(1952), n.d.  
Photographic print

↑ Isamu Noguchi  
*Composition for  
Arrivals Building*,  
*Idlewild Airport*, 1956  
Unrealized model  
Commissioned by  
Skidmore, Owings  
& Merrill  
Plaster, paint

↑ Isamu Noguchi  
*Second Proposal for  
Lever Brothers  
Building*, New York,  
1952; fabricated 2003  
by Larry List



↗ Isamu Noguchi  
Model of  
alternate element  
for *Composition  
for Arrivals  
Building*, *Idlewild  
Airport*, 1956  
Plaster, metal,  
paint

All photographs,  
sketches, and  
documents from  
The Noguchi Museum  
Archives, unless  
otherwise noted. All  
artworks Collection of  
The Noguchi Museum,  
unless otherwise noted.



↑ Wurtz Brothers  
*International Arrivals  
Building*, *Idlewild  
Airport*, 1959  
Photographic print  
Courtesy of Milstein  
Division, The New York  
Public Library

11 *International  
Arrivals Building*,  
*Idlewild Airport*, 1958  
Photographic print  
Courtesy of the  
Queens Borough  
Public Library, Long  
Island Division,  
Chamber of Commerce  
of the Borough of  
Queens Records



← Isamu Noguchi  
*Double Bird*, 1958  
Greek marble

↓ Isamu Noguchi  
*Untitled*, c. 1956-58  
Plaster



↗ Isamu Noguchi  
*Untitled Study*, n.d.  
Plaster



↗ Isamu Noguchi  
*Untitled Study*  
c. 1955-65  
Molded plaster  
on brass



↗ Isamu Noguchi  
*Model for Double  
Helix*, *Gardens for  
IBM*, *Armonk*, 1964  
Plaster, paint



↗ Isamu Noguchi  
*Model for Night  
Bird*, 1966-67  
Plaster



↑ Isamu Noguchi  
*Model for Maiastra*  
c. 1970-71  
Plaster molded on  
aluminum



↗ Isamu Noguchi  
*Model for Challenger  
Memorial*, 1985-87  
Steel rods set into  
plasticine base

## Composition for Idlewild Airport



← Isamu Noguchi  
*Untitled*  
c. 1955-65  
Marble

12 Ezra Stoller / Esto  
View of *The Family*,  
part of *Gardens for  
Connecticut General  
Life Insurance  
Company* (1956-58),  
n.d.  
Photographic print

→ View of Noguchi's  
*Mississippi Fountain*  
(1961-62), John  
Hancock Mutual Life  
Insurance Company  
headquarters,  
New Orleans, LA, n.d.  
Photographic print

