

## **The Noguchi Museum Announces *A Glorious Bewilderment: Marie Menken's 'Visual Variations on Noguchi'***

September 27, 2023 – February 4, 2024



Left to right: Marie Menken with her Bolex camera. Photo: William Wood. Isamu Noguchi with *Study for Luminous Plastic Sculpture*, 1943. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 03766. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, NY / Artists Rights Society (ARS). Lucia Dlugoszewski playing timbre piano. Photo: Courtesy of the Erick Hawkins Dance Foundation, Inc.

New York (July 2023) – **The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum** – the first museum in the United States to be established, designed and installed by a living artist to show their own work—is pleased to announce ***A Glorious Bewilderment: Marie Menken's 'Visual Variations on Noguchi.'*** The exhibition, curated by Noguchi Museum Curator **Kate Wiener**, will span most of the Museum's second floor with a focus on experimental American filmmaker **Marie Menken's** (1909–1970) film, *Visual Variations on Noguchi* (c.1945–46/1953). This exhibition marks the first time the film will be screened at The Noguchi Museum, and 2023 also marks the **100th anniversary of the invention of 16mm film**. While *Visual Variations on Noguchi* is appreciated in avant-garde film circles because of the impact of Menken's pioneering hand-held camera work, this exhibition will, for the first time, explore in depth Isamu Noguchi's work and studio as the film's subject matter, and the previously unrecognized affinities between Menken's work in film, Noguchi's interlocking and illuminated sculptures, and composer **Lucia Dlugoszewski's** score for the film.

*Visual Variations on Noguchi* (16 mm, black and white, sound, 4 min.), Menken's first solo film, was shot in Isamu Noguchi's MacDougal Alley studio in New York City's Greenwich Village. Using a hand-cranked Bolex camera, Menken moved rapidly in and around Noguchi's sculptures producing a disorienting and captivating portrait of Noguchi's work in motion. Menken's filmic technique, characterized by hand-held shots and ambulatory movement, became highly influential for a new generation of experimental filmmakers, including Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, and Andy Warhol.

*A Glorious Bewilderment* provides an in-depth exploration of the film and the interconnectedness and shared artistic vision between Menken and Noguchi. It celebrates Menken's invitation to bring the full force of our moving bodies to Noguchi's sculptures, echoing Noguchi's belief that "sculptures move because we move." The exhibition will also reveal composer Lucia Dlugoszewski's role in creating a jarring and haunting score that enhances the film's disorienting effect. By examining their respective contributions to *Visual Variations on Noguchi*, this exhibition offers the opportunity to newly appreciate the artists' related contentions, which were developed in the face of post-war anguish but remain equally relevant in our own fractured moment, that "art postpones death" (Menken), "that bewilderment is glorious" (Dlugoszewski), and that "it is out of this mess that our poetry must come" (Noguchi).

"It is an honor and joy to screen Marie Menken's *Visual Variations on Noguchi* at The Noguchi Museum for the first time and introduce new audiences to her spirited and pioneering practice, which is still largely underappreciated," says **Kate Wiener**, Curator at The Noguchi Museum. "The film's torrent of images and surreal soundtrack by Lucia Dlugoszewski conjures an inspiring sense of freedom and ecstasy in its embrace of fragmentation and movement. Showing this work at The Noguchi Museum alongside Noguchi's related sculptures gives us a unique opportunity to reexamine its relationship with its titular subject and to illuminate the shared connections between Menken, Dlugoszewski, and Noguchi."

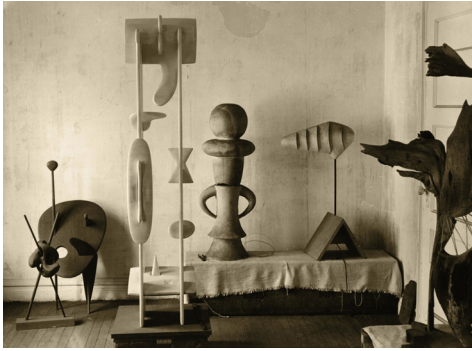
## BACKGROUND

Although still largely underrecognized, Marie Menken was a pioneer in American avant-garde cinema whose innovative handheld camerawork and riotous movement introduced a new approach to filmmaking that proved deeply influential in the world of experimental film. In Menken's first solo film *Visual Variations on Noguchi*, shot in Isamu Noguchi's studio in New York with a hand-held Bolex camera, Menken first experimented with the rapid movements and pulsing rhythm that defined her radical approach to filmmaking. The film was originally silent, but in 1953, composer Lucia Dlugoszewski, a friend of both Menken and Noguchi, produced an equally jarring soundtrack for the film which pieces together a haunting collage of discordant sounds. Although there are no records of Noguchi's response to the film in his own writings and archive, Menken recounted, "when [Noguchi] saw the footage, he was entertained and delighted. So was I."<sup>1</sup>

To date, discussions of this film have tended to focus on Menken's pioneering filmic strategies, and how, with her rapid movements, she effectively translated, transformed, or obscured Noguchi's sculptures. While it is challenging to identify specific sculptures in the fast-paced frames of Menken's film, this exhibition offers the context to reconsider the importance of Menken's subject—Noguchi—and how her approach may be understood not as a distortion of his work, but rather as an embrace of Noguchi's own invitation to step in and find new meaning. Pairing *Visual Variations on Noguchi* and other select films by Menken with a collection of Noguchi's related sculptures, this exhibition offers space to explore the interplay and affinities between these artists' otherwise seemingly disparate practices: particularly, their shared sense of the liberatory capacity of fracture and fragmentation, and the nature of flickering light.

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<sup>1</sup> Menken quoted in P. Adams Sitney, "Interview with Marie Menken," *Filmwise* 5 & 6 (1967): 12.



Left: Sculptures in Isamu Noguchi's MacDougal Alley studio, Greenwich Village, New York City, c. 1944. Photo: Rudolph Burckhardt. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 03198. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / © Estate of Rudy Burckhardt / Artists Rights Society (ARS). Right: *The Seasons*, with sets and costumes by Isamu Noguchi, choreographed by Merce Cunningham with music by John Cage, 1947. Photo: Larry Colwell. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 01658. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS).

## EXHIBITION

*A Glorious Bewilderment* will span The Noguchi Museum's second floor and will feature Marie Menken's four-minute film, *Visual Variations on Noguchi*, projected in its original 16mm format.

The exhibition is broken up into various sections: the first explores the connection between Noguchi and Menken through their shared involvement in the world of dance and their mutual concern for the "flying spirit of movement." Although the exact details of Noguchi and Menken's initial meeting are unclear, they were involved in their first and only other collaboration for the ballet *The Seasons* in 1947, choreographed by Merce Cunningham with music by John Cage. Noguchi designed costumes and scenery for the ballet, and Menken likely helped produce the now-lost films of fire, rain, and ice that were projected behind the dancers. Archival materials related to *The Seasons* and a later film of Menken's titled *Hurry Hurry* (1957) will be presented to provide clues into the nature of that collaboration. Also on view will be works that demonstrate Noguchi's interests in kinetic energy and propulsive movement, including his plywood props for Martha Graham's *Herodiade* (1944) which directly influenced the creation of his biomorphic slab sculptures seen in Menken's film.

The exhibition's next section will feature a number of Noguchi's interlocking sculptures that either appear in or are closely related to the works that appear in Menken's film, alongside enlarged film stills from *Visual Variations on Noguchi*. Visitors will be encouraged to take inspiration from Menken's raucous non-linear movement between Noguchi's works and will be invited to chart their own paths in and around his sculptures. This section will also focus on Menken and Noguchi's shared interests in fracture, precarity, and fragmentation. The works that Noguchi made in the mid 1940s—which appear in Menken's film and will be on view in the exhibition—were often held together in tenuous balance and betrayed Noguchi's new sense of despair having seen the world torn apart by atomic war. Rather than seeking the resolution or static coherence of these composite sculptures, Menken embraces and expands the sense of fracture inherent in Noguchi's work through disorientating movements, tilts, and rapid shifts in perspective.

The final section highlights the shared significance of light in Menken and Noguchi's work. On view will be a selection of Noguchi's electrically-illuminated magnesite sculptures, known



Left: Isamu Noguchi, *Red Lunar Fist*, 1944. Magnesite, plastic, resin, electric components. Photo: Kevin Noble. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS). Right: Isamu Noguchi, *Floating Lunar*, 1945. Magnesite, electric components. Photo: Nicholas Knight. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS)

as “Lunars,” which Menken explored in *Visual Variations on Noguchi* by tracing their illuminated surfaces and creating a captivating flurry of light on the screen. Noguchi’s Lunars will be presented alongside a selection of Menken’s work that reveals her longstanding interest in the nature of flickering light, including her two later films *Moonplay* (1964) and *Lights* (1966), and a thickly textured painted folding screen (1956)—a special loan from Anthology Film Archives. Menken began her career as a painter, and as showcased in her painted screen, she often incorporated unconventional materials into her works to produce sparkling tactile surfaces that interact with changing light and viewer movement.

The final section of the exhibition will be a reading room, where visitors will be able to learn more about Menken, Noguchi, and Dlugoszewski through archival materials and secondary sources. Also on view will be select footage from The Noguchi Museum’s newly digitized Multimedia Collection—which will represent a very different approach to documenting Noguchi’s interest in movement, light, and fragmentation on film.

#### SPECIAL THANKS

Exhibitions at The Noguchi Museum are supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, in partnership with the City Council and from the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.

The Noguchi Museum extends a special thank you to Anthology Film Archives; Erick Hawkins Dance Foundation, Inc.; The Film-Makers’ Cooperative; Music Division, Library of Congress; and Mono No Aware.

#### LOCATION

The Noguchi Museum  
9-01 33rd Road (at Vernon Boulevard)  
Long Island City, NY 11106

Open Wednesdays–Sundays, 11 am–6 pm  
Visitor information: [noguchi.org/visit](http://noguchi.org/visit)



To learn more about The Noguchi Museum and *A Glorious Bewilderment*, please visit [noguchi.org](https://noguchi.org) and follow [@noguchimuseum](https://www.instagram.com/noguchimuseum) on Instagram. *A Glorious Bewilderment* is open at The Noguchi Museum from September 27, 2023 to February 4, 2024, every Wednesday–Sunday from 11 am–6 pm.

#### ABOUT THE NOGUCHI MUSEUM

Opened in 1985 by category-defying Japanese American sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum (now known as The Noguchi Museum) was the first museum in the United States to be established, designed, and installed by a living artist to show their own work. Located in Long Island City, Queens, the Museum itself is widely viewed as among the artist's greatest achievements. Holding the world's largest collection of Noguchi's works, it features open air and indoor galleries in a repurposed 1920s industrial building and an outdoor sculpture garden. Accompanying the permanent installations placed by Noguchi, the Museum presents temporary exhibitions exploring themes in Noguchi's work, his milieu and collaborators, and his enduring influence today among contemporary practitioners across disciplines. It exhibits a comprehensive selection of Noguchi's material culture, from sculpture, models, and drawings to his personal possessions, and manages the artist's archives and catalogue raisonné. Through its rich collection, exhibitions, and programming, the Museum facilitates scholarship and learning for audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

[noguchi.org](https://noguchi.org) | [@noguchimuseum](https://www.instagram.com/noguchimuseum)

#### ABOUT KATE WIENER

Kate Wiener is a Curator at The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum in Long Island City, New York, where she is involved with exhibitions, public programs, and publications. In addition to organizing *A Glorious Bewilderment*, her other recent curatorial projects at The Noguchi Museum include the co-organized exhibitions *Noguchi Subscapes* (2022–23), *Noguchi: Useless Architecture* (2021–22), *Noguchi's Memorials to the Atomic Dead* (2021), and a forthcoming major touring retrospective of artist Toshiko Takaezu's work (2024–26). She has contributed to numerous publications including *Toshiko Takaezu: Worlds Within* (Yale University Press, forthcoming 2024), *Looking Up: The Skyviewing Sculptures of Isamu Noguchi* (Giles, 2022), *Out of Bounds: The Collected Writings of Marcia Tucker* (Getty Research Institute/New Museum, 2019), and *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* (New Museum, 2017).

#### ABOUT MARIE MENKEN

Marie Menken (1909–1970) was an American avant-garde filmmaker, painter, and actor whose pioneering hand-held camerawork and animation techniques showcased in a body of exuberant and gestural films served as key inspiration for other experimental filmmakers including Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, and Andy Warhol. In 1946, Menken, along with her longtime creative partner and husband, the poet and filmmaker Willard Maas, founded The Gryphon Group, a loose experimental film collective. Menken was born in Brooklyn to a Lithuanian immigrant family and studied painting at the New York School of Fine and Industrial Arts and the Arts Students League before working as a secretary for Hilla Rebay, the first

director and curator at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (later renamed the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), in the animation division of Signal Corps' Army Pictorial Service, and later as the night-manager of the Cable News Desk in the Foreign News Department at Time-Life, a position she held for over twenty years to support her artistic career. Using a hand-cranked Bolex camera, Menken created a group of dynamic and witty short films, many of which served as playful meditations on the relationship between filmmaking and the painterly and plastic arts and as portraits of the artistic practices of her friends and influences, including Isamu Noguchi, the subject of her first solo film *Visual Variations on Noguchi* (c. 1945-46/1953), Andy Warhol, who is captured at work in *Andy Warhol* (1964), and Fluxist artist Robert Watts, who appears in *Watts with Eggs* (1967). Menken was said to have taught Warhol how to use a Bolex camera and later acted in a number of his films. Menken began her career as a painter and maintained this practice, often creating highly textured canvases with reflective media including phosphorescent paint, crushed glass, and sequins which she exhibited at Betty Parsons Gallery and The Tibor de Nagy Gallery. In all mediums Menken rejected the "staid static," instead poetically experimenting with movement and light on the canvas and in film, as in her stunning masterpiece *Go! Go! Go!* (1962-64), an exhilarating time-lapse of the bustling streets of New York condensed from two years of stop-motion footage. Although still largely underrecognized, Menken has received more recent attention as the subject of Martina Kudlacek's poetic film *Notes on Marie Menken* (2007) and a small collection of insightful book chapters including by the influential experimental film historian P. Adams Sitney (in *Eyes Upside Down*, 2008) and art and film historian Cash (Melissa) Ragona (in *Women's Experimental Cinema*, 2007).

#### ABOUT LUCIA DLUGOSZEWSKI

Lucille (later "Lucia") Dlugoszewski (1925-2000) was an experimental American composer, poet, and later, choreographer. She was born to Polish immigrants in Detroit, where she first studied piano, before moving to New York to study with composers Grete Sultan, Edgard Varèse, and John Cage. She was interested in incorporating the sound of everyday life into her music and evoking a sense of poetic immediacy. In her lifetime she invented over one hundred musical instruments in collaboration with sculptor Ralph Drazio; developed a technique whereby she used a variety of objects to play directly on a piano's strings, which she termed the "timbre piano"; and composed music for theater, film, and dance. In 1952, Dlugoszewski began working with the choreographer and dancer Erick Hawkins, who became her lifelong collaborator and romantic partner. In 1953, Dlugoszewski became the composer-in-residence for the Erick Hawkins Dance Company and went on to compose more than 25 dance scores for Hawkins before eventually succeeding him after his death as the artistic director. Other notable collaborations include her original scores for three experimental films: Marie Menken's *Visual Variations on Noguchi* (c. 1945-46/1953), Jonas Mekas's *Guns of the Trees* (1962), and Maryette Charlton's *Zen in Ryoko-in* (1971); and her scores for multiple productions organized by the experimental New York-based theater group The Living Theater. Her work was also commissioned by Pierre Boulez and the New York Philharmonic, Mikhail Baryshnikov and the White Oak Dance Project, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Dlugoszewski was the recipient of numerous awards including the Tompkins Literary Award for poetry (1947) and an award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1966). In 1971, her *Tender Theatre*

*Flight Nagiere* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, and two years later she received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1978, she became the first woman to receive the Koussevitzky International Recording Award, for *Fire Fragile Flight* (1973).

#### ABOUT ISAMU NOGUCHI

Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) was one of the twentieth century’s most significant sculptors, yet his resolute redefinition of the art form led to a practice spanning gardens, playgrounds, public projects, furniture, lighting, and set design. He believed strongly in the social role of art and dedicated much of his life to creating public works such as parks, plazas, and fountains. Born in Los Angeles to a white American mother and a Japanese father, Noguchi felt a lifelong sense of never really belonging anywhere, and channeled this into his artistic vision and philosophy, aspiring to be a citizen of the world. Noguchi’s first retrospective in the United States was in 1968 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. In 1985, Noguchi opened the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, now known as The Noguchi Museum, in Long Island City, New York. In 1986, he represented the United States at the Venice Biennale. In accordance with his wishes, his studio in Mure, Japan, became the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum Japan in 1999. Noguchi received the Edward MacDowell Medal for Outstanding Lifetime Contribution to the Arts in 1982; the Kyoto Prize in Arts in 1986; the National Medal of Arts in 1987; and the Order of the Sacred Treasure from the Japanese government in 1988. He died in New York City in 1988. Learn more about the life and work of Isamu Noguchi: [\*\*noguchi.org/biography\*\*](http://noguchi.org/biography).

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