

RE: ARTS

MASAHIRO NAKAGAWA

Better living through recycling

By VICTORIA JAMES

Staff writer

In the world of haute couture, it is generally the design ideas that get recycled, not the clothes themselves. Barely has one decade ended before its trends resurface as retro chic: new clothes, same old look.

Little wonder, therefore, that the art and fashion worlds are beginning to sit up and take notice of 33-year-old Masahiro Nakagawa. As a designer, he has won a devoted following among Tokyo's youth for his hip 20471120 label (so named for Nakagawa's conviction that "something will happen on Nov. 20, 2047").

Under the name of Nakagawa Sochi, however, he is the anticonsumerism crusader behind the Tokyo Recycle Project, where old clothes get a brand-new look.

Nakagawa uses the term "recycouture" to describe the bizarre and often beautiful creations of his recycle project, which began in Tokyo in 1999 and was snapped up for a stint at the city's Watari-um Museum of Contemporary Art before traveling to Hong Kong and New York earlier this year. Tokyo Recycle Project #7 is currently part of the Yokohama Triennale, but the concept will have a permanent home at the new 20471120 store, opening in Shibuya on Nov. 23.

Although without formal training (he was working at an



Fashion designer Masahiro Nakagawa presents his Tokyo Recycle Project under the art-name of Nakagawa Sochi

KENSAKU SHIOTA
PHOTO

Osaka fishmarket when, in 1992, he met graphic designer Lica who became his collaborator on 20471120), Nakagawa doesn't design street fashion just because he can't handle high fashion — he chooses to. As if to quash any doubts, in his TRP #3 show at Art Tower Mito in Ibaraki Prefecture last year, the man who has put *anime* culture on catwalks worldwide demonstrated his mastery of formal design.

Nakagawa captured the look of each decade of the past century by sending models down the catwalk in recycled outfits pieced together

from contemporary castoffs, such as a '50s prom dress made from baseball jackets — and then sending the same items out again, this time paired with jeans, for a flawless take on HaraJuku trends.

But fashion is only the beginning of what Nakagawa is trying to do with his recycle projects: "You yourself are recycled," the artist's statement promises those handing over garments. "The point of this is that, hopefully, you the participant feel a little bit more invigorated, regenerated, recycled."

This recycle philosophy is rooted in the designer's own experience of

the solitude and comfort-shopping so characteristic of big-city life. "The idea for the recycle project came after I moved from Osaka to Tokyo," the designer explains in TRP #7's fabric-strewn temporary workshop in Yokohama's Queen's Plaza. "I spent five years doing fashion shows with music, acrobats and circus performers — it was just like entertainment, really. But then I began to wonder what I was doing; I felt lonely. My company was expanding so fast that I had 30 employees but never any time to talk to them meaningfully. I bought anything that caught my interest — toys, CDs — but dumped it all quickly... One day, I painted everything in my apartment white, toys and everything, there was so much stuff. Then I could relax."

Nakagawa has written a manga to illustrate the underlying philosophy of the recycle project. It begins with Japan's familiar pop-culture blend of the *kawaii* (cute) and the *howai* (scary). Our hero, the round-faced bear Hyoma, leaves his rural home for Tokyo, where the streets are stalked by Godzilla-like "Guzzling Monsters" that gobble up new consumables and spew out old models. Missing his mom, Hyoma begins to wonder if city life is changing him for the worse, when a chance encounter leads him to the Nukegara dōjo. There, he renounces urban consumerism and discovers the three stages of spiritual cleansing:



Viny (the moment at which the desire to change appears); *Dappi* (the process of breaking one's shell); and *Nukegara* (the shed skin that reveals the reborn individual). Anime, meet asceticism.

It may be unusual to find a fashion designer critical of consumerism, but the message of Nakagawa's manga is deadly, if playfully, serious — and customers, too, play along. Hyoma is an alter ego of the designer himself; clients take the role of Hyoma's anxious mom and must enclose a "letter to Hyoma" along with the items they bring in for recycouture; and every



After "recycouture," baseball jackets are transformed into a 1950's prom dress (left), or in this before-and-after shot, a pair of trousers. PHOTOS COURTESY OF NAKAGAWA SOCHI

TRP gallery installation includes a replica Nukegara dōjo where visitors hand over their old clothes. Within the week, the finished piece is mailed out in what Nakagawa calls the "re-box." This,

like some reformed Pandora's box, should work its refreshing magic when opened by the customer.

Despite his idealistic philosophy, Nakagawa is delightfully down-to-earth in person. Friendly and informal, he gives every appearance of being oblivious to his growing reputation. Last year he was invited to exhibit at the Tokyo-Los Angeles Superficial show, curated by Japan's artistic powerhouse Takashi Murakami. He's been praised by *The New York Times* and *International Newsweek*, and his 20471120 HaraJuku store has been patronized

by John Galliano of Dior.

It is difficult, though, to guess what course Nakagawa's career will take from here. An icon for the manga generation, his stated aim as an artist and designer is to discover "what fashion might be capable of meaning."

And what conclusions has he reached so far? "I started the recycle project because I didn't want to be just another commodity for consumption," explains Nakagawa. "What does fashion mean? Fashion is — or should be — an expression of freedom."

The new 20471120 store is at Shinjuku Bldg. 1F, 3-26-8 Shibuya-ku, tel. (03) 6770-2060

Correction

In the article about Japanese art in Britain which appeared on Page 13 of the Oct. 31 issue, Yoshiko Shimada and Itaru should have been described as two separate individuals who collaborated on the work "Birth — Concealment of Venus."