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Junichi Arai

Textile Designer, 1932 - 2017

In September 2017, Kiryu city lost one of its most recognised sons. At the same time, the world lost one of its greatest textile designers. From working in the family obi and kimono weaving business, to the global collaborations and applications of his designs, Junichi Arai, self-titled 'textile planner', quietly revolutionised the textiles industry.

Arai's work was rooted in woven textiles where he was instrumental in the digitisation of Jacquard weaving, first translating his wife Riko's black-and-white woodcuts into cloth. But he moved fluidly across knitting, printing, dyeing and pioneering transfer printing, and he became a widely recognised expert on Kiryu's mills and workshops. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s he collaborated with leading textile innovators particularly in fashion, where his concepts were fundamental to avant-garde designers like Kansai Yamamoto, Rei Kawakubo and Issey Miyake. This work secured global recognition and awards, including the 'Honorary Designer for Industry'. He also cofounded the Nuno Corporation where his touch remains evident today. By the late 1980s as his practice shifted to artistic production he found close friends and champions in designers and artists Jack Lenor Larsen, Sheila Hicks and Diane Sheehan. He had a great bond with the British weaver Peter Collingwood, with whom he exchanged samples for years, and Ann Sutton, who was responsible for bringing Arai's genius to world audiences.

Passionate about primitive cultures and artefacts, Arai collected hand-made and natural objects from all over the world: from masks to oversized beaded necklaces, to giant seedpods, and textiles ancient and modern, the creativity, complexity or simplicity of which often formed the beginnings of his thinking.

He believed in 'construction and deconstruction', a highly conscious building from basics, in order to best understand how to 'un-build'. Much of his work began by reinventing established principles of yarn making, cloth construction and textile finishing to create unimaginable materialities. Through careful collaborations he developed slit-film plastic and metallic threads for extraordinary reflective and transparent qualities, and high-twist cottons for voluminous multi-layered cloths. He also loved to explore the chemistry of his materials in finishing treatments. He patented techniques like 'melt-off', removing material elements in given substrates to create diverse opacities and textures. And by resist-dyeing, he put the 'hand' back into factory built textiles.

Many of the ideas Arai developed have long-since become part of the DNA of contemporary textile design. But he never stopped reinventing, and was still sampling even a few weeks before his passing. His legacy in textiles, and indeed beyond, is truly great.