

**Ken Miki: Bringing Depth to Design** Japan has nearly every amenity that technology can provide. Yet most people feel curiously empty and robbed of direct experience. How can a designer reach people, and make them feel whole again? With thoughtful, literal and often tactile work, Ken Miki leads them back to earth. **By Maggie Kinser Saiki**

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In an ancient Japanese fable, the sun and the wind hold a contest to prove which is more powerful. Below them walks a man wearing a coat. Whoever convinces him to remove it will be the victor. The wind blusters and blows. Shunning the wind, the man pulls his coat closer to himself. The sun simply shines, and the man happily sheds his

extra layer. Putting ourselves in the man's place, we recognize that he is not simply warm or cold, but is reacting emotionally to the methods used on him; no doubt he grimaces against the force used by the wind. Ken Miki is an Osaka-based designer in his mid-40s who works like the sun in this fable: compassionately. He invites us to participate in and enjoy the thinking process. He makes it a pleasure to join him in the dialogue, to follow him down the path to his insights, and to smile. When we search his work for meaning, we do not find ourselves in a maze constructed to challenge our convictions; we are standing on a plateau, arm in arm with the designer, enjoying the view. We warm up, remove our coats and prepare to stay a while.

Although design should not be a battle cry, the design in Japan today tends to be combative rather than inviting, colder when it could be warm. It responds to the tight weave of Japanese society and its culture, which expects of every individual loyalty to a group before loyalty to his own instincts and values. Communication through design in Japan often leans toward one of two extremes: It can be minimal, sophisticated and self-referential, something like the tea ceremony and similar prescribed cultural acts, or it can be coarse and unbound by culture, crass in its generalized statements, regardless of our diversity. Finding a friendly middle ground, in which communication via dialogue is unrestricted by the culture of a group, is a challenge for every designer in Japan. Miki, who founded his studio in 1982 at the age of 27, has continually found work through which to declare his belief in the strength of the individual, in personal experiences and insights, and in the power and necessity of cultural individualism, or ethnicity.

Ken Miki grew up in the city of Kobe and spent his childhood, like most post-war kids, playing marbles on the ground at the local Shinto shrine and making things out of found materials. His mother was a seamstress and his father ran a shop selling children's goods, both contributing to Miki's interest in objects, materials and crafts. In Japan, however, what your grandparents do is at least as important as what your parents do; it's where you came from. So on his father's advice, Miki spent the summer between fifth and sixth grade at his grandparents' salt farm, preparing a presentation on "old-fashioned" sea-salt production. This experience awakened in Miki a lasting curiosity about process and a deep respect for genuine labor, indige-

nous craft, and ethnicity. He has translated this curiosity into design founded on a genuine distinction between the image of a thing and the thing itself, between an imagined experience and the experience itself. He insists on a physical aspect that will stimulate the audience to recognize this distinction, often working in the third dimension.

Miki discovered topographic maps while in grade school. With a pair of scissors, he traced two-dimensional maps into old cardboard boxes, and constructed his own landscapes. Much of his three-dimensional work today stems from his understanding of the meaning inherent in this 2-D to 3-D transformation. Miki uses each dimension to deliver the appropriate message. For example, on the dust jacket for *Applied Typography 5*, the ancient hieroglyph for 'letter' is camouflaged in the hues and dots of a test chart for color blindness. Remove one layer (the dust jacket) and you find the 'letter' two colors removed, but one dimension closer; on the hard cover, it is embossed in white on white.

In another project for ABE Survey's corporate identity and brochure, Miki built mountains out of the company's name and explained its operations by making the brochure a picture book, describing in illustrations, not words, the measurements of civilization: such as the speed of running water, the numbers of cars on the roads, the decibel levels of trains. Miki's instinct for the appropriate physical expression appeals to the Japanese today because, even though Japan has accepted digital technology and virtual reality more readily than any other developed nation, half of its population can still recall the days of salt farming—the thoroughly analog world of post-war privation and a sense of wonder with the first consciously-designed objects. Supersonic post-war growth eventually produced the economic bubble of the 1980s, a glut of money and things, and some deep psychological needs.

In 1988, Miki executed an elaborate project that perfectly answered these needs. In a product design for a line of gift coffees and a store to sell them, Miki created a fictitious nation with the brand, "Nouveau Coffee," an imaginary amalgamation of 12 coffee-producing countries. With this product, he offered the customer a sense of connecting to both a simpler, more ethnically defined community than Japan would ever be again, and a wider, more sophisticated world than Japan could ever attempt to join. Miki involved his urban audience in the product by applying the Japanese custom of *omiyage* gift giving to a make-believe global country. The Japanese characters for *omiyage* mean "products of the earth," indicating unique local products we buy for people back home. Giving "omiyage" proves that we are travelers, part world citizen, and that we hobnobbed with the locals somewhere else. Miki suggests that he "over-designed" this job, but every decision was based on the product and its marketing objec-

tive. To make Japanese customers feel like part of a larger, ethnically diverse world, Miki filled the gift package with extras like an “art stone” illustrated with a primitive figure “with the roots of what a Navajo Indian might have drawn,” a CD that was “a national anthem for Nouveau Coffee, as if it were a country” and a “passport.”

Homogeneity is generally prized in Japan, but in 1990, Miki made a social statement with a corporate identity for the rebirth of an established space design company. He found his solution by rethinking similarities as they appear in nature. First he dissected the “W” of the company’s name, WRAP, into three triangles and turned them into three cones. Aiming to stress employees’ differences, he then gave the three cones to each of the 50 or so employees to rearrange as they liked. These arrangements became the unique symbols on their business cards, because as Miki put it, “They act and appear as a group because they have the same goal, but each is unique.”

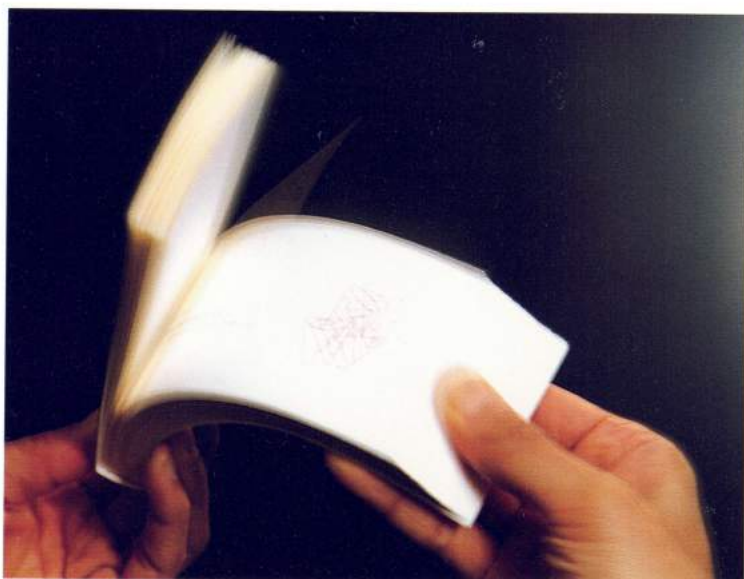
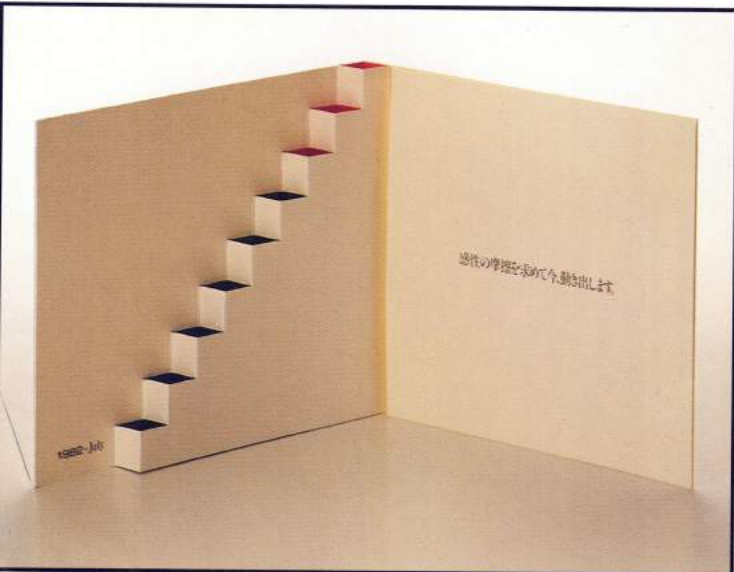
When his son Ibuki was born in 1993, Miki made three-dimensional graphic poetry in praise of individuality. He also made one of the most intricate birth announcements ever. The metal clasp on the outside of the announcement represents the belly button and umbilical cord. For the Japanese, the end of the umbilical cord is a keepsake, so this work speaks more directly to a Japanese audience, but the universal understanding of life and birth leads us all to the same conclusion; birth is a joy and yet the beginning of separation. Unclasping the metal closure releases the package, revealing a red thread running through three leaves (the character for Miki means “three trees”) and through the three surfaces of the accordion-fold announcement. In



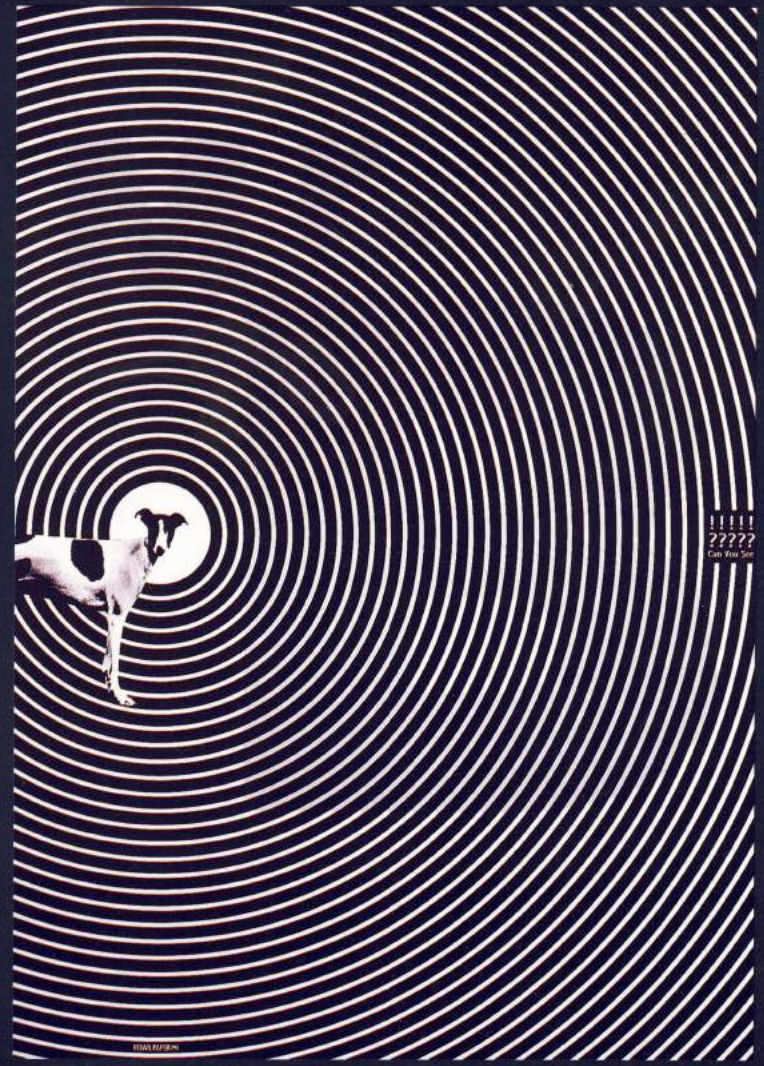
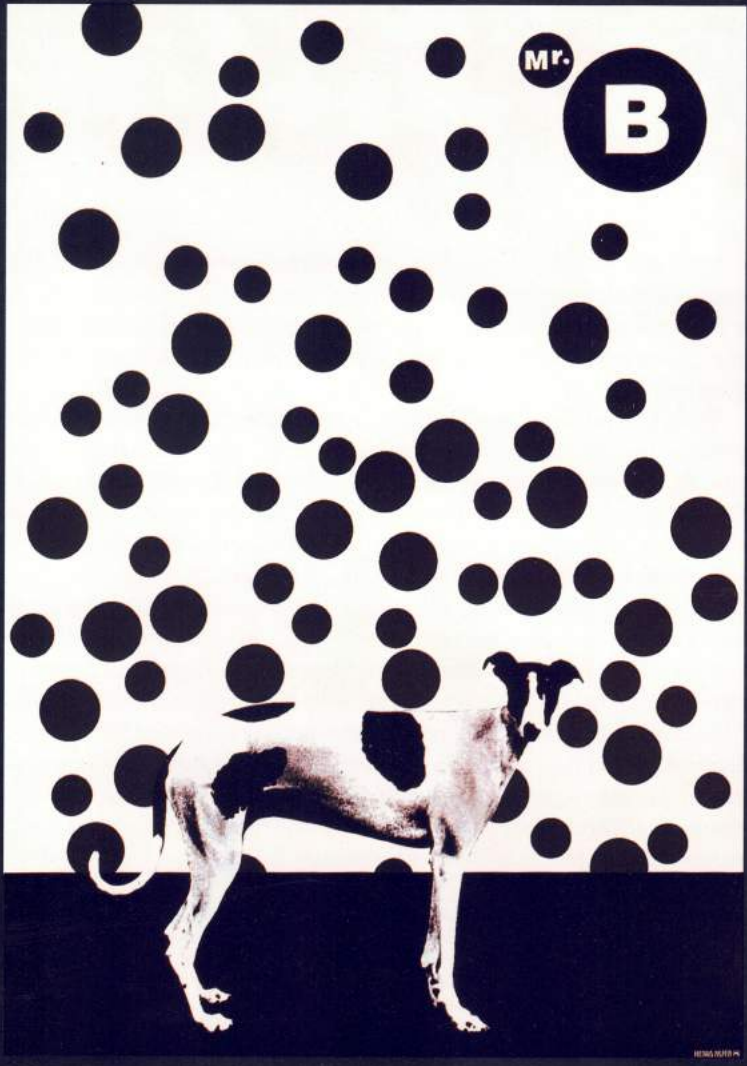
other parts of the package, Miki repeats the random squiggles of the cord, the full moon, and the yin-yang of life in three dimensions. With a flipbook of naked baby photos, he invites his friends and family to play animators, adding motion—time, the fourth dimension—to his package.

With temporality practically banished from the communication process by digitalization, Miki is doing his part to reinstate the grandeur of time. Miki’s work on the website of Japan IBM’s Design Center aims to counterbalance the speed, anonymity and emptiness of the digital experience. The first ‘Smile Project,’ a Miki original, is a greeting card that arrives like an email but can be ‘opened’ with a few clicks of the mouse, allowing us to experience the feeling of breaking the seal on a physical letter. When asked what he was looking for in the future of design, now that we are digitally connected, networked into complacency and globally standardized, Miki replied, “Since digitalization began, people have been craving something more human, more related to tools, culture, ethnicity, a more fundamental aspect, something with a greater life force. It’s very important to make things that thrill and excite us, and remain firmly in our hearts and memories, not just in a computer memory.”

(Opening page) Nipponjin poster for an exhibition, 1995 • Art Director & Designer: Ken Miki • Client: Close-up of Japan in Sao Paulo • (Opposite) Portrait of Ken Miki • Photo by: Kazuo Chikada • (Above) Ibuki, 1993 (A kit made to document his son’s birthday, with the first letter of his son’s name in 3-D graphics) • Art Director & Designer: Ken Miki • (Below, left) Established Card, 1982 (A greeting card describing the establishment of Miki’s office. The studio’s development and rise is expressed by stairs) • Art Director & Designer: Ken Miki • (Below, right) Wrap, 1990 • Art Director & Designer: Ken Miki Client: Wrap Inc.

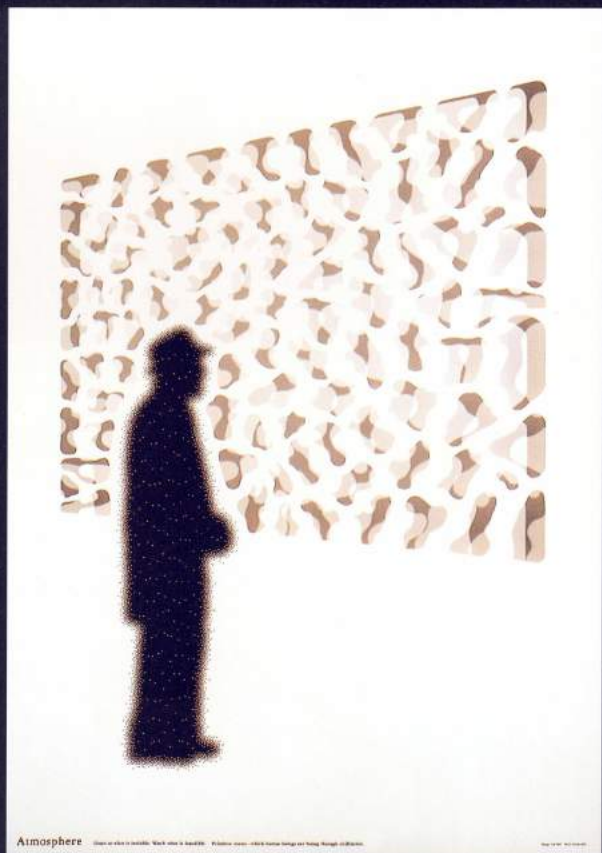
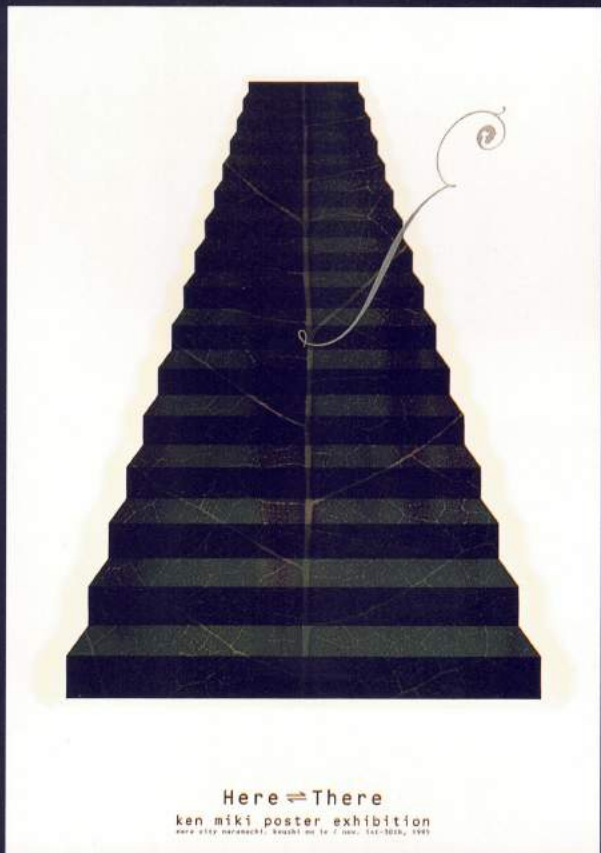
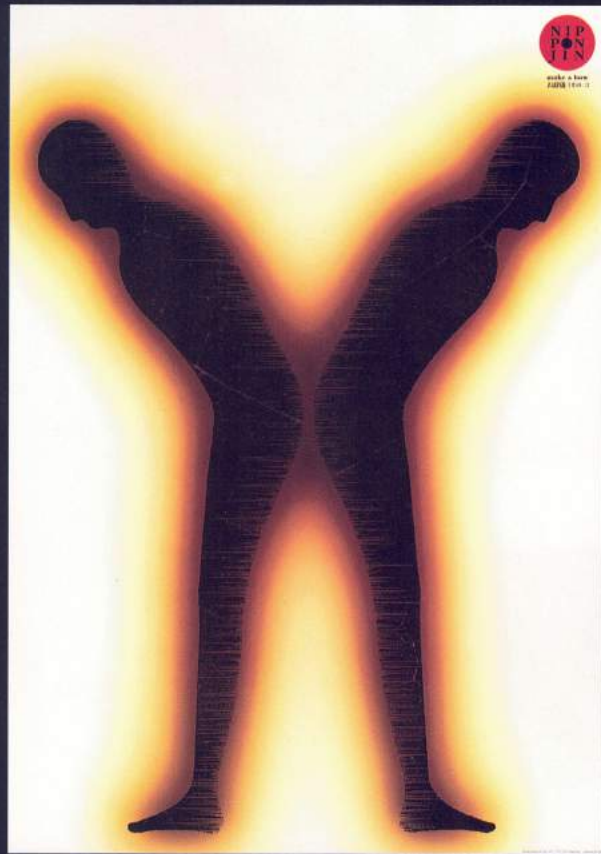


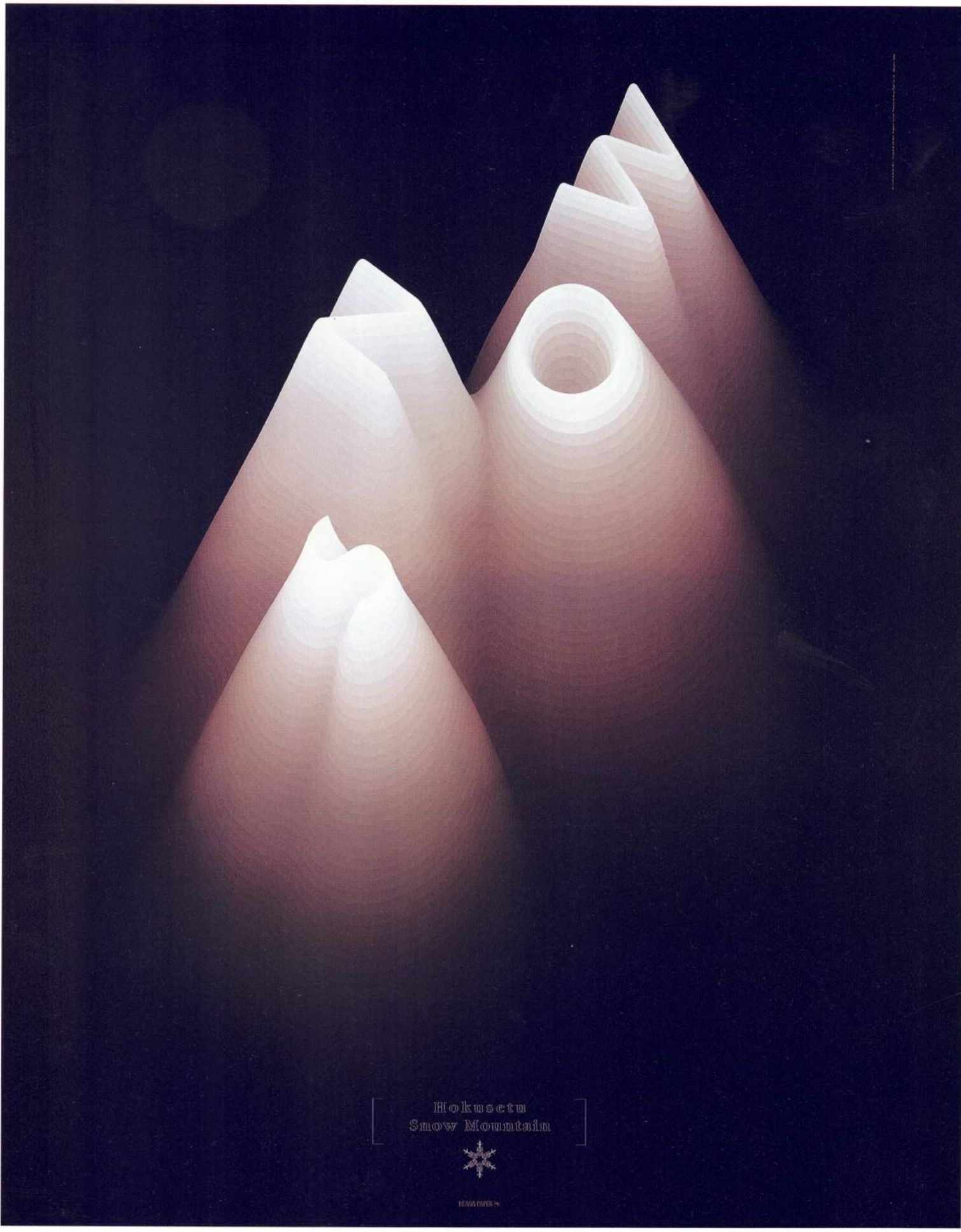
Posters of a paper named Mr. B, 1996 **Art Director & Designer:** Ken Miki **Photographer:** Nob. Fukuda **Client:** Heiwa Paper co., Ltd.





(Top, left & right) Nipponjin poster for an exhibition, 1995 Art Director & Designer: Ken Miki Client: Close-up of Japan in São Paulo, 1995 Art Director & Designer: Ken Miki Client: Foundation for Naramachi Promotion (Bottom left) Here There poster for an exhibition, 1996 Art Director & Designer: Ken Miki Client: Tomoko Miki Copywriter: Ken Miki Gallery: Haku





Hokusei  
Snow Mountain



HEIWA PAPER

Top: Lidic bottle and cosmetics packaging, 1994. Creative Director: Takuya Kihara. Art Director: Ken Miki. Designers: Ken Miki, Junji Osaki. Copywriter: Takuya Kihara. Photographer: Koutichi Okuwaki. Mariambolle Inc.

