

Reiko Sudo. NUNO: Visionary Japanese Textiles.
Edited by Naomi Pollock. London: Thames &
Hudson, 2021.

ROBERT, MARILYN

INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR OF TEXTILE AND FIBER RESEARCH, TEXTILE DESIGNER, AND VISUAL ARTIST

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BOOK REVIEW BY MARILYN ROBERT

NUNO: *Visionary Japanese Textiles* traces the history and development of the iconic Japanese design house NUNO Corporation (henceforth NUNO) from its inception to the present day. The word *nuno* 布 means simply “cloth” in Japanese. Sudō Reiko 須藤玲子 (whose work is known worldwide using the spelling “Sudo”) is the proprietor and head designer of NUNO. She is “an irrepressible creative force,” states Caroline Kennedy in the foreword to the book (p. 9). It is no exaggeration to say that her artistic vision endows NUNO with its reputation. The internationally renowned textile designer Arai Junichi 新井淳一 founded NUNO in 1983.¹ Soon after, he invited Sudo to join him at NUNO. Four years later he turned over the role of Design Director to Sudo. Arai was the catalyst for Sudo’s textile education; already widely recognized and praised for his avant-garde textile creations, his genius propelled her forward. Some of NUNO’s early innovative designs from the 1980s, radical for the time and designed individually and together, are found in this volume with decades of textile creation.

NUNO has turned the world textile design industry on its proverbial head, led by Sudo, who uses her ability

to combine high technology and low technology along with artisan-designed traditions to create formerly unimaginable cloth. Most of her textiles are made entirely by machine, but many have the sensibility of handwoven textiles. From a childhood introduction to textiles and on through her working life Sudo had an appreciation for the craft of the maker. She was a weaver and dyer herself in her formative years, and came to understand and appreciate the discipline of cloth production by hand. NUNO brings that knowledge to its design work, and along the way it has managed to bridge the cloth of kimono with spatter-plating—a technique from the automotive industry (pp. 13–14).²

The book is well illustrated, with contributions by notable writers outside the field of textiles, from architect to author to archaeologist. It is organized into eight chapters, of which the titles and partial content of five of the chapters are from a series of seven small-format hardcover illustrated volumes in the “NUNO NUNO BOOKS” series published by NUNO Corporation between 1997 and 2012. The seven are *BORO BORO* (1997), *SUKÉ SUKÉ* (1997), *FUWA FUWA* (1998),

1 The introduction (p. 10) states that Arai started NUNO in 1983. Other sources give 1981 and 1984.

2 Spatter-plating is a special process used in the automotive industry to “chrome” door handles and other small parts. NUNO was able to apply it to a large, flat, flexible fabric surface.

SHIMI JIMI (1998), KIRA KIRA (1999), ZAWA ZAWA (1999), and ZOKU ZOKU (2012). Two, SHIMI JIMI and ZOKU ZOKU, are not seen in the new publication. The book under review adds three more chapters, SHIWA SHIWA, SHIMA SHIMA, and IRO IRO to the five. Each chapter title is a pair of onomatopoeic words that emphasize the emotive meaning and suggest the qualities of the textiles described within. For example, *boro boro* ぼろぼろ means ragged, tattered, and frayed (p. 308) and contains those textiles that appear deconstructed, and are designed to take advantage of that very feature of the cloth. The sophistication of the seemingly unstructured cloth is exploited in the garments sewn from it, with beautiful results. Other examples include SHIMA SHIMA, meaning “striped, patterned in bands” (p. 116), ZAWA ZAWA, “humming, bustling, lively” (p. 260), and IRO IRO, “layered with different colours” (p. 353).

In another chapter, the design concept for SHIWA SHIWA (*shiwa shiwa* しわしわ) meaning wrinkled, rumpled, and tucked (p. 68), is indicated with a quotation from Hara Kenya 原研哉, a graphic designer and president of Nippon Design Center. “There is a special Japanese aesthetic sensibility known as *mono no aware*, ‘pathos toward things,’ a poetic appreciation of impermanence premised on a Buddhist awareness that all phenomena shift and change, reaching their peak for only a fleeting moment” (p. 72). This sensitivity is manifest in the textiles shown in this chapter. Some of these are manufactured by combining different fibers that perform differently with exposure to elements such as heat. For example, the cloth *Demon Crepe* (p. 71) combines wool and cotton (it is also worth noting the names NUNO gives to their textiles are among the most creative in the industry). When the wool shrinks in a hot-water bath, the cotton yarns are pushed out, creating a rippled texture. SHIWA SHIWA includes multiple textile examples that use yarns with different properties. When varied weave structures or other tools and equipment are added to the mix, new designs and patterns are created.

In her fulsome introduction to the book, Naomi Pollock, an American architect and the editor of this volume, notes, “For NUNO, standard weaving structures are meant to be reconfigured; the behavior of fibers, natural or artificial, is to be exploited; and just about anything, be it a rusty nail, dinner fork or rubber band, can be a design tool” (p. 11). Within each chapter of this book are essays that relate to the types

of cloth under discussion in each respective chapter, but in delightfully oblique and creative ways. Some of the writings from the earlier “NUNO NUNO BOOKS” series are repeated here with little or no modification but the format is entirely different, with the new publication much larger and thicker than each small volume, although both the series of “NUNO NUNO BOOKS” and the present publication are amply illustrated. The smaller books have glossy covers that illustrate a textile featured within whereas *NUNO: Visionary Japanese Textiles* has a special cloth cover. The writings include an essay by author Murakami Haruki 村上春樹 (pp. 22–24) that first appeared in *FUWA FUWA* (1998), and another (pp. 212–16) by architect Itō Toyō 伊藤豊雄 is taken from *SUKÉ SUKÉ* (1997).

The reader of *NUNO: Visionary Japanese Textiles* will note Sudo’s respect for the textile traditions that NUNO helps keep alive. We see this in the use of the traditional indigo dye employed with some of the cloth. Indigo dyeing (*aizome* 藍染) has a rich history in Japan going back to the Edo 江戸 period (1603–1868). Pollock notes in her introduction that Sudo, working with retailer MUJI, promotes this traditional dye technique as a member of the advisory board for reMUJI, a MUJI subsidiary company whose focus is sustainability, reuse, and remaking. In their processes, pre-owned cloth items and scraps are shredded, mixed with new fibers, respun into new thread or yarn, and then reconstructed. Many are dyed with indigo in small dyehouses and resold (p. 15). NUNO attends to the reduction of waste with its own designs. Looking at cloth in the *BORO BORO* chapter, there is *Twig Gather Ohshima* (pp. 322–23), slices of cloth remnants stitched on silk organdy. Another textile made with recycled cloth is *Tsugihagi* (pp. 326–27), which is constructed from fabric scraps in the fashion of overlapping patchwork-pieced quilts.

In addition to the cloth and clothing sold at the NUNO outlet in Tokyo and within department stores or other shops in a few cities in Japan,³ Sudo has designed large commissions, among them all the textiles (floor, furniture, and wall treatments) for the hotel Mandarin Oriental, Tokyo. They have also constructed installations such as *Koinobori Now!* which premiered at the National Art Center, Tokyo in 2018, for which

3 More information about NUNO’s shops, exhibitions, and textiles can be found on the NUNO Corporation website, nuno.com

NUNO made hundreds of carp fish windsock streamers—a feature of Children’s Day celebrations in Japan (p. 8). These fish were shaped from NUNO cloth and suspended from the ceiling. A recent exhibition, *Making NUNO: Japanese Textile Innovation from Sudo Reiko* held at Japan House London from 17 May to 11 July 2021 was widely acclaimed.⁴ Some NUNO textiles seen in the present volume can be found in collections of major art museums and other institutions, including the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City.

The chapters that largely reproduce the earlier series of “NUNO NUNO BOOKS” also include additional textile pieces. The cloth in the chapter titled *KIRA KIRA*, meaning “shiny” or “to sparkle,” highlights NUNO’s dazzling metallic inventions that use copper, stainless steel, and bronze to fashion both the threads to be woven as well as the finished cloth and garments. Another technique features the spatter-plating technique noted above with iron, chromium, and nickel—stainless steel alloys, applied onto polyester organza, which results in both cloth, such as *Sputtered Gloss* (pp. 174–75), and a jacket of that cloth. Sudo’s craft education background is evident in this cloth and other designs (pp. 12–14). She studied metals and food, ceramics, and wood. By 1995 Sudo had developed a process whereby cotton threads are coated in a gel made from banana plantain stalks, resulting in a cloth, *Knossos* (p. 367), that offers the coolness of *asa* 麻 (cloth made from hemp, linen, ramie, or other plant fibers), just right for a regional subtropical climate. Together, these ideas reflect engineering skills that permit NUNO to conduct artful experimentation with material properties, fluid mechanics, electricity, and thermal conductivity: branches of science and technology that are concerned with design, building, and structure.

NUNO is dedicated to small textile businesses, and employs a number of them in production. It works with small family weaving studios (p. 154), an embroidery business (p. 304), and local dyers. In Kiryu City 桐生市 (Gunma Prefecture), at the Gunma [Prefectural] Textile Research Institute (Gunma Sen’ikōgyōshikenjo 群馬繊維工業試験場), NUNO created origami-shaped organza cloth (p. 110). In the original fabrication of *Origami Pleats* (p. 109), the cloth was fitted into a paper

that was folded into an origami shape. A sheet of dye-colored paper was placed above and another below the cloth in what could be called an “origami package.” Then it was moved to a heat press where the shape and colors were permanently set.⁵ Since then, Sudo states, “Thirteen years and many origami textiles later, seeking to replicate the same results without all the laborious paper folding, we developed a loom that could create ‘peak’ and ‘valley’ folds mechanically, using alternating pin-tuck weaves to the back and front” (p. 105). With the innovation of woven cloth with pleats in place, NUNO saved time for the design and fabrication of other inventive cloth.

NUNO: Visionary Japanese Textiles is replete with photographs of stunning cloth from one page to the next. The images of these textiles are largely full page in this oversized book, stimulating admiration for the texture and weave structure of cloth, as well as the surface finish. One is struck by the diversity of threads and their properties; this cloth would not achieve its fame without such variety. There are overspun cotton, wool, and silk yarns, paper, *kibiso* (silk made from the outer layer of a silk cocoon, which is usually considered waste material),⁶ milk casein, metallized threads, aluminum/nylon slit yarns, cotton-covered Spandex,TM and more. The descriptions of these textiles bring wonder at the manipulation of the properties of the threads.

What lies ahead for NUNO? What new ideas for cloth from Sudo and the creative staff of NUNO will extend the textile vocabulary in the twenty-first century? We will continue to look to NUNO and the art of the thread to excite and inspire. How will we see and use NUNO cloth over the next forty years? How will science transform the threads yet again? *NUNO: Visionary Japanese Textiles* undoubtedly will continue to offer readers a collection of the most influential textiles in our experiential world.

4 The virtual exhibition may be viewed on the website www.japanhouselondon.uk.

5 For Sudo’s explanation of the process and images of *Origami Pleats* see two videos made at COOPER HEWITT: <https://collection.cooperhewitt.org/objects/18699461/videos/>.

6 See <https://www.cooperhewitt.org/2017/02/28/green-glossary-k-for-kibiso/>.