

The enigmatic Hideki Inaba is winning more and more prestigious client work and critical recognition. His refusal to reveal the method behind his trademark style makes it all the more beguiling, says Richard Clayton

If it's possible to judge a man by the company he keeps, Hideki Inaba is a force to be reckoned with. His work might not be familiar in the UK, but it's been seen alongside that of Michael Bierut, Vince Frost and Milton Glaser on posters in New York and in a Barcelona gallery that was also showing Joshua Davis, eBoy and Rinzen. Now his name has been dropped with those of Jonathan Barnbrook, Kessels Kramer and Stefan Sagmeister in Taschen's latest survey of Contemporary Graphic Design. Surely that's admission to the magic circle?

'His work is absolutely cutting edge in its form and use of technology,' says Charlotte Fiell, co-editor of the Taschen book. 'It has an amazing sense of lightness and movement, while his use of proportion and composition is spot on, giving it a very Japanese sense of harmony and balance.'

Despite a client list that includes Sony, Nike and Levi's, however, the Tokyo-based Inaba is not especially big in Japan – though that might be about to change. He has just applied his characteristically fluid swirls to packaging for Shu Uemura, an upscale cosmetics brand popular with the city's most fragrant shopaholics. His studio, which currently consists of himself and two assistants, may soon need a few extra hands.

'I'm not sure how my work fits into the Japanese design scene,' Inaba says. 'I don't think it's mainstream. In Japan, many ads use movie stars to get their messages across, such is the power of the media. My work is a small activity by comparison.'

His modesty does him credit, but it's not particularly illuminating. Fiell, fortunately, goes further. 'A lot of work coming out of Japan is either more commercial or has a "cutesy" element,' she says. 'Inaba, in contrast, has an ethereal, transient and poetic quality, reminiscent of [the late] Shiro Kuramata in architecture and product design. In some ways, Inaba's style is very Japanese, yet it also transcends cultures, because it has an engaging quality that anybody can appreciate.'

The language barrier is a problem when interviewing Inaba – though his faltering English is far better than my non-existent

Japanese – and it's hard to get his measure. Yet I'd wager he's a singular personality, the kind that knows his own mind and follows his own path. Born in 1971, he is a science graduate, with no formal design training. The ribbon-like pattern, which diffuses through many of his works like ink in water, is his visual leitmotif. Is he conscious, then, of having a distinct aesthetic?

'I will do what I want to do,' he replies. 'I can only say that for the time being.' Perhaps having admired New Line, Inaba's solo art project, Shu Uemura asked him to create a graphic for the 24th anniversary of its boutique in the chi-chi Omotesando area of Tokyo. Mindful of the company's 'fusion of art, nature and science', Inaba designed a celebratory 'bouquet' marque, which has been implemented on-pack and in-store.

Of his New Line project, Inaba says, 'I wanted to make graphics with my feeling [sic] like a piece of music or a painting, not thinking in my head.' Maybe he could have become a digital artist if a friend hadn't got his design career moving by inviting him to work on a magazine launch in 1997. Inaba was art director of +81 for the next four years, and he's still involved in editorial design with the GasBooks series of monographs.

Alice Twemlow, a US design writer and lecturer at the School of Visual Arts in New York, commissioned a poster from him last autumn. She recognises his artistic eye. 'His gestural design evokes both the calligraphic traditions of Japan and the contemporary aesthetic of computer graphics,' she says. For his part, Inaba admits he 'doesn't really like the hand-drawn line', but won't divulge what software he uses. 'Many people ask me about this, so I'd prefer not to answer.'

Inaba might be secretive about the tricks of his trade, but he is prepared to pull his rabbit from any hat. 'I don't care about the medium, as long as it's new and interesting,' he says. So which will be the first British brand to fall under his spell?

Contemporary Graphic Design, edited by Charlotte and Peter Fiell, will be published by Taschen in August