This summer I had the privilege to spend a month in Japan. I was also lucky enough to hike in the mountains in Big Sur, California on the way to Japan, which became an important contrast to the wilderness I would experience. The unfamiliar creased rich green landscape I saw below me on my descent into Japan was the first indication that I was about to arrive in a foreign land.
The first 23 days of my trip were spent in a residency at Sandwhich, the studio of artist Kohei Nawa. I learned of this opportunity from Robert Platt after showing him my work. Kohei works with ideas of nature and perception using synthetic materials. I also work within a similar paradigm and have explored similar materials; glue, insulation foam, resin, and yupo paper. It was an invaluable experience to see how Kohei and his staff structured and approached his projects, materials, and work on a day to day basis.

Every morning at 9:00am everybody met upstairs in a large circle and exercised to raji taiso which is a form of warm up calisthenics. You can listen to the song that accompanies this here: http://taro.podomatic.com/entry/2007-08-15T16_10_08-07_00

After exercising and having a short group meeting where we would be told who would be visiting the studio that day, we cleaned our work and living spaces for a half an hour before starting the workday. These rituals were very different from my own practice, but I found that they really helped me ease into the workday. I worked in the area pictured above and to the right. On my first day I was given a wooden board to practice placing glass marbles on with hot glue. After I finished I was taught how to apply resin to the surface of the marbles evenly and seamlessly. The careful, precise, and quick movements required by these processes are very different than my messy experimental material based processes. Engaging in this practice 5 days a week really gave me a deep appreciation for what it takes to realize Nawa san’s vision, but even more, it gave me a renewed sense of love for my own studio practice.
After the 9 - 6 workday I spent time on my work. I built an apparatus from funnels I found at the hardware store, or the do it yourself store as it was referred to in English.

The apparatus was designed to use gravity to mix two different colors. I know it is hard to see, but the larger component on the left has red ink in it and the one on the right in filled with pink ink. Then I allowed all of the mixture to drip on the yupo paper at a rate of approximately 1 drip every 4 seconds and then I let the water evaporate, which took about 4 days. These details became something I was inspired to pay attention to due to the nature of the work I was doing for Nawa san.
Artifact of the process of dripping pink and red ink onto yupo paper and allowing evaporation to take place undisturbed.

When I returned to my studio in Ann Arbor I went back into the form in the picture on the left with alcohol to disperse the concentrated pigments.
I also did more controlled experiments with ink, water, alcohol, yupo paper, and plexiglass.
Unfortunately, I don't have any pictures of the time when Nawa san took Robert Platt and I to an exhibit he curated of his students and then took us out for an amazing meal. However, I did take a picture of one of his works that was displayed at the exhibition. This painting is made with ink and metallic powder on yupo paper using an air compressor.

The piece to the right is an ink on wall painting/drawing done by Nawa san in Kobe at Madame Kiki's.
The view of the Uji river outside of Sandwhich.
Nawa san took a group of architects and artists from Sandwich on a 2 day trip to see projects they had in the works at Inujima, an island occupied by many art and architecture projects and Kobe. We met at Kyoto Station, pictured above, and took many trains, a boat, a taxi, and my favorite mode of transportation, a Shinkansen. I will present a few pictures from the journey in the next few pages.
This is the project Kohei and a group of architects were working on at Inujima. There was a mini model of it in the studios that I looked at everyday so it was surreal to walk inside of a finished lifesize version.
Inujima used to be a copper refinery in the early 1900's, and was turned into an art project in 2008.
Our group took a Shinkansen to Madame Kiki's restaurant in Kobe where Nawa san and the artists and architects working at Sandwich redesigned the whole space. Madame Kiki and Nawa san are pictured in the photo in the lower right. The food was oishii!
This is Yuki and Aki. I met them in line waiting for the bus from Kansai airport to Kyoto Station on my first day in Japan. Yuki came up to me to see if I needed any help figuring out where I was going. I can't say this enough, people in Japan are so very nice! They had just come back from a 3 day trip to Canada and Yuki was pretty good at speaking English so we talked almost the whole bus ride to the train station, which was about 2.5 hours long. We traded e-mail addresses and decided to keep in touch. A few weeks later they came to Sandwich and picked me up to take me to their town, which was about an hour and a half away. On the way we stopped at Biwa lake, where they have a boat named Michigan because they think of Lake Michigan and Lake Biwa as sister lakes. Then they took me food shopping to get ingredients for taco-yaki for dinner and to show me all the different kind of food they have. We arrived to their home and they showed me around before we went next door to their neighbors house for dinner. Their neighbor is a sweet family with three young girls. Yuki teaches the girls english so they were very excited to meet their first native speaker. Their mother had prepared games to play and we all cooked taco-yaki at the dinner table together. Taco-yaki are called octopus balls in english. They are cooked with vegetables and batter in a special cooking pan. After dinner we drew pictures of each other and had fun trying to teach each other English and Japanese.
Minami is the little girl pictured in these images. Yuki sent me an e-mail the day after our day together. She said:

"When we went home at night, we met Minami.
She said to me "I want to go to America and visit Jessica!! I have to save allowance!!"
She is so cute."

I offered to talk to Minami over Skype when I returned to America so she can continue to practice her English.
I went on many other day trips with other artists in residence during my time at Sandwich. We went to the mountains of Nara, many shrines, gardens, and even an onsen (bath house in the hot springs). During the last week I went to Tokyo and stayed in the Asakusa District (pictured below) at a hostel.
When you enter a shinto shrine it is customary to wash your hands in a purification trough. You can see me doing this on page 1 of this report. The role water plays in the cleansing of impurities was very powerful to me.

Another custom is to write a wish or a blessing on a wooden plate. Several hundreds of them are displayed with wishes written in many different languages. The one at the bottom left of this page says:

"I wish that everyone in the world is happy. Love India"

"A shimenawa (pictured below) is a straw rope with white zigzag paper strips (shide). It marks the boundary to something sacred and can be found on torii gates, around sacred trees and stones, etc."

--Japan-Guide

I saw people praying under them.
Contemporary Art in Tokyo

'Reflection' installation by Do-Ho Suh

Video Installation by Pippilotti Rist
I saw a lot of art in Japan, but most of the spaces do not allow photos to be taken. The most incredible show I saw was by "Lee Bul: From Me, Belongs to You Only" at the Mori Museum. It was a solo exhibition which included 4 major series that Bul has worked on. Her works in this exhibition span the gamut from simple small paintings that hang modestly on a wall amongst large pristine cyborgs hanging from the ceiling to a floor covered in mirrors reflecting the large sculptures that sit on top of them. There is a room that was remade into her studio space. It was insightful to be allowed to peek into Lee Bul's process. In her studio I saw several versions of the same sculpture made with different materials. I saw shrunken versions of the larger installations I had just encountered and I was allowed to glean clues for what was to come. There were videos playing in perfectly crafted white futuristic bubble cars, and interactive installations.

I was in awe walking through all her worlds within worlds and seeing all the directions she was able to go with her work.

You can go here to see images from the exhibition: http://www.mori.art.museum/english/contents/leebul/introduction/index.html
