

APPETITE

Conversation with James Jack

April 7, 2021; Zoom Interview between New Haven & Pandan Studio, Singapore

Kathryn Miyawaki: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today about your practice. To start off, I am curious where your interest in soil comes from. Was there a specific experience or encounter that brought you to this practice?

James Jack: Thank you for this opportunity. I think every child, at some point, puts dirt in their mouth. I think it might be an instinct shared by humans and more than humans... a desire to touch but also internalize soil, the histories of the land, and the connections to our bodies. The earth is where we come from, it's also where our cells and our matter will return to.

In Japanese, *daichi* 大地 means Mother Earth. The artist who taught me this was Sekine Nobuo (1942-2019). I did oral histories with him and other Mono-ha artists while living in Japan as a Crown Prince Akihito Scholar from 2008. I learned the word *daichi*, animistic views of nature, as well as actions or practices of working with the Earth from these artists. Takayama Noboru, whose studio is still in Miyagi Prefecture today, was a big influence. Particularly around 3.11... a time of processing trauma while loving the earth but also being very afraid of it. Takayama was a passionate artist, professor and lifelong critic of human-centric consciousness. The work *Iwaki Windows* was made in the years right after 2011, with a hope to re-sensitize ourselves through direct contact with the earth once again, even though it is contaminated with radiation. For example, while making these drawings, there were Geiger counters everywhere in Iwaki city and many areas of Tohoku — remember, this was in 2012-2013, not long after the Daiichi explosion. In Takayama's words, "We play with nature, and nature plays with us." My artistic consciousness is rooted in this very intimate relationship with the earth.

Kaushik and I talked about this because Appetite is a restaurant — I was working on an organic farm for a year and a half right after finishing my undergraduate degree. Five months after I moved to the farm, 9/11 occurred. I will never forget the safety of being on a farm, while the volatile situation unfolded in lower Manhattan, affecting our family, friends and many others. The gasoline, supplies and roads were restricted everywhere surrounding the city including the highway that led to the farm. We couldn't deliver produce to Soho, so we had an abundance of food, shelter, and each other. There was a lot of uncertainty, but we had the essentials — nutrients, Earth, love, creativity, health. From that point on, I always remember that cities such as Tokyo, Singapore and New York depend upon agriculture, resources and knowledge from rural areas. Now we're in another pandemic — different from 3.11 and 9/11 — but still, too many of the problems in these circumstances are caused by humans. I hope that in repairing our connections with the earth, we as humans might be able to correct some of our bad habits and care for each other and for the earth better. Those are a few brief experiences that have shaped my artistic practice of working with the earth.

K: For *Iwaki Windows*, many of your samples were from Japan—were they sites that were still considered "danger zones" due to radiation? What specific areas of Japan were you taking these samples from?

J: Yes, the work started and ended with Iwaki city, which is located in Fukushima Prefecture. I carried my sketchbook with me and wherever I went, I touched the earth, then rubbed it directly onto one sheet of paper. Other sites in Japan include Yame (Fukuoka Prefecture), Jōsō (Ibaraki), Naha (Okinawa), Beppu (Oita) as well as sites in Hawai'i, Singapore and other places. When the work was first exhibited at Iwaki Alios Center and Moritakaya Art Space (2014), a separate bilingual list was provided to viewers listing the 88 sites included in this work. The series is intentionally composed of 88 sheets in homage to the number of temples along the *henromichi*, or pathway of pilgrims on Shōdō Island, which I had just completed walking on in late 2011.

K: You made them by rubbing the soil onto the paper with your finger?

J: Yes, no tools... just a trace of dirt in between two fingers gently rubbed into the paper. On the back, each piece of paper is labelled with the location of the soil sample. These are actually pages of my sketchbooks, which I created as a meditation while trying to work through a difficult situation. For a few years after 3.11, I kept a record of the place I was in. I was teaching an open seminar in Iwaki city each month while completing my PhD, which consisted of a series of talks with local community arts organizations. It was an art management seminar, so people of diverse ages and backgrounds from local organizations who wanted to heal, recover and thrive with art and culture gathered monthly to talk openly together. There was some support for post-3.11 rebuilding in Tohoku, and I continued to help them achieve their dreams: get grants, start up an artist residency program in a clothing factory, make specific proposals to hold exhibits outdoors and other cultural activities after the triple disaster.

One of the towns was Ōfunato, others included Futaba, Namie and Onahama, as well as some sites along the side of the road, where there were countless big sacks full of topsoil contaminated from radiation. The government didn't know what to do with these bags of topsoil — some of them are still there, apparently. Some of the *Iwaki Windows* samples come from there, and some come from Tokyo. This one is from Majorca, Spain, where I travelled with my partner to visit a friend of ours who was doing a residency at the Utzon home. This one is from Hakozaki in Fukuoka, which is where I ended up living later. Another is from Yame, where I advised a project called the 芸濃, or Art-Farm school. Some are from the US. This one is from Gillman Barracks in Singapore. I was making these between 2012 to 2015, then we showed it in 2016 at Iwaki.

K: When you were in Japan and speaking with those affected by 3.11, how were people reckoning with the aftermath of the catastrophes? Was it something that was talked about openly? Or were people struggling to speak about it, given that it was only a year or two after it happened?

J: I would say both of those reactions were there, and much more. Some people were talking a lot about it, other people were struggling inside and quiet on the outside, while others near me were doing a lot of volunteer work. There was a lot of trauma and uncertainty because of the nuclear meltdown... it is a never-ending disaster that continues to this day with the scheduled release of the contaminated water into the sea and thyroid cancer rates increasing now.

Earthquakes happen frequently in Japan — people still remember the earthquake in Kobe clearly, for example, and there are a lot of smaller ones we experience all the time. So the earth shaking beneath us is strangely common, but the nuclear aspect was a big question mark. Information was being fudged by the government and they weren't sending out the real time reports of Geiger counters' measurements so this invisible toxicity aroused a lot of concern. A lot of professors and

friends of mine got their own counters and we loaned them to each other to test our own neighbourhoods for radiation. A professor in Gunma was giving out real time feeds on SNS so you could enter a code in convenience store copy machines and print out a map for that day's radiation levels in the Kanto region.

There was so much to consider at that time, even simple things like taking a walk became disconcerting when considering we enjoyed walking near waterways, canals, and rivers, which were hotspots for radiation. We were also worried about food because we didn't know if the soil was safe and certain foods were repositories for radiation such as mushrooms. There were all these mixed messages from the government and the news: foreign and domestic sources from scientists to journalists were all saying totally different things. It was impossible to know what to believe. That was all continuing to happen in our lives in Japan while I was making this work.

K: I can't even imagine the ambiguity and anxiety people felt during this time. How long were you in Japan? When did you end up leaving?

J: I never really left because so much of our lives remain there, but we moved to Singapore in 2018.

K: You made *Light of Singapore* using soil samples as well. I was wondering if you've noticed a difference in peoples' relationship with the land in Singapore versus Japan. When I was thinking about the timeliness and pertinence of this show at Appetite, I began to think about Singapore's paradoxical identity as a "Garden City." In your observations, what do you see to be the relationship people share with the natural environment in Singapore?

J: That's a great question. I don't have a clear answer just yet, but I do have some observations. To start of, a couple of the samples in *Iwaki Windows* are from Singapore because I came here for an exhibit in 2013 and a residency in 2015. From that time, and still in my practice today, I have been working on repairing fractured relationships between land and sea in Singapore. Many people have been displaced from the Singapore River to right in front of my studio, which is where the Pandan River meets the sea. So, I've been listening to their stories and their grievances as one window into the larger trends of displacement. This was in the 1980s, so there are just a few people that remember it vividly... but there are a lot more colonial remnants here that have been swept under the facade.

I make my large scale pieces with just pigments from one location. For my installation works, I only use samples from the place where the exhibit is occurring. Then I return the pigments after the project is over. For example, the works I make here in Singapore are all made with local dirt. For *Natura Naturata: Light of Singapore* (2017), all of the pigments are from Western Singapore — an HDB construction site on Commonwealth Ave, Fort Canning (an archaeological dig site that has revealed a lot of pre-colonial history), and the Japanese cemetery (which holds a lot of war memories). The Japanese occupation of Singapore was short but violent. Another place I took samples from was the MacRitchie Reservoir, which is where much of our water comes from. Now there are a lot of other plants that are being built for potable water from desalination, recycled water and additional catchments during the current pandemic. I gathered samples from these sites and more with students from NTU, who suggested locations that would be interesting — locations with rich social history as well.

I am interested in places that are currently in transition, such that they look like blocks of colour when you see them on the window or on the paper, but there's more to see — unwritten histories or alternative views on the past. Each of the colours come from a place with a story. These projects are very much about the past. Looking is not just looking, it's also reconsidering, rethinking, and rewriting the past. I hope that the simple act of looking at a colour — since you're looking at traces of the actual earth — reveals these stories, the ghosts, the insects, and previous ancestors that inhabited this land too.

K: Being in the presence of these soils triggers sight, taste, memory, and so many other sensorial experiences.

J: Yes. The sensation of being around that much dirt illuminated with light is a bodily experience... and not always a positive one. You feel all of these complicated memories, you might think of the stench of rotting soil or organic fertilizer.

K: Yes! Now that you mention it, the smell of soil carries so many memories for me, and for many others. My mom loves gardening and the smell of fresh mulch reminds me of her. My dad and I golf together a lot, and the chemical smell of fertilized grass or fertilized soil is a very distinct one.

J: Exactly. Have you been to Japan before? If so, what regions?

K: Yes! I went to Tokyo, Kyoto, and Hiroshima with my family when I was about eight years old. Then, after my sophomore year of high school, I studied abroad in Nagoya for the summer. I lived with a host family not knowing a lick of Japanese. I didn't grow up speaking it at all; my dad is third-generation and all of his family is in Hawai'i. My great grandparents were originally from outside Hiroshima.

J: Yeah, I was going to guess your family was from around Setouchi. My photographer in Takamatsu's family name is Miyawaki. Near Onomichi, Hiroshima Prefecture, an elderly couple helped us build the artwork *Boat to Khayalan* (2014-2018), and their family name was also Miyawaki. So I was thinking you might have roots in Setouchi, near Hiroshima.

K: Wow! That's so incredible. When I was in Japan, I came to realize that Miyawaki is not a very common Japanese name... so it's really amazing you knew two different people or families with that name. I really want to go back to Japan; it's such a wonderful place.

J: Absolutely.

K: Could you speak about your experience teaching and creating works there?

J: Absolutely. The dirt samples were borrowed, exhibited, and returned on from the same places — following local protocols. I worked with lawyer, professor, and community leader Malia Akutagawa. This spiral work is ongoing, and these are all community movements focused on Molokai and how the 'āina (the land) possesses the power of rejuvenation and protection. Protect Kahoolawe Ohana (PKO) became an outstanding positive example of how to protect the land from damage when they took back Kaho'olawe Island from the military, with indigenous rights, for example. I am engaged in a community art project in Kona, on Big Island, right now, and that will open later in May. The project focuses on water inside of the 'āina — the wetness inside the land.

It is an open system for re-sensitizing humans to the powerful presence of water and our dependence upon it.

K: That's amazing. So, you were only able to exhibit the samples that you borrowed in Hawai'i? I imagine there are restrictions on what leaves the island, but also that it was a matter of respecting the 'āina and the local peoples.

J: Right. There was a biennial really interested in the work I made with samples from Molokai for Honolulu Museum of Art, but the work was intransportable. The idea of taking something and touring it in an exhibition is a very colonial concept... like in a World Expo or national pavilion style of presentation. Instead, we got permission to use the Molokai spiral anywhere from my co-creators Uncle Walter Ritte and curator Healoha Johnston, and to share it with anyone who wants to learn how to care for the land today in this ongoing documentation of successful events to protect land. The focus of my artwork is on rejuvenation and community.

The lessons I learned on Molokai were about decolonizing our practices as artists by centring community voices and making decisions together from start to end. Actually, to tell the truth, Molokai won't let you do otherwise. If you don't follow the Molokai process, it is impossible to do anything. That conscience I learned from cultural practitioners including Malie Akutagawa, Walter Ritte and Matt Yamashita is very important for artists to practice today.

K: Wow. I had no idea.

J: Yeah, they are very careful who they let in and what they let out. Whenever somebody comes with a business proposal, a development plan, a camera, or something like that, Molokai will check your motives. If they are extractive or bad for the island, they will just chew you up and send you back where you came from. This is not about hatred, it is really all about love! They love the 'āina. They love people, and they will not tolerate otherwise. The community is so clear about what you need to do and how they want to be represented with their values of sharing, abundance, respect and caretaking. I was living on O'ahu in 2007 when I first went to Molokai, and I distinctly remember that the news on O'ahu often portrays Molokai people as jobless, anti-tourism, anti-this, anti-that. What should be in the spotlight is all that they are actually pro: pro-'āina, pro-humans, pro-sovereignty, pro-future, and much more. They are working hard to protect and promote deeply Hawaiian values. That's why they're so strict; they won't put up with any destructive behavior.

K: Yes. That's how it should be. They have every right to be that strict.

J: The love in their hearts, which drives their actions, can teach us ways to care for the land in our own neighborhoods now—let this conversation continue to spiral on in colourful shades to come!