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AIRY
(ARTIST IN RESIDENCE YAMANASHI)

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Thomas Lord

In 2011, after completing my Bachelor of Visual Arts at the Dunedin School of Art, I faced two paths: take out a substantial loan to start a photography studio or find a job that required a degree – any degree. A quick online search led me to the Japanese Exchange and Teaching Programme, an initiative that employs foreign teachers in Japan's public school system to not only teach but act as cultural ambassadors of their home nation. By August the following year, I found myself in Yamanashi-ken working as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) for the next two years.

The rural prefecture of Yamanashi welcomed me with a rhythm of life unlike anything I had known, marked by deep community ties, seasonal rituals, and a strong connection to the land. Immersing myself in this environment profoundly reshaped how I understood work and my place within a community. I picked fresh yuzu alongside locals, observed a 2000-year-old cherry blossom tree flower (Jindai-zukura) and immersed myself in daily life at every opportunity. Before leaving in late 2014, a serendipitous dinner in Yamanashi's capital city Kofu introduced me to Artist in Residence Yamanashi (AIRY), where two Danish artists shared insights into their full-time practices. Inspired, I promised myself that one day I would return, not as a teacher, but to AIRY as resident artist.

In March 2020, that promise was almost fulfilled when I was offered a residency at AIRY. Just as things were falling into place, the pandemic brought everything to a halt. Travel restrictions made the opportunity seem unattainable, but I remained in touch with AIRY's owner, artist Izumi Sakamoto. Our casual exchanges and updates on the weather and life in our respective countries proved valuable. She later told me that while many artists clamoured for a residency during uncertain times in their own countries, my consistent engagement reassured her of my genuine connection to Yamanashi. At the end of 2022, Izumi reached out: "How about next year?" I countered: "How about the year after?"¹

With time to prepare, I applied for funding from the Asia New Zealand Foundation. After two unsuccessful attempts, I was awarded support in March 2024 as a recipient of the Arts Practitioners Fund, only a couple of months before my scheduled residency.

I arrived in Tokyo on the last day of June and was welcomed by a sweltering temperature of 37°C and high humidity. Before heading to Yamanashi, I visited the Reminders Photography Stronghold, a Tokyo-based photobook archive and exhibition space. There I deposited my 2021 photobook *screams like home* and encountered Tetsuo Kashiwada's book and exhibition *Warasano*, a meditation on loss and absence through the lens of an only child deciding not to take over the family house and garden.² Seeing his photobook displayed as an installation expanded my thinking about exhibiting work with pages laid out alongside framed prints, mirroring the act of turning pages. A wall-sized print overlaid with framed images caught my attention for some time. It wasn't just the scale that intrigued me, but also the precision of the framing. The detailed mattes were perfectly aligned to the imagery beneath.



Figure 1. Feature wall Tetsuo Kashiwada.

Another significant early visit was to the Enoura Observatory, an architectural project by photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto. The observatory was designed to connect visitors to the ancient rhythms of time: sunrise at the summer solstice aligns with a glass corridor, which also acts as a gallery housing Sugimoto's large silver gelatine *Seascapes*; a winter solstice chamber welcomes the first light of the season as it travels down a passage before illuminating the Light Well which dates back to the Edo period (1603-1868).³ Walking through the observatory's gardens, encountering carefully placed ancient rocks and fossils, I felt a psychological shift. The pressure of producing work and the anxiety related to fulfilling obligations had lifted. I could simply be present and open to the experience and trust that my patient and slow practice, applied back home, would lead to honest and new work here. Absorb the land before reacting to it. Welcome chance encounters. These became guiding principles for my residency.

Travelling from Tokyo to Kofu is a beautiful experience in itself. The densely populated cityscape gradually gives way to lush greenery and dramatic gorges, before the journey passes through a mountainous tunnel emerging into Kofu. Kofu sits in a mountain basin, reminiscent of Central Otago and likewise famous for its fruit, wine and lakes – and of course Mt Fuji. Yamanashi has long drawn creatives such as the poet Bashō and the ukiyo-e artist Hokusai, who sought connection with nature, a retreat from the routines of Edo-period urban centres and a detachment from the material world. Beginning my month at AIRY, I felt grateful to be part of this rich tradition. AIRY occupies a former women's hospital founded by Izumi's father, with living quarters upstairs and a gallery below. It can host up to three residents at a time, but for my time I was the sole resident. It took a few days to become accustomed to my new surroundings. At night, the old hospital was filled with unfamiliar sounds and the shifting shadows of historical furniture. I came to accept these nocturnal offerings as a kind of unfamiliar language, one I tried to interpret rather than resist. I spent most nights venturing into the countryside nearby, reacquainting myself with Yamanashi's soundscape: a chorus of frogs in rice paddies, the relentless buzz of cicadas. Long moments were simply spent staying still, listening and attuning myself to subtle shifts within the landscape.

The extreme heat, which often exceeded 40°C, forced me to adapt. My original plan to create daily plein air drawings proved impossible, so I worked indoors during the cooler morning hours. The slow process of layering gouache and pastel while reflecting on my surroundings helped me cultivate patience. Just as I was ready to begin photographing with my large format camera, I discovered a crucial part had broken. With weeks before a replacement could arrive, I switched to a digital workflow but imposed constraints: shoot with a tripod, disable image previews and delay any form of review for days, to preserve an intentional slowness and time to process the experience offered before me and my lens.

I structured my work around revisiting Minobusan, a mountain that I used to visit regularly due to its beautiful natural features but also a place where unexpected encounters would occur. By slowing my movements and following intuitive decisions, I often spent hours in a single location where encounters with the land became more profound. One day, while sitting beside a narrow trail, I became aware of a plant swaying against the still air. I sat beside this plant and observed my surroundings for an hour or so, waiting, before finally noticing a massive toad directly in front of me. It had been there all along, motionless, observing me. As I reflect on this experience, a quote commonly attributed to Minor White comes to mind: "Be still with yourself until the object of your attention affirms your presence."

This encounter stayed with me. It was a reminder that patience reveals presence and that what is unseen is often simply unnoticed. Later, on a school visit, when sharing the image with a former teaching colleague, she reacted with astonishment. "We haven't seen that species around here in two years!" The toad, it seemed, was an unexpected messenger. Slowing down perception, actively listening to the land, became integral to my time in Yamanashi. On another occasion, a stray dog blocked my path in an aggressive manner while I was in a hurry



Figure 2. Stray dog at Shosenkyo Gorge.

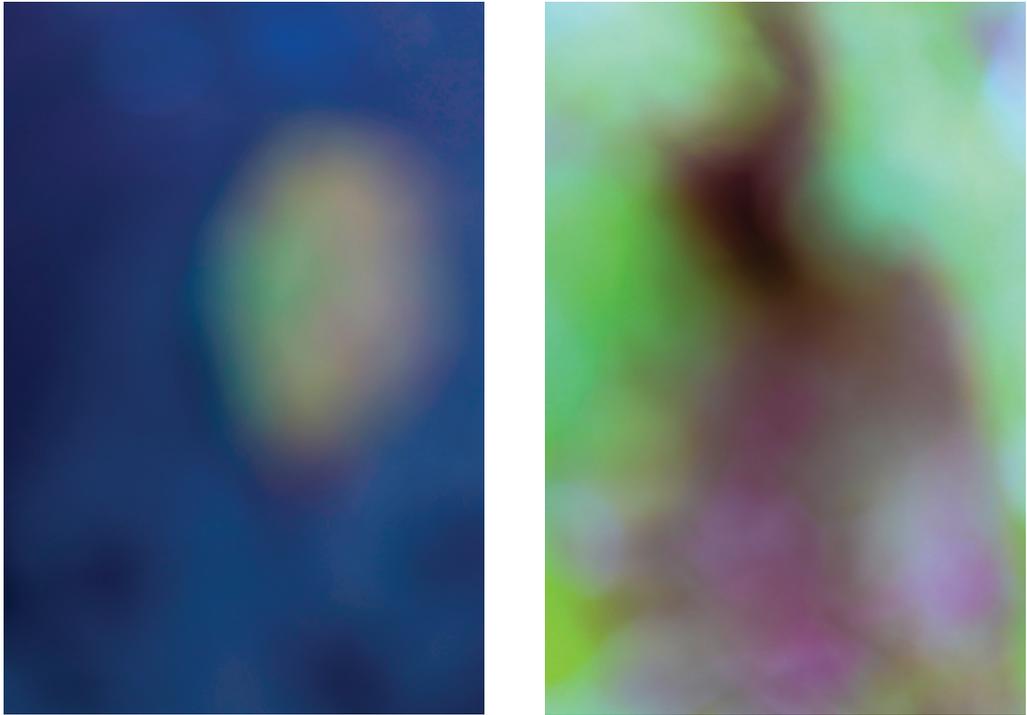


Figure 3. AIRY images – colour abstracts.

to catch my bus. For 40 minutes, it refused to let me pass. Rather than retreat, I moved to the side, mirroring its stillness. When it finally walked by me, I realised the delay had given me an extended period of contemplation, an unexpected slowing down that reshaped my sense of time. I began photographing in response to this altered rhythm, making images that attempted to represent the air of Yamanashi and the spaces between things.

Residencies come with opportunities beyond artmaking. At Yamanashi Gakuin University's International College of Liberal Arts, I gave an artist talk and a cyanotype workshop. My discussions with students revealed an interest in a slower, more intentional artistic process, something they often felt pressured to abandon in favour of fast, digital workflows and assessment deadlines. This also provided me with valuable networking opportunities and a chance to describe my experience of life for an art student at the Dunedin School of Art. Izumi also attended my workshop and employed two bilingual students to work as translators at my final exhibition.

The exhibition, titled *Caught a Glimpse*, took shape from my newly consolidated philosophy of making. Izumi was fascinated by the expression, which I had shared with her as I briefly noticed the summit of Mt Fuji while walking back to AIRY one day. 'Caught a glimpse' also suggests a reciprocity between the observer and the observed that is important in my process while reinforcing the idea that meaningful encounters are fleeting but deeply felt. Inspired by my visit to Reminders Photography Stronghold, I laid out my images as if sequencing a photobook. I wanted the viewer's eye to move across the whole work in the same way one encounters a busy forest scene, drifting, pausing and returning. Nightly observations of a murder of crows flying between buildings also informed the placement of smaller images across the wall.

Printing in Yamanashi presented challenges. The local print lab specialised in high-gloss graduation portraits, which didn't suit my aesthetic and reminded me of how grateful I am for the options and convenience we have here in Dunedin. In Tokyo, specialist printers often require an in-person business meeting to schedule a session, typically



Figure 4. Myself, Izumi Sakamoto and Dr Sam Stocker at iCLA.

booked several weeks in advance – a level of preparation that exceeded the short timeframe of my stay. However, research led me to Matsudaira, a master printer in Tokyo specialising in Piezography, a technique using multiple grey inks to achieve rich tonality and image quality unlike other inkjet printing. I had three key images printed using this process, deepening my appreciation for the materiality of prints and opening doors for future projects.

The exhibition attracted a diverse audience, much to Izumi's delight. Children were intrigued by the 'puzzle' of the layout, university professors engaged with discussions on contemporary photographic practice and first-time visitors to AIRY were excited to discover a new creative community in Kofu. Conversations unfolded naturally, many facilitated by the student translators.

I also left behind a cyanotype installation, which consisted of 12 prints on linen documenting a single hydrangea flower from Izumi's mother's garden. She spoke fondly of this plant, and much like the first exhibition I visited upon arriving in Japan, her mother is preparing for 'severe pruning' as she acknowledges that her time tending to the garden is coming to an end. This installation will form part of an ongoing collaboration with Izumi, who intends to approach it slowly, integrating the cyanotypes into her textile practice while reflecting on the memories this garden holds for her and her family.

The residency reaffirmed the importance of slow, immersive engagement with place. Encounters with a fox, a toad or a community of artists shaped the experience just as much as the work itself. Now back in New Zealand, I sit with a body of recently developed large format and medium format film, waiting for the right moment to re-engage with it physically. Izumi has extended an open invitation to return, ideally in a cooler season. My hope is to spend two months in Yamanashi in the future with my family. The work that began there remains unfinished. It waits patiently for its next chapter to unfold, slowly and in its own time.



Figure 5 Piezographic print.

Thomas Lord is a Lecturer in the photography studio at the Dunedin School of Art. As well as photography, Thomas has held exhibitions in painting where nostalgia, ecology and the concept of home forms a common thread between the two media. Recent projects include a group show on the Isle of Lewis as part of the Hebridean Dark Skies Festival as well as his 2021 large format photographic series *Super Sport Sunday*.



Figure 6. Piezographic print.

- 1 Izumi Sakamoto, email to author, 21 September 2022.
- 2 Tetsuo Kashiwada, *WARASONO* (Tokyo: Tetsuo Kashiwada, 2024), limited edition of 68 copies.
- 3 Odawara Art Foundation, *Enoura Observatory Catalogue* (Tokyo: Kajima Corporation, 2024), 25.