

Artist Statement

dancing with washi: This project is a progression of form, content, and tradition, investigating cultural and material histories in the context of photography, printing, and sustainability.

In February of 2023, I spent a month in Japan, starting out at Kashiki-seishi, a kōzo and washi operation near the town of Ino, Kochi prefecture. Harvesting kōzo (mulberry bush) from neighbouring properties is a long-standing practice, but because of an aging population and changing technologies, those who run such mills often depend on outside forms of labour. In the case of Kashiki-seishi, the owners of the mill bring in ‘woofers,’ mostly non-Japanese workers who volunteer their labour in return for room and board.

I took my Leica M10 and stayed at the operation, periodically joining the woofers and managers to photograph them as they harvested kōzo, often on hilly regions a short distance away from the mill. The harvested branches were trucked back to the mill where local volunteers joined the woofers to strip the outer and inner bark (only the inner bark, composing 4% of

the harvest, is mulched to become washi) away from the branches. This was a highly communal affair and my interest, from my photojournalistic background, was to reflect all elements of the harvest and the people who made it possible.

My interest also stemmed from my partner, Ayumi Goto, who was working at the mill as an artist in residency, and whose ancestors also owned and operated a mill near Ino many years ago. A performance artist, Ayumi spent time ‘dancing’ with sheets of the paper known as 1000-year washi because of its longevity and endurance. After her time working with woofers and the managers of Kashiki-seishi, we travelled southward to Cape Ashizuri-Misaki, the southernmost tip of Shikoku. It was here that Ayumi performed a dance with washi — on the unfenced deck above the Mana Village Onsen which looks southwestwardly to the Phillipine Sea — while outfitted in a washi dress made by fellow artist in residence Alexa Hatanaka.

When I reflected on this project, I decided I wanted to print the images I had made directly onto thousand-year washi to mirror the cycles of harvest and

production, effectively making photographs whose content was printed directly onto the eventual product. However, while washi is known and loved by traditional printmakers, it is not seen as a photographic medium, which began my quest to figure out how to transfer these images onto such a surface. After some research, and with the assistance of one of my Ontario College of Art and Design University colleagues, Jay Irizawa, I was led to Gallery 44 in Toronto which provides a mentorship service to teach various techniques. There I was introduced to Gerry Pisarzowski, an accomplished photographer and master of a delicate and expensive process known as platinum-palladium printing.

I learned that by coating a washi surface evenly with a complicated formula of drops from these essential elements, I could create a surface that when processed properly could transfer a contact negative image onto the washi. I found Gerry to be a most patient and knowledgeable teacher, and upon conclusion of our lessons I learned that he was one of the most preeminent platinum-palladium printers in the country. Although I had enjoyed making test prints and learning the process, I requested Gerry to fulfill this project for me so I could retain the highest quality, and I was

thrilled when he granted my query to hire him for this job. The exhibition is comprised of fourteen images (17½ x 21½” framed, 10 x 13” unframed) photographed using the Leica, then digitally transferred to monochrome negatives which were contact printed on the treated washi. It was a delicate process to produce images that were consistent and without tearing the washi which, normally very resilient, is extremely fragile when soaked as it needed to be to make these prints.

Gerry did a marvellous job and while he admitted that he wasn't sure the quality would hold up on the washi, he and I were duly impressed with the end results. Alongside these black and white framed images, I display the smaller full-colour digital images, these ones printed on traditional photographic paper, alongside poems inspired by each image, which also appear in the exhibition catalogue. The exhibition also includes a washi-dance by Ayumi as part of the August 15 opening, which is rendered to video for the duration of the exhibition.

A full catalogue is available for viewing or for purchase (\$5).

All original, framed platinum-palladium prints are available for \$2500.

Biography

Ashok Mathur is a writer, artist, and cultural organizer who works extensively with Indigenous and other diverse communities in the global arts sector. He is the author of four novels, a critical anthology on approaches to truth and reconciliation, and has produced numerous art publications and installations. Ashok is Vice-President, Research, and Dean of Graduate Studies at the Ontario College of Art and Design University and is the author of several books of poetry and fiction that address the politics of race and contemporary identity.

Ayumi Goto is an Assistant Professor at OCAD U, working in performance art, currently based in Toronto, traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Huron-Wendat, Anishinaabe, and Missisaugas of the Credit First Nations. Born in Canada, she identifies as Japanese-diasporic and often draws upon her cultural heritage and language to creatively challenge sedimented notions of nation-building, cultural belonging, and activism. Inspired by collaborative work, she also explores inbetweenness, land-human relations, and (beyond) space-time beingness.