

Circling back

Julie Curtiss (Youkobo Residency Artist 2019)



This past fall, I had the privilege of returning to Youkobo Art Space as part of their Returnee Residency Program. I had previously been in residency at Youkobo more than ten years prior, in 2008, and both tenures proved to be formative artistic experiences, each in their own way.

When I first arrived as a Youkobo resident ten years ago, I was just beginning my career as an artist and, fresh from school, feeling somewhat isolated as I sought to connect with an artistic community with which I could exchange knowledge and ideas. Youkobo not only linked me with an international brain trust of artists and provided me with a platform that enabled me to push myself and my practice, but, most importantly, showed me what a supportive, encouraging, and compassionate art community looks like.

My initial time at Youkobo helped lay the foundation for the work I am doing now. During that visit, I was drawn to the elaborate beauty regimens that are marketed to Japanese women and illustrated in almost perturbing detail in instructional pamphlets, which I collected along with local fashion magazines and adapted into drawings using Sumi ink. This body of work, presented in a two-person show with Clinton King titled “Split Ends,” addressed themes of artifice and nature, beauty and the uncanny, cultural norms and the body—themes that continue to inform my practice.

On my most recent visit to Youkobo, I returned eager to pursue a new body of work focused on a phenomenon, unique to Japan, that has long fascinated me: food sampuru, the hyper-realistic, strangely-beautiful plastic food samples that restaurants use to entice visitors. Food has become a recurring theme in my work, often as a way to explore the porousness between the seductive and the repulsive, as well as to investigate the surrealist elements of modern life, in which our corporeal appetites are titillated with the extravagant, abnormal, and bizarre. Thanks to my residency, I was able to create an entirely new series of sculptures, using materials I would not otherwise have had access to, and surrounded by sources of inspiration that deeply enriched the work. I also used the residency as an opportunity to return to painting in black and white—this time in gouache—and to lay the foundation for future work. During my time in Japan, I traveled to see Shinto shrines, ukiyo-e prints, Buddhist temples, and other forms of traditional Japanese art that have left me invigorated with new directions, ideas, and questions I am keen to tackle in my practice. For example, seeing the iconography, use of space, and painting techniques used in painted panels at temples and shrines has inspired me to embark on a new series of prints that will draw heavily from this firsthand experience.

The unique community fostered at the Youkobo Art Space continues to be a defining part of the residency, and something for which I am deeply grateful. Both during the organized talk event in which I participated and via more informal channels, I was able to engage in rich dialogue with the fellow residents, which I believe left each of us with a more nuanced and more global perspective on the art world. From hearing from fellow resident Yang Chen about the differences between Japanese museums compared and their overseas counterparts, to sharing my perspective as a New York resident on the relationship between politics and art, these conversations offered important opportunities for cross-cultural exchange. I was gratified to share my work with the local community through Youkobo’s “Trolls in the Park” festival and my two-person exhibition, “Tandem,” with Clinton King. In both instances, I was delighted to see how my sampuru-inspired sculptures provoked people to think differently about a familiar phenomenon. It was clear from viewers’ reactions that the series had shifted their perception of these sampuru—highlighting, perhaps, the artistry in these everyday objects, while also probing the uncanniness of objects that both repel and attract. I welcomed the conversations I was able to have about craft and process—discussions that are different from those I’ve had with viewers of the work in other contexts.

As Youkobo Art Space celebrates its third decade of existence, and more than a decade of shaping me personally, I can’t help but look back with deep gratitude on an organization that has provided me with the space, community, and resources to travel beyond the familiar and tap into invaluable wellsprings of inspiration. Though the residency has come to an end, Youkobo’s influence on my practice will continue for many years to come.

