

Mokuhanga Artist Residency in Echizen, Fukui Prefecture, Japan

From June 15th to July 19th I took part in an artist's residency in advanced mokuhanga (Japanese water-based woodcut). Since 2011, MI-LAB (Mokuhanga Innovation Laboratory), and prior to that from 1997-2011, Nagasawa Art Park, has run an artist-in-residence program to share mokuhanga practices with international artists. I was lucky to share this experience with fellow artists Jana Bareham (Slovakia/UK), Nichol Markowitz (USA), Kimiko Miyoshi (Japan/USA), and Joshua Winkler (USA), who are now dear friends and colleagues.

I'm so grateful for this unique and transformative experience. Thank-you to Yasuyuki Sato, the Chair of MI-LAB, for his dedication to the program and his care in hosting us; to administrator, interpreter and fellow artist Keiko Kobayashi, for all of her varied and invaluable support; to interpreter Eri Fujieda, for making us feel at home away from home in beautiful Awatabe Town, and leading us in philosophical discussions; to Interpreter Mitsuko Shiba for treating us to her amazing home-cooked meals; and to our wonderful instructors, Chihiro Taki, Asuka Tsutsumi, Hiroko Tamura, and Toshio Soyama, for giving us so much. Thank-you so much to my partner Richard for his encouragement and for running the show at home while I was away, and to my children Audrey and Julian, and family and friends.

My time was balanced between instruction; independent studio time; local-ecology-based research; tours of Echizen papermaking factories and museums; hiking and exploring local mountains, forests, rivers, wildlife, shrines and temples, by foot and bicycle; writing; sightseeing along the Echizen coast (thank you Naoko Osano); spending a couple of days each in Tokyo and Kyoto; and enjoying the hospitality and generosity of people sharing everything from food and gifts to knowledge and culture.

Instruction included different approaches to carving, advanced printing techniques (e.g., transferring woodgrain, making gradations, grainy textures, using mica powder), tool maintenance (e.g., sharpening tools, re-covering barens, preparing brushes), paper sizing, traditional scroll-making, and book-binding. There was far too much content and complexity to go into here, but I'm really excited to integrate what I've learned into my studio work going forward.

The prints I created in Echizen were studies of the methods I was learning and the landscapes surrounding me: grey herons little egrets flying to and from their rookeries, wading in the rice fields and Kuratani River; towering Japanese cedar (sugi) and feathery leaves of bamboo groves, and other inspiring local flora and fauna. I took over 5000 reference photos (I put a few more up on my website, lisamatthias.com), several hours of digital sound recordings, and wrote roughly 20000 words of nonfiction prose and poetry. I look forward to sharing other art-related updates in a fall newsletter, and would love to hear from you too.



Japanese Cedar Forest I, mokuhanga, gouache on paper, 6x9", (left); open studio day (right).



The Kuratani River in Echizen.



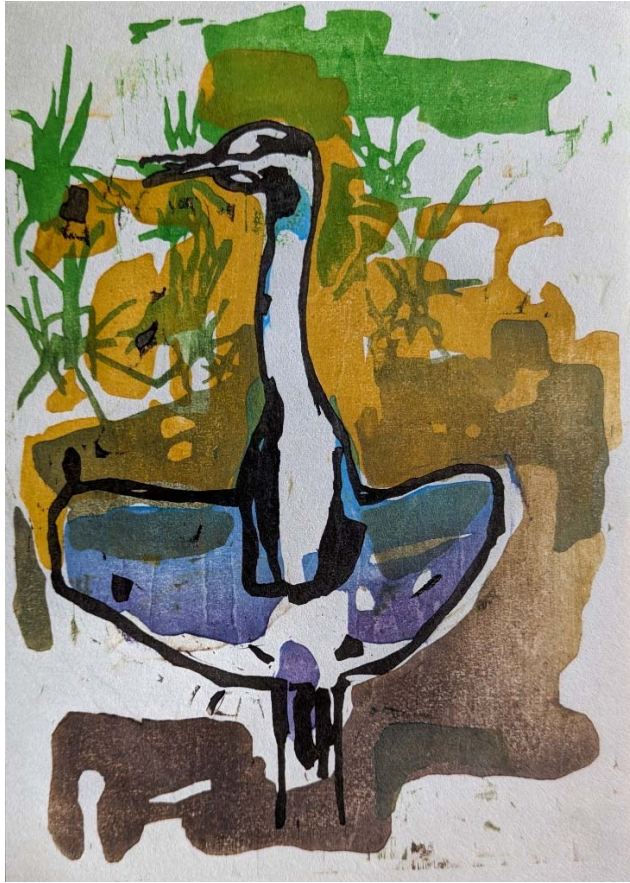
My scroll: the results of a week under the patient guidance and expertise of Soyama-san.



A typical view of the lush mountains surrounding the Awatabe Town area of Echizen.



Watching dozens-to-hundreds of grey herons and little egrets, along with lapwings, kites, ducks, wagtails, bulbuls, and more.



Grey Heron Drying its Wings, mokuhanga, gouache and sumi on paper, 8x11", (left); *Spotted Bellflower*, mokuhanga, gouache and mica on paper, 9x6", (right).



A few of the assorted mokuhanga brushes at MI-LAB.



Awatabe Town, mokuhanga, gouache on paper, 8x11"



Sunset over Awatabe Town.



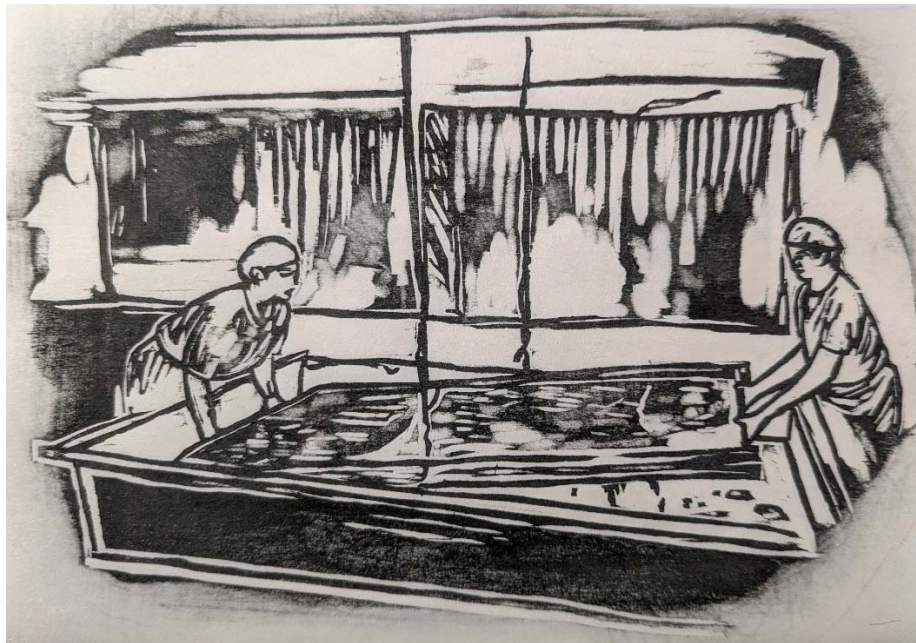
Kozo Leaves, mokuhanga, gouache and sumi on paper, 8x11", (left); applying a thin layer of gouache to a woodblock to achieve woodgrain transfer (mokume).



Otaki Shrine, dedicated to the goddess of papermaking, with its beautifully ornate roof.



Echizen Poem, variations, mokuhanga, gouache on paper, 4x6".



Echizen Washi Village, mokuhanga, sumi on paper, 7x9".



Huge Cedar of Sugio, first proof, mokuhanga, mokuhanga, gouache and sumi on paper, 11x16", (left); huge cedar of Sugio (right).



Left to right top row: Lisa Matthias, Jana Bareham, Joshua Winkler, Kimiko Miyoshi, Yasuyuki Sato. Left to right bottom row: Keiko Kobayashi, Chihiro Taki, Nichol Markowitz, Asuka Tsutsumi,



Two of many favourite stone lanterns near where I was staying in Echizen.



Selfie in front of MI-LAB, Echizen.



Jana and I whittling the wooden dowels for the bottoms of our scrolls (left, photo: K. Kobayashi); posing with a favourite sculpture at nearby Kakyo Park, Echizen.



Four types of Japanese stab-bound books that I made.

Morning Along the Kuratani River

Coursing between
lush hills of cedar and bamboo,
not quite mountains,
no looming range behind.
Misty beach-glass greens,
purplish-blue depths;
one soft crest behind the other
each more faint and distant
until no tint at all.
Water rushes noisily
over a weir;
concrete channel,
constructed banks,
boxed-in river.
Thick vegetation
reclaiming edges;
kudzu vines
snaking around my ankles.
Songbirds overhead:
Barn swallows?
Seven o'clock,
my skin already damp
from the rising July sun,
soon-to-be scorching.
Japanese tree frogs!
Two centimetres long,
new-leaf or sage-green,
below crooked boughs of
lichen-covered cherry trees.
Resting, pigeon-toed,
on a rusty handrail.
I frighten one away,
too close with my phone.
Insects buzz from tall blades.
I recall the Japanese camel cricket
from the other evening:
curious creature,
mix of sow bug and grasshopper,
crawling like a spider.
Black damselflies:
Atrocalopteryx atrata,
delicate in flight

alighting with
four upright wings.
Stealthy river stalker,
long-necked sentinel,
head drawn back.
Does it notice me
while it's hunting?
The grey heron
raises its head
and takes flight.
Two more tiny jumpers
on the fence,
the first, bright like pondweed,
the next grey-ish;
They let me photograph them.
One draws its feet in closer,
wary, it watches me
as I approach.
Rice paddies to my left,
shallow mirror-fields,
beyond the sakura.
A duck in the passage ahead:
Eastern spot-billed duck.
Cars quietly pass in the distance,
early commuters.
A crow calls.
Also perched on the
metal rail, where
spiders tether their webs.
Black damselfly passes
just behind my legs.
Fleabane flowers
mass among the grasses.
This frog is sleeping;
more crows caw softly;
carrion crows,
not the large-beaked crows
from Tokyo.
Another grey heron overhead:

Meeeaack, meeeaaack

One rises from the river
just in front of me.

My first impression of Echizen:
pale wading silhouettes
standing in the wet fields,
alongside white egrets.
Stalking, hunting,
Wings folded frontward,
drying.
Watching them through binoculars,
in their massive interspecies rookery,
steps from my room.
Hundreds each day
soaring above Awatabe Town
to and from the countryside
and their broadly thatched nests.
Towering columniform sugi,
the dark canopies
pillow the tangled stick beds.
Feathery avocado-leaves spill
from greyish-blue canes,
of profuse bamboo thickets.
I smell breakfast
cooking in a nearby house
subtle and mixed with the
earthy channel.
I wind back through a neighbourhood,
overflowing gardens,
uniformed children walking to school,
bear bells on their backpacks.

- Lisa Matthias