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By Zoe MacDonell

The idea of a trip to Japan emerged when I opened my post one mid July day. I had received a letter to inform me that I had been selected for the *Tyranny of Distance* exhibition that was to take place as part of Tokyo Designers Block in a few months. Excitement surged through my veins - the possibilities, can I go - as well as my work? After considering my options, I realised that there really wasn't any way I was going to miss this opportunity. Memories of a trip there 10 years ago arose like dream sequences. I wanted to be reminded that these places actually exist, simultaneously, right now - only 10 years older. I had already decided somewhere within my thoughts that I would return to Japan one day to explore further.

Creative passion took over and I soon threw myself into making new pieces for the show. My work is created from layered imagery, often drawing reference to the different experiences connected with travel. I work from drawings, images and photographs of elements found within the landscape, such as botanical specimens, found papers, writings and textures. The work itself becomes layered stories and the creation of the work becomes a journey. I knew that this trip could be a great research and gathering opportunity to stimulate my ideas.

I landed in Tokyo. For a long sweaty five hours I made my way through a myriad of train and subway systems to a small welcoming suburb, Nishi Ogikubo. I had with me a crinkled, hand-drawn map, Akiko's directions to her apartment. We had exchanged many emails and I had heard stories of Akiko over the years from a good friend in Sydney, so I was delighted to be invited to stay with her. I arrived at Akiko's small pale green door; it looked like it had been tucked under the ceiling of the corridor, squashed in proportion. The key I had collected fitted effortlessly and I peered through the door to move aside a thick green velvet curtain, sending red plastic hanging beads into dancing clusters. A split-leveled room appeared with fun chandeliers suspended from the ceiling, a low sofa draped in fabrics, candles on the sideboards and traditional rice paper screened windows and cupboards. I felt immediately at home in this new environment.

I slept through Akiko returning home that night and going back to work. I started to get to know her through understanding her apartment and sensing her presence. Akiko's world opened up to me, her friendship enriched my experience of the Japanese culture through her many stories, beliefs and customs. She cooked delicious assorted dishes of miso, tofu, vegetables and sauces, and pulled out her great grandmother's inspiring antique kimonos.

My curiosity lead me to explore the area where my exhibition was to be held. Friends had shared stories of their time at former Tokyo Designers Block exhibitions with sparkling bright eyes. This exploration and staying with Akiko allowed me to experience two different worlds. Akiko's apartment is in a quiet suburb with narrow red lanterns lining the streets, locals on bicycles, traditional noodle bars and flower shops that close and leave their flower display outside at night. The hustle-bustle of the city had awe inspiring architecture and bright lights. This made for a surrealistic setting where lots of Australian designers would soon join me. I felt a sensation of worlds colliding. Central Tokyo delivered me to modern Japan. I sat in a café and the music enlivened me, bright colours and lines evoked the words stylish, clever and sophisticated.

When settled into my new quiet rhythm, I ventured around Tokyo, saturating my senses. Before the exhibition began I made my way to the mountains - to Nikko on the local train. I watched as the landscape changed. Buildings varied from pretty oriental curving roofs, to boxy houses awkwardly placed like lego pieces. Farmhouses emerged with clusters of gravestones; elegant trees fit for kimono embellishments lined garden walls. Rice fields stretched out, bright green shoots springing forth in the heavy cool air. I observed the mist over the mountain crevices and the birds in the sky that moved abruptly like smoke caught in the wind. I stayed for two quiet nights next to a rushing river and was soothed further by the splendor of the temples in the area. They are ornate yet so delicately simple, not a detail over-looked. This was a brief insight into another way of life in Japan, I then returned to a contrasting world for Tokyo Designers Block.

The *Tyranny of Distance* exhibition, a group show of Australian designers (curated by Ross McLeod and Veronica Saunders) took place in Harajuku, on Omotesando-dori, known as Japan's Champs Elysees. Our exhibition was one of the events taking place as part of Tokyo Designers Block, (and Seoul Designers Block, Korea) an event of international standing. Various exhibition locations within Central Tokyo included designers from Japan, Australia, Europe and the UK. There were 7 of us from Australia in our exhibition, and we shared and embraced the experience together.

There was so much to see and to explore. I used my intuition to lead me to the right places. Everything was stimulating, the architecture, the people, and odd little shops in pretty backstreets that seem to wind and cross in web-like formations. It was great to meander through the streets and come across warm familiar faces and friends from Australia. We were a support network that could explore and expand together, on many levels. This added spontaneity and adventure to each day, opening up new possibilities and experiences.

The evenings were just as thought-provoking. Events and parties were held in celebration of the week. One particular event was held in a traditional Japanese house with an exquisite garden. Performers with silver grey painted faces and costumes floated through the crowd like misplaced aliens. I felt like I was drifting through a film set. As I walked in beautiful rooms, excited chatter filled the air. Outside, rising up from the soaked grass, was a large screen with a projection of a waterfall, barely visible through the heavy rain - a surreal combination of wet. I moved down steps to another large sheltered area which hosted an exhibition, an ice carver, elegantly dressed people and a bar.

Later in the evening I was intrigued with the thought that in a foreign city I was sitting in a noodle bar at 2am with a typhoon raging outside, my socks soggy for the 5th day in a row, with special people I had only met a few days before, having such an incredibly wonderful time. I found that through the process of adventure many of my walls came down. The fact that my creative work had brought me to these experiences gave me a sense of satisfaction and the desire to keep creating.

After the exhibition I traveled to Kyoto. I smiled to find myself in the winding, narrow streets with sticky dripping mochi balls, sweet and chewy in my mouth, foreign language buzzing in my ears. I curved around bends on a borrowed bicycle to reveal temple buildings and manicured trees that eased my mind. I was staying in the hills of Kyoto with a friend - Alice. Her house was traditional and very old, as if it could fall apart at any moment. Tatami matting lined the insides and large sliding windows led to small wooden ledges for observing the surrounding forest. The house was buried in the beauty of a steep hill next to the oldest shrine in Kyoto - it was old accommodation for the priests. It now was host to 7 people and a silky black cat. Water was collected each day from the sacred spring for cooking and we washed from buckets of warm water, as there was no bathroom. Many of the people I met spoke only Japanese, and so we shared thoughts beyond words, delicious delicacies such as handpicked rare mushrooms from a sacred mountain and wine that had traveled from afar to be opened in a celebration of meeting. The experience nourished my creative senses. I felt the joy and kindness of these warm people.

Each day I added to my new collection of papers, writings, ideas, sketches, images, postcards, fabrics, personal observations, notes of visited exhibitions and antique fabric shops. I was inspired by Japanese sensibilities. The fabrics are modern and bold in design, but also there is subtlety, with delicate and powerful patterning. I photographed the detailed layers of my surroundings. I focused on gathering experience, textures and stories.

Japan rose up inside me with an incredible wave of creation and discovery. My experiences there will continue to influence me on many levels until

they are enlivened by the next journey I make there.

The exhibition *Tyranny of Distance* was curated by Veronica Saunders and Ross McLeod, RMIT Furniture Laboratory.

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