

# Living Things

A reflection by artist Yukari Kaihori

by

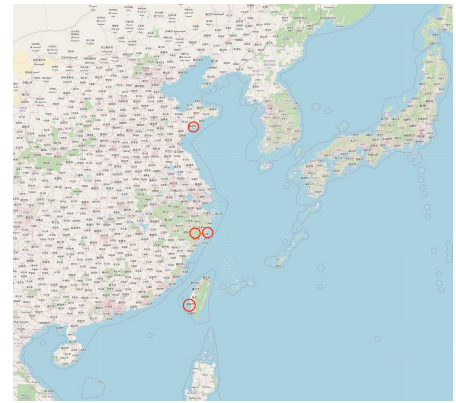
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Yukari Kaihori collecting things, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of the artist.



Fishing gear with city name, found on Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of the artist.



Mapping the origin of the plastic waste found on Ishigaki Island, Japan. Courtesy of Yukari Kaihori.



Making stamps of Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of Yukari Kaihori.



Tree growing from a rock, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of Yukari Kaihori.



Installation by Yukari Kaihori at Ma Umi Residencies, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

*This reflection by Aotearoa-based artist Yukari Kaihori was originally produced as a HUMcard, a special mailout sent to members of Contemporary HUM's Publishers Circle. However, due to the change in HUM's circumstances shortly after it was commissioned, and the suspension of our publishing programme, we proposed to publish it to our website instead.*

*In December 2023, Aotearoa-based Kaihori spent two weeks at Ma Umi Residencies on Ishigaki Island, a small, subtropical island that sits in between Okinawa, Japan and Taiwan. Kaihori ruminates on her time there in this reflection. What emerges is a story of the knotted entanglement of things, demonstrating the way in which the ecological processes of our world break apart the categories that are kept discrete by received binaries, as well as the very category of "thing" itself.*

Ma Umi Residencies is situated on the North Peninsula of Ishigaki Island, about an hour from the central township of Nosoko. Ishigaki is part of the Yaeyama Islands, an archipelago 400 kilometres southwest of Okinawa's main island, and it is closer to Taiwan than mainland Japan. In recent years, Ishigaki has been at the frontline of a geopolitical struggle in the East China Sea. The Japanese Self-Defence Force established a new army base on the island with missile-capable troops in 2023. This move was heavily criticised by the local people as the scars and stories from wartime-forced migration by the Japanese Army are still fresh for some. On the other hand, the island is a popular tourist destination. With its unspoiled beaches, coral reefs, and limestone caves, the island's tropical environment and unique biodiversity is very different from mainland Japan.

Because of the island's historical, natural, and geopolitical context, Ma Umi offers a distinctive opportunity to artists and researchers. The residency is provided by a not-for-profit organisation founded by artist and researcher Valérie Portefaix. It hosts one artist at a time for 14 days to cater to the individual researcher's project. Ma Umi's vision is to respond to "the ongoing global crisis of climate change ... to create a sustainable space, in both ecological and economic terms."<sup>[01]</sup>

My proposal was to look into local people's spiritual relationship to the more-than-human world on the island. During my stay, I was taken to various *utaki* (sacred sites), cultural events, and historical places across the island and met with local activists, farmers, fishermen, and business owners: I was meeting different people daily, making notes while having tours or sharing meals with them. Everyone was generous in sharing personal and family stories, their view on the natural environment, and their spiritual engagement with nature.





View from Ma Umi Residencies, Ishigaki Island, Japan. Courtesy of Yukari Kaihori.



*Utaki* (sacred sites) in the City, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of Yukari Kaihori.



Yukari Kaihori interviewing locals on Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Photo: Valérie Portefaix. Courtesy of the artist.



Yukari Kaihori interviewing locals on Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Photo: Valérie Portefaix. Courtesy of the artist.

The humid and heavy warm air welcomed me as I exited the airplane at Ishigaki Airport. In December, the mainland in Japan is in winter, but Ishigaki is in the high 20's. During the first week of my stay, each day's activities were determined by the coming and going of the rain; the island's schedule is dictated by nature, something beyond human control. Because we could not travel much, I started the residency by making clay from the red soil outside my room. I collected the leaves that fell with the heavy rain outside and imprinted them using stamps I made from the clay.





Interior of Ma Umi Residencies, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of Yukari Kaihori.



Making stamps of Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of Yukari Kaihori.



Yukari Kaihori printing with clay, Ma Umi Residencies, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Photo: Valérie Portefaix. Courtesy of the artist.



View from the back room of Ma Umi Residencies, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of Yukari Kaihori.



Making clay from the garden soil, Ma Umi Residencies, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of Yukari Kaihori.

As soon as the rain subsided, I stepped onto the white beach by the accommodation, and I felt there was someone else there. When I sat and held my breath in silence, a number of hermit crabs in different shapes and sizes started moving around me. I also saw some crabs trying to find refuge in plastic containers that had washed up on the beach. There were a lot of pieces of broken coral along the beach, some so small they look like pebbles or bones; the waves push broken coral pieces up to the shore and into the sea again.

There were also a lot of artificial items that have been washed up—plastic bottles, fish nets, equipment from boats, toothbrushes, shoes, lighters, noodle packaging, and so on. A lot of the fishing equipment bore the names of Chinese coastal towns north-east of Ishigaki, hundreds of kilometres away. One of the lighters I found had the name and address of a hotel in Taiwan. The local people told me they often find coconuts on the beach, although there are no coconut trees on the island. Those are the signs that objects have travelled far across the sea.

The roots of the vegetation around the beach grow through thick walls of plastic jungles and polystyrene, washed up from the sea. I observed the more-than-human world of Nosoko's beaches, where marine debris lives together with various sea creatures. Where life begins and ends in things is a big question I have been pursuing for the last few years.<sup>[02]</sup> The life of a plastic flip flop is not over when a person loses it at a beach or discards it in a bin.





Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023.  
Courtesy of Yukari Kaihori.



Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023.  
Courtesy of Yukari Kaihori.



Vegetation growing through plastic at the beach, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of Yukari Kaihori.



Fishing gear with city name, found on  
Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Mapping the origin of the plastic waste  
found on Ishigaki Island, Japan. Courtesy of  
Yukari Kaihori.



Coral on the beach, Ishigaki Island, Japan,  
December 2023. Courtesy of Yukari Kaihori.

I got a streak of blue pigment on my palm when trying to pull out a blue plastic flip flop that was entangled in tree roots and beach sand. The degrading blue plastic was so smooth that it melted between my fingers when I touched it. The life of a flip flop continues as microplastic disperses into our environments. Strangely, looking at my blue-stained fingers, I felt a sense of relief —assurance that we are all connected within the same journey of uncertainty by sharing plastic between our bodies; because we, who are responsible for plastics, experience the same disruptions



within our bodily systems as the environment does within its ecological system.<sup>[03]</sup> I had read that microplastics are hurting the ocean and aquatic life, but I had not witnessed it until this moment. The life of microplastics circulates like water through air, ocean, and rain, touching everyone and everything.<sup>[04]</sup> Our more-than-human world includes the microplastics in our environment.

At the end of the residency, I did an artist talk with an installation work made from material I collected from the local beaches. I placed over 20 found flip flops (none were in pairs) at the entrance to the accommodation. Small broken coral pieces covered the outside terrace and plastic pieces covered the inside *tatami* mats. I placed the plastic items in order from industrial to more personal (e.g., from fishboat float to toothbrush). Three sticks of incense inside burned standing in a pile of beach sand.



Yukari Kaihori installing work at Ma Umi Residencies, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Photo: Valérie Portefaix. Courtesy of the artist.



Details of installation by Yukari Kaihori at Ma Umi Residencies, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of the artist.



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Installation by Yukari Kaihori at Ma Umi Residencies, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of the artist.



Presentation by Yukari Kaihori at Ma Umi Residencies, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Photo: Valérie Portefaix. Courtesy of the artist.



Details of installation by Yukari Kaihori at Ma Umi Residencies, Ishigaki Island, Japan, December 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

Teruya san, a local *mozuku* (a type of seaweed) collector, explained that he asks the sea for permission to take things each morning when he goes into the water. He would do the same if he were cutting down a tree on the mountain. He said they have three

deities: the sky, the land, and the sea. This is why they use three sticks of incense in traditional ceremonies, representing these three elements. He also told me that rising seawater temperatures in recent years are affecting sea turtles' habitats and seaweed growth—the familiar island is undergoing an eerie change.

This residency has been about how intertwined we all are in the ecology—both the plastic bottle and hermit crab, things from here and there. To be aware of what is on the ground and what is around us is critical. *Everything* has a unique story: where it began and how it got there. I am grateful to all the residents of Ishigaki for opening up to me and to Ma Umi for generously introducing me to their friends through their networks. My time there was priceless. I have been thinking about the story from Teruya san—if we all asked permission to take something from the sea or the forest every time we needed something from nature, we might have a very different situation today.

### Footnotes

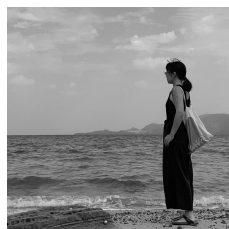
01. Ma Umi Residencies, “About,” accessed 20 February 2024. [www.maumiresidencies.org/about](http://www.maumiresidencies.org/about)

02. The enquiry around my research is about the differences between things and objects. Objects here means dead and things means alive.

03. Isabelle Gerretsen, “Microplastics are everywhere: Is it possible to reduce our exposure?” *BBC*, March 6, 2024. [www.bbc.com/future/article/20240110-microplastics-are-everywhere-is-it-possible-to-reduce-our-exposure](http://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240110-microplastics-are-everywhere-is-it-possible-to-reduce-our-exposure)

04. Matt Simon, “Plastic Rain Is the New Acid Rain,” *Wired*, June 11, 2020. [www.wired.com/story/plastic-rain-is-the-new-acid-rain/](http://www.wired.com/story/plastic-rain-is-the-new-acid-rain/)

### Biographies



Yukari 海堀 Kaihori is a Japanese-born artist working and living in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, currently a doctoral candidate at Elam School of Fine Arts. Her work develops an interest in the More-than-Human-World and draws on practices located in Japanese folk animism to consider the life-force in materials and things by building on a material practice of respect and awareness of the immediate environment. Recent exhibitions include *two sides of the moon*, Te Tuhi (2023), *Touching Time*, Audio Foundation (2022) and *wiggling together, falling apart*, Michael Lett (2023), all in Tāmaki Makaurau. She has attended residencies in Aotearoa, USA, Germany, and Japan. She was a recipient of the Asian Artist Grant (2022, 2023) and Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (2015).



