

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



TRAVEL DIARY
(SOUTH KOREA, JAPAN, CHINA, HONG KONG)

PROJECT BY STERLING RUBY

Day 1: Tuesday, September 2

I leave my house, which is located in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, at 8:45 a.m. It is rush hour, the worst time to leave for the airport. I meet up with Natasha Garcia-Lomas at LAX at 10:15 a.m. Natasha, who runs Sterling Ruby Studio, will accompany me on the entire trip. We are on Korean Air Flight 18, headed for Seoul.

Both Natasha and I watch the movie *Noah*, which stars Russell Crowe, directed by Darren Aronofsky. The biblically inspired film starts off with a young Noah as he watches his father being murdered by Tubal-cain (I believe that Tubal-cain is a descendent of Cain). The most absorbing part of *Noah* is the fallen angels, or "Nephilim," called "Watchers." The Watchers were banished from Heaven for trying to help humans; they came crashing to Earth and upon impact were covered

in rock. The Watchers protect Noah and his family and assist in building the Ark. The Ark is essentially a massive black box. It reminded me of the Kaaba; the monumental black building, which is at the center of Islam's Al-Masjid al-Haram mosque. When the Ark is near completion, it is filled with animals that have been put to sleep by incense. (Little do I know now, but incense will be a reoccurring theme during my trip). To be brief, Tubal-cain and his followers want to take over the Ark, but when the floods come, only Tubal-cain succeeds in entering the Ark. Noah does not know that Tubal-cain is on the Ark until the last portion of the movie, which is crazier than you can imagine. In the end Noah kills Tubal-cain, the rains stop, and they arrive safely on land.

I take an Ambien.

Day 2: Wednesday, September 3

We arrive at the Incheon Airport, Seoul, at 5:25 p.m. In order to "land" in Gwangju we must transfer to the Gimpo Airport, which is an hour car ride away from the Incheon Airport. Once checked in at Gimpo, we take Asiana Flight 8709 to Gwangju. We arrive in Gwangju at 9:10 p.m. Natasha and I wait for a taxi outside the airport after collecting our bags.

There are a few "young" people in the airport, they could be in town for the Biennial. They all have guitars and drums; perhaps they are in Gwangju for a different kind of show. We finally catch a taxi and head into town. I check into the hotel. I am so hungry, my stomach is upside down, but there is only "one bowl" of asparagus soup left in the entire hotel. I pass on the soup, and eat Pringles from the minibar instead.



HONG-KONG STREET SCENE
Photo by Sterling Ruby



Day 3: Thursday, September 4

I am up at 4:00 a.m. I go to the gym to run on the treadmill. I run for a total of 40 minutes, increasing my speed every 5 minutes. I am listening to my music as loud as I can and jump when there is a pause in cadence. I am in a zone and have no idea that there is someone else in the very back of the gym watching me. I catch the eye of an older man in his late sixties who seems absolutely terrified by my antics. I grab my towel and leave.

At breakfast I run into the LA-based correspondent Kevin McGarry. I have an hour-long casual conversation with Kevin, which is nice because we don't always get the time to catch up in LA. I take a taxi to the Gwangju Biennial.

I am sorry to have missed the Minouk Lim procession, which took place the day before, where the exhumed remains of Korean War victims from unmarked mass graves traveled to the Biennial encased in shipping containers. Through small windows in the containers, now installed in the plaza, I view the remains.

Jessica Morgan's curatorial approach to *Burning Down the House* seemed to celebrate the resurrection and reevaluation after deterioration, not as some modernist trope of formalism and nostalgia, but as a genuine sign of sincerity. The Biennial feels "lived through."

My contribution to the Biennial was four large fully operational stoves. Two were installed in the plaza outside and were used to burn wood during the opening days of events. While I am familiar with the sense of smell that the stoves produce in my studio, I could never have imagined how far reaching and suggestive the burning could be in this kind of environment. Jessica installed the other two stoves inside the museum, one in a room with a deep-red Dan Flavin. I have no idea how she came to this choice, but I am happy that she did.

What can I say about the Biennial's after-party? It took place in one of the largest karaoke joints ever known to man: Korean boy bands popping up out of the floor; a huge laser light show, a trapeze aerial gymnastics routine, and the roof opened up and imitation snow was dropped.



Day 4: Friday, September 5

Natasha, Serena Cattaneo Adorno from Gagosian Gallery, and I head to the airport. While waiting for our flight to Tokyo, Serena introduces me to Urs Fischer. I speak with Urs about his installation at the Gwangju Biennial, which is made up of panoramic photographic wallpaper of his house. We both have children, and I comment on how hard it is to get stickers off of brushed stainless steel appliances after seeing his dishwasher and refrigerator covered in kids' stickers. We exchange phone numbers, and I board Asiana Airlines Flight 1045, to Tokyo.

When we land at the Haneda Airport in Tokyo, Natasha and I go directly to Taka Ishii Gallery to start installing the *BCRIPS* show. We have dinner with Taka Ishii, Elisa Uematsu, and critic Minoru Shimizu. The dinner

conversation revolves around sumo wrestling, as the upcoming season is only two weeks away. Minoru informs us that one of the most talked-about and championed sumo wrestlers today is Egyptian. His name is Osuna-arashi Kintaro (they call him the "great sandstorm") and, from Minoru's perspective, he is somewhat of a sex symbol in Japan.

We are staying at the soon-to-be-torn-down Hotel Okura. The Okura was built in 1962, consists of 796 rooms, and is one of Japan's most highly regarded modernist architectural examples. Over the next four days I will meditatively watch the staff at the Okura prune, rearrange, and tend to the ikebana flower arrangements, which are everywhere throughout the hotel.

Day 5: Saturday, September 6

I stay in the hotel room for the first half of the day, catching up on writing and interviews. The morning is slower, and I feel less anxiety, which is a nice break in pace. Later, I go to Taka's gallery and finish the install of *BC RIPS*. The exhibition consists of five bleached textile paintings, each with a strip of neon-pink elastic down the center.

Taka, Elisa, Natasha, and I go to the fish market to get lunch. After lunch, we head over to Taka's Gallery Modern outpost, where I curate a small show of photography by Los Angeles artists Sarah Conaway and Melanie Schiff. The show consists of five photographs ranging from still life studies of folded fabric forms to light-filled landscape images of plants and water.

After we are done here, we go to Taka's third space in Tokyo, which is dedicated solely to photography. He has a wonderful Katsumi Watanabe exhibition comprising fourteen photographs from the late-1960s-to-early-1970s *Shinjuku* series.

Melanie Schiff, Sarah Conaway, and Alexis Rose from Hauser Wirth & Schimmel arrive from Los Angeles. I have drinks in Hotel Okura's Orchid Bar, with my wife, Melanie. The Orchid Bar has a small beautiful Miró work behind the counter. The room, while dark and moody, includes an illuminated colorful stained glass motif that complements the Miro. We drink Japanese whiskey and talk about the kids and what needs to be done back in Los Angeles.

Day 6: Sunday, September 7

Melanie and I are up at 4:00 a.m. We go for a long run in the rain through the Imperial Garden. Before the opening, we visit collector Takeo Obayashi's Tadao Ando house. Takeo gives us a tour of the house and his art collection. The 60's guitar-driven band Cream is being piped through the stereo system of the entire house; we listen to one of Clapton's longest guitar solos while looking at a unique installation of Lee Ufan and Hiroshi Sugimoto.

After the visit I have interviews and the opening of *BC RIPS*. Taka and Elisa show us large boxes and binders of available Araki Polaroids, and we sit at a desk and flag our favorites with colored Post-it notes. Toyota Municipal Museum of Art curator Tomoaki Kitagawa is there watching us in amusement.

At dinner we meet a Japanese gentleman who is training with the Russian space program to be an astronaut. His goal is to be the first space travel agent. He points out that, in upcoming space travel, not all seats will have equal views.



Day 7: Saturday, September 8

Melanie finds out that Hotel Okura gives you spa credits each day of your stay, and seeing as we only have one day left to use them, we decide to do an hour or so at the spa. The Okura spa has options for oxygen, light, and meditation treatments. I choose a combination of the three, and after a short stint sitting under a fluorescent lamp, I am guided to a vibrating leather lounge chair with an oxygen tank attached. While I breathe a constant flow of oxygen, a large flat screen plays aerial helicopter footage of Japanese mountains, including Mount Fuji. The soundtrack is a combination

of ambient drones and classical music, which, when mixed with the oxygen machine's repetitive noises, makes me fall asleep. The ambience of this weird dreamlike scenario seems akin to being on life support. When I finally wake up, I see a train going into a tunnel and a red text scrolls across the screen that reads

“SEE YOU ON THE NEXT TRIP.”

Before leaving the Okura I buy a copy of Lafcadio Hearn's book *In Ghostly Japan* at the gift shop.

Day 8: Tuesday, September 9

Air China Flight 184, from Tokyo to Beijing, delayed.

I get through the first nineteen pages of *In Ghostly Japan* to the chapter called “Incense.” Hearn's take on incense begins with the fragrance of travel. He later proposes that incense “as a burnt offering, symbolizes the pious desires of the faithful” and that life is like smoke. He explains in depth how to play the ancient incense party game called *Ko-kwai*, which was most popular during the Tokugawa period. In the last chapter

Hearn gives the reader a number of incense recipes, which are pretty cryptic.

We arrive in Beijing, China, midday. Natasha and I immediately go to the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), 798 Art District. We meet up with curator Phil Tinari and get the lowdown. The install for the *Los Angeles Project* has been going on for a few days. Four of my works are still stuck in customs. I go back to the hotel and take an Ambien. I still can't get my sleep schedule on track.

Day 9: Wednesday, September 10

While everyone else is touring the Forbidden City, I am waiting at the UCCA for my work to arrive. I am fortunate though, because when I get back to the hotel,

Melanie hands me a duplex cricket cage. Apparently while I was at the UCCA, the gang was visiting the grasshopper and cricket market.



CRICKET CAGE, DUPLEX, BEIJING
Photo by Sterling Ruby

Day 10: Thursday, September 11

This is the opening day of the *Los Angeles Project* at the UCCA. We continue the install throughout the morning and into the early afternoon. The final hang of my work at the Ullens consists of a suite of five spray paintings, a suite of four red-dyed textile paintings, two quilt-like flags, and five urethane sculptures.

I do a talk with fellow Los Angeles artist Kaari Upson, moderated by Phil Tinari. Kaari and I both share details on the day-to-day work in our studios, especially how LA allows for a certain kind of expansiveness. Beijing has this sort of trajectory as well, a pioneering spirit, and I am reminded of my past visits to the studios of Zhang Xiaogang and Li Songsong. At the end of the

discussion we give Phil a trucker's hat that has *Los Angeles* embroidered on it. Phil puts the hat on; it sits high on his head, and the audience goes crazy. This act seems to ceremoniously bond Los Angeles and Beijing together, and the show opens.

So many familiar faces are at the opening. It seems reasonable to give a few shout-outs in recognition of support: Sarah Watson, Alexis Rose, James Lindon, Melanie Schiff, Jérôme Sans, Serena Cattaneo Adorno, Xavier Hufkens, Natasha Garcia-Lomas, Paul Schimmel, Baron and Baroness Guy and Myriam Ullens, Qiao Zhibing, Derek and Christen Wilson, Richard Chang, David Watts, and Nick Simunovic.



Day 11: Friday, September 12

Cathay Pacific Flight 347 departs Beijing and arrives in Hong Kong at 1:50 p.m. I go straight to Gagosian Gallery, located in the historic Pedder Building, to work on the install of the *VIVIDS* exhibition. The show consists of nine new spray paintings in which the color pink is a central theme.

I am staying at The Upper House hotel, which is by far the nicest hotel I have ever stayed in. While I know that

I will not be in the room for more than a few hours, I make a promise to myself to spend every moment I am in the bathtub, which has an incredible panoramic view of the harbor, the city, and the lush mountainside.

Unfortunately, I will miss the opening of Nicolas Bourriaud's *The Great Acceleration* Taipei Biennial. Nicolas is showing a group of thirty-five of my collage and drawing works from the past ten years.



Day 12: Saturday, September 13

I continue the install at Gagosian. I quickly go to the Joyce Boutique, located right across the street, to check out the window display that they have done for the Raf Simons / Sterling Ruby collaboration. I have two hours before the opening. Natasha and I dedicate time to go to the Man Mo Temple at 124–126 Hollywood Road, Sheung Wan.

We have been to this temple before, and it always blows my mind. We arrive to a packed house of incense smoke and worshippers. The celebratory tribute is for Kwan Tai, also known as the god of war. I am attracted to the eternal flame at this temple, and am surprised to learn that it is part of an eco-friendly incinerator that was installed by the Hong Kong productivity council to reduce air pollution. I start to make the connection to the reoccurring subject of incense, and purchase a bundle to burn.

At my opening I share a beer with Ken Hakuta, Nam June Paik's nephew and head of the estate. We talk about his Shaker furniture collection and cast-iron stoves. Nick Simunovic and Serena give wonderful

toasts at dinner. Serena reads a few lines from F. Scott Fitzgerald:

*From the western half of the sky the sun was shying little golden disks at the sea—
if you gazed intently enough you could see them skip from wave tip to wave tip until
they joined a broad collar of golden coin that was collecting half a mile out and would eventually be a dazzling sunset.*

After the dinner I am persuaded to go see Chali 2na from Jurassic 5 spin records at a club called FLY. While I am not a huge fan, it did not stop me from having an exorcism on the dance floor. Glasses of vodka are coming from everywhere and, by about 3 a.m., I realize that not only am I seriously intoxicated, but I am pretty sure that some strange guy has slipped me MDMA.

When I get back to The Upper House, I attempt to get into the tub, but somehow sound judgment prevails, and I crawl into bed instead of drowning. A few hours later I get the wake-up call.

Day 13: Saturday, September 14

The car is here at 9:30 a.m. to take us to the airport. I am not well. When I finally get into my seat on Cathay Pacific Flight 884, bound for Los Angeles, I am starting

to detox. The toxins are pouring out of me, and I am sick. I watch *Noah* again.