

Modified Land: Creative Research in Taiwan as a Fulbright Scholar in 2021

Katie Baldwin

FULBRIGHT SCHOLARSHIP

I started the application process for a Fulbright Scholarship in the winter of 2018. I began by brainstorming the countries that would best suit my interest in expanding my creative research into woodblock printing in East Asia. A friend suggested that I consider Taiwan. I knew very little about the country and so turned to the internet to learn more. Taiwan has a complex political history that informs the country, their current status with China and its relationship with democracy. I was immediately drawn to images of this small country, surrounded by water. Maps of canals and reconstructed wetlands cut through the urban landscape, and the rolling hills and forested mountain ranges that encircled the capital city of Taipei captured my imagination, as my studio work is rooted in narrative landscape and, through my research of old and new agriculture and irrigation systems, considers the way mechanisation shapes the land. In 2019, my proposal to spend a year as a Fulbright Scholar in Taiwan was accepted.

The Fulbright Scholar Program is a cultural exchange program based in the United States that provides grants for university professors, professionals, and artists to undertake teaching and research at institutions around the world. As a Fulbright Scholar, I had the opportunity to work at the International Printmaking Centre at the National Taiwan Normal University. However, a few months after arriving in Taipei, the city shut down due to a Covid outbreak. No longer able to use the printmaking studio, I worked in my small apartment. I learned about the landscape of Taiwan by riding my bike through the city and hiking through the countryside. Inspired by my explorations of the land, I created drawings for a series of woodblock prints. I carved blocks and printed them by hand, using traditional water-based techniques called mokuhanga.

BACKGROUND IN LEARNING MOKUHANGA

I was first introduced to the basics of mokuhanga by my teacher, Peter Ramsey, while I was a student at The Evergreen State College in 1993. I was an art student, primarily studying sculpture. I became interested in the process of mokuhanga by looking at a Ukiyo-e print hanging on the wall in the print shop. I was curious as Peter described the process and history of the print, Kanagawa, from the Fifty-three stations of the Tokada Ando, created by Hiroshige in 1831. Shortly after, at my local library, I came across the book, Japanese Print Making: A Handbook of Traditional and



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 1: Meeting Place (Fire Drill), 2021, Mokuhanga, 19 x 22 inches, CC
 Figure 2: Meeting Place (Forest Park) 2021, Mokuhanga, 17 x 22 inches

Modern Techniques, by Toshi Yoshida and Rei Yuki. I spent a few weeks experimenting with cooking rice paste and making a small baren from cardboard, chord and canvas. I carved a woodblock and managed to pull a few humble prints. At the time I was living in the Pacific Northwest on a sailboat. The idea that the process did not require a large studio space and was non-toxic stayed with me.

In 2004, I moved to Philadelphia, where I earned my MFA from the University of the Arts in book arts and printmaking. After graduation, I no longer had access to the presses that had been available to me as a student. My creative practice was facing serious limitations: my kitchen table was about to become my studio. While I was attracted to working with big heavy letterpress equipment, I was living in tiny spaces. I wanted to study mokuhanga so that I would be able to continue printing. That year, I attended the Nagasawa Art Park residency, where I lived and worked for two months, along with other international artists learning about the process of mokuhanga. Learning about the tradition of tools, materials and process of mokuhanga shaped my studio work. The residency gave me the skills in a technique that allowed me to continue my work in printmaking and book arts with limited space and equipment. I have continued to explore this technique over the years, returning to Japan in the summers of 2017 and 2019 for the MI-LAB Advanced Residencies.

TAIPEI 2021: MODIFIED LAND

The experience of working as an artist in a new culture and learning a new language has challenges that require flexibility and patience. 2021 brought about additional challenges due to the pandemic. One major adjustment was the loss of access to the university's printshop. Carving and printing woodblocks from my small apartment in Taipei brought back memories of living and working on a sailboat decades earlier in my career. Over the course of the year, I responded to the interior and exterior of natural and manufactured environments in Taiwan. I rode my bike along nearly empty streets in the sweltering summer heat to visit the wetlands, gardens, canals and parks. I walked through neighbourhoods, discovering small gardens along sidewalks and in alleyways. I explored the traces, modifications, transformations and reconstructions of the Taiwanese landscape. From these experiences, I created a series of narrative prints, as well as quilts and drawings, that explored the human capacity to shape the world around us.

MOKUHANGA PRINTS

Modified Land is a series of woodblock prints that capture the experience of what it is to be in a place. Each print is an expression of my experience in Taiwan. The series pulls together the larger, global narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic, the national history of Taiwan, and a snapshot of my existence there during my one-year residency. In parallel, I deliberately select art-making techniques, considering their own history of development.

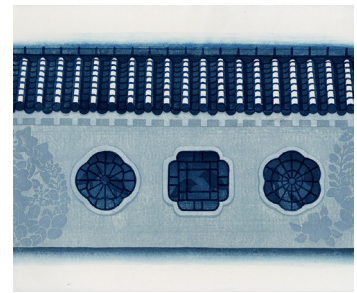


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3: Meeting Place, Mokuhanga, 2021, Edition: 10, 19 x 22.25 inches
 Figure 4: Clipped Landscape, 2021, Mokuhanga, 19 x 22 inches
 Figure 5: East Sea, 2021 - 2022, Hand pieced and quilted textiles, 48 x 36 inches

When I arrived in Taiwan, the rules for entering the country during the pandemic required 15 days at a quarantine hotel, followed by an additional week in self-quarantine before being able to move about the country freely. In the middle of the night during the self-quarantine, the hotel fire alarm went off and I evacuated the building. I stood on the sidewalk in a foreign country in the middle of the night, out of sorts, wondering if the situation was an emergency or a drill.

Meeting Place (Fire Drill), the first print in the Modified Land series, alludes to an evacuation from a crisis. Inspired by ink brush paintings, I worked with a limited colour palette of black and grey. I simplified the linework of this woodblock print while emphasising its shapes. The composition is primarily symmetrical, with overlapping and repeated forms. A line of figures breaks off the picture plane, while the trees stand in a circle. Plumes of smoke rise, suggesting the start of a fire. As a narrative landscape, this imagery tells the story of a meeting place, where people come together to consider what to do next. Infringing on each other's personal space, the figures overlap; after all, they find themselves in this situation together.

As a visitor to Taiwan, I tried to make sense of an unfamiliar world. Masking, contact tracing and views of fighter jets flying low over the city were a reminder of the global challenges affecting life in the country. I explored Taiwan through the lens of everyday life, which began each morning with a jog at Da'an park and fresh pineapple from my neighbourhood market. The public park, located in the centre of Da'an District in Taipei, is 26 hectares of land with an urban forest. The park also doubles as an evacuation site in the case of an emergency. From early in the morning until late at night, people gather to participate in endless activities. Any time of day you can find groups playing frisbee, singing, dancing, exercising, searching for fireflies, taking photographs, reading, pushing the elderly in wheelchairs, walking dogs, playing with children, picnicking, smelling flowers, roller skating, learning tai chi, chatting, and so on. As the regulations for public gatherings during the pandemic would shift and change in response to Covid cases, the gatherings at the park would shift and change in response. The large groups disappeared, and the park became a place where individuals kept their distance from each other. A person practised their saxophone, another fed the birds, while someone else sat on a bench. Alone amongst the forest trees, people practised tai chi.

As a mapmaker, it is as important to consider what information to eliminate. A map of a place is not useful if it includes every single piece of information. I have found that creating an image that represents the nuances of a place has similar challenges. In the print Meeting Place (Forest Park), I pared the imagery down to just a few elements in order to best capture a sense of the place. The monochromatic print shows two figures practising tai chi amongst tall trees. Long shadows cast by the trees in the early morning sun are emphasised. Before making this print, I worked with a brush and sumi

ink on paper to sketch the image. The carved woodblocks attempt to capture the characteristics of the brushwork from my drawing in the printed image.

Meeting Place is a woodblock print inspired by the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, erected in memory of the former president of the ROC. We have relied on virtual experiences for connection during the pandemic. My work responds to these limitations, for example, documenting my experience in Chiang Kai-shek Memorial hall, despite its intentional omission from mainland China's map provider's (Baidu Maps) coverage of Taiwan.

The Chiang Kai-shek memorial opened in 1980 and was designed for democratic public gatherings as well as a place for exercise, singing and playing chess. Originally the site of a military base, it covers 25 hectares and is surrounded by a white wall of corridors with a blue tiled roof and lattice windows. A person can find shade from the sun or shelter from the rain under these covered corridors. I worked on my computer at one of the stone benches in the summer heat when coffee shops were closed due to the pandemic. I walked the path through elaborate gardens of artificially landscaped hills, ponds and carefully manicured non-native trees. I could also see the iconic blue roof of the memorial from the balcony of the building where I live. Despite the unusual circumstances of the pandemic, which required flexibility, a masked face and often solitude, I wanted to capture the experience of what it is to be in a place.

A wall with elaborate windows and traditional glazed roof tiles makes up the prominent elements in the woodblock print, Meeting Place. Rather than looking through windows at the scenery borrowed from the landscape outside the garden, the viewer looks from the outside of the wall into the garden, at three figures and two birds. Working monochromatically with Prussian Blue, I referenced not only the blue of roof tiles but my associations with the colour blue, such as solitude, calmness and serenity. Woodblock printing, while an ancient technique, is also a revelation in technology. In the making of this print, I considered the history of printing ink, the development of the pigment of Berlin blue, and how its colour permanence and accessibility forever changed the woodblock printed image.

The Palace Museum, located in Taipei City, has an enormous permanent collection of Chinese artefacts. Much of the collection's complicated journey began in China, was relocated multiple times, and eventually moved to Taiwan. Metalworks, ceramics, carvings, paintings, calligraphy and rare books in the permanent collection span the neolithic to the modern period of Chinese history. The museum grounds also include the Zhishan Garden, a traditional landscaped Chinese garden. When the museum was not admitting visitors due to Covid restrictions, I would sketch in the garden, capturing the carefully composed elements: water, stone and plants. I would watch the gardeners maintain the manufactured landscape.

The print, *Clipped Landscape*, shows two gardeners in the middle of their work. As one trims hedges, the other gathers the clippings. Shadows cast by the bushes indicate that it is midday; the sun is high in the sky and it is hot and humid. The bushes, constantly growing, will always need the gardeners. The work required to maintain the garden is endless.

Modified Land is a series of woodblock prints in progress. Working from sumi ink drawings I made in Taiwan, I continue to carve and print images for the series. Deeply influenced by the restrictions of 2021, I imposed my own limitations for working on this series. A limited colour palette, simplified visual language and personal storytelling explore my narrative about a particular time and place. When the series is finished, together the woodblock prints will tell a story about the human capacity to shape the world around us.

QUILTS

While in Taiwan, I created a series of five quilts inspired by the East Sea, reconstructed wetlands along the Tamsui River and the buildings and gardens in the densely urban neighbourhoods of Taipei. I started this series when I discovered the Yongle Fabric Market: a multi-story building packed with fabric stalls. I spent hours wandering and looking at the endless selection of fabric. Inspired by specific locations I had visited in Taiwan, I searched for fabrics to recreate the places I had visited. I used rich browns for the earth after rain, dull blues and greys for fog on an overcast day, or black for nightfall. I began making the quilt tops by posing a simple question: could I represent a sense of place specific to Taiwan in a patchwork of colour?

I started with a visit to the East Sea, where I gazed out at a seascape in motion made up of blues and greys, reflecting water, rocking buoys and boats, and a changing sky. Back in my apartment, I worked with a limited selection of fabric scraps and pieced squares (and fragments of squares) together intuitively. As I worked, I would change my mind, take apart and rearrange squares. Once I was satisfied with how I had pieced the top together, I hand-sewed the top, middle and back layers together. After completing the quilt, *East Sea*, I continued to create textile works responding to specific sites: my apartment balcony view of Taipei during a plum rain; a midnight walk through the city streets; dredging to reshape the land along Keelung River; or a bike ride through the Shezidao Wetlands. As I worked with my fabric, the scraps grew smaller, inspiring me to arrange and rearrange fabric until I arrived at a combination of colour and shape that satisfactorily expressed each time and place. This work is hand pieced and quilted with dense running stitches and the series is intended to be exhibited alongside the *Modified Land* prints.

CONCLUSION

When I departed Taiwan to return to Huntsville, Alabama, in January 2022, I had generated new drawings, textile pieces and woodblock

prints. This work builds on my experiences of living and working in other countries (Mexico, Iceland, Japan) and fits in with themes of the human narrative and landscape that I have explored throughout my artistic career. However, the series, Modified Land, is unfinished. I am carefully carving woodblocks for drawings I made of ancient fish traps on the northern coast of Taiwan, the Jinbaoli Trail on Yangmingshan Mountain, and two gardens in Da'an District, the neighbourhood where I lived. Carving, proofing, refining the blocks and editioning the prints is slow work. From this, I plan to continue delivering on the theme of place and how anthropogenic processes impact the landscape.

I use the technique of mokuhanga because the work is slow, time-consuming and meticulous. My textiles are pieced and quilted by hand. However, my process for making work in mokuhanga and in quilting is quite different. Mokuhanga requires me to work with a specific series of steps, where my imagery is carefully planned out from drawing, to pattern, then carving and printing. While I was developing Modified Land, carving the blocks, and perfecting the printing, I desired a way to generate my impression of Taiwan more spontaneously. I found that working with textiles allowed me to improvise and respond to decisions of colour and form in the moment. Textiles allowed me to be intuitive. I do not begin with a plan or a pattern, I simply respond to the materials in the moment, cutting, sewing, arranging and rearranging until satisfied. When the prints and quilts are exhibited together, the results of these two ways of working inform each other and complete the narrative.

Modified Land records the interplay between how humans have shaped the world and how one person experiences time and place. I navigated neighbourhoods, parks, shorelines and mountains from the perspective of a newcomer and guest. Typical barriers of culture and language were intensified with the need for physical distance and isolation. My cultural and personal perspective is integral to my work. Simultaneously, my experience in Taiwan is formed based on the physical landscape and social narrative. Through my work, I delve into this tension that exists between personal and human narratives.

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Katie Baldwin received a BA from the Evergreen State College in Olympia, WA (1994) and an MFA from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, PA (2004). A 2021 Fulbright Scholar at the International Print Center in Taipei, Taiwan, Baldwin conducted creative research

on her project Modified Landscape. She has traveled internationally as an artist-in-residence to Scotland, Iceland, Nicaragua, Poland, Cuba, Mexico and Japan. She was one of seven international artists selected in 2004 to learn traditional Japanese woodblock printing (mokuhanga) from master carvers and printers at the Nagasawa Residency on Awaji Island. She returned to Japan in 2017 and 2019 for the Mi-Lab Advanced Residencies in Kawaguchi. She served as the Victor Hammer Fellow from 2011 - 2013 at Wells College in Aurora, New York. Selected for the 2022 University Distinguished Research Award, she is an Associate Professor at the University of Alabama Huntsville in the United States of America. Dedicated to collaboration, Baldwin co-founded wood+paper+box with Mariko Jesse and Yoonmi Nam in 2013 and the Shift-lab collective with Denise Bookwalter, Sarah Bryant, Macy Chadwick and Tricia Treacy in 2013.

IMAGE GALLERY



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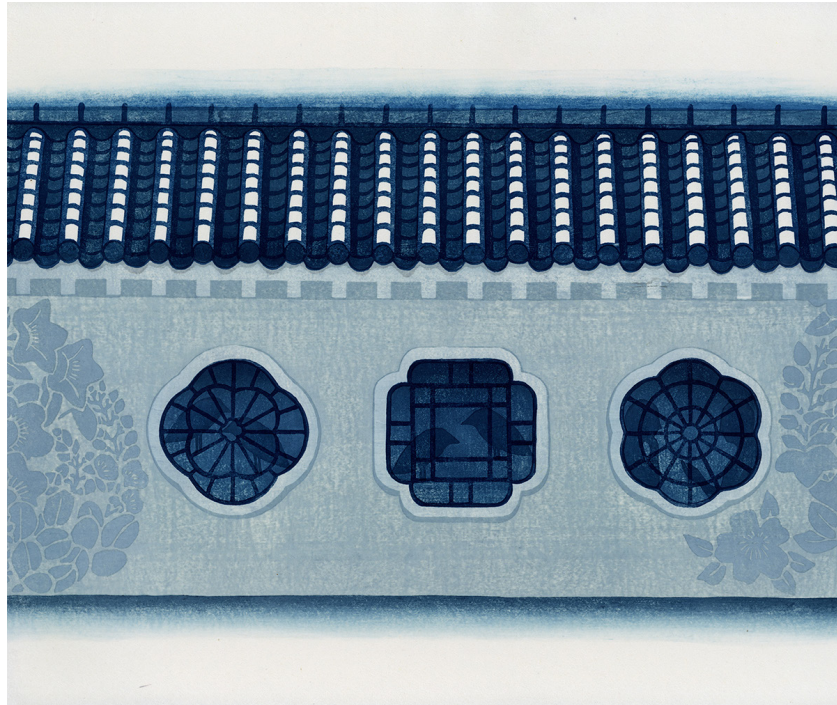


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