

2016 Benjamin  
**MENSCHEL**  
Fellowship  
**EXHIBITION**



THE COOPER UNION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE AND ART

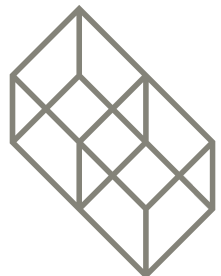
DANIIL ASHTAEV ART

YU KIU CHAN | KELSEY LEE | PIAO LIU ARCHITECTURE

MAJA GRIFFIN ART

JENNY HSIAO | HUI RONG LIU ARCHITECTURE

SARAH SCHMITT | ANAMIKA SINGH ART





JANUARY 31 THROUGH  
FEBRUARY 16, 2017

The Benjamin Menschel Fellowship Program to support creative inquiry was endowed by a grant given to The Cooper Union by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation in 1994 to support work in the fields of art, architecture, design, and engineering. This generous grant was intended to provide funding to exceptional students who propose scholarly, independent projects that will in some way provide a culmination to their educational endeavors at The Cooper Union. It is the hope of the Goldsmith Foundation that students designated as Menschel Fellows will be encouraged by their awards to complete bodies of artwork, develop scientific protocols, or otherwise further their intellectual investigations in a manner that will provide inspiration and illumination to the community as a whole.

Professor Sohnya Sayres, *Project Director*

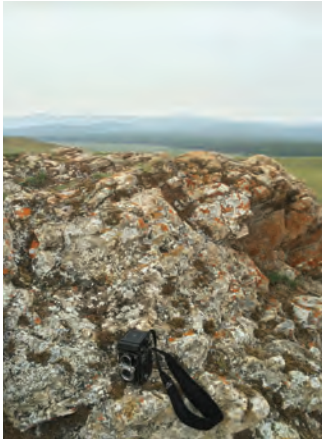


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*left:*  
Yu Kiu Chan  
*Cover image:*  
Hui Rong Liu



## LAKE BAIKAL: THE LORE OF THE LAND



In the midst of Siberia lies the deepest and oldest water reservoir in the world—the mighty Lake Baikal. It contains roughly a fifth of the world’s fresh water, equivalent to the volume of all five of the Great Lakes, and harbors hundreds of endemic species. For centuries, it has provided sustenance to numerous nomadic populations and has become the object of their adoration. Its majestic beauty and rich geologic presence inspired people to transform the lake into a deified being, and its tributaries, islands, and winds into other deities, thus creating a homeland for myths and many other kinds of legends and tales.

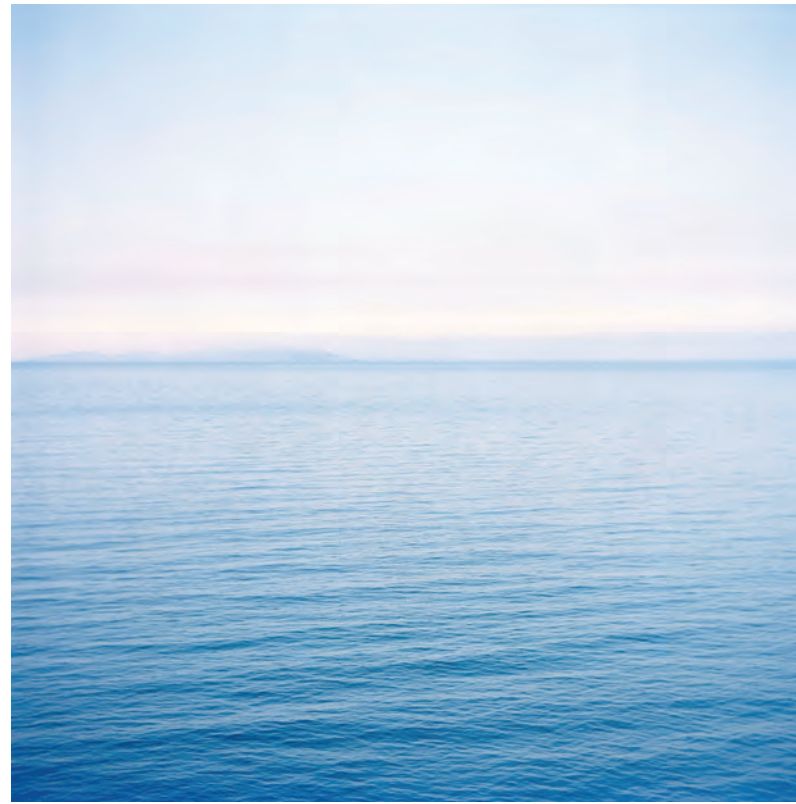
My project took me to Lake Baikal in search of a place at the crossroads of its existence as both myth and resource. I sought to be immersed in its vastness while exploring its many sacred sites. My exploration started with meeting Valentin Khagdaev, a local shaman, who practices a centuries-old lineage of tradition. In the days we spent together, he introduced me to his homestead, which was not confined by the limits of his house, but extended far into the plains and mountains. Valentin conducted himself with great respect and devotion to past generations, who had cultivated and nurtured the land for ages. The strength of his art came from those predecessors and their tradition. In his presence, I gathered the beliefs and practices of native peoples, who, above all, showed faith in the power of the land, and regarded spirits of their ancestors as its possessors.



## DANIIL ASHTAEV



DANIIL ASHTAEV



The next stage of my research was on Olkhon Island, a spiritual treasure trove amid the lake, abounding with indigenous sacred sites. I explored the island alone with a backpack, small tent and my faithful camera. As I walked along, I met locals who shared their stories and attitudes towards the lake and the landscape. Treading dirt, sand, rock and silt, I followed my own quest of tracing the confluence of fable and reality. Despite the encroachment of civilization and the use of landscape for resources, I felt an ancient

presence in cavernous and overturned rocks, vestiges of fortifications built by peoples of the past, and prominent markers venerating long-gone generations of ancestors.

While different tribes have come to the sacred lake and gone from it, all have left traces of their ways of thinking, worshipping and perceiving the lake. I found that the folklore and tradition surrounding Lake Baikal are living and maintained despite the passing of time and modern developments. Rather than fading, the myths of the Lake grow.



## TRACING THE FORGOTTEN: TIBETAN VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

Central to the culture of the “grand architectural heritage” is the review of the palaces and monasteries of old Tibet. At the same time, Tibetan practices and techniques of building homes and villages reflect the highly versatile and resourceful lifestyle of the people.

Our journey began with Tibet Autonomous Region, Lhasa, where farmhouses are located in urban conditions, and Ganden, a religious spiritual village. We then moved, often traveling more than a day’s bus ride, to the smaller and more remote Tibetan villages in the Kham Tibetan Region, located deep in the mountains. We conducted careful surveys of local terrain, talked to local people and also took an active part in participating in the community, at the same time learning the process by constructing a house with locals on site. We compiled photographs for both architectural records and cultural archives.

We recognized that different regions adapt the traditional Tibetan central courtyard into various typologies. In Tibetan farmhouses, a central courtyard connects two or three houses built from local materials. In the Barkhor area in Lhasa, where the farmhouses have been redesigned to accommodate an urban environment, there are normally two to three families living in the courtyard and sharing the central communal space. In Ganden and some other predominantly religious villages, courtyard houses are radially dispersed around a major temple, with houses and rooms modified for the religious way of living.

Tibetan houses are rich in color and design. Exterior walls are normally painted to represent the site’s program: red and yellow indicate space for religious and public buildings, and white marks indicate residential zones. Windows are heavily decorated, with each one featuring signs of the sky and the earth, the knowledge of the Universe, and paintings of the phases of the moon.

YU KIU CHAN | KELSEY LEE | PIAO LIU







The Chinese government's impositions and the inevitable modernization of building materials threaten the unique architectural topography and culture of Tibet's urban sites. During the Cultural Revolution, some 40 percent of Tibetan farmhouses were demolished in an attempt to force people to the cities to work in industry. And, since 1990, an average of 35 old buildings are torn down each year in Lhasa. The small isolated Tibetan villages, however, maintain some protection from these forces because of the challenging terrain, and these "cultural pockets," with their limited connection to the outside world, leave their cultural treasures largely unrecognized and unexplored.

We regard our project as a contribution to a better understanding of the culturally sensitive and site-specific architecture of Tibet and as a contribution to its preservation efforts.



HOME—THIS MUST BE THE PLACE:  
*ABANDONED HOMES IN JAPAN AND BALTIMORE*



***“I long, as does  
every human being,  
to be at home  
wherever I find myself.”***

—Maya Angelou

When I was young, my home was foreclosed in a collapsing neighborhood in Baltimore, Maryland. Suddenly, “my home” did not exist though the house still sits on a street of other homes, all now abandoned. As I grew, I came to understand that my city was being crippled by sixteen thousand vacant former homes, a crisis compounded by poverty, high crime rates, and a dimming sense of hope. The place where I spent my childhood cannot be found on Google and is not depicted in recent maps of Baltimore.

MAJA GRIFFIN



For my Menschel Fellowship, I proposed a comparison study of what I had come to know so well, my city of Baltimore, with other cities in another country also experiencing these empty images of former lives. I chose Japan, as far away as possible from the laws and policies already too familiar. Half a world away and prosperous, Japan is facing its own crisis—over eight million abandoned homes sprawled across the nation. My research took shape around three guiding questions: What happens to



memories of a home that does not exist anymore? How do we express our feelings about this loss? In a structural sense, what do we mean by home?

I set about traveling to several cities in Japan. I photographed and talked to people. This journey was challenged by misunderstandings and police restrictions; it was often heart-wrenching, and sometimes packed with anxiety. It was not easy to explain my position in an open way. What I did learn is that a home or a lack of home can take multiple forms. In Japan, generally speaking, the people are wearing this crisis well, while in comparison, Baltimore is drowning.



My plans for furthering this investigation are growing still. When I returned to Baltimore, I shared with community groups what I had learned, and I listened. I believe that vacant homes can become a map of a special kind of social space, one that teaches us about how people are affected by their vacancy. In other words, this project can act as a catharsis for the traumas of no longer being on a “map.” It can draw people into a conversation about homes, neighborhoods, and individual senses of loss as an opportunity to re-enter these uninhabited spaces.



## A BOWL OF OCEAN SOUP

The way we eat and the stories and memories we have of food form a visceral level of our identity. Where does the fish in your bowl come from? The urban condition in which we live is a confluence of variety and supply that is made possible by resources brought in from far away, yet it is hinged on this disconnect. Along the archipelagos of the Inside Passage (the Pacific Northwest), one of the largest salmon industries in the world, we trace the spaces and cadences of salmon production, of fishing, farming, shipping, market, kitchen and hearth.

Salmon fishermen go out on the sea in two-week cycles, in which the boat becomes their home. As in a house, the center of a boat is the hearth, where the heat gathers, the meal is cooked, the fire stays alight.

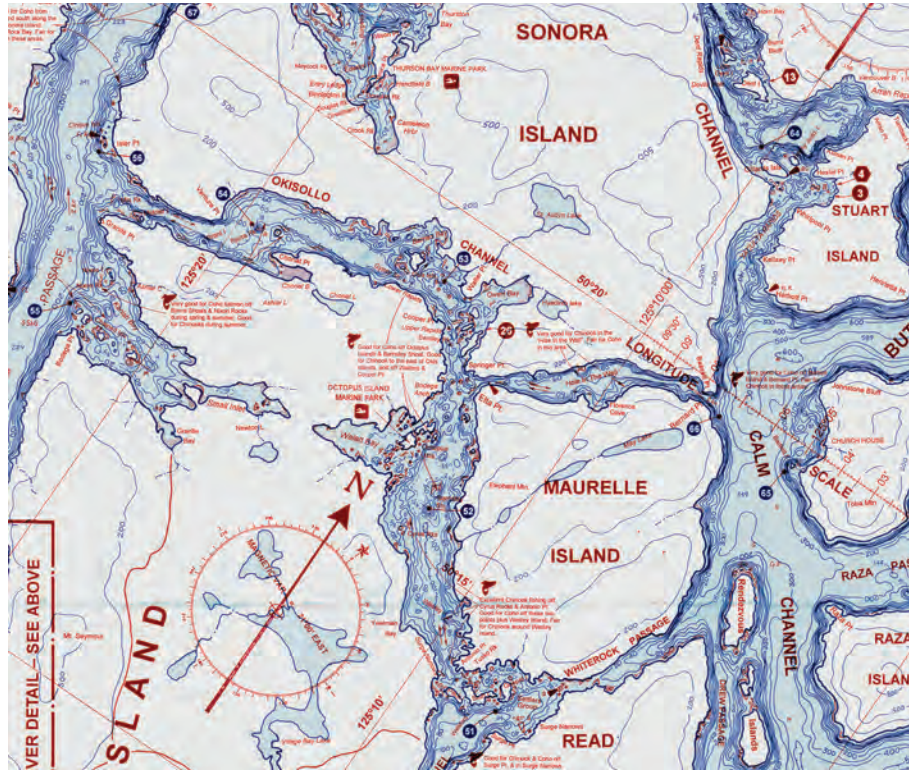
We visited remote islands by hitching a ride on a beer run. We encountered John Boyd, who is some kind of pirate whose work is only between himself and the sea. He plays both sides of the farming industry, in turn hauling away waste byproducts and scuba diving to document environmental degradation beneath farms. Skipper Otto described to us the “morning-set,” when first light hits the ocean, and the salmon begin to move en masse in a sunrise chorus “as loud as the jungles, underwater.”

At the center of the Hunts Point Fish Market, a commissary serves hot food to the overnight workers of the walk-in freezer warehouse. The cooks relay information and duties as if they are part of the same stream of consciousness taking form in each

JENNY HSIAO | HUI RONG LIU



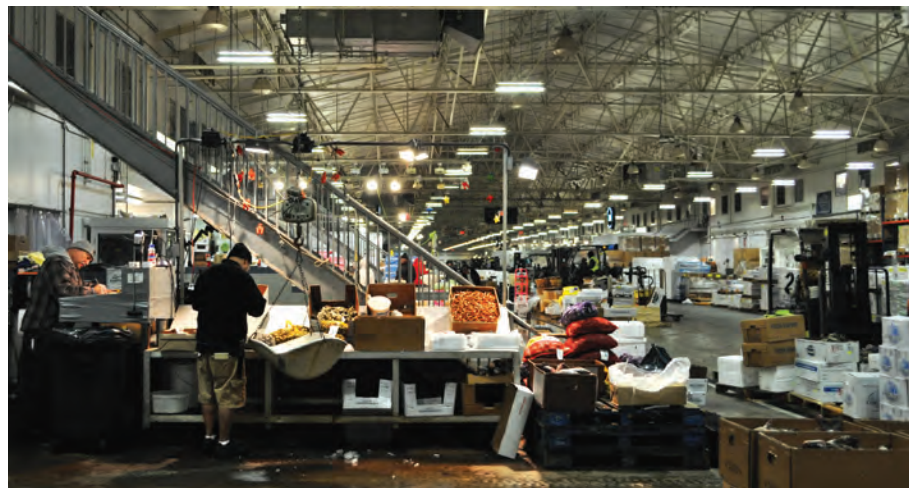




JENNY HSIAO | HUI RONG LIU

individual at different moments. They form a network of give and take, where one part extends where another has need in a natural interplay of needing and being needed, generosity and forgiveness, acceptance and debt.

Like water, we seek our level as we make our way through the fragmented archipelagos and their communities. In/with each of the vessels, from our bowl to our bodies to the boat to the sea, is a negotiation of trying to hold true, of finding a relationship with our environment that could work, of trying to sustain a way to live. In drawing out the connections to our food, we begin to see how cultural practices as intimate as cooking and eating influence the shapes of our cities and shorelines.





## CHARTING KĀLĀ PĀNĪ

For our Menschel Fellowship, we traveled to Port Blair of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located between the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, to investigate the infamous Cellular Jail, or Kālā Pānī. The prison was built by the British in 1896 to house Indian political prisoners who were actively resisting their colonization. The design plans followed Jeremy Bentham's famed "Panopticon": a center tower with guards surrounded by seven wings which held the cells for the prisoners. The open, barred side faced the tower, creating an environment in which prisoners never knew if they were being observed or not. It was a form of architecture as surveillance and intimidation.

We were drawn to the different mythologies about Kālā Pānī, which now attracts visitors as a national museum memorializing a brutal penal colony. We sought to track the power of the gaze as it traced its way through the prison's exhibitions, into the port (Port Blair) where the prisoners' labors were exported, and into the colony's control center: Ross Island. The British made Ross Island into the so-called "Paris of the East" to comfort the colony's administrators.



SARAH SCHMITT | ANAMIKA SINGH







At the museum, under the sway of Indian nationalism, nooses hang from the gallows and mannequins resurrect torture scenes; in the evenings, a sound and light show portrays the story of the prison's role in Indian independence struggles. As we moved on to study Port Blair, more complicated narratives competed with one another. After six months of solitary confinement under the conditions of the panopticon, prisoners could graduate to being laborers in the Port. There they mingled with those exiled from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. Children were born there, and Port Blair became their home, but they and their descendants continue to be attached to the ever-changing identities of the nation-states that claim them.

Ross Island was a casualty of the Tsunami of 2004; hardly anything remains of the governor's palace but its Italian tile flooring. Among overgrown foliage, stairwells lead to nothing. Tourists are free to wander the island for a small fee, contemplating the ease, yet confinement, of this remote place—built upon imprisoned relationships.

SARAH SCHMITT | ANAMIKA SINGH

And tourists are also free to wander into every cell and climb the tower and onto the roof. From the tower one can watch the goings-on in and between the wings of the prison, or turn out to face the ocean and Ross Island. In these moments, as in viewing decorative images of the native Jarawa people in our hotel, we were caught by the many uses and abuses of historical narratives which overlap so powerfully here, in the ghosts of the prisoners, the lost histories of the exiles, the gross walls and lines drawn into the architecture and into the lives of people.

Our installation attempts to document these impressions reinforced by study in the prison library, interviews with administrators, and speaking with descendants. We offer it as an exploration of different means of “telling.”







*Daniil Ashtaev*