



YUSUKE ASAI
yamatane

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2 OCTOBER - 11 NOVEMBER 2014

Rice Gallery

Pictures of one of Yusuke Asai's "earth paintings" sent by Josh Fischer, Rice Gallery's assistant curator, arrived in my email with the comment, "Pretty impressive." The images were of a classroom in rural India in which every square inch of wall and ceiling space had been painted with an earthy palette of reds, yellows, and browns. In what appeared to be an alternative universe, hundreds of odd and comical creatures emerged from and dissolved into swirling layers of plant life and pattern. Their forms suggested possible inspiration from any number of sources—prehistoric rock paintings, tribal art, and Japanese anime—all reinterpreted through a fresh and exuberant vision.

Josh's discovery of Yusuke Asai's work could not have been timelier. Months before, Menil Collection director Josef Helfenstein had invited Rice Gallery to present a site-specific installation in conjunction with his exhibition, *Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence*. Asai's concept of a peaceable kingdom were a perfect fit for this project, and we thank Josef Helfenstein for the opportunity to be part of it.

As no one in our office speaks Japanese and Yusuke does not speak English, *yamatane* would not have gotten off the ground without the help of Mutsumi Urano, owner of URANO, the Tokyo-based gallery representing Yusuke Asai. Mutsumi's guidance and



communication skills were invaluable to our planning. Additionally, Mutsumi connected us with Yusuke's longtime assistant Ayami Mori, whose knowledge of the artist's practice and her fluent English made her a dream go-between.

Since Asai asked for local dirt ("local" interpreted by us as Texas) to use as his medium, an intensive period of soil collection commenced before his arrival. We thank Dianne Kerr of the Hermann Park Conservancy, Professor John Jacob of Texas A&M University, and Rice professor Cin-Ty Lee who lent

their expertise to this search. Time and again, Rice Gallery staff members Christine Medina and Josh Fischer, and summer intern Paige Polk braved the searing August heat to collect the many types of dirt that gave Asai the largest and most varied color palette he had ever used. We also thank Rice professors Natasha Bowdoin (visual art), Adrienne Correa (bioscience), Cin-Ty Lee (earth science), and Alida C. Metcalf (history), who each shared a unique insight on *yamatane* from the standpoint of their fields as speakers in our Professors' Perspectives lecture series.



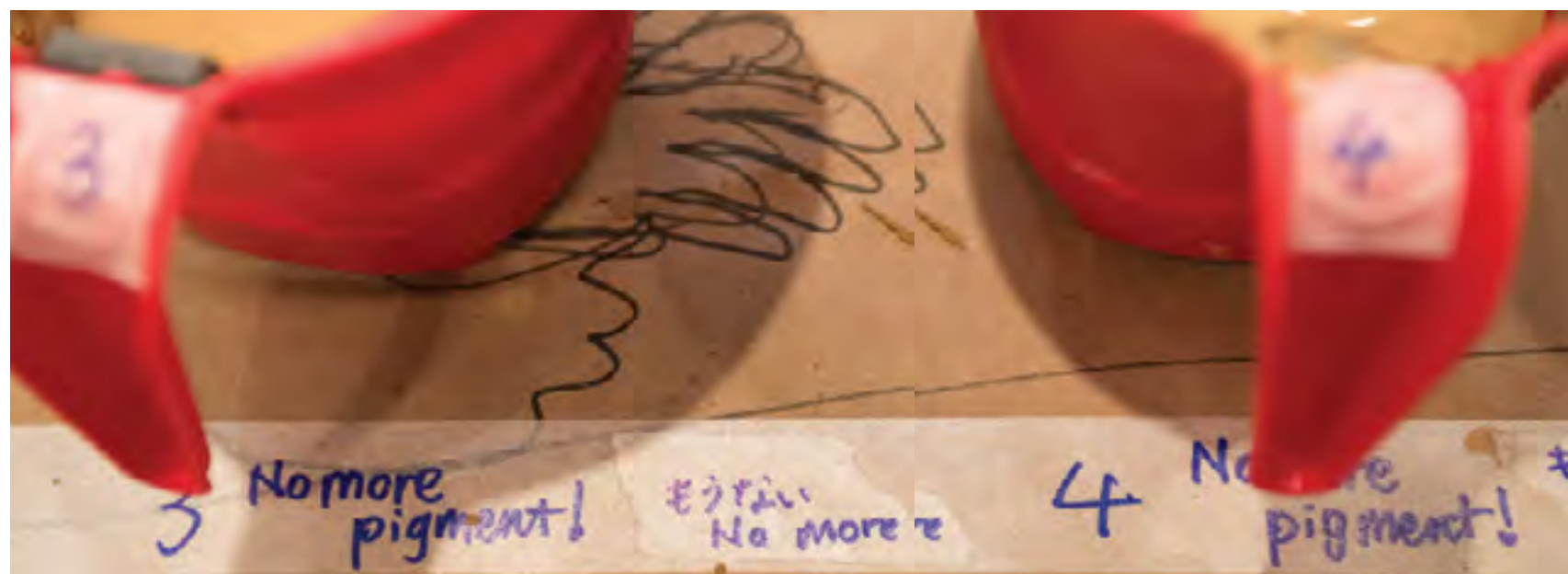
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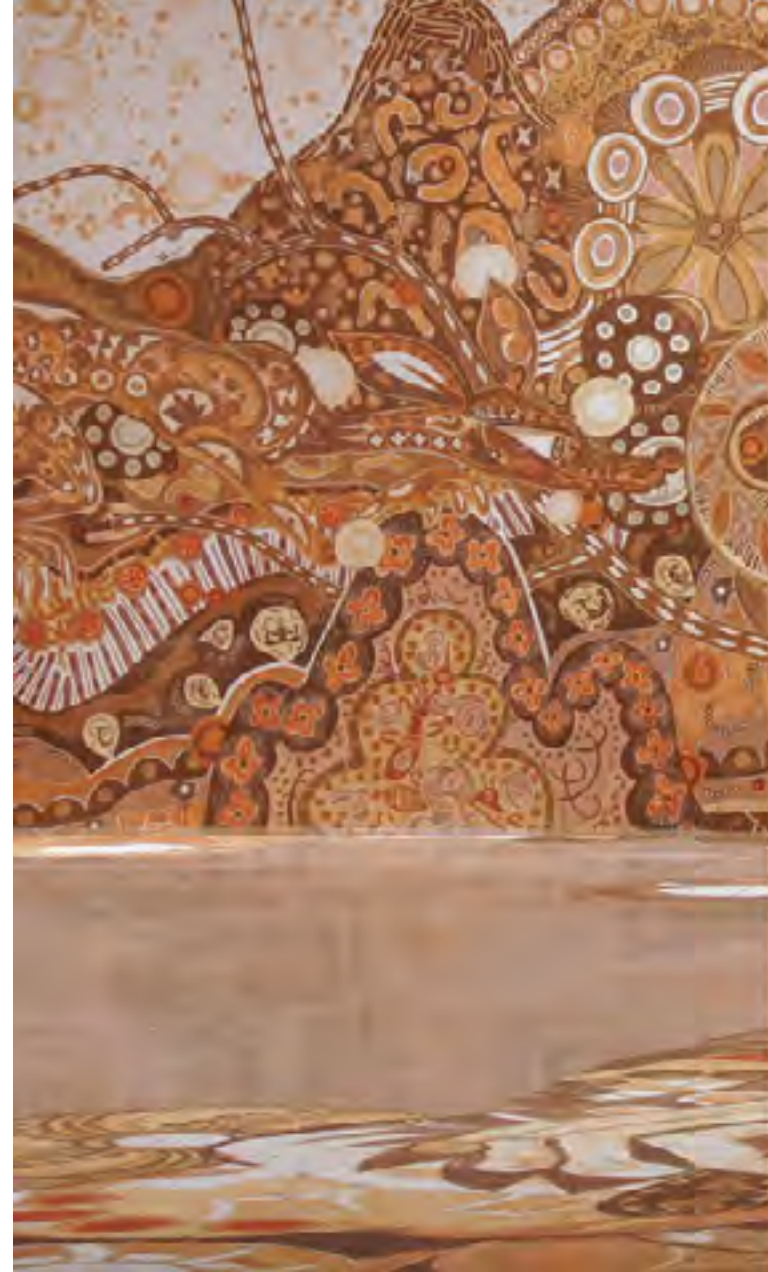
It was thrilling to see Yusuke Asai and his assistants Ayami Mori and Kumpei Miyata begin work by meticulously separating soils by color, crushing them to make fine pigments, and then mixing these with water to create paints. The artists worked day and night, sometimes even sleeping at the gallery, miraculously sustaining their high spirits and good humor. I thank Yusuke Asai for the singular and spectacular experience that was *yamatane*, and for showing Houstonians, as he had demonstrated to residents of a rural Indian community 9,000 miles away, that the tools needed to make a captivating work of art do not have to be technologically advanced or expensive. Using an artistic medium and technique stretching back to cave paintings—natural pigment and drawing—Asai’s most powerful tool proved to be his relentless imagination.

Kimberly Davenport
Director









Everything has a role; parts disappear and something is added. The world accepts it and keeps changing. I begin each work thinking of the countless small things that come together to make a larger world.

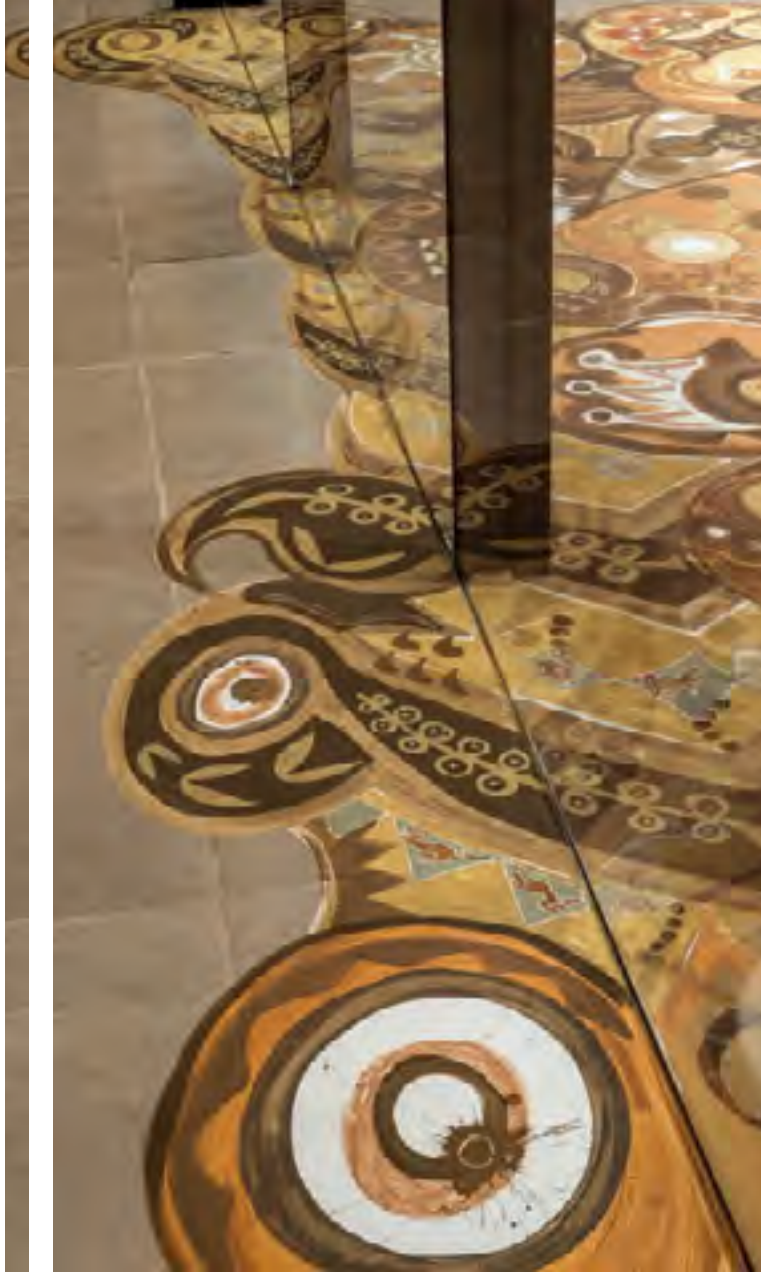
- Yusuke Asai

Yusuke Asai seems to never stop drawing. Even after working day and night on his Rice Gallery installation *yamatane*, he would sketch little characters on the sugar packets at dinner, leaving them behind for a lucky stranger. A compulsion to draw is not unusual among artists, but what makes Asai unique is that he fulfills this desire nearly everywhere he happens to be using immediately available, ephemeral materials. After graduating from high school and foregoing art school, he worked at an art gallery's reception desk where he was not allowed to draw. Bored with idle hands, Asai began using the masking tape for hanging wall labels to make drawings. Like a street artist, he started taping his "masking plants" to telephone poles along his route home and inside train stations. Asai's "plants" grew throughout the city with short life cycles as they were taken down or peeled away.

Drawn to readily available, inexpensive materials and a connection to the natural world, Asai eventually found the perfect material: dirt. With this discovery, Asai could work anywhere in the world, and an opportunity to do so came from Wall Art Project, a



yamatane



Tokyo-based non-profit. Asai was invited to participate in the annual Wall Art Festival, co-sponsored with the Japan Foundation, where Japanese and Indian artists are invited to paint, lead workshops, and interact with students in the villages of Sujata in Bodhgaya (Bihar), and Ganjad (Maharashtra), India. For this festival, Asai collected and made paint from the types of soil in the local village, which he used to create what he calls an "earth painting." The bare walls of the classroom became an imaginative and inspiring environment for local children and their families.

Upon inviting Yusuke Asai to Rice Gallery to create a site-specific installation, it was clear that Asai's favorite material of dirt would not be in short supply, but the challenge was to find a range of colors. Prior to Asai's arrival, my Rice Gallery colleagues, David Krueger and Christine Medina, along with our summer intern Paige Polk, joined me with shovels and five-gallon buckets to collect it. The first samples were easily obtained nearby—a construction site on campus, across the street from Rice in Hermann Park, and at the banks of the White Oak Bayou in The Heights neighborhood. The quest for variety led us half an hour away to a housing development being built in Sugar Land, and to a stop along an undistinguished roadside in Conroe where we found beautiful red soil. The Enchanted Rock area of the hill country near San Antonio yielded a rare green soil with magnetic properties, while light yellow and brown colors were



carried back from the West Texas town of Terlingua near the Mexican border. The final collection yielded 27 colors, the widest spectrum representing a place that Asai had ever worked with.

The lumpy and often wet, clay-based soil had to be dried to grind into fine pigments using a laborious mortar and pestle technique (and a few broken coffee grinders). Once finely ground, sifted, and mixed with water, Yusuke Asai began painting and drawing on the walls freehand, referencing only an image in his mind and a few lines of a preparatory sketch. He and his assistants, Ayami Mori and Kumpei Miyata, worked for two weeks, often from 10:00 am into the early hours of the next morning, filling the walls and floor through a meticulous additive and subtractive process of scraping and repainting surfaces, using tools as fine as chopsticks to create patterns of line, shape, and color.

yamatane (mountain seed), Yusuke Asai's "earth painting" for Rice Gallery, was one of the largest and most intricately detailed works he had ever done. Peering into the installation through the gallery's front glass wall to the back wall, one saw two huge eyes staring back, surrounded on all sides by a swirling composition of foxes, birds, cats, insects, and tiny human figures, all forming and dissolving into rolling mountains, flora, fauna, and geometric patterns. *yamatane* referred back to the prehistoric





cave paintings and the tribal art of Africa, Australia, Japan, and India, especially Warli painting done primarily by women in rural villages of India—all sources of inspiration for Asai. A self-taught artist who characterizes his art education as “going to the zoo and the museum,” Asai’s animals, plant life, and patterns honor his artistic influences, but not by simply quoting them. Instead, these various influences were made fresh in *yamatane* as Asai filtered these traditions through his own style and intuitive approach.

For instance, a dog’s pointy ear shared the same shape as a leaf on a nearby plant; for as Asai explained, when he began a drawing he never knew what it might turn into. Similarities among the more than 300 unique characters and a near-monochromatic palette unified the teeming landscape and gave *yamatane* its feeling of interconnectedness and possibly infinite expansion. *yamatane* even extended to the gallery floor and broke free of the confines of the space with curving circles flowing past the glass wall and out into the foyer.

Asai described *yamatane* as a living ecosystem or mini-universe. To experience the installation was to stand within an expression of continuous growth and evolution, as if you just happened to have entered at a moment of flux caught in stasis. Asai calls dirt a “living” medium, home to seeds, insects, and

microorganisms. As with all living things, dirt is also an ephemeral material and cannot last. When Asai finished his monumental installation after days and days of non-stop work, he sat in the gallery and reflected upon the nature of his chosen medium and his art:

I accepted the ephemeral nature of dirt as a medium from the moment I started painting with it. Once dry, paint cannot be wiped away, but with the addition of water, dirt can be removed from a surface. I have been doing this type of earth painting since 2008 and most of these works have already disappeared. There is a desire for artwork to be permanent, but to try and keep it forever would mean that my painting would become unnatural. When I erase the painting it is sad, but within the context of the natural world, everything is temporary.

Joshua Fischer
Assistant Curator













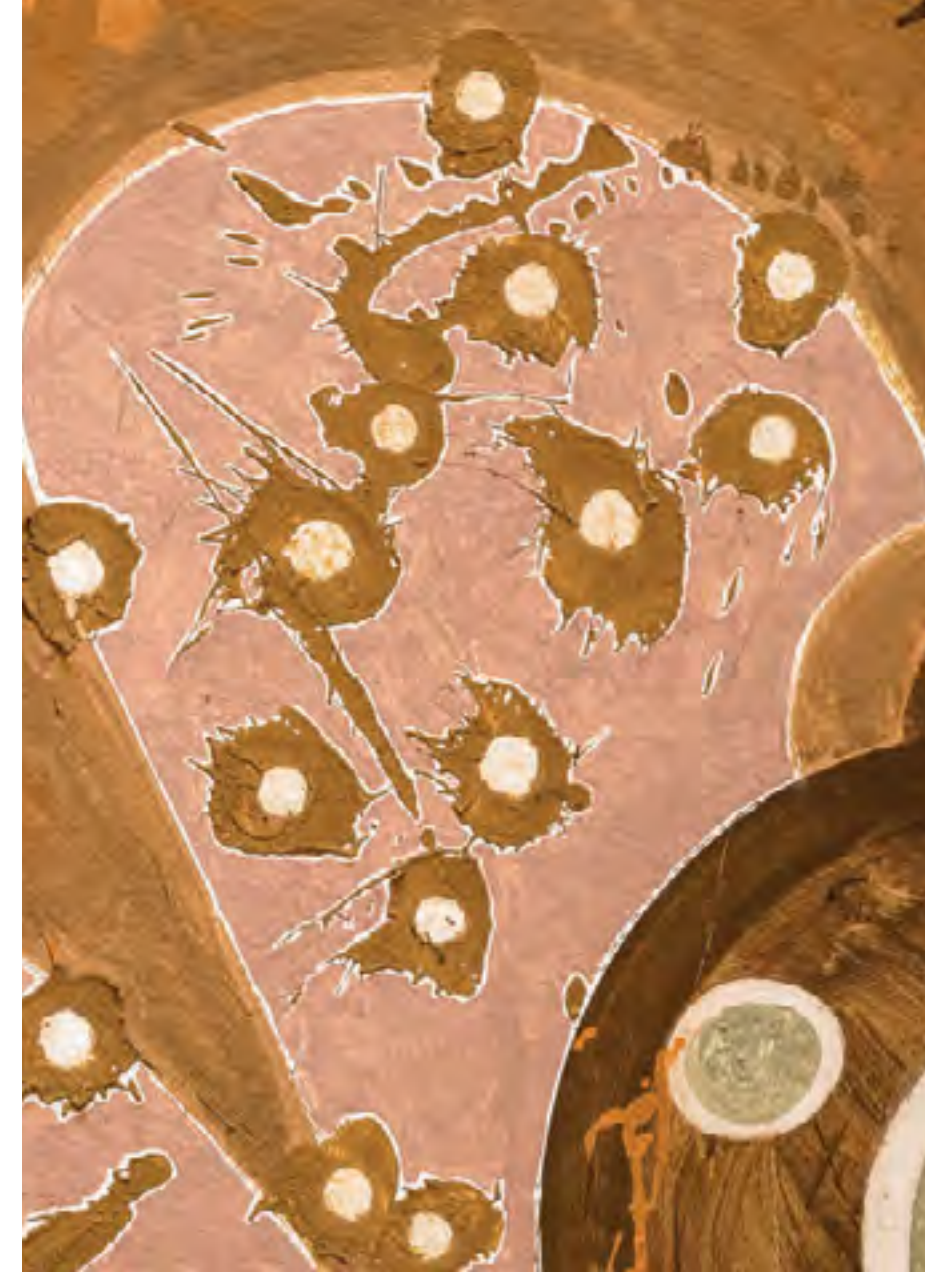




















Born in 1981 in Tokyo, Japan, Yusuke Asai began his artistic career by filling the margins of his textbooks with drawings. Graduating from Kamiyabe High School, Kanagawa, in 1999 with a concentration in ceramics, he chose to forgo college and instead to continue making art on his own. He has had solo exhibitions throughout Japan at the Hakone Open-Air Museum (2015), the Aomori Contemporary Art Centre (2012), and Art Center Ongoing, Tokyo (2011).

Group exhibitions include *Constellations: Practices for Unseen Connections/Discoveries*, Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo (2014), Setouchi Triennale (2013), Rokko Meets Art (2012), and the Aichi Triennale (2010). His installation at Rice Gallery was his first exhibition in the United States. Yusuke Asai lives in Japan's Kumamoto Prefecture and maintains a studio in Tokyo. He is represented by URANO, Tokyo.



about the artist



Yusuke Asai, *yamatane*
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2 October – 11 November 2014

Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the campus of Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the web at ricegallery.org.

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Yusuke Asai, *Earth Painting / Blessing Dance*, 2011
Wall Art Festival 2011, Bodhgaya, India
Photo by Kenji Mimura. Courtesy of Wall Art Festival, URANO.
Page 5

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