

No. 67

Winter
2024

The Red Brick Bulletin

Feature: Sapporo International Art Festival 2024

JET Spotlight: Dugerjav Nominchimed (Takikawa City CIR)



www.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp

The Red Brick Bulletin (English edition) is written by Armi Henriksson, a Coordinator for International Relations (CIR) at the International Affairs Division of the Hokkaido Government.

Sapporo International Art Festival 2024

The beautiful city of Sapporo has no shortage of big annual events. Every year, we see the cheerful dancers of Yosakoi Sōran Festival, the delicious foods of the Autumn Fest, and of course the massive snow sculptures of our famous Snow Festival – to name just a few. In this article, I will introduce a rarer event that only takes place once every three years, and this time actually returned after a long break of six and a half years due to the pandemic: Sapporo International Art Festival (SIAF).

What initially caught my attention in the SIAF 2024 posters that suddenly appeared all over the city center was their use of the Ainu language. It is the language of the indigenous Ainu people of Hokkaido and has therefore been present here long before the arrival of Japanese people on the island, but it is nowadays rarely seen or heard as there are few speakers still remaining. I was happily surprised to see the Ainu name of the festival, *Usa Mosir un Askay utar Sapporo otta Uekarpa*, displayed alongside the Japanese and English text.



▲ Jussi ÄNGESLEVÄ + AATB, *Pinnannousu*



Courtesy of SAPPORO INTERNATIONAL ART FESTIVAL 2024

The theme of SIAF 2024 is *LAST SNOW*. The festival also has three sub-themes, each in a different language. The Japanese subtheme is *Hajimari no Yuki* ('First Snow'), while the English is *Where the Future Begins*. The Ainu subtheme is *Upaste*: it is described as a portmanteau of the words *upas* ('snow') and *paste* ('to notice'). The word *upas* itself is comprised of two parts as well: *u* ('together') and *pas* ('to run'), based on how snowflakes swirling down look like they are racing with each other.

All issues of The Red Brick Bulletin can be accessed at https://www.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp/ss/tsk/akarenga_eng.html

Published by the International Affairs Division, Department of Policy Planning and Coordination, Hokkaido Government (Edited by Armi Henriksson)
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Moerenuma Park

My first experience with SIAF began at the vast Moerenuma Park. It was a blindingly bright January day, and I sorely regretted not having brought my sunglasses. The park was full of people enjoying the snow with skis and sleds, but I was on my way to a very different world: that of the *Pinnannousu* exhibition by artists Jussi Ängeslevä + AATB.



I approached the exhibition venue warily. There were no signs outside the doorway, which felt oddly menacing in its nondescriptness. What could lie waiting beyond the dark curtains? I braced myself and walked through, leaving behind the white snow, sunlight, and children's laughter.

I was now in a dark cave, full of eerie, echoing sounds. As my eyes got used to the dark, I could start making sense of my surroundings: the large room, which is normally used for snow storage, was now home to blocks of ice in various stages of melting. Each piece was illuminated by a spotlight directed towards the wall, giving their intricate shadows an even larger role than the ice itself. At the center of the exhibition, one ice block was still being processed by a robotic arm.



▲ Jussi ÄNGESLEVÄ + AATB, *Pinnannousu*



▲ Jussi ÄNGESLEVÄ + AATB, *Pinnannousu*

The name *Pinnannousu* is Finnish and roughly translates to 'rising surface'. In the cold darkness of the exhibition venue, I felt as though being inside a melting glacier: the longer I stayed, the more the strange clinks and creaks echoing around me now sounded like wails of dying ice. Returning to the white world outside and again seeing the many people enjoying the beautiful winter day, I was strongly aware of how fragile that source of joy is. As ice melts, so does snow: how long will we have them with us?

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Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art

Two days after pondering deep thoughts at Moerenuma Park, I walked the icy streets of central Sapporo to visit my next SIAF exhibition, which was titled 1924–2024 *FRAGILE [Handle with Care]*. As the name suggests, it was to take me through a hundred years of art: from black-and-white photos and simple landscape paintings to massive thread-constructed pieces hanging from the ceiling and abstract color experiments, there were a variety of media and styles represented. Other than all art being more or less literally fragile, it was difficult for a layman like myself to draw connecting lines between the artwork exhibited. However, the connection of the century-long timeline to the overall theme of the festival was clear: it was inviting me to look where we came from and where we are going.



I also decided to check out the museum's other exhibition taking place at the same time, which featured a large selection of Ainu art and crafts. Throughout the years I have spent in Hokkaido, I have come across Ainu designs in various places, such as the permanent exhibition near the Sapporo subway station, but this was the first time I had a chance to see such a wide variety of Ainu crafts in one place. Among them were embroidered fabrics and *attus* robes, jewelry and ceremonial items, knives in elaborate sheaths, and a diverse display of more contemporary-flavored work, including wristwatches and humorous wood sculptures. The exhibition was so massive that to truly appreciate the detailed beauty and craftsmanship of each piece would have taken a good while; I had foolishly planned for my art excursion to end by lunchtime that day, and thus refrained from prolonged oohing and ahing in order to make it to my next destination.

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Future Theater

From the art of decades past and ancient tradition preserved in craftsmanship, I was now about to travel forward in time with an exhibition titled *2124 –Where the Future Begins–*. I headed to the Future Theater with scarce expectations: I had never been to this theater before, and only knew that it went under a name change for the duration of SIAF and is normally known by the (significantly duller) name Higashi 1-chōme Theater.

The entire theater had been turned into an exhibition space. Walking through the deep bowels of the building, I encountered one powerful scene after another. One of the first personal favorites I discovered was *Custos Cavum* by Choe U-Ram, depicting a mythical seal-like guardian of a hole between two worlds, inspired by a real-life seal gnawing at a hole in ice to keep it from freezing over. Another favorite were the gorgeous, delicate glass sculptures by Aoki Mika: many of them had shapes reminiscent of spores or viruses, sometimes breaking through beakers and syringes. Although the artwork was from a much earlier year, I could not help but be reminded of the recent pandemic and how it once again showed the inescapable hold that nature has over us.



▲ Superflux, *Refuge for Resurgence, Window View*



▲ AOKI Mika, *Starting from light, coming back to light*

Throughout the exhibition at the Future Theater, I could see the same overarching themes: the Earth, snow, climate change. Where are we going? Will Sapporo soon have its last snow? The future looks grim in a lot of ways, but there is always hope. In the end, the art piece that enthralled me the most was actually one depicting a nearly post-apocalyptic scene: *Window View* from Superflux's *Refuge for Resurgence*. It showed that even in a world where much of what we know is underwater and in ruins, life can prevail and find new balance.

While I am writing this, I look out of our office windows and see snowflakes chasing each other on their way down. The sight reminds me of the Ainu subtheme of the art festival, but also of a famous quote by scientist Nakaya Ukichirō: “Snow crystals are letters sent from heaven.”

It is time to read those letters.



▲ ISHII Tōru, *Snow Crystal*



▲ GOTŌ Akinori, *In Motion*

Sapporo International Art Festival 2024

When? January 20 – February 25, 2024

*The exhibition at Sapporo Art Park will continue until March 3, 2024.

Where? Various venues around Sapporo City

How much? Some venues free, others accessible with individual tickets (¥1,500) or festival passport (¥2,700).

*Discounts available for students and Hokkaido residents.

Free admission for: children under 16, visitors with a disability certificate plus one accompanying person.

Website: <https://2024.siaf.jp/en>

HOKKAIDO JET SPOTLIGHT

There are over 300 participants of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme who call Hokkaido home. They come from all over the world and they all have a very unique experience with the island. In this issue, we introduce a JET participant working as a CIR (Coordinator for International Relations) in Takikawa, a city in Sorachi Subprefecture.



MEET NOMINCHIMED



▲ Peeking through an "Anywhere Door" at the Nanohana Festival in Takikawa

Tell us a bit about yourself.

Hello! I am from Mongolia and my name is Dugerjav Nominchimed; please call me Nomin. I first came to Japan 25 years ago in 1999 and graduated from Hokkaido University in 2004. After graduating, I worked in Mongolia, but it is currently my second year back in Japan since I started working as a Takikawa CIR in 2022. When I have time, I like to ride my bicycle and enjoy the scenery of towns and nature. In the winter I don't get on my bike, but still like to go on walks. When I move about the city by bike or on foot, I tend to discover many interesting things and chic establishments in unexpected places.

What brought you to the JET Programme?

After returning to Mongolia and starting a family, I always wanted to show my children the wonderful nature of Japan, especially Hokkaido, and have them experience Japanese culture and education.

Compared to English-speaking countries, the JET Programme does not recruit many people from Mongolia. There are currently only three Mongolian JET participants in Japan. By chance, I saw a job posting on social media for a CIR position in Takikawa, Hokkaido, and thought it was a great opportunity. I applied in 2020 before the pandemic, but because of Covid-related border measures, the recruitment was postponed many times: once, it was even cancelled just one day before I was supposed to arrive in Japan. After two years, I was finally able to come to Japan with my family in May 2022.

What kind of work are you doing as a JET participant?

The city of Takikawa has a friendly relationship with the Övörkhongai Province in Mongolia and has hosted many trainees and technical interns from there. Originally, I was going to be in charge of a project called LGOTP (Local Government Officials Training Program) that manages these trainees, but the project was cancelled due to Covid. However, I am still involved in many ongoing exchange projects with Mongolia, such as school exchanges and donations of school bags, ambulances and fire trucks. There are fairly few people in Japan who want to study Mongolian, but I have posted a total of 19 beginner-level Mongolian language course videos for

them on YouTube. I also visit schools, children's centers and nursery schools in Takikawa and surrounding towns such as Furano and Yuubari, and participate in events to introduce Mongolian culture, games and cuisine.

What in your experience are some of the differences between Japan and where you're from?

Like Japan, Mongolia is a Northeast Asian country. Culturally, we share many similarities with Japan, including Buddhism, rites of passage, grammar, and sumo wrestling. Hokkaido in particular has a similar climate and nature to the northern part of Mongolia, so there is a sense of affinity. The most significant difference is that Mongolia is a nomadic nation. Mongolians are people who move with their livestock depending on the season, in search of grass and warm places. They live in family units and have to make decisions individually, so I feel that many Mongolian people are highly individualistic.

Tell us of a memorable moment you've had in Hokkaido!

When I was a student at Hokkaido University, my elderly dormitory manager took me to local festivals and other events in places like Niseko, which left a big impression on me. I got to try snowmobiling and visit Japanese homes, and I really valued the experience.



▲ Takikawa Lantern Festival

What are your favorite things about Takikawa or the surrounding region?

As mentioned in my self-introduction, I like to travel around by bicycle. I have cycled around not only Takikawa, but also most of the nearby towns like Akabira, Sunagawa, Uryuu and Shintotsukawa. The central Sorachi region, including Takikawa, is full of greenery and nature. In the summer, I went by bike to pick cherries at an orchard on the outskirts of Takikawa, and to eat delicious ice cream at a farm in Sunagawa. Sky sports are also popular in Takikawa: you can fly a glider right in the city at Takikawa Sky Park. At the Takikawa Lantern Festival held in February, more than 10,000 handmade paper bag lanterns give the city a magical glow. In May we have the Nanohana Festival, where many visitors from Japan and abroad come to see the bright yellow canola flowers that decorate the hills. I encourage everyone to visit us!

