

Roko Kawai: an artist's workbook

BELONGING AND SOLO 07

IZU HOUSE 08

TOKYO JOURNAL 05

TRAVEL JOURNAL 05

BIOGRAPHY



North: Ainu 4



"here, let me put this ainu coat on you and take your picture." "uh... o...kay..."

it was just me and Hikawa-san, the carekeeper of the Chise. inside this one room "house" made of straw was a hearth, traditional implements, and old photos. our situation was odd – a lone woman with a older male stranger alone in a dark, window-less hut on a depopulated lake. but i decided to trust my instincts. he was a nice guy.

"here, pose in front of the (taxidermy) bear." "uh... o...kay...."

for a natural history museum host, he is a man of few words but we got to talking. "there are plenty of us ainu around!" he said proudly, showing me photos of family in traditional dress & ceremony. i recalled at sounkyo gorge, the gentle inn-lady had said: "i don't know where the ainu have gone to. they're all gone now."

it was almost 5. "actually," i ventured, "i'm thinking of staying at Lake Akan tonight but don't yet have a reservation. any good recommendations?" he whipped out a pamphlet & within minutes i was set. he said his house is just a stone's throw from my inn, that he can show me a short cut. "follow my ass," he said. and so i followed his car through mountain passes & rice fields. as he dropped me off at the inn, he said: "why don't you stop by my store later!"

Akan is a tourist trap. what remains of the Ainu community is usually busy selling tacky-touristy souvenirs, a few authentic crafts. but when i spoke to them, they were grounded, friendly—never obsequious. in this tourist town—me as mainland japanese customer, and they as shopkeepers—it was hard to break out of the politesse of merchant & guest, to act sympathetically to the trinkety industry that sustains them. i went with the flow.

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Background image: Hokkaido: Kotan Museum of Ainu. June 2005.

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it was just me and Hikawa-san, the carekeeper of the Chise. inside this one room "house" made of straw was a hearth, traditional implements, and old photos. our situation was odd – a lone woman with a older male stranger alone in a dark, window-less hut on a depopulated lake. but i decided to trust my instincts. he was a nice guy.

"here, pose in front of the (taxidermy) bear." "uh... o...kay...."

for a natural history museum

sounkyo gorge

around!" he said proudly, she Located in the middle of Hokkaido, it was a highlight as I travelled across rugged mountain ranges through the rain.

gorge, the gentle inn-lady had said. "I don't know where the ainu have gone to, they're all gone now."

it was almost 5. "actually," i ventured, "i'm thinking of staying at Lake Akan tonight but don't yet have a reservation. any good recommendations?" he whipped out a pamphlet & within minutes i was set. he said his house is just a stone's throw from my inn, that he can show me a short cut. "follow my ass," he said. and so i followed his car through mountain passes & rice fields. as he dropped me off at the inn, he said: "why don't you stop by my store later!"

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← North: Ainu 5

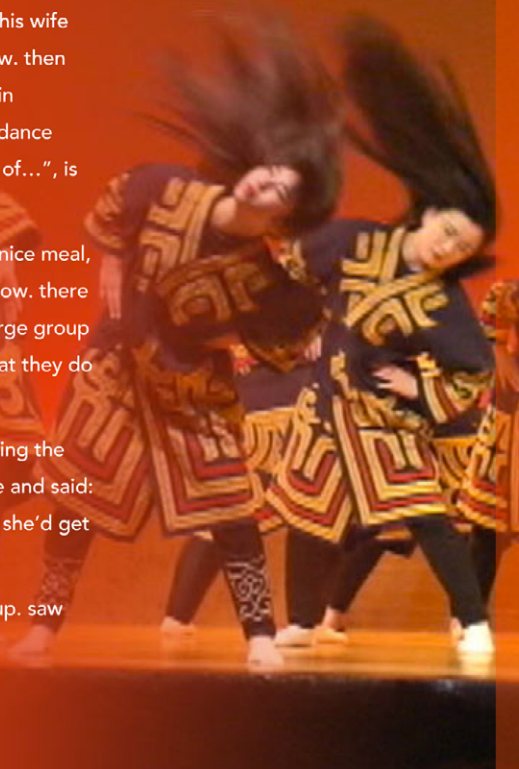


i found Hikawa-san's store at the top of the hill, just next to the dance performance hall. his wife was a strong, straightforward, friendly woman. i hung out with them a bit before the show. then his wife jumped up. gotta take tickets. like Hikawa-san who has 2 jobs hosting the Chise in Kussharo & running this store in Akan, she jumps up 6 times a day to tear tickets for the dance perf. the dance perf that, while the announcement says is authenticated by the "ministry of...", is presented 6x a day, 365 days a year, largely unchanged. EEEEEKKKK!

most guests were "mainland" japanese, older folk in yukata after their hotspring bath, a nice meal, & lots of beer. some were drunk but everyone seemed attentive & appreciative of the show. there was a main MC/dancer young man, two elderly female singers, one elderly man, and a large group of youngish female dancers. it felt authentic. it did. though i couldn't get over the fact that they do this same show over and over and over and over...

after the show, went back to Hikawa-san's store. delicately asked Hikawa-san's wife if doing the same program got to them. ever the solid businesswoman, she just looked straight at me and said: "actually, doing that show never gets boring!" then she asked if i wanted to see it again, she'd get me in for free.

so i saw it again. saw the silhouette of the young MC in the dark before the lights came up. saw him take a deep inhale. this was the 6th & last show of the day. but otherwise he was flawless—told the same jokes, made the same reverent bows during a ritualized dance.



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Background image: Hokkaido: Performance presented at Akan town's local tourist theater, Akan National Park. June 2005.

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← North: Ainu 6



hikawa-san noticed that i was especially taken by the textiles. "you like patterns?" i said yes, and how strikingly similar they were to those of the native peoples of the pacific northwest (*kwakiutl*, *tlingit*, etc). he got a slight "look" on his face. "uh.. well, people say our patterns look more like those in *Poland*," he deflected. i could tell for ainu, being compared to native americans was not good. but the similarity is truly undeniable. perhaps the struggle of a people trying to hold onto what's left of the uniqueness of their heritage.

at a trinkety store, i couldn't help but buy a tiny glass jar with "marimo" inside – marble-sized live green moss balls, only found in lake Akan (and some place in russia, again?), once considered sacred by ainu peoples, now found everywhere in akan's cutesy stores, amidst keychains of foxes, bears, and a jarring loudspeaker blaring the advertisement for the next dance performance.



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Background image: Hokkaido: Niputani Museum, Ainu outer garment. June 2005.

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←

North: Ainu 6



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hikawa-san noticed that i was especially taken by the textiles. “you like patterns?” i said yes, and how strikingly similar they were to those of the native peoples of the Pacific Northwest (the Kwakiutl, Tlingit, etc). he got a slight “huh” and said “your patterns look more like the ones from the Pacific Northwest than the ones from the Pacific Northwest.” i told him that i had been to the Pacific Northwest in 1988, I traveled to the region to speak with three local artists about the symbol of the killer whale in their work.

tell for ainu, being compared to native americans was not good. but the similarity is truly undeniable. perhaps the struggle of a people trying to hold onto what’s left of the uniqueness of their heritage.

at a trinkety store, i couldn’t help but buy a tiny glass jar with “marimo” inside – marble-sized live green moss balls, only found in lake Akan (and some place in russia, again?), once considered sacred by ainu peoples, now found everywhere in akan’s cutesy stores, amidst keychains of foxes, bears, and a jarring loudspeaker blaring the advertisement for the next dance performance.

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← North: Ainu 7 →

headed out early the next morning on the endless drive back to south hokkaido. mountains and mountains and mountains. car butt. to Piratori, considered the largest(?) ainu community. got lost along the way. people who gave me directions all said: "piratori? nan-nimo nai." when i finally arrived, it felt like no one was there, just a friendly woman in one of the few open stores, guarded out front by two gigantic plaster statues, weather-worn, of an ainu couple in traditional dress. funny how like the american west it was. saw the 2 local ainu museums—considered the best. but hard to absorb against the long drive.



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Background image: Hokkaido: Sign posted at the entryway of the Niputani Museum: "You paid 100,000 yen (\$1000) to get here—what's another 4 bucks?" June 2005.

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North: Ainu 8



glad to have met & chatted with Kaizawa-san, who ran a souvenir/craft workshop nearby & proudly self-identified as a 70%-blooded ainu. his carvings were beautiful, though done on "saleable objects" like penboxes, etc. again, it was just the 2 of us. i let him know i was here on fellowship from america. i.e., not a typical "wa-jin" (pre-assimilation term for mainland japanese).

"are asians were still discriminated against in the U.S.?" ahhh... finally a conversation that dug deeper. "yes, indeed." "still?" he was genuinely surprised. i asked him about ainu. "well, we've gained legal rights. technically we can get an education & rise up the ladder. but our education is so poor. and 'wa-jin,' i mean 'nihon-jin', still don't like for us to marry in with them. it's an attitude thing."

he showed me old photos of Piratori, how 100% traditional it had been as recent as 1932. all Chise in a snowy landscape. as hunters & gatherers, the ainu had to learn new trades with "modernization." including woodcarving for tourists.

Kaizawa-san explained the symbolism of the curved patterns, the never-ending flow of life & nature, time & experience. he showed me a print of a salmon deity leaping, starkly represented in black, white & red. i tried again: "it does have a similarity with the salmon designs of pacific northwest peoples, right?" that look again. "i mean, of course, it's different too." i bought alot of gifts from his store in thanks.

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Background image: Hokkaido: Kaizawa-san, who runs a souvenir and craft workshop in Piratori town. June 2005.

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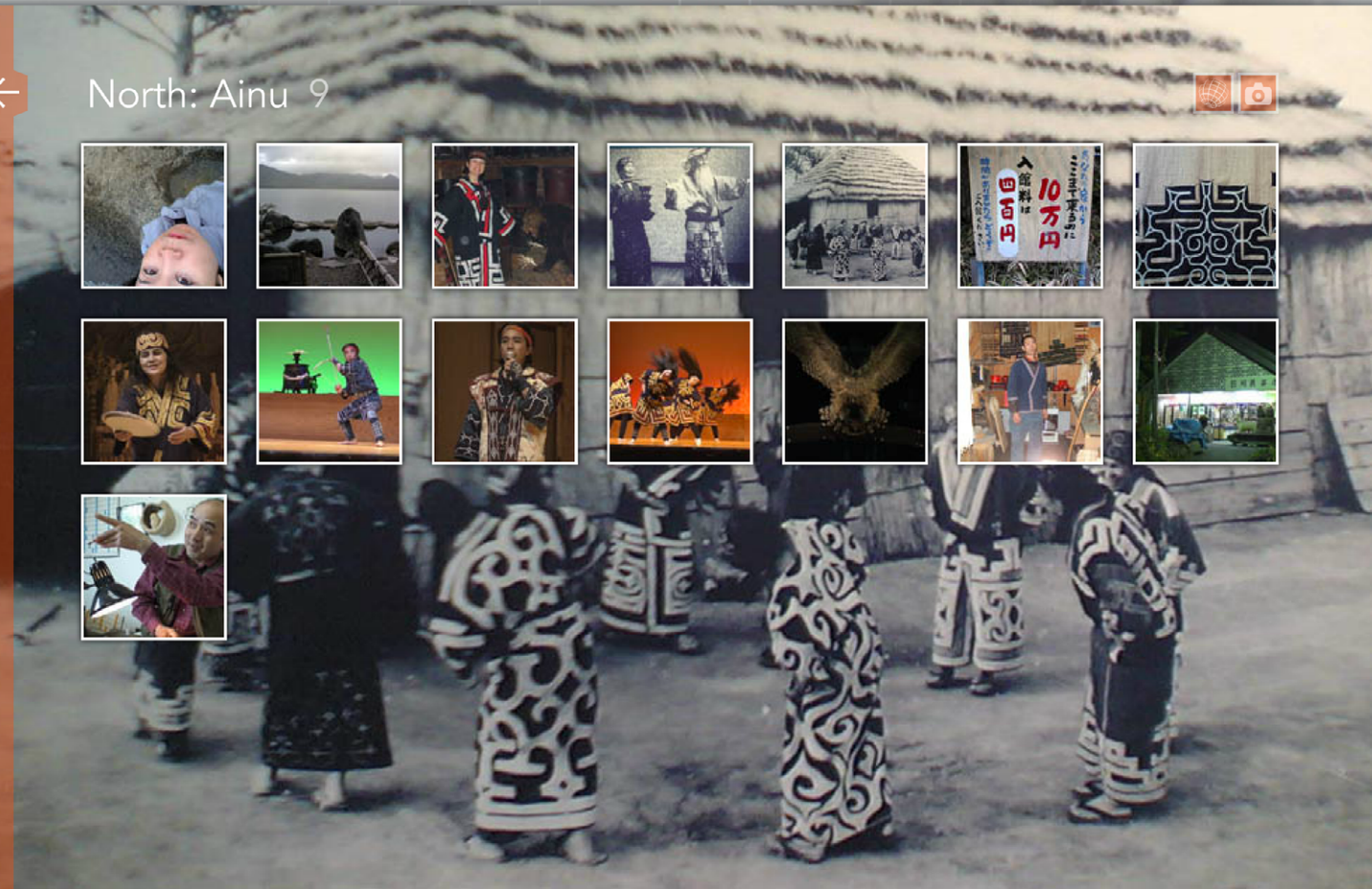
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North: Ainu 9



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North



Hokkaido: Tracing back inland from Shiretoko Peninsula to Lake Kussharoh and its Sunayu shore or, literally, "Sand Hot Water." At first it looks like a regular sandy beach, deserted on this rainy day, swan peddle boats parked at empty docks, just a few people around. But when I took off my shoes and dug a small hole, scalding water poured in! I dipped my feet in the lake water itself and found it chilly! June 2005.

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Background image: Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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North



Hokkaido: Kotan village and hotspring. The left side is for women, the right for male bathers. Within Akan National Park. June 2005.



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Background image: Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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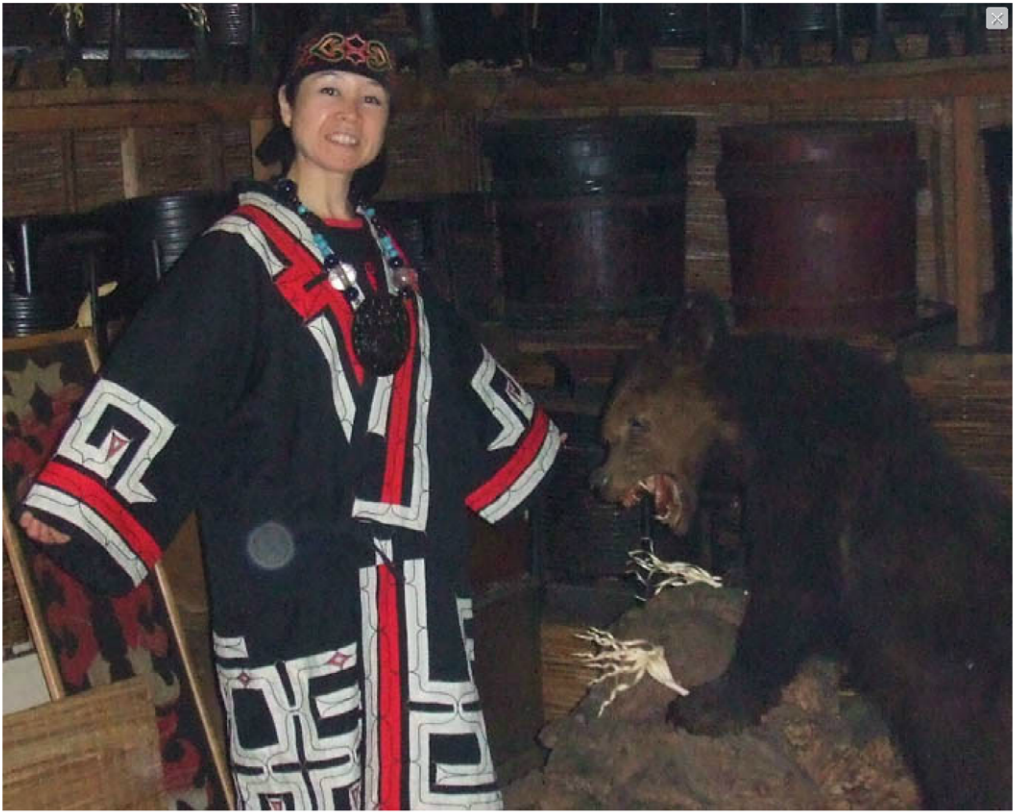
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← North













Hokkaido: Kotan Museum of Ainu. In this model Chise (traditional Ainu home), the docent Hikawa-san photographed me in traditional Ainu dress next to a taxidermy bear. The bear is one of the most sacred animals within the Ainu religious practice. June 2005.

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Background image: Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph featuring an elderly Ainu couple. Niputani Museum. June 2005.



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Background image: Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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North















Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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Background image: Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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North



Hokkaido: A sign posted at the entryway of Niputani Museum that reads "To get here from your house was 100,000 yen! [\$1000] What's another 400 yen [\$4] to come inside? Give it a try!" June 2005.

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Background image: Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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←

North: Ainu 9





Hokkaido: Ainu outer garment, Niputani Museum. The Ainu textile patterns often reminded me of those of Native Pacific Northwest tribal peoples I saw during a research trip in 1987. However, I sensed a tension whenever I mentioned similarities between these textiles and the arts of American native peoples. June 2005.



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Background image: Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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←

North: Ainu













Hokkaido: A show of Ainu dances and songs at Akan town's local tourist theater, Akan National Park. June 2005.

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Background image: Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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Background image: Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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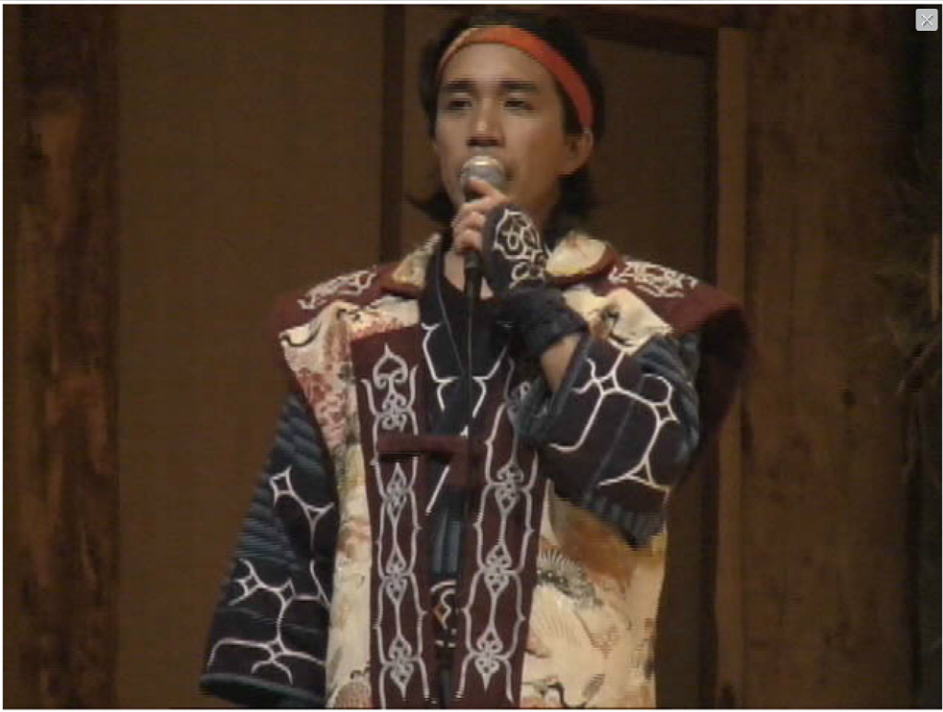
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← North: Ainu





Hokkaido: There are, I was told, multiple performances per day, 365 days a year, of this show of Ainu dances and songs at Akan, in Akan National Park. This was the sixth and last show of the day for this young MC. June 2005.



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Background image: Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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BIOGRAPHY

←

North: Ainu





Hokkaido: This is one of the popular traditional Ainu dances in which women use their long hair as part of the choreography. Presented at Akan town's local tourist theater, Akan National Park. June 2005.



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Background image: Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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BIOGRAPHY

←

North: Ainu













Hokkaido: Akan, Hokkaido Owl (carved) at top of main gate in Akan town, Akan National Park. Alongside the bear, I saw many owl icons in tourist centers for Ainu culture. June 2005.

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Background image: Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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←

North: Ainu 9





Hokkaido: Kotan Museum of Ainu. Hikawa-san, the docent for this model Chise, the traditional Ainu house. Through him, I found lodging for the night and was led to the Akan theater where traditional Ainu dances and songs were performed for tourists. June 2005.





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Background image: Hokkaido: Photo of an archival photograph of an Ainu dance. Niputani Museum. June 2005.

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← North: Ainu

Hokkaido: Akan National Park, Hikawa-san's Ainu souvenirs store in Akan town. June 2005.

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← North: Ainu





Hokkaido: Kaizawa-san, who runs a souvenir and craft workshop in Piratori town. He proudly self-identified as a 70%-blooded Ainu and was curious to know if Asian Americans were still discriminated against in the United States. June 2005.

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North: Osore-zan 1



6.5.05 : NANNIMONAI

"ghosts will jump onto your shoulders and come home with you. i think you should not go there... they hitch onto people who are 'weak,' like my wife. she won't even go to cemeteries to visit her ancestors. besides, 'nanimo nai' (nothing there). just rocks on a mountain."

—hotel clerk at return stay in Hakodate

3 or 4 separate people told me "ikanai hoh-ga iito omoimasu"—i think it's best if you don't go to... Osore-zan. upon my return to Tokyo, most of my acquaintances also looked at me with a quick, silent: "why did you go there?" like i'd decided to go to iraq during my vacation, or relax at ground zero at the world trade center. Osore-zan, very forlorn northern tip of Honshu, place of ghosts, mountain to be feared. where the souls of the departed come back to visit earth.



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Background image: Osore-zan: northern tip of Honshu. June 2005.

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North: Osore-zan 1



6.5.05 : NANNIMONAI

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my wife. she won't even go t
besides, 'nanimonai' (nothing there). just rocks on a mountain."*

Nannimonai
"There's nothing out there."

—hotel clerk at return stay in Hakodate

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Background image: Osore-zan: northern tip of Honshu. June 2005.

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North: Osore-zan 2



a sulphuric sputtering moonscape. truly "nan ni mo nai." and i loved it. 45 min bus to the top of Osore-zan. i was the only rider. an audio began playing once we got up into the woods. some clips of shamans singing to bring back the dead, to convey messages to us. in the greenwoods, stone Jizo with bright red bibs began to appear. protectors of lost children. osore-zan is also known as the place where the spirits of still borns reside. if nothing else, i thought it would be good to commune with my father...

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Background image: Sulphuric lake, Osore-zan. June 2005.

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← North: Osore-zan 2



Jizo

Small stone statue that one sees at temples and other roadside areas. A protector of travelers and children.

a sulphuric sputtering moonscape. truly "nan ni mo nai." and i loved it. 45 min bus to the top of Osore-zan. i was the only rider. an audio began playing once we got up into the woods. some clips of shamans singing to bring back the dead, to convey messages to us. in the greenwoods, stone Jizo with bright red bibs began to appear. protectors of lost children. osore-zan is also known as the place where the spirits of still borns reside. if nothing else, i thought it would be good to commune with my father...

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Background image: Sulphuric lake, Osore-zan. June 2005.

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← North: Osore-zan 3



but i had to chuckle last night as i unpacked. i'd *forgotten* i'd put 5 or so condoms in the bag—just in case. alas, didn't run into any eligible men, it being the low season for tourism. not even wandering *gaijin* on the shinkansen. just retired folk & people from taiwan on huge tour buses, or the occasional young couple in a rent-a-car. but it was good to chat with old ladies in hot spring baths, inn keepers, fishmongers and the 3–4 Ainu (indigenous northern ethnic group) who befriended me. nope, can't complain.

back to o-keiko this afternoon. later this eve, may attend a dance critic's lecture on how "silly" most dance is—not sure i'm ready for all that cynicism again yet.

"place of ghosts," Mt. Scary (literally)

where the dead visit earth & the living can commune with lost loved ones. (i went to visit my father)



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Background image: Osore-zan: northern tip of Honshu. Jizo statue, protector of the souls of stillborns. June 2005.

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North: Osore-zan 4



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Background image: Osore-zan: another view. June 2005.

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Sign at entry way to Osore-zan, or literally, "the Mountain of Fear and Dread." Osore-zan is at the forlorn northernmost tip of Honshu Island—a place of ghosts, a mountain to be feared, and a place where the souls of the departed come back to visit earth. June 2005.

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Background image: Osore-zan: another view. June 2005.

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North



Osore-zan, northern tip of Honshu: "Ghosts will jump onto your shoulders and come home with you. i think you should not go there..." June 2005.

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Background image: Osore-zan: another view. June 2005.

Roko Kawai: an artist's workbook

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North: Osore-zan



Osore-zan: Amidst this barren landscape there were ceremonial structures. June 2005.



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Background image: Osore-zan: another view. June 2005.

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North



Main temple at Osore-zan. June 2005.



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Background image: Osore-zan: another view. June 2005.

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Osore-zan: A sulphuric sputtering moonscape. June 2005.



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Background image: Osore-zan: another view. June 2005.

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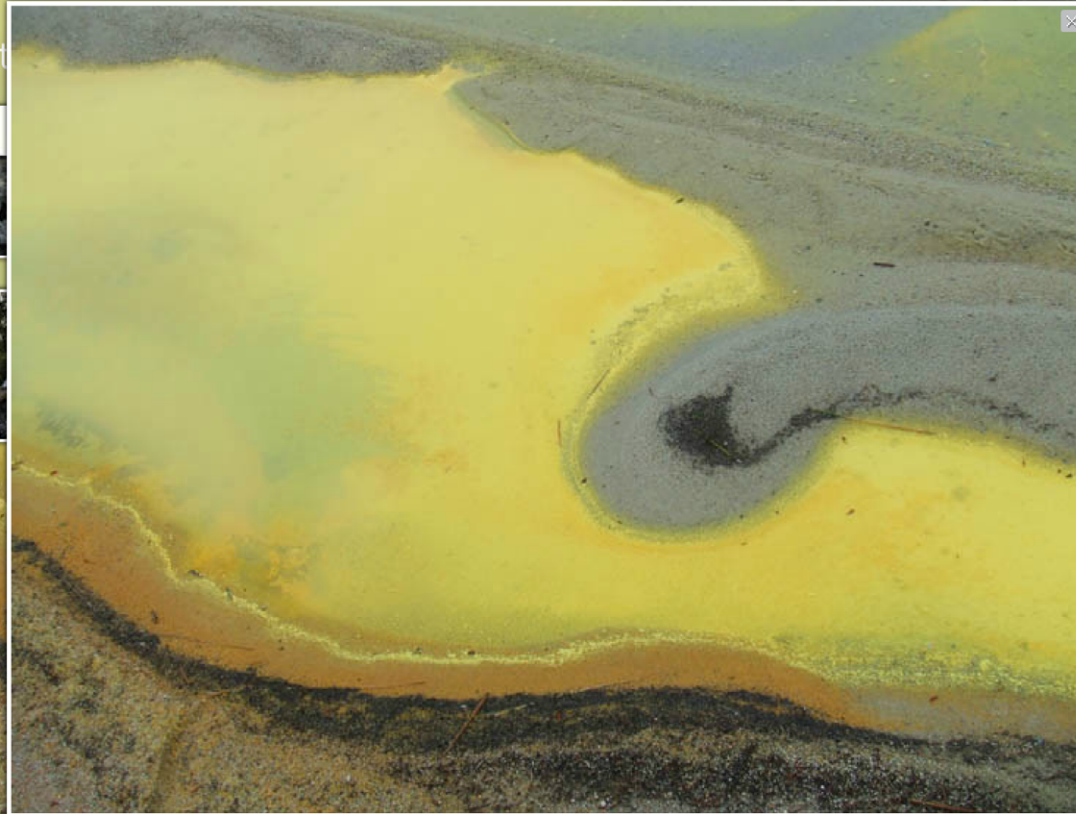
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Osore-zan: another view. June 2005.



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Background image: Osore-zan: another view. June 2005.

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North



Osore-zan: Jizo statues, protectors of the souls of stillborns. June 2005.

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Background image: Osore-zan: another view. June 2005.

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North: Osore-zan



Osore-zan. June 2005.



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Background image: Osore-zan: another view. June 2005.

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North



Osore-zan: There were two hotspring houses on the grounds of Osore-zan. No one was there but since they were well kept I took a quick (very hot) bath. June 2005.

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Background image: Osore-zan: another view. June 2005.

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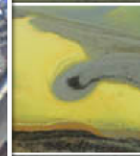
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North: Osore-zan



Osore-zan: northern tip of Honshu. June 2005.



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Background image: Osore-zan: another view. June 2005.

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North: Solo 1



still settling back into Tokyo. was awoken by another brief shake of earth at 5:30am this morning. home sweet home. solo travel was a first for me, worth doing—once—okay, maybe a few times. i waver between hushing the part of me that wants to say it would have been better with someone, and wondering if it brought me closer to each sight, moment, and question along the way, which can only happen when you are alone.

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Background image: Staying at an inn in Sounkyo Gorge, Hokkaido. June 2005.

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North: Solo 2



maybe the memory of the trip will seem more romantic & ideal 3 months from now, especially since the highlights are so beautifully captured on film. but in between each photo opp were long hours of driving, downpouring rain, a low hum of anxiety about where i was staying that night, and whether or not what was touted in books would really end up worth it after all this effort. travel in japan is a little like that—"nihon-wa atari to hazure ga aru kara ne"—might be a jackpot, might be a letdown. you just can't tell from the advertising.

a good part of the trip was puzzling out what i could "hear" between the lines, getting 2 or 3 opinions before really determining where to point myself next.



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Background image: Souunkyo Gorge, Hokkaido. June 2005.

Roko Kawai: an artist's workbook

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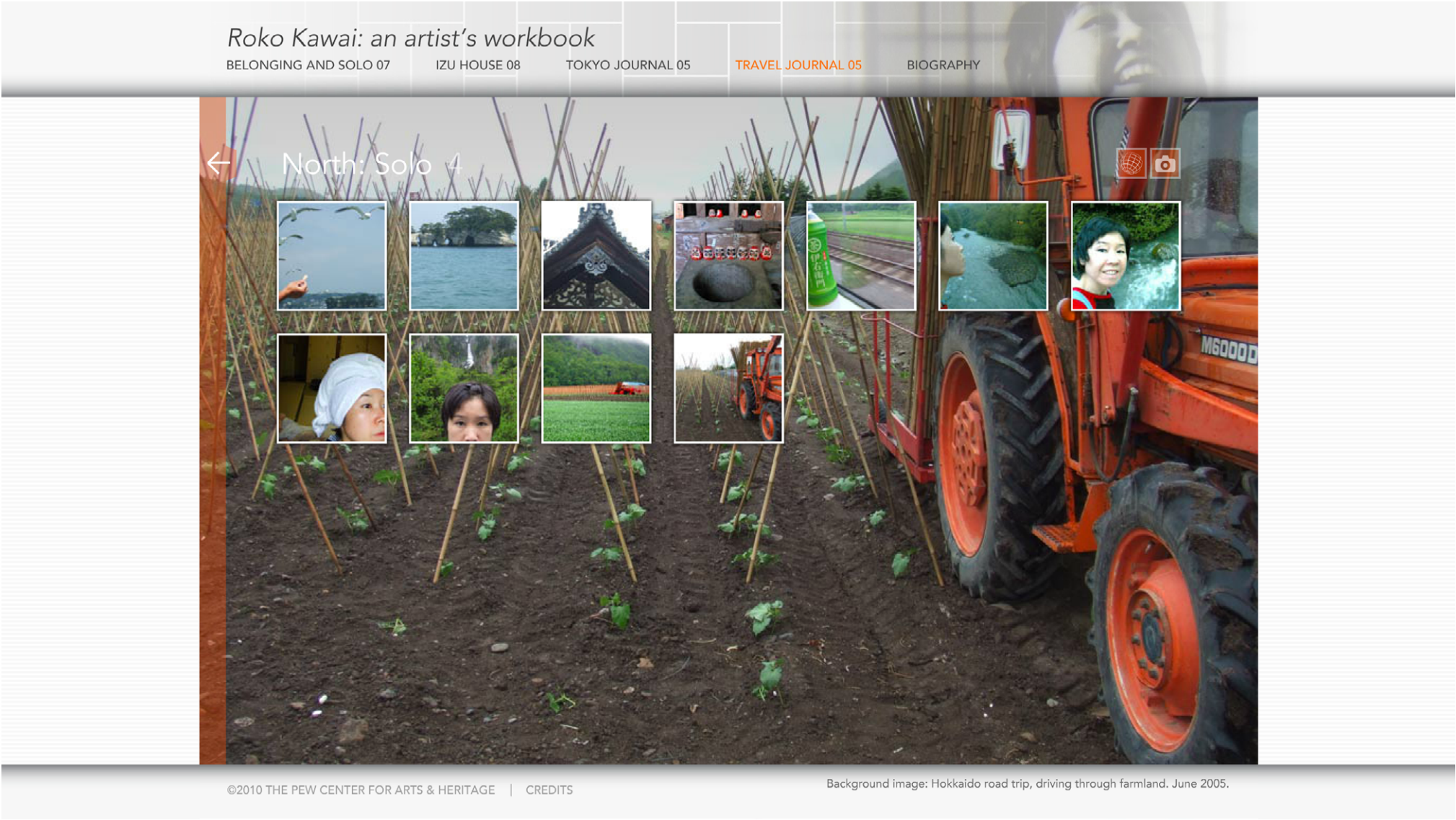
North: Solo 3

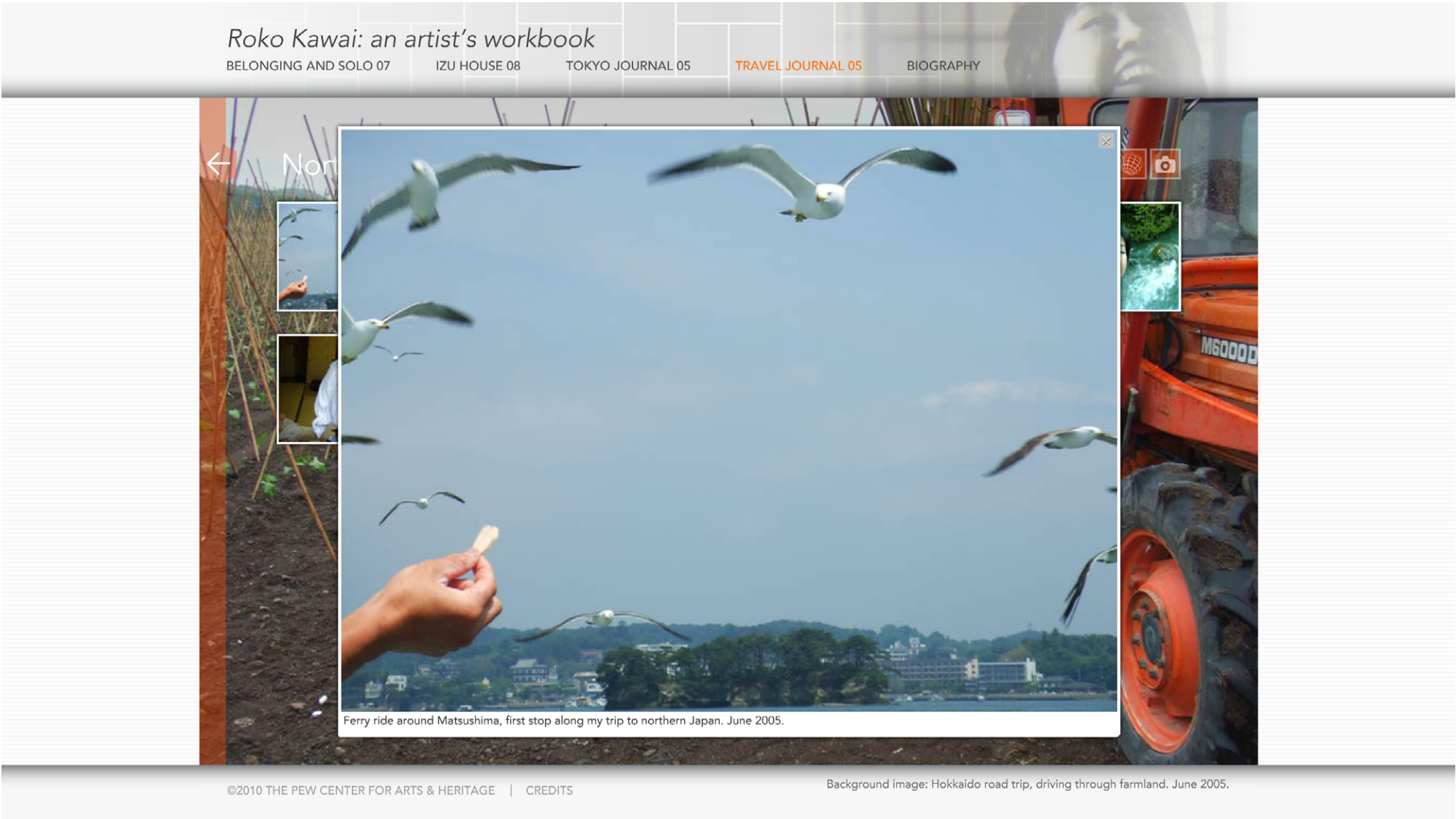


so i return, a bit sober from the quiet-scenes of these 7 days. a mix of small friendly conversations i had along the way with innkeepers, fishmongers, ainu & old ladies in hotspots and the sights that, while they don't quite spank the living daylights out of you like the grandeur of new zealand, the pacific northwest, canyonlands of the southwest, farmlands of virginia/pennsylvania, the ricefields of bali, or even the gross awesomeness of metro-tokyo, glow in their own way, misty-pure.

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Background image: Rausu, a quiet fishing town on the eastern coast of Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. June 2005.





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Background image: Hokkaido road trip, driving through farmland. June 2005.

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← North: Solo 4





Zuisenji Temple. June 2005.



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Background image: Hokkaido road trip, driving through farmland. June 2005.

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←

North

On my trip north, riding Japan Rail toward Hokkaido. This is a typical view from the window. Scores of *nan ni mo nai* views (nothing there)—nothing but rice, fields, mountains, water! June 2005.

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Background image: Hokkaido road trip, driving through farmland. June 2005.

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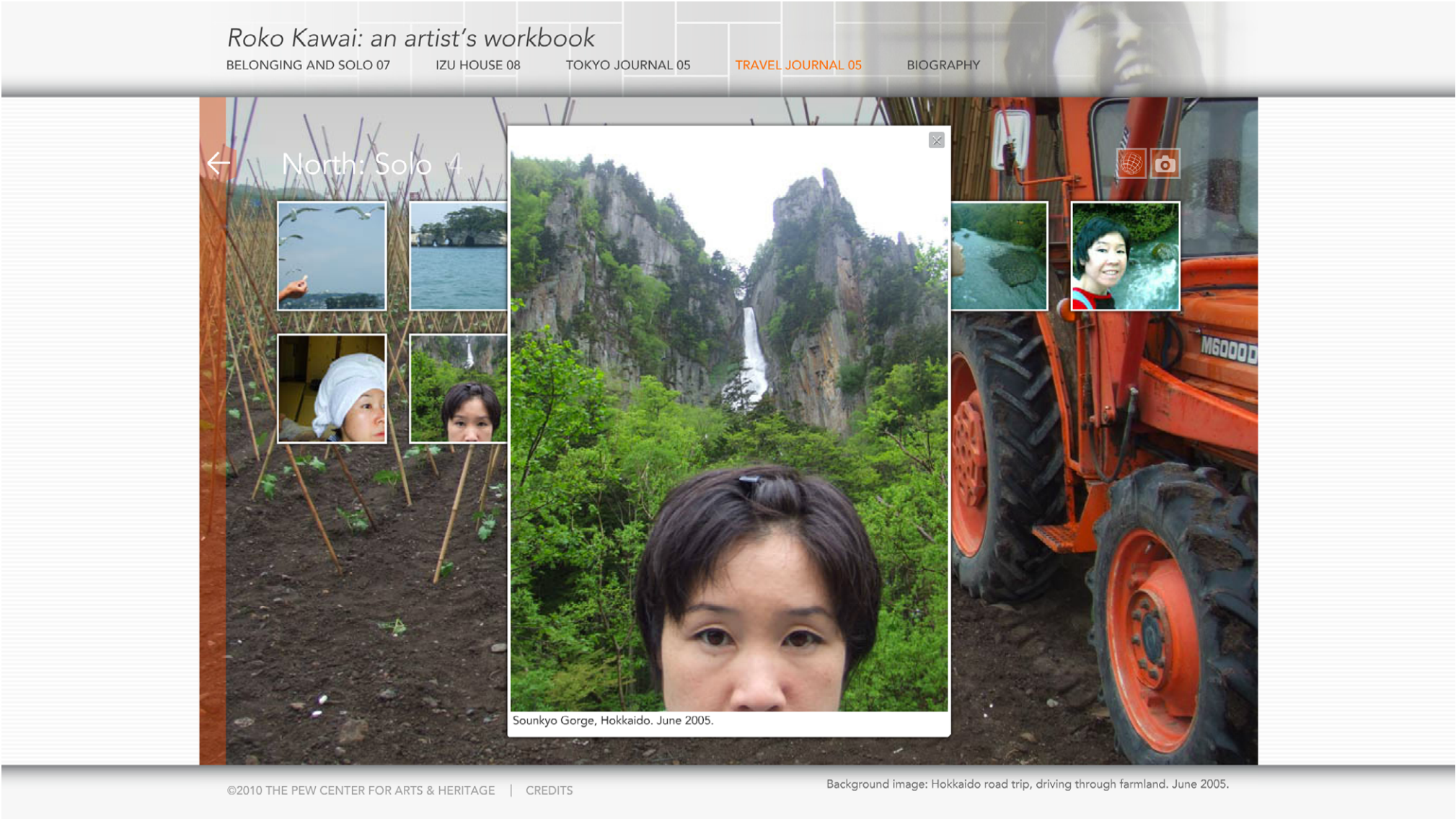


Sounkyo Gorge, June 2005.

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Background image: Hokkaido road trip, driving through farmland. June 2005.





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Background image: Hokkaido road trip, driving through farmland. June 2005.

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North: Shiretoko 1



6.19.05 : AND ON AND ON...

i missed (pissed!) the scenic bypass to the "great panoramas" of Akan National Park and accidentally ended up in the coastal drab town of Abashiri. "nan-ni mo nai," i was warned. and yet, i had a mood change there. now on the Okhotsk Sea, it really felt like what Russia must feel like. on a rainy Sunday, there was barely a soul in sight. just a few highway signs pointing to "midokoro"—Abashiri Prison, Museum of Northern Peoples, Harbor of Ice Flows. distinctively less cheerful.

in retrospect, i should have stopped there for a few minutes to take it all in.

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Background image: Hokkaido: Reaching the northern tip of the island, Shiretoko Peninsula at Goko (5 Lakes). June 2005.

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North: Shiretoko 2



by the time i got to shiretoko, the skies were a dark gray and the drizzle traded places with rapid windshield wiper rains. managed to stay just ahead of the tour buses containing the usual multitudes of school field trippers, older folk, & travellers from Taiwan. an odd way to feel alone—alongside lively entourages, amid a misty coast of near nothingness.

the souvenir shop lady said i could still go to Goko (5 Lakes). the book said it was a spectacular scene, where each lake reflected the mountain ridges still capped with snow, "a photographer's paradise." as i pulled into the parking lot, the fog was so dense i could barely make out the guy taking my parking fee. "can one still walk around???" i asked. "sure."

it was a photographer's paradise, in its sheer whiteness. but after 2 of 5 lakes, i thought i better get to my lodging soon. it was already quite dark.

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Background image: Hokkaido: Reaching the northern tip of the island, Shiretoko Peninsula at Goko (5 Lakes). June 2005.

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North: Shiretoko 2



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it was a photographer's paradise, in its sheer whiteness. but after 2 of 5 lakes, i thought i better get to my lodging soon. it was already quite dark.

Shiretoko

Northern most peninsula of Hokkaido island. A beautiful natural coastal area designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Centre, shortly after my visit there.

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Background image: Hokkaido: Reaching the northern tip of the island, Shiretoko Peninsula at Goko (5 Lakes). June 2005.

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North: Shiretoko 3



"nan-ni mo nai" Rausu, a small fishing town. and the hotel was awful—peeling paint on the outside, black mold on the ceiling of the bath area, crusty shower. at least, i wasn't camping in the pouring rain. all restaurants were closed by 7:30p. ate a sad microwaved meal from a convenience store. but i appreciated rainy Rausu in the morning. it really is "nan-ni mo nai" in the good sense. just a tiny coastal village with a single boat dock, nets & floats bundled ashore. and there was an old, almost completely faded out road sign that said: "Give Us Back Our Islands!"



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Background image: Inn at Rausu, a quiet fishing town on the eastern coast of the Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. June 2005.

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North: Shiretoko 4



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Background image: Rausu, a quiet fishing town on the eastern coast of the Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. June 2005.



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← North







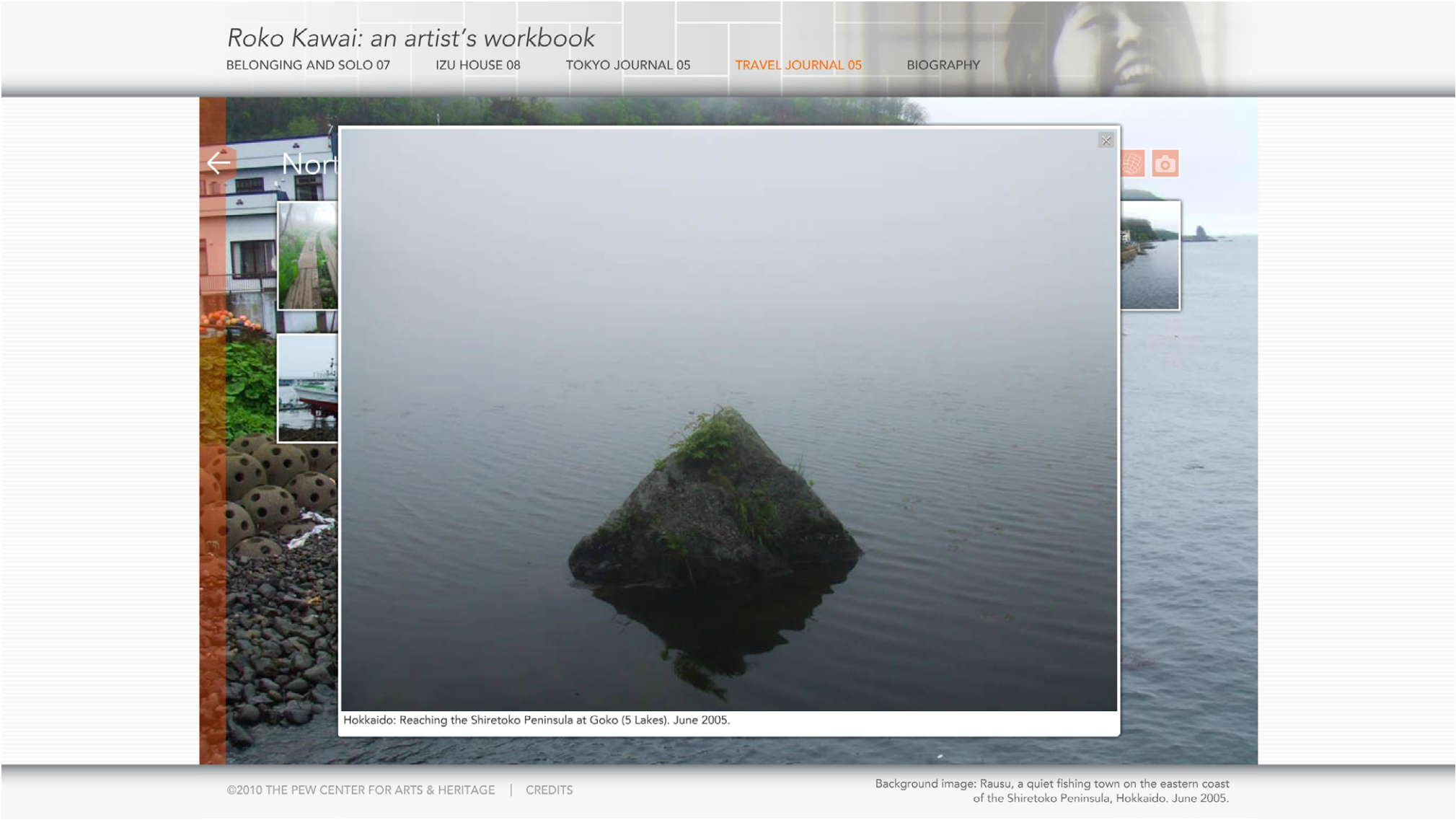
Hokkaido: Reaching the Shiretoko Peninsula at Goko (5 Lakes). June 2005.

Background image: Rausu, a quiet fishing town on the eastern coast of the Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. June 2005.

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← North

Hokkaido: Tourist group at Goko, Shiretoko Peninsula. June 2005.

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Background image: Rausu, a quiet fishing town on the eastern coast of the Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. June 2005.

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← North





Hokkaido: Goko, Shiretoko Peninsula. June 2005.





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←

North









Inn at Rausu, a quiet fishing town on the eastern coast of the Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. Totally deserted, my only dinner option was a local convenience store. June 2005.

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Background image: Rausu, a quiet fishing town on the eastern coast of the Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. June 2005.

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← North









Rausu, a quiet fishing town on the eastern coast of the Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. What many would describe as nan ni mo nai (nothing there), I found quite beautiful and satisfying. June 2005.

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Background image: Rausu, a quiet fishing town on the eastern coast of the Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. June 2005.

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← North





Rausu, a quiet fishing town on the eastern coast of Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. June 2005.

Background image: Rausu, a quiet fishing town on the eastern coast of the Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. June 2005.

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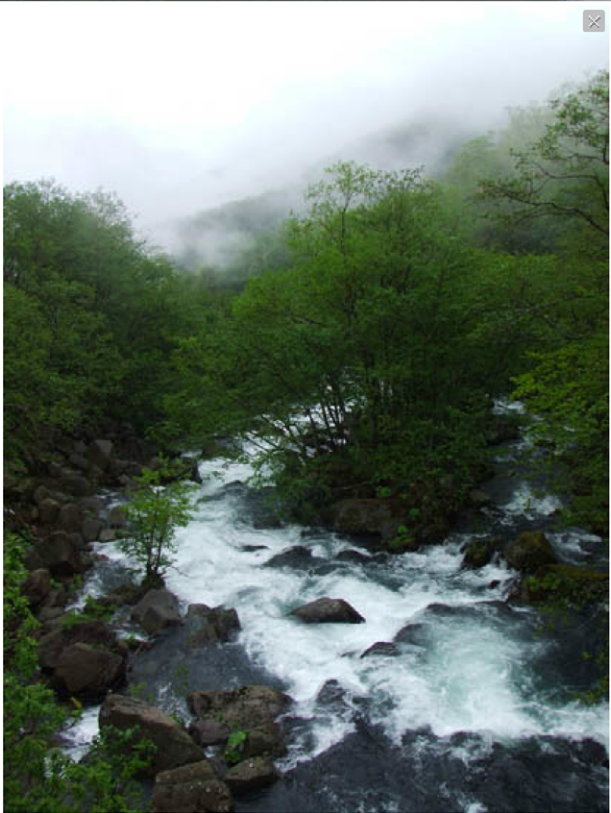
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← North: Shiretoko







Shiretoko Pass, Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. June 2005.





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Background image: Rausu, a quiet fishing town on the eastern coast of the Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. June 2005.

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← North: Shiretoko 4

Kita-kitsune (northern fox) mother and cub. Shiretoko Pass, Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. June 2005.

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Background image: Rausu, a quiet fishing town on the eastern coast of the Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido. June 2005.

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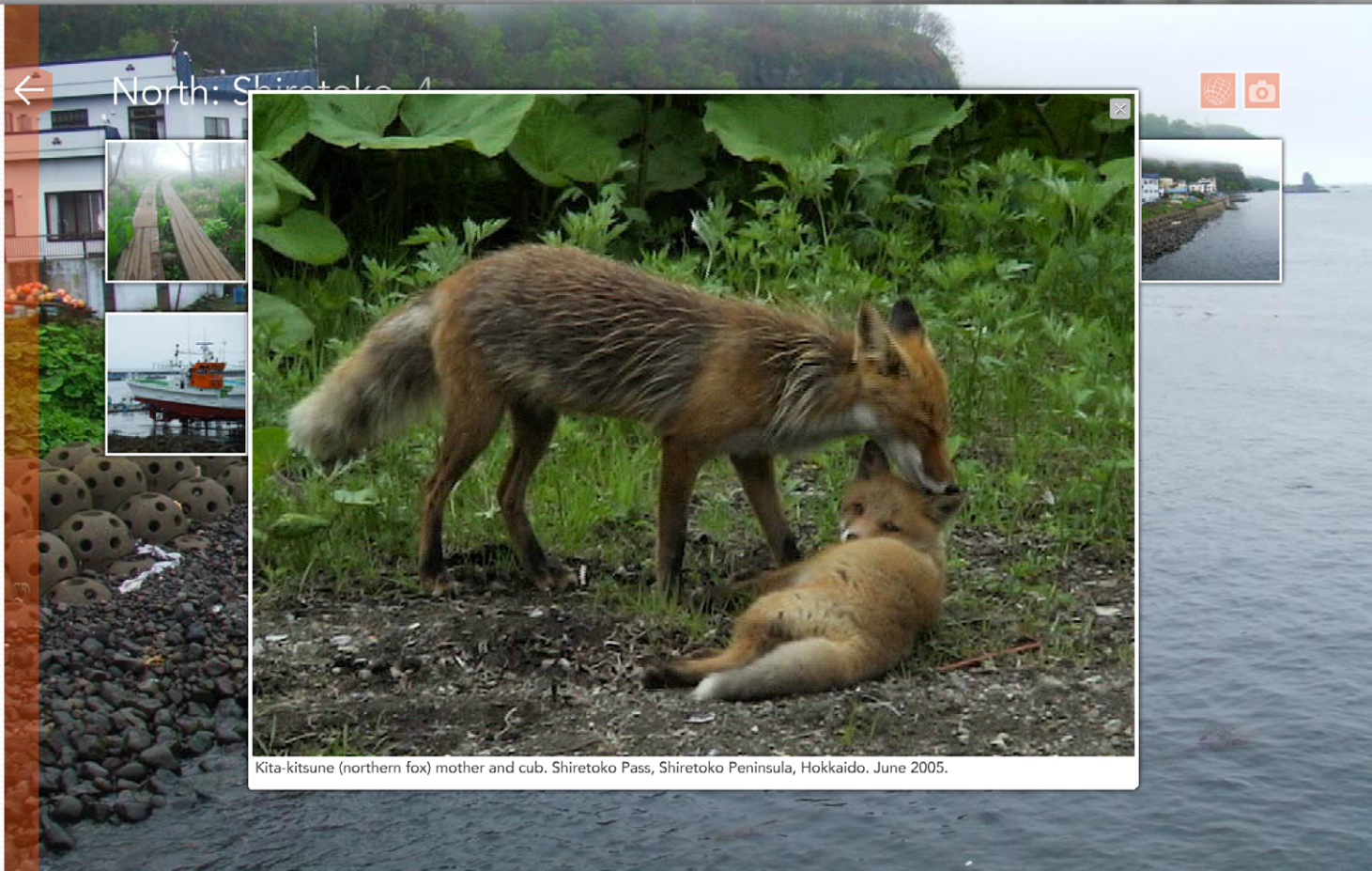
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