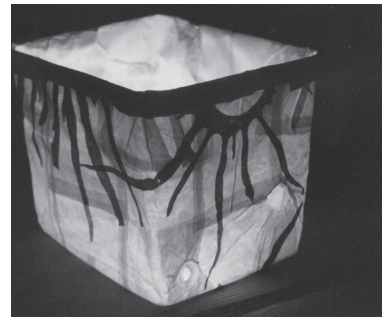


the intention of this project was two-fold: to investigate the role that the Japanese *sento* (public bath) and *onsen* (hot spring) play in the Japanese conception of public space through an installation piece in Tokyo; and on return to Toronto, to use that project as a foil to a piece responding to Toronto's urbanity.



Dry Bath | Ice Bath | Feather Bath | Mud Bath

Christie Pearson

my first project in Tokyo was to become a regular at my local *sento*. 'Kogane Yu' serves as a small but vital community centre. Though tiny, it incorporates saunas, jet, electric, and outdoor baths for each sex; a tv lounge with coin-op massage chairs, a snack bar which serves anything from beer to packaged meal sets, and a coin laundry. The clientele are of all types and ages, all from the neighbourhood or those nearby. It is a typical Japanese *sento*.

While experimenting with traditional Japanese *washi* papers and rice glue, I got permission to cast some unused bathtubs outside the local plumbing shop. One was of enameled steel, half-full of concrete; one of plastic, similar to the one in my apartment; one of cedar, an old-fashioned construction which turned out to have been built by the proprietor; and one of concrete with ceramic tile finish. They all had the typical residential proportion – about 60 x 90 x 90cm. I cleaned and cast the tubs in the evening, chatting with the proprietors and the locals who would stop by. They told me about the coming *bon-odori*, when the deceased return to visit their families: the local summer festival is a dance for the spirits of the dead. During Kita Kogane's *bon-odori*, the area in front of the station usually occupied by buses and taxis, was cleared for a stage, taiko drummers, citizens from all walks of life and dance club members in colourful cotton summer *yukata* dress. The area and main streets were hung with typical paper lanterns, pink, green, blue, yellow, with advertisements written on the side. The spaces for most festivals I saw in Japan were not year-round plazas, as one would find in a European city, but temporary spaces carved out of the tight fabric of roads and buildings by cordoning-off traffic. Though momentary, the festival is a very organized, collective occupation of quotidian/profane time and space.



Kogane-Yu is also used as a dedicated space and time for collective play. Traditional bath time is before dinner or bed. My neighbours often walked home in their pajamas. While adults may at times look incredibly serious in their washings, the sounds of laughter, singing, whistling, and the continual presence of playing children in the *sentō* remind us that we come here because it is delightful. The intent of my installation Dry Bath on the evening of Kita Kogane's *bon odorī* was to draw attention to the *sentō*, and the parallel between it and the ongoing festival. Dry bath was an evening walk from Kita Kogane Station to Kogane Yu. Seven *washi* paper bathtubs marked the way, lit by candles like old paper lanterns. Each tub was cast from with two layers of paper sandwiching a different material related to impressions of local textures. They attempted to articulate something about renewal, the personal and collective shedding of skins.



Starting from the station: Yu-furo (hot water bath) was patterned in the ink-brushed phonetic for 'hot water', which is typically found on a *sentō* sign. The written character is the wallpaper of the Japanese city. A plain bath preceded *gomi-furo*, which incorporated expanded foam mesh generally used to protect individual pieces of fruit. This bath had qualities of insulated jackets or cable-knit sweaters — more wrappings, in the land of infinite, layered wrappings. *Hana-furo* contained artificial flower petals, beauty preserved, oranges, yellows, reds, pinks, of *hana-mi* (blossom-gazing) and *hana-bi* (fireworks) and Angela Carter's collection written here (artificial fire/feux d'artifices/*hana-bi*/fire flowers). *Himo-furo*'s string reinforcing echoes that of a traditional *bonbori* candle lantern, its spiraling string emanating from the drain hole. *Take-furo* incorporated bamboo grass from a precious nearby vacant lot. *Kaiso-furo*'s wild forms are soaked and expanded seaweed, dietary staple.

From 5:30 in the evening, I had many interesting conversations with people: mostly enthusiastic, some telling me how long they had been going to the *sentō*: and a few unpleasant encounters which I would say touched on the issue of what was permissible on the public roadside. I think the anger was towards things which are out of the ordinary, which are perceived to be very threatening in a country where being able to live harmoniously within densely packed spaces is essential. The project lasted until about 11:00 and a policeman. Suddenly, the noisy crowds of dancers, singers, speakers, kids in *geta*-clogs and sparkling plastic hair ornaments, glowing pink and smiling under the kind lights and beer tents disappeared within moments, replaced once more by taxis and buses and sullen, hurried commuters.

In Toronto between January and March 2002, I created two pieces which tried to convey the intense visceral experience of the *sento* and the *onsen*. Canadians seem not to dive as deeply into creating this kind of cultural re-framing of powerful natural effects; I tried to do this through materials sensually resonant to Canadians.

Ice Bath was a cast of the negative of a standard North American steel bathtub in ice. The old tub was inverted and three steel sides were welded to complete the form. The filled form was frozen in a grocer's freezer and then placed in Toronto's St. Patrick's Square behind the Harrison Baths and Swimming Pool in February 2002. The piece read quite clearly as a bathtub, and was an invitation to get in and lie down with your body or your imagination. Due to a warm spell, Ice Bath lasted only seven days.

Ice Bath intentions were to draw the attention of the passerby in an intimate way to the form of their solid/hollow body in relation to the public space, to memorialize the public bathtubs that until last year were in the Harrison Baths and Swimming Pool complex, to celebrate public spaces such as this complex which is threatened by cutbacks, and to celebrate the spring thaw. Ice Bath fit comfortably into the parkette, a pocket of calm next to the busy intersection of Queen and John Streets. It was visited regularly by residents and office workers on the park's perimeter, Harrison Baths users and strollers. The bath was an evocative piece of furniture throughout its life, melting gently into the park — a notable part of the ordinary environment of many people along the popular short cut from Grange Park to Queen Street. It also inspired someone to look up from their writing and say, "Decay is beautiful, isn't it?"

Feather Bath was like the *onsen* half of the project. Set outside the city's core on Toronto Island, the bathtub used to make the ice cast was placed on a pier going out into Lake Ontario. For a few days, it gathered water from waves, inviting a cool dip. Cleared out and filled to the brim with white feathers from a duvet manufacturer, it became the terminus of a studio show-and-tell at the Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts. Nighttime bathers began to remove their clothes despite the cool temperatures, as the feathers were so insulating. The piece allowed participants to identify with birds keeping warm in the icy water, and awakened the desire to enter the lake.

Mud Bath was an invitation to immerse yourself in your environment — confronting its inviting and disturbing aspects. A claw-foot bathtub filled with Don Valley mud and river water was placed in the foyer of Mies van der Rohe's TD bank lobby; in an urban wilderness zone beneath an overpass; and at the edge of the Don River.

These projects express something about how culture continually feeds off of the natural world and the elements. We are constantly participating in their interpretation through creation of our urban landscapes. □





Christie Pearson is an artist working in Toronto. Her work engages the disciplines of architecture, sculpture, installation, urbanism, poetry, ritual, and the art of living.

selected exhibitions: York Quay Gallery, The Power Plant and Red Head Gallery in Toronto, and The Physics Room Contemporary Art Space, New Zealand.

publications: spacing.ca, samplesize.ca, anti-loft.org, Mix, the Toronto Star, Alphabet City: Open City.

presentations: University of Toronto and The Canadian Centre for Architecture.