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ICON 10

THE SKETCHBOOK

LET'S CONNECT

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A Common Language of Communication

THE SKETCHBOOK:

LET'S CONNECT



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THE SKETCHBOOK:

Let's Connect

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The sketchbook; the marks made on its pages are unscripted, with no guidelines, no safety net. The ink and paint are applied immediately and instantly reflect what one sees, hears, tastes, and even smells. Much like our lives, a decision made at the moment; then one moves forward with the best of intentions. The searching lines of the pen, impressions of the brush. Discoveries are made about one's art and process, but more importantly, about one's self. The beauty is the imperfection of the searching, with no fear and no regrets.

Why keep a sketchbook? A number of us do, or perhaps a journal of some kind, whether it is to record experience, jot down a note, or to work out an idea visually. As a creative person, and one who has made a living by drawing, the sketchbook has always been all of these things for me. In time, it has become something much more.

The past six years, I have been teaching a course entitled, Cultural Safari. The basis of the class is to use our city as a classroom, to tell the story of ourselves, our city and its people. In my preparation, research and constant reinvention of this class, I have continually rediscovered fundamental ideas and principals around the concept of visually recording experiences and events. Many books are available on subjects referring to specialized techniques by many incredible artists. Books on reportage, observational drawing, and the popularity of

urban sketching, are a handful of the themes and topics covered. Additionally, there are many notions on why we draw at all. The very foundational concept of mark making led me to an interest in the emotional and spiritual connection with the act of drawing. A TED talk from 2011 by Sunni Brown, entitled "Doodler's Unite" speaks to the idea of unlocking brain power by doodling. (Brown, 2011). Another such approach the paper published in the Journal of Applied Cognitive Psychology entitled, "What Does Doodling Do? The author Psychologist and Professor Jackie Andrade states that people who draw or doodle, whether it is during a lecture, speaking on the phone, or during a presentation, retain and take away more information than those that don't. (Andrade, 2010). I, being a member of this particular doodler clan, agree with this statement. In fact, I recall many more informational details if I am actively drawing while listening. This justification of my drawing habit comes as a small victory for repeatedly getting in trouble doodling during my high school Social Studies classes. Although I did happen to find out many years later, Mr. Alberts, the teacher of the course, had kept all of my confiscated drawings. Professor Andrade's paper made a direct correlation to my thoughts around "feeling centered" while spending time in my sketchbook, forming a connection with myself. The idea of "feeling centered" led me to the works of Frederick Franck. In his handwritten and illustrated book, The Zen of Seeing, Seeing/Drawing as Meditation, Franck writes about experiencing the world by participating in that particular moment in time and seeing it with new eyes. He calls it seeing/drawing. Becoming the thing, the object, the person you are drawing. Heartily giving yourself over to your surroundings as you record it. Making a connection with the sights, smells, tastes, and sounds that come with the situation. He speaks of Bodhidharma, a Buddhist monk who lived in the fifth or sixth century who, legend has it, brought Ch'an or Zen Buddhism from India to China. Bodhidharma's teachings of "Buddhahood," or the "Cosmic Unconsciousness," experiencing the world in a "Zen state" of connecting, seeing and evolving.

Right: Sketch
Detail from the
"Offering of the
Divas." TianTan
Buddha, Lantau
Island, Hong Kong.
Summer, 2017





THE SKETCHBOOK





Above:
Monks visiting the
TianTan Buddha,
Lantau Island, Hong
Kong. Summer 2017

Left:
Drawing of jet.
Summer, 2017

Next Page: Tatiana and Finnegan's drawings they made before our departure. Summer, 2017





"I draw a leaf... still it is moving. Still, the birds are on the wing. I can hear the silent falling of the snow... some of the grasses are long, others are short." (Franck, 1973).

PLANES, TRAINS, SUBWAYS, BUSES, CABS... AND LOTS AND LOTS OF WALKING

"Traveling—it leaves you speechless, then turns you into a storyteller."

-Ibn Battuta, The Travels of Ibn Battutah

"Let's visit China." With this phrase began our transformative summer of 2017. It brought new adventures and discoveries for my family and me. My wife Alexandra, son Finnegan (10) and daughter Tatiana (8) and I decided to make a 7,700-mile journey to China. There were lots of questions. "You are going take your kids to China?", "Is it safe?", "Are you sure?" "What about the language?". My wife, an excellent researcher, took care of the planning for the trip regarding travel schedules and planning. I had no worries there. The real question that stuck with me was about the language barrier. How would we interact not knowing any of the Chinese dialects, Mandarin or Cantonese? But I could draw. This new travel adventure offered a new and exciting opportunity for me to a take my practice to a new level and

experience another culture by keeping a travel sketchbook, a visual journal of our encounters every step of the way. My wife and I traveled through Europe in the past, and the language barrier was not as significant an issue, but perhaps this would be different? I wanted to believe that drawing was something that bound us all together and that this skill would come in handy. We were traveling without cell phones, and thus no translation apps were at our disposal. Obviously drawing a few images would not replace having command of another language, but would a drawing suffice?

Before our travels began, my wife reached out to our airline carrier. This international trip would be our children's first. In preparation, the kids and I did a few drawings to share with the airline in hopes that they might do something special for the kids. We thought the illustrations were a nice touch, and it gave me an excuse to start getting my head into the process of keeping a travel sketchbook. We, of course, didn't hear anything back, so we quickly forgot about it.

Leaving Kansas City, we arrived in Chicago for our connecting flight to Hong Kong. The gate was loud and overly crowded with our soon to be travel companions. We made our way to a position in the cue, stepping over luggage and around sleeping passengers. We went up to the desk to check in for the flight, and upon showing our passports, the airline official whisked us to the front of the line. We were



met by additional airline representatives "Mr. Terrill?" they asked, "Are these the children that made the drawings?", "We loved the drawings!" With swag bags bestowed on the kids, the representative added, "... and, we are upgrading your family to Economy Plus seats!" (I didn't know what this meant until later when I realized it was an extra five inches of legroom during our flight!) We proceeded to board the plane at the head of the line where the kids were able to meet the captain, sit in the cockpit while visiting with the crew. The kids were thrilled, and mom and dad proud. During this long flight, I passed some of my time making drawings and paintings of other passengers and my family. Unexpectedly, my family and I started receiving food from the first-class galley, though apparently, we were not first-class passengers. Somewhere over Siberia, a plate of brie and fruit found its way to our trays as well as pastries to those of our children. Over the course of the flight, I talked about art and other creative endeavors with the airplane crew, stewards, and even other passengers. Specifically, I spent time with a grandmother from Taiwan and her granddaughter, all because of a few drawings my children and I made. Sketching apparently has some real connecting power.

Eighteen hours later we arrived in China. Tired and hungry we piled into a cab heading to our first destination in Hong Kong. During our stay, we explored the city (which has the most amazing and efficient subway, by the way), swam in the South China Sea, traveled 1,400 miles by train along the Chinese countryside, and resided in a Beijing Hutong. While in Beijing, we drove three hours outside the city and hiked a portion of the Great Wall of China, camping out in tents overnight in an ancient watchtower. The act of keeping a sketchbook during our seventeen days in China connected me in an impactful way to my family, and genuinely binding me to our shared experiences of the culture and my sketchbook practice.

Above: Beijing vehicles. Beijing China, Summer 2017.

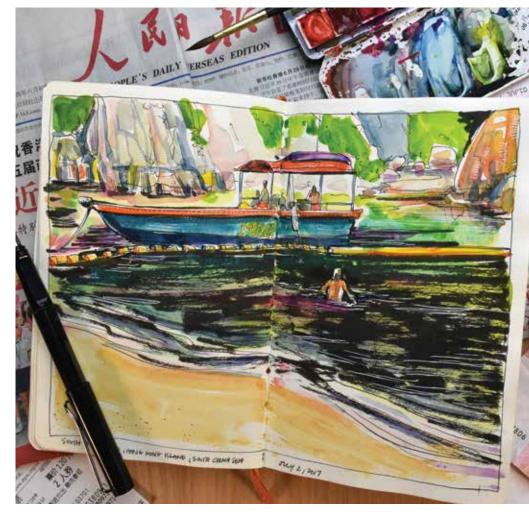
Right: Locals pulling their boat onto the beach, South China Sea, Hong Kong. Summer, 2017

A FEW STORIES OF CONNECTION

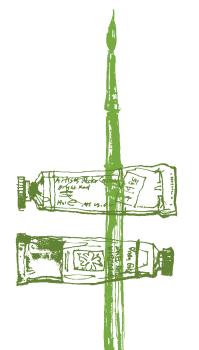
Upon our return from Beijing and the Great Wall, we spent some time back on the beach in Hong Kong. During one of these occasions, I was painting my children experiencing their first ocean swim, in the South China Sea with my wife. What a fantastic experience for my kids to have their first beach vacation in such an exotic location. While I would work in my sketchbook, Chinese tourists would come up to watch me work. They would smile, some even took photos of me with their children holding my work.

At the beginning of another watercolor sketch, two Chinese women approached me, one

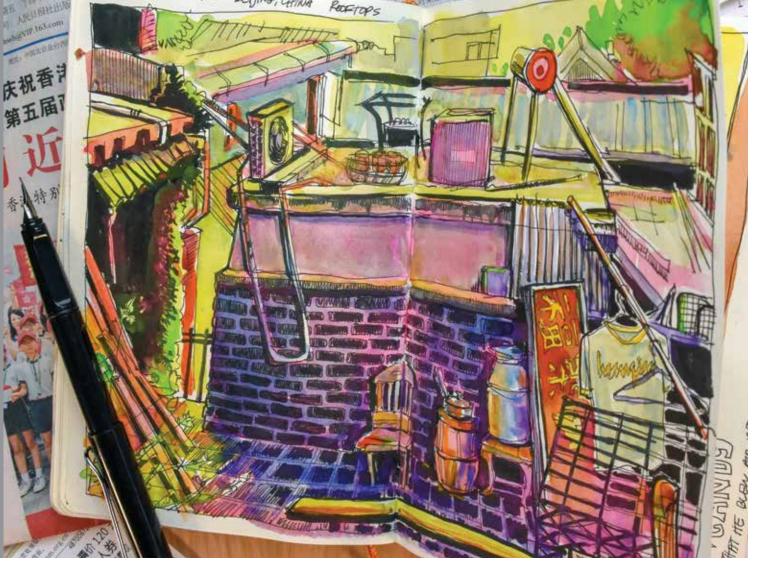
touching me on the shoulder. She motioned that she wanted to look at my sketchbook. Now, there seem to be two basic positions regarding the subject of sketchbook privacy. The first opinion is it is a private matter, and no one should look inside other than the artist, period. The second is that the sketchbook is to be experienced and shared with anyone who is interested. The author, artist, subject, the stranger passing by on the street. Neither stance is right or wrong, but I am a believer in the latter. I opened my sketchbook to her, and she paged through it, stopping and commenting in Chinese, I responded in English, both smiling with huge grins and lots of nodding. At one point she found a page where I had made a drawing of all the two and three-wheeled vehicles I observed while in Beijing. On the upper left of the page, I had drawn the Chinese characters for "Beijing." Evidently, I made it legible enough because she stopped, and with a broad smile on her face, she pointed with animated hands to the symbol for "Beijing" and then back to herself. At this point, I realized we just communicated. A small interaction, but none the less, we connected point A to point B. She was from Beijing, a city of 21.7 million people, nearly the entire population of Australia, and was on vacation in Hong Kong. She continued to leaf through my sketchbook and came to rest on the page from our travels to the Great Wall. Once more she



looked at me and smiled. Then, reaching into her pocket, pulled out her cell phone, brought up the phone's home screen, and showed me a photo of herself on another portion of the Great Wall. I learned later that there are a growing number of Chinese that now have an income that allows them to go on vacations. Some are visiting the ocean for the first time in their lives. Taking their parents and children of all ages. I observed this on a few occasions with elderly couples taking selfies of themselves near the water, but never getting too close to the edge of the surf. After my new friend paged through my sketchbook, she sat down next to me on the beach. She watched as I painted an individual down the shore meditating. I soon found myself in the same state of meditation as my subject. I felt another tap on my shoulder. Thirty or so minutes had passed, my companion just smiled and motioned goodbye. We shared the same moment in time together yet spoke







vastly different languages. This moment has had a profound effect on me and how I view the human condition. This encounter is the most tangible instance and best example of a genuinely Zen-like experience while working in my sketchbook. I was participating in the sights, sounds, smells, and presence of the environment surrounding me. I think Frederick Franck would have approved.

I continued to record my experiences with my family in my sketchbook. Drawing and painting on location, sometimes finishing the piece later from reference photos taken. I was aware that some moments may not have been appropriate to draw or capture a picture in a particular instance. I worked diligently to be mindful and respectful of the culture.

Once more, while working in my sketchbook, I met two French ex-pats living in China. Interested in what I was painting, the two women approached me and started a conversation. While the painting I made that day was of no consequence, something one of the women said to me did have a lasting effect on me. She said, her time in Hong Kong was "in parenthesis." She had her life before Hong Kong and her life after Hong Kong. Hong Kong was in the now. Her comment made me stop and think. These little (or long) moments we have in life are all "in parenthesis." It is up to us to live and experience them for what they are and to be receptive to that moment in time.

Frederick Franck refers to the eye having stage fright. All is needed is time for the eye to calm down and the hand to trust it again. (Franck, 1973). I couldn't agree more with this statement. While drawing in public can be intimidating, with the awkward side glances from your subjects, and the hovering of onlookers, I have always found creating pictures of my own family the most intimidating subject matter of

Above: Baochao Hutong, Beijing, China.

Below: Beach on the South China Sea. Summer, 2017





all. How can I possibly draw someone so dear to me and do them justice? Experiencing my children's first beach vacation with them was a fantastic adventure, and I believe cured me of this ailment. The ability to capture the moment by my hand in a sketch, while they played on the beach with their mother, was a cherished event. Was this the best sketch I have ever made? No, not really, but this isn't the point. It was a moment in time. I can remember the way the sun fell on my face, the smell of the breeze from the sea, the laughter of my children mingling with the roar of the surf. And, for a physical manifestation, there are still a few tiny pieces of sand from a South China Sea beach embedded in my painting. This page in my sketchbook is one of the most valuable keepsakes I will ever have in my possession. It generated a new connection with my family and a memory that is irreplaceable.

CONNECTING TO THE PAST

But why do we keep a sketchbook, or more generally, why do we draw in the first place? Human beings begin drawing around the age of four. We all start out life drawing, painting, sculpting; creating in some manner, usually inspired by the everyday life around us. Unfortunately, some of us stop making art, but there are those of us that continue with this practice. I offer that one of the reasons people react so positively to experiencing an individual working in a sketchbook is that it is a reawakening an innate, long forgotten desire to create themselves. Even as I write this paper, as recently as last week, I had an encounter regarding this subject. In a restaurant, while waiting for my dinner companions, I was sketching the bar scene across the room. My waiter approached me to see

Above: Downtown Hong Kong, Central District. Summer, 2017

Below:
Beijing Street.
Summer, 2017





what I was drawing. He took a look inside my sketchbook and a sad/happy look came across his face. He then remarked, "You know, I used to draw. I even had a drawing of mine displayed years ago when I was in school." Unfortunately, I hear this all too often. I felt heartbroken for him and encouraged him to take up the practice again.

Upon our return from China, a vague memory arose in me. A lecture from a long-ago art history course in college. Pictures of animals on cave walls in France and Spain? In 1940 one of the more famous Paleolithic caves were found in Lascaux, near the village of Montignac, France. These 15,000-year-old discoveries were previously thought to be the oldest paintings and drawing made by early humans and the Upper Paleolithic European Aurignacian culture. My interest grew, and more research into Paleolithic cave paintings revealed that the Chauvet Cave, in southeastern France, is more than twice as old than those found in the Lascaux Caves at 30,000 to 32,000 years old. (David, Lefrère 2014). Even now additional discoveries are being made in the study of Paleolithic art. A January 2016 article in Smithsonian magazine entitled, A Journey to the Oldest Cave Paintings in the World, by Jo Marchant, reports that earlier drawing and paintings have been discovered recently on the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia, dating to 35,400 years old, even farther back than those in Chauvet caves. (Marchant, 2014).

A question that scholars have pondered over time is why did these early humans make the drawings and paintings in the first place? In a time when hunting-gathering and survival were of the utmost importance, I would imagine that just staying alive was the first thought of the day. What drives us to create? In the book, The Oldest Enigma of Humanity: The Key to the Mystery of the Paleolithic Cave Paintings, by Bertrand David and Jean-Jacques Lefrère, the authors theorize that the cave drawings were possibly commemorative representations of life of the Aurignacian clans of the time. The images of the horses, mammoths, bison, bears and other animals referred to the early human's particular clan affiliation; the

Right: Detail of Hong Kong alley with graffiti and scooter. Summer, 2017

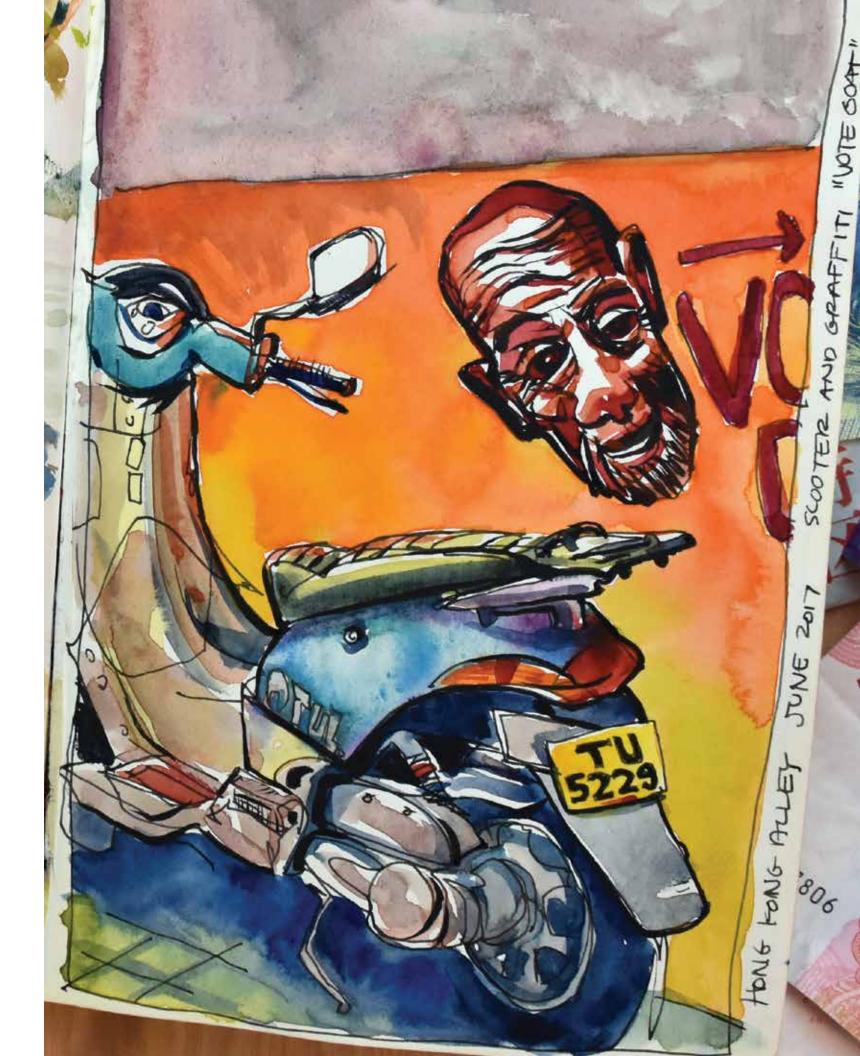
Below: Lascaux Cave Paintings Discovered, Drawing from detail.tdih-sept12-HD.jpg (History.com, 2018)



mammoth clan, the horse clan, the bear clan, and so on. As a nomadic people, these artworks were a permanent visual sepulcher honoring those that had passed. Telling the story of their lives as they moved on, leaving behind an elaborate Paleolithic commemorative form of communication. (David, Lefrère, 2014). I prefer this interpretation of the purpose applied to these works of art. This narrative is not that different from who we are today.

CONNECTING TO THE PRESENT

Our "modern cave walls" are now virtually experienced via Instagram, Facebook, websites, blogs, etc. With our modern nomadic spirits, (and short attention spans) we spend our time searching the internet landscape, huntinggathering information. We share our stories and our adventures, our triumphs and defeats. We consume information, look for inspiration and diversions. We commemorate those we love; much like early nomadic humans of the Upper Paleolithic era. Like most of us, I share my sketchbook on a few social media channels. I believe that specifically, Instagram, is proving to be a valuable tool for today's clans of artistic nomads, posting their own narratives to their respective cave walls. My own cave wall of social media recently featured my China sketchbook, garnering attention from friends, family, acquaintances, and strangers. The images found within its pages make a connection with individuals starting conversations around China, drawing,





and travel. Notably, a friend, who adopted his daughter from China many years ago, had a profound and meaningful response to the work. The images made a connection with him. My commemoration of a significant life event documented in my sketchbook related to an intense experience of another person. Thousands of years ago, perhaps there was a similar occurrence when a passing bear clan discovered a bison clan's commemoration painted on a cave wall and stopped to contemplate and make a connection.

Back in Kansas City, Cultural Safari continues to evolve. My recent epiphanies in China have seen to it that as I pass them on to my students. We continue to use our city as a classroom, observing the life of our town, as well as studying death by observing cadaver dissection as to better understand human anatomy and all its complexities. The sketchbook's true power lies in its ability to connect us to what we are observing and form a symbiotic relationship with it and ourselves. "No longer do I look at a leaf, but enter into direct contact with its life-process, with life itself, with what I, too, really am." (Franck, 1973).

After experiencing these recent revelations, I find myself striving to become, as the ninth century Zen Master Rinzai would say, a "true-man-without-label." (Franck, 1973). But if I were to apply a label, I think it would be something like, "the accidental Zen-Buddhist Cro-Magnon sketchbook artist."

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Above: Sketchbook spread of Beijing vehicles Summer, 2017

Right: Sketchbook spread Beijing commuter. Summer, 2017



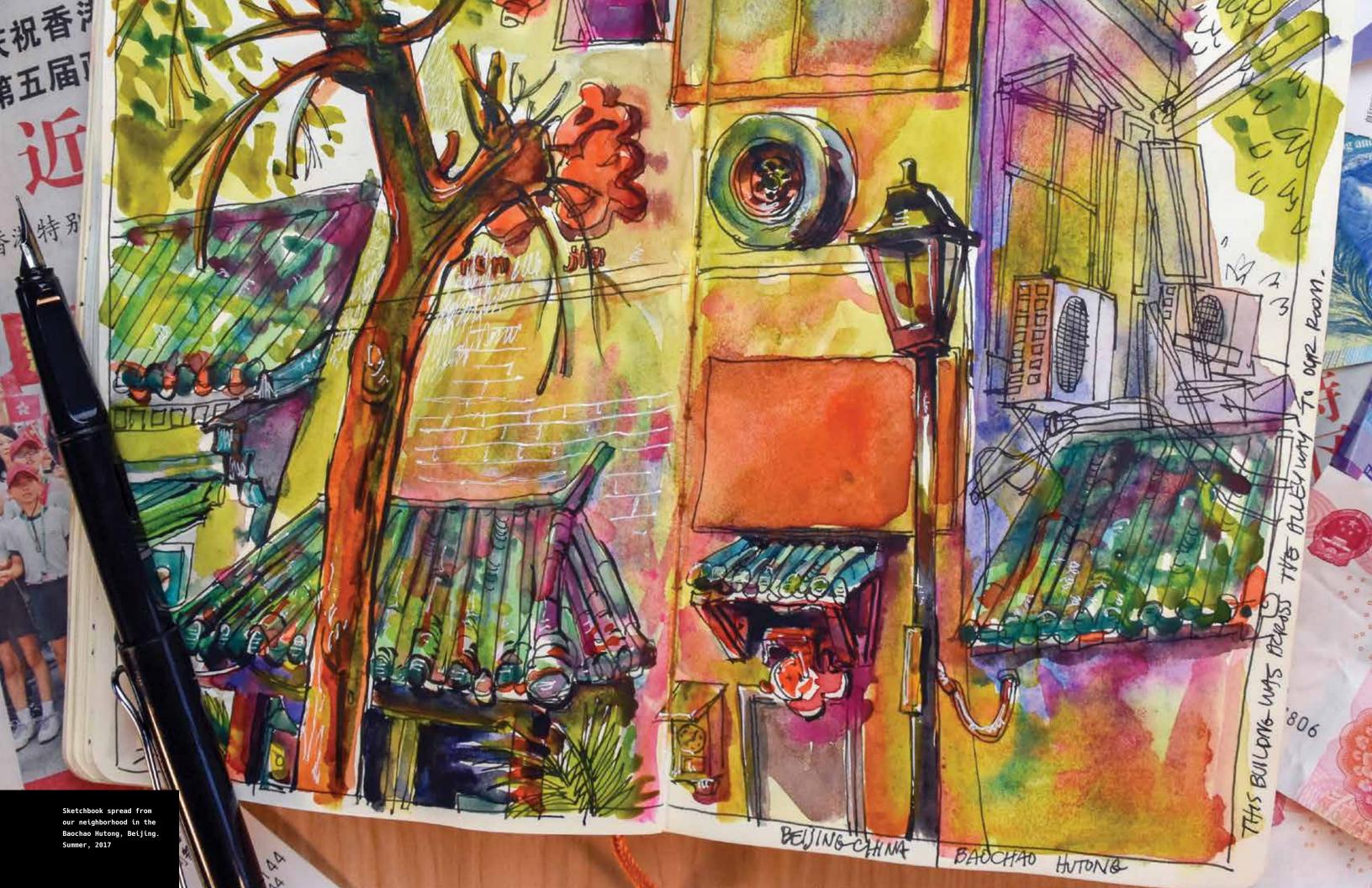
"I draw a leaf... still it is moving. Still, the birds are on the wing. I can hear the silent falling of the snow... some of the grasses are long, others are short."

-Frederick Franck, The Zen of Seeing









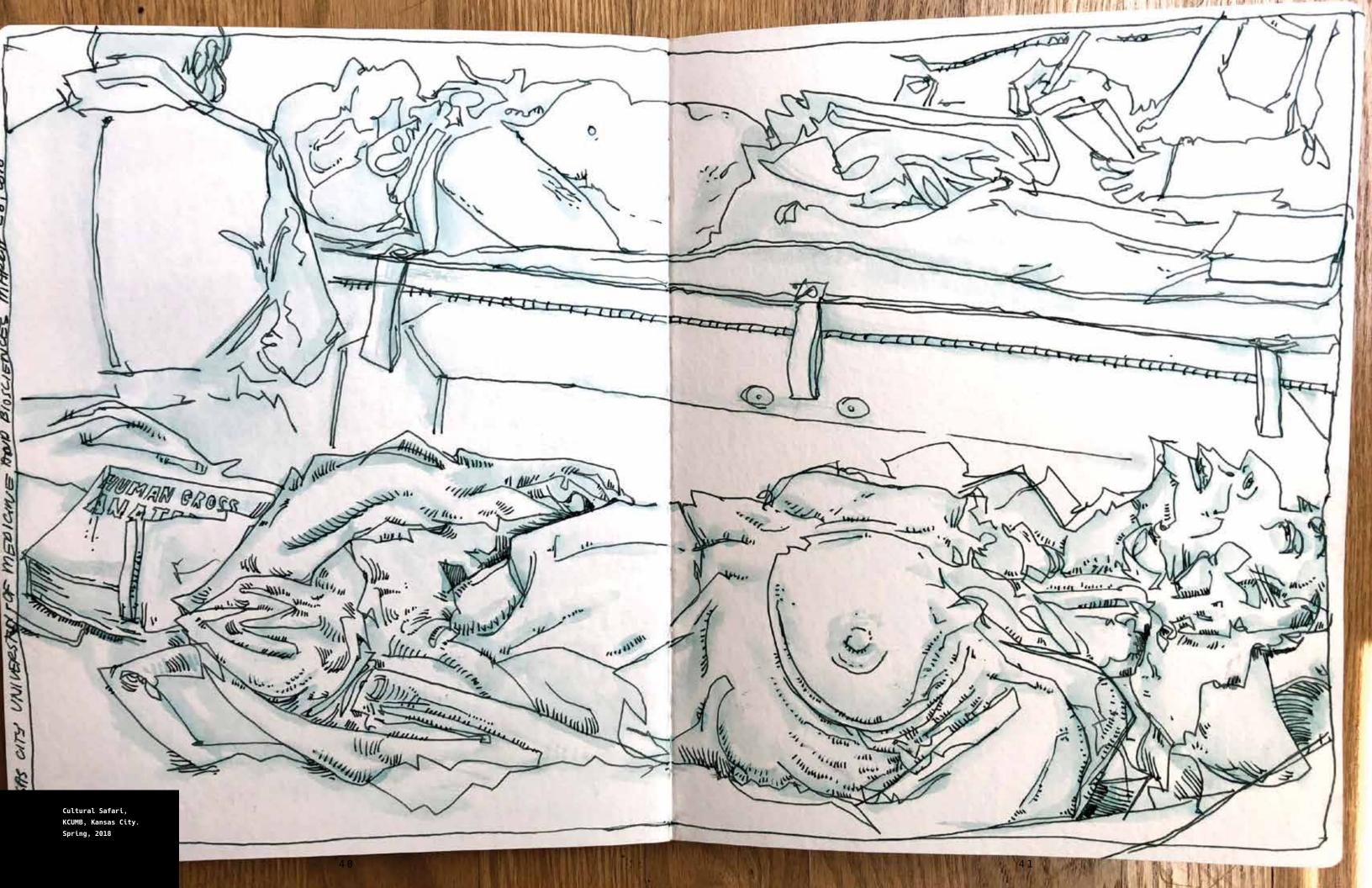






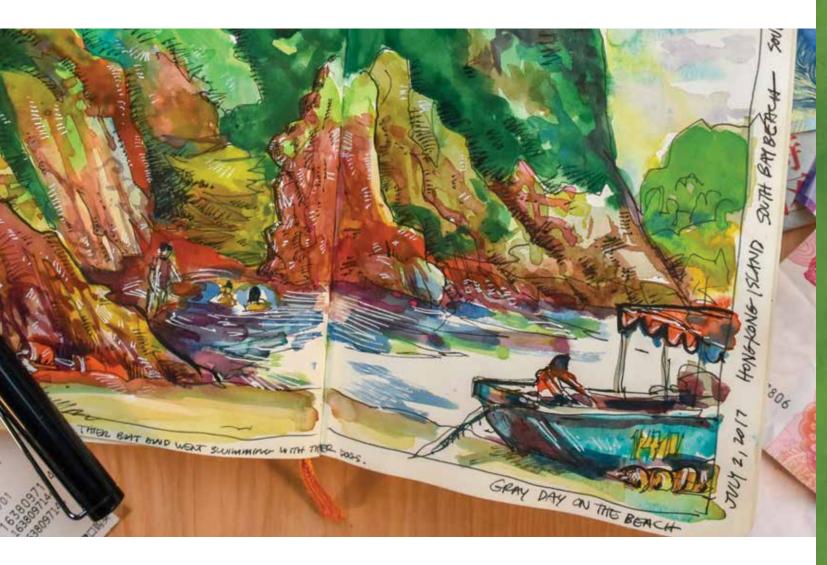












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Above: Locals pulling their boat onto the beach, South China Sea, Hong Kong. Summer, 2017



