

## ARTIST-IN-SCHOOL PROJECT

# Studio Mica: Fountain Studies

*By Mica Cabildo*

This is my first time in Japan. Coming to subarctic Sapporo from tropical Manila, I knew only two things: first, that I wanted to make a project using sand and ice; second, that I was going to work with primary schoolchildren.

While researching for my application to Tenjinyama Art Studio's open call for the winter program, I immediately connected with sand as a material. In wintertime Sapporo, sand refers to anti-slip material used for traction on slippery streets. In the Philippine islands, sand refers to tiny coral particles lining the archipelago's many beaches. I wanted to use sand as a metaphor for "rubble" to symbolize Japan and the Philippines' resilience in dealing with natural disasters.

I prefer to call the asphalt anti-slip material "gravel", because it is not like the fine, white sand that I was familiar with. Back home, sand is used to build sculptures as tourist attractions, while in Hokkaido, snow and ice are used for large-scale sculptures in many winter festivals. As a foreigner, I wanted to somehow bring sand and ice together.

With the help of Tenjinyama staff, the first three weeks of my residency was spent researching about what makes ice slippery and how anti-slip material is used. This goal took us to Otaru, where crushed scallop shells are used near the scenic canal. We also consulted Sapporo Snow Management Office to know more about Sapporo's anti-slip gravel. To learn more about ice, we visited Professor Gen Sazaki of the Phase Transition Dynamics Research Group at the Institute of Low Temperature Science in Hokkaido University, and he gave us a lecture on crystal growth and surface melting. Lastly, we went to Hakodate and the Hokkaido Scallop company in Shikabe, where Otaru's scallop shell sand is produced.

When I began my artist-in-school program at Sumikawa-Minami Primary School, my focus shifted from my personal artistic goals to creating activities for students aged 6 to 12. I was allowed to use the courtyard to make a dry garden model of surface melting based on Professor Gen Sazaki's microscopic images and research. I immediately became fixated on an experimental water structure in the middle of the courtyard, which was buried under two feet of snow.

I was able to work with students during their 20-minute breaks in a span of 7 schooldays. The activities included drawing crystal growth images and making liquid-like "ice drops" by freezing water with crushed scallop shells in plastic egg containers. Preparing for the courtyard installation involved excavating the experimental water structure—I like to call it "fountain"—and discovering its physical construction. I began thinking of the fountain as a shared community space and an ornamental version of a well or spring, which are crucial to human settlements.

Beneath all the snow, I found out that the fountain and courtyard already had many of the features that I planned to make. At the bottom of the fountain were loose pebbles which were the color of gravel. The structure already had cascading steps that served as terraces. The courtyard itself was already designed as a garden. I decided to mix the pebbles with snow and freeze this layer into ice, and add circular mounds to represent liquid-like drops that cause surface melting.

This allowed me to work less and play more with the idea of a fountain crystallized in winter, and to create a memorable experience for children by "melting" the "crystallized" fountain and making it accessible to the school community in a new way. On the last working day of my artist-in-school project, we opened the courtyard to the students so they could put ice drops onto the fountain.

My work with the fountain was limited by time and physical conditions, and so I wanted to bring it back to Tenjinyama for the final presentation, by building a half-sized model of it using bags of Sapporo anti-slip gravel. Here, I can continue to modify it, and together with visitors, contemplate on the physical and conceptual possibilities a frozen fountain presents.