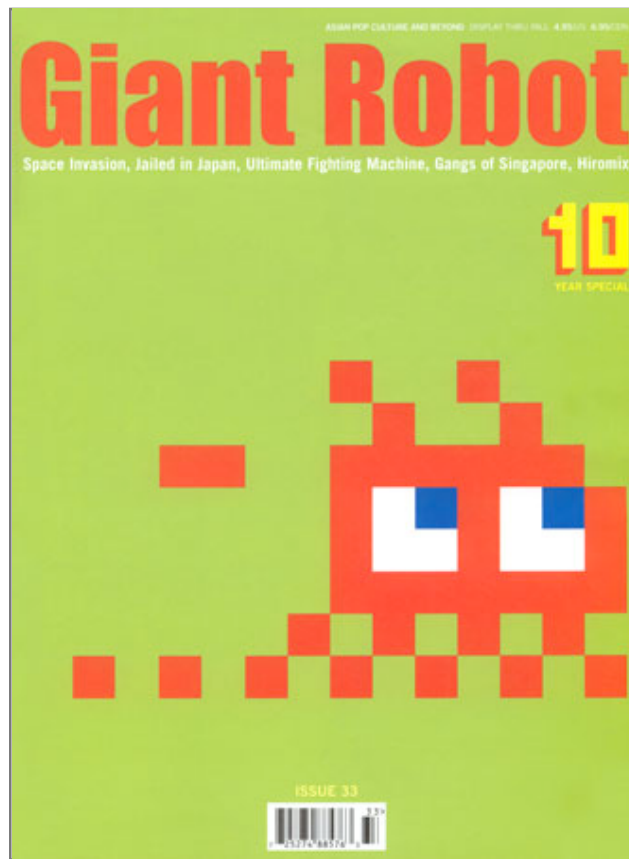


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words and pics | David Choe

Jailed in Japan

CHOE'S LIFE

The times I'd gone to Japan before, I got graffiti all over Tokyo and Osaka, stole any bikes that weren't locked up, and jerked beads, joints, or whatever. This time, I was only supposed to be there for three days—kind of like those hours on Gilligan's Island. It was a business trip. My host told me that I'd have no time to go shopping because I had to paint a mural, set up a show, sign autographs, and do other stuff for the GQFF gallery. The plan was to return home in time to help my girlfriend move and celebrate Christmas and New Year's.

ROAD TO RUIN

I was trying to be a good boy when my host told me, "I forgot something at the office. You have half an hour to go shopping." So I visited Paris. Some books I paid for, others I didn't.

Around 5:30 p.m. in the middle of Shibuya, a hand smacked me upside the head. It was just like how I goof around with my friends, and I thought, "What do I know in Japan?" I turned and saw this guy wearing dark sunglasses and a black North Face jacket. He grabbed my shopping bag and grumbled something in Japanese. Hundreds of shoppers were walking by, and I was thinking, "Is this guy really trying to take my shit or fuck off all these people?"

He grumbled again, and the next seconds unfolded in slow motion. With one swing, I broke his nose. His glasses cut his eyes, and he hit his head on the wall as he went down. I took off, ducking and weaving through a mass of people with him 20 feet behind me, screaming at the top of his lungs. I ran back in high school, but I was a sprinter, not a long-distance runner. And I was out of shape. After three blocks, I couldn't breathe.

I fell on a police officer's arm and said, "Dude, there's this crazy fuckin' guy chasing me." He blew his whistle and pretty soon four cops were on me. The guy I punched showed up with his face covered in blood. In the meantime, a crowd had gathered and began taking pictures of me on their cell-phone cameras. I was getting so fucking angry because the cops wouldn't listen to me. I told them that he hit me first, and they responded in Japanese. (Turns out the man I sucker-punched was an undercover security officer.)

I gathered my energy and tried to run. Five steps later, a huge cop grabbed my shirt collar and tossed me in the subway. I collapsed and they dropped me, put me in handcuffs, and took me away.

STATION TO STATION

The police station was totally mellow when I got there around 6 p.m. A bunch of chain-smoking detectives with their violins rolled up typical white criminals bowed their heads in shame. Then the doors flew open, and I came in peeing. "Get the fuck off me! I have an art show to be at!" My translator, whose only job was to translate, was totally pissed. Whipping, saying, "Stop your bullshit." The head detective in charge of my case was this mean old guy that looked like a Japanese Harvey Keitel.

The translator was totally fucking with me, and the cops didn't believe a word I was saying. At midnight or 1 a.m., I was still ranting and raving when they let in someone who looked like a mummy. He was wearing a nice brown robe, the top of his head was bandaged, and there were more band-aids over his cheeks and nose.

When I realized he was the guy I had hit, I started laughing and said, "This is bullshit. Obviously this guy's trying to get money from me." The detective said, "Now American motherfucker! You come to our country and beat up our citizens and don't have any shame. Show some respect. We punched this guy so hard he has whiplash."

They asked if I wanted to talk to someone from the U.S. embassy, but I don't want a criminal record in Japan and America. In hindsight, I should have said yes, but I was thinking I'd get out of there the next day.

JAIL TIME

It was 1 or 2 a.m., and the cell smelled like farts. Because they don't really have guys in Japan, I was looking at people with cuts and gashes and scars all over their faces. Fingers, toes, and teeth were missing. They looked like scary cartoon characters. I was behind bars with scary fuckin' people, and they all smiled.

I have a very high pain threshold, but at this point my alternative level went down, and the spot where the cop bowed me felt like it was bleeding inside. I didn't want to be a punk, but I couldn't sleep. I couldn't even sit or lie down. Finally I called the guard over. He happened to be one of two guys who spoke English. I said, "I need medical attention," he said, "Get me some." I offered my shirt, and there was no blood in anything. He said, "You're full of shit. You were in the interrogation room for six hours, and you didn't tell the detectives you were hurt. Quit coddling problems."

During the whole process, people assumed I was Japanese. Then they thought I was a Japanese-American dumbass who didn't even speak my own language until I said, "No, I'm Korean." That's probably the worst thing you can say in Japan, and I felt like all the guards were talking about me behind my back. But the guys in my cell couldn't have been nicer. One guy from Chile spoke Japanese and English and did a lot of translating. The other guys were self-conscious about their country. They said, "Please don't hate Japanese people because of your horrible experience." They even started massaging my back. That was nice.

ART TALK

Being an artist helped bridge the language barrier. I started showing everyone right away the guards and the inmates. Most of the guys were in jail for smoking a joint or doing petty shit. They read telephone book-sized porno comics and magazines. One guy was reading Rolling magazine and saw a huge ad for my art show. He was like, "David Choe art exhibit. Hey, that's your shit's tonight!"

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