

[www.giantrobot.com/features/photographs-of-tohoku/](http://www.giantrobot.com/features/photographs-of-tohoku/) />



Timely advice: This message written on a surfboard was photographed by filmmaker Michael Arias in Tohoku following the March 11, 2011, tsunami that devastated parts of the region. The work was recently shown at a Japan film festival in Frankfurt, Germany. MICHAEL ARIAS

## Filmmaker savors being in situation where threat of the unknown looms

### Computer graphics, animation part of Michael Arias' life in Tokyo's 'small town' film world

By KRIS KOSAKA  
Special to The Japan Times

A surfboard mounted against a sea of sludge, whimsically defiant to the ruinous tide of debris. It's the kind of quirky beauty you might expect from Michael Arias, an American filmmaker based in Tokyo. Arias' creative work, in film through to his recent photographs of Tohoku, all paint with the same creative brush the defiant flowering of hope amid despair.

The surfboard shot is one of 100 photos sent to Nippon Connection's Japanese Film Festival in Frankfurt, Germany, for a special exhibition last weekend. Part of this year's festival was to raise awareness and funds for the continuing struggle of the tsunami survivors in Tohoku, and Arias, a frequent contributor on the film side, donated his personal photographs taken in the immediate aftermath of the March 11, 2011, tragedy. (The photos are viewable at



Arias is seen on the set of his most recent film, "Hope." SAYURI SUZUKI

[www.giantrobot.com/features/photographs-of-tohoku/](http://www.giantrobot.com/features/photographs-of-tohoku/)

"I wasn't up there to take pictures," Arias says, "but you didn't have to search for footage. It was just everywhere."

Arias' connection to Tohoku itself is personal and bittersweet. His former wife's family live in and around Onagawa, a small coastal town in Miyagi Prefecture devastated by last year's tsunami. Although based in Tokyo, much of Arias' 20 years in Japan has been spent exploring Tohoku over weekends with his sons. As Arias relates, "I am still very close to my in-laws. An hour after the quake on March 11, I received a cellphone text message cut off halfway through from my brother-in-law up north: Fleeing. After that, I couldn't get through to anyone at all."

When Arias received an offer later that night to escort an Australian news crew through the area, he did not hesitate. A film industry friend lent him a production van: "I grabbed whatever I could fit from local Tokyo grocery stores in two garbage bags — blankets and energy bars, whatever I could find, and just went. The news crew agreed that I could make stops along the way to search for family members. They really just needed someone with wheels and language and familiarity in the area." After going door to door and pleading with neighbors to sell him gas, Arias and Channel 7 News Australia headed north on the Tohoku Expressway. It was March 12, a little after 3 a.m.

After driving north from Tokyo for about an hour, they encountered roadblocks set up at Saitama, but Arias persuaded the police to give them a temporary pass through: "It didn't take that much convincing, as the police were so overloaded at the time. They gave us a one-month paper windshield pass and wished us good luck."

The Australian TV crew wanted to rendezvous with the Australian fire and rescue crews searching for survivors, and Arias stopped in Sendai and Ishinomaki, both in Miyagi Prefecture, then headed for Onagawa, checking in on thankfully safe family along the way and dropping off supplies. "On the highway, all we saw were fire engines and ambulances and gas trucks. Once we started driving along the coast, the devastation was everywhere."

Arias made nine trips in total in the first 60 days after the disaster, wielding the windshield pass and loading up each weekend with supplies.

One of Arias' favorite memories of his Tohoku trips centers around the "kebab-mobile": He and his brother-in-law, Kazu, operating out of Kazu's Royal Kebab catering truck, supplied shelters and schools with fresh kebab sandwiches and ice cream, often teaming up with Rainbow Cinema, a volunteer organization traveling throughout the devastated areas, screening free movies and providing entertainment at schools, nursing homes and shelters.

After 25 years in the business, Arias has connections throughout Tokyo's film industry. "It's like a small town here, the film world in Japan. The economics of film production are a bit different in Japan, a much smaller market, but also a much tighter community of crafts people."

Arias occasionally sees other foreigners, coming over for brief stays to learn traditional animation or working on documentaries, but there are currently few, if any, other foreigners directing feature films in Japan.

Arias entered the film industry in Hollywood in 1987, at the newly formed visual effects firm Dream Quest Images as an unpaid intern when he was just 19. Graduating from high school two years early in Los Angeles, Arias then spent two years studying linguistics at Wesleyan University — including entry-level Japanese — before leaving to pursue a short-lived career as a musician. A family friend introduced Arias to the internship but Arias soon turned it into a full-time position, involved in the visual effects for blockbusters like "The Abyss" or "Total Recall."

Accompanying a filmmaking mentor to Osaka to attend the 1990 expo, Arias returned to the United States impressed by creative Japan. "I saw Japanese cartoons growing up without knowing they were Japanese — 'G-Force' ('Gatchaman') or 'Speed Racer' — and they made some kind of impression on me, since it is quite nostalgic for me when I look at them now, but I was not aware of it at the time.

"I had a good friend in high school who was Japanese, and in university, when I was picking out a language, I narrowed it down by eliminating all the Romance languages." Arias' mother is a linguist, a professor of Spanish, his father a writer and journalist, and Arias himself was raised bilingually and biculturally, visiting his father's ancestral home in Mexico often as a child or

spending summers in local camps while his mother taught Spanish at language schools catering to expat students.

His work with DreamQuest put Arias at the edge of the rapidly expanding field of computer graphics in media, and in 1991, he accepted a job with postproduction giant Imagica in Tokyo. A year later, he moved to Sega Enterprises, where he worked briefly as a director of computer animated theme park attractions.

Constantly learning and creating with computer graphics, Arias went back to the U.S. for a few years in film before accepting a position with 3-D animation software innovator, Softimage.

At Softimage, Arias developed and eventually patented the computer graphics software Toon Shaders.

Toon Shaders bridged his work in Hollywood's computer graphics and the traditional hand-drawn animation favored in Japan: "Toon Shaders allows companies like Ghibli and Dreamworks Animation to integrate computer graphics with their hand-drawn animation," Arias explains. "They allow CG animators to simulate the look and feel of traditional hand-drawn work." Director Hayao Miyazaki's Studio Ghibli were early adopters of Arias' software, used with great effect in the classics "Princess Mononoke" and "Spirited Away."

"Japan is visually an exciting place," Arias says. "Everywhere you turn, there is something cool to look at, out the window or around a corner there's a new tableaux. A lot of modern Japanese architecture and the way the cities are designed is fascinating, even the trains. On the technical or artistic level, Japanese animation still leads the world in traditional animation. If you like the idea of film as a handmade artwork, then traditional animation in Japan is a pretty good place to be."

Arias' first work as a director, the award-winning 2006 animation "Tekkonkinkreet," materialized gradually, nearly 10 years after he read the manga by Taiyo Matsumoto.

Affected by the redemptive bond between two street orphans, Arias admits the story itself motivated him to take the risk into the director's chair as the only way to get the movie produced: "I got my start as a director very late. Directing was not something I wanted to do. I would have been happy doing any part of filmmaking. I like the backstage, nerdy part. I like doing sound. I like working with music in films."

After the success of "Tekkonkinkreet," Arias continued to direct. Among others, a live-action drama "Heaven's Door," following the last days of two terminally ill youngsters who defy mischievous fate by stealing a car to catch a final glimpse of the sea, and most recently a short film, "Hope," which traces the creative possibilities of escaping the despairingly mundane while trapped inside a broken elevator.

Working and living in Tokyo, Arias has forged long-standing partnerships with animation boutique Studio4°C, film distributor Asmik Ace Entertainment, and most recently, a computer graphics production house located in Shirokane: "I am working with an extremely talented team at a fascinating company, Polygon Pictures. They have several hundred people there, and about half the crew is from all over the world. That's a new and different environment. What I am doing is just a very small project, but it has been exciting to work with these artists. Right now, I think this company has the most talented CG artists in Japan, and it is quite nice, as a director, to work with all these thoroughbreds."

Although Arias admits he learned to love directing — "It is interesting and exciting to take an idea and turn it into an actual finished work of art, what directors and producers are focused on" — part of his creative energy is fueled by the unknown: "I will try anything at least once. I really don't hesitate. I do pretty well when the threat of failure is imminent. I am able to somehow turn that threat into something positive. Directing live action, doing the music videos with Japanese idols AKB48: I like the feeling of being the stranger in a strange land, going into unfamiliar situations — I find it very exciting, and it is nice to come out the other side."

Fans certainly hope Arias keeps challenging the unfamiliar, nurturing new seeds of creative possibility.

The Japan Times: Saturday, May 12, 2012  
(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)