International Travel Report (May 5th – May 30th 2008)

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Destination: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia
Cities Visited: Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sarajevo, Visoko, Travnik, Zenica, Doboj, Mostar, Gracanica, Tuzla, Bugojno, Donnji Vakuf, Brecko, Stolac, Bosanski Brod), Croatia (Slavonski Brod, Dubrovnik)

The content of my work focuses primarily on military scenes and images due to my experience of war in Bosnia in 1990’s. I was 18 years old when I left Bosnia, four years after the war. I never got the chance to explore and see the rest of my country. The only places I have come to know are located in the central part of Bosnia. My desire was to further explore this beautiful country and its heritage. This dream became reality on May 6th 2008.

While in Bosnia, I visited many archeological sites from the Ottoman Empire, Austro-Hungarian Empire and some sites from Roman Empire. I took numerous photographs, which I recently incorporated into my artwork. I visited the small town of Stolac in Southern Bosnia; a place that has 122 tombstones marked with unique carvings of 13-15th century Slavic worshippers of the Bosnian Church. My current work integrates these into the composition of my paintings and they take on a symbolic meaning.

I collaborated with Professor Dr. Dzelal Ibrakovic from the University of Sarajevo. While in Sarajevo, I worked with him on the cover of his new Book “Bosnia, Islam, Bosnjaks.” My artwork and his book share similar content, so he was able to use one of my recent paintings for his book cover. He has also introduced me to many other professors from the University and helped me find additional resources for my benefit. Furthermore, I enjoyed talking with him about history as well as the current political
situation. He provided me with an extensive list of books that I will use for my future research.

I worked with the High School teacher Vehid in Slavonski Brod, Croatia. His students and I worked on their artwork projects. Their projects focused on the preservation of the environment and how simple things in nature can become art.

I visited the Academy of Fine Arts in Sarajevo, where I met with Dean Metka Hozo. She introduced me to several students at the Academy. As I closely worked with the undergraduate students at the Academy, it became apparent that they had scant art supplies, due to their financial situation and the school’s lack of resources. For example, they could not afford oil paint and bought cement paint instead. This paint would not work on canvas or any kind of paper. I was saddened to witness the lack of material support for the tremendous talents.

The content of my previous work dealt with national identity. After the war in Bosnia, the country was unfairly split into two separate entities. One entity is the so-called “Republic of Serbia”, an ethnically clean portion of the country. The other half is the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result of the genocide, devastation, and separation, many people migrated from Bosnia to foreign countries. That is why my family and I came to the U.S. This is why national identity is central to my work. Almost 13 years after the war, the Bosnian Serbs believe they ought to keep what they occupied in bloodshed during the war. My house was burned during the war and my father’s and my grandfather’s land is within the territory of “Republic of Serbia.” Having borders within the borders of one country only encourages more ethnic hatred. As I returned to Bosnia this past summer, I experienced that hatred once again. I saw burned houses, and
houses’ with walls painted with nationalist sings and symbols of hatred. Bullets and shell holes are still present on the walls of the building and reconstruction is slow. Collective and personal memories still haunt the region especially by seeing graves of those who were murdered during the aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina. The political situation is far from being resolved, but the hope for a better future still lingers among people. Hope is there, and people want to live in peace and in their own homes. Whether that’s possible is still unknown because of the existence of the jingoists and their dreams of new wars. Even a soccer match turns into a nationalistic fight with songs saying: “Knife, Barbed wire, and Srebrenica.”

I revisited this beautiful country that is rich in history and tradition in order to explore it further and connect with other artists. The journey also brought back personal memories of the place I once called home. During the war I lived in Maglaj, and I remember every detail of that town, every street and every corner. Every street in Maglaj led to either life or death during the war. Another town, Mostar, is an old town with a newly resurrected old bridge that connects the Western and the Eastern sides. Here I found souvenirs from the war. Here: flags, red stars, JNA (Yugoslav National Army) hats from the communist era, Ottoman and Austro Hungarian artifacts, are joined by recent bullets and stones from the destroyed bridge with the message “Do Not Forget.”

In my previous work, I focused on the problem of landmines that are still scattered throughout the different parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. During my travels I saw sings of them next to the main roads. Although these areas are marked, the process of removing the landmines is slow. This task is overwhelming for a struggling country with few financial resources.
As an artist, it is always my goal to raise awareness about issues. In my case, this means war and its aftermath. I feel sense of responsibility to do so. I would like to succeed even more and develop my concept further. My experience in life is the breeding ground for ideas in my paintings. By making connections with Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian artists and by working together with them I know that we need to stand united in order to bring a better future to Bosnia and Herzegovina and its people. In my own work I want to create artwork that speaks about my personal experience and imbeds symbols that represent hope for a better future. For me, painting is the means of communicating dreams that represent something in the present. But artwork should also be situated in a historical context. Collective memory can be erased and rewritten, deconstructed, constructed, proclaimed, seized or re-seized. History and memory are in the eye of the beholder and that is the case with my artwork. I want to share my experience and interpretation of history with my audience.