Overview

Thanks to the department of Art & Design at the University of Michigan, I had the opportunity for a two-month study and exploration in Costa Rica, Central America. This extended amount of time allowed me to experience both the urban and rural aspects of the country. The Urban experience consisted of a one-month stay in the country’s capital, San Jose. While there I was enrolled in an intensive language program at Universidad Veritas. The Rural experience consisted of living and working on an all women’s owned ‘agro-eco farm’, El Yue, in the Southern Lowlands, studying sustainable and organic agriculture and rainwater collection systems.

The Urban Experience of Costa Rica

San Jose is a bustling, thriving, metropolis. Cars pack the streets day and night; there is a lot of pollution, thriving national and international culture scenes, and excellent National Museums. I submerged myself is as much art culture as possible, visiting museums and galleries and talking with local artists. While living in San Jose I lived with Rodolfo Seagleau (an arranged home stay) in the barrio (the local word for neighborhood) of Corridbat. Monday through Friday I took rigorous language courses at the School of Art, Design and Architecture: Universidad Veritas.

Continuing to develop fluency in Spanish made it safer to travel alone in the country as a young woman, where this is not a cultural norm (I want to be clear and state that traveling alone as a woman, in both rural and urban areas is dangerous), and also made direct interaction with people in rural areas possible (where English is not spoken). On the weekends I took trips to see other areas of the country. Cities I visited during this first month are listed below, with the focus of the visit in parenthesis: Playa Hermosa (water availability and observation of life below sea level, artist communities), Jaco (water, ecological effects of tourism), Puntarenas (effects of tourism, historic city exploration, transit to the Northern Pacific Region), Mal Pais (remote area, effects of tourism), Montezuma and Santa Teresa (artist community, coral reef, eco-tourism), Manzanillo (water accessibility), Alajuela (Madera Exotica, an artisan “fabrication factory”), Sierpe, Bahia Drake, Isla del Caño (scuba dive with master diver and biology team taking a fish count, manglares (mangrove) tour, water accessibility, and National Parks).

The Rural Experience of Costa Rica

The majority of the second month in Costa Rica was spent in the Southern Lowlands. For nearly two weeks I lived and worked on an all women’s owned “agro-eco” farm, called El Yue. The farm is located in Hone Creek de Talamanca, a Southern most region below sea level, on the Caribbean Coast of the country. It is a
remote area of the country, with a much different way of life than the city. The president of the small organic and sustainable farming community (consisting of no more than five farms) and of the Talamancan Reforestation Project is Rosa Emilia Cruz. She welcomed me with open arms, taught me much about the local flora and fauna, and at the end of my stay asked me to return to the farm as a guest of the family (I later did return). The owner of the farm I stayed on is named Rosa, and her daughter is Jessica McKinney. It is Jessica whom I spent the most amount of time with, since once the workday was through— it was just Jessica and I and her two young children.

While there I helped with the reforestation project, transplanting trees in an open-air nursery, I tended the vegetable garden, painted three murals, learned how to harvest bananas, and all the while I closely observed how the natural resources on the farm where conserved, consumed, reserved, and sustained. Specifically I focused on water, and learned a great deal about water collection systems while one the farm and in the Southern Lowlands (Chuita, Puerto Viejo, and Talamancan). Everyone on the farm was sustained by collecting our own rainwater and by having a keen sensitivity to our daily consumption of it. On the backs of all doors and above facets and showers signs read is Spanish “Please do not waste water. She is life.”

While in this region I also visited Cahuita National Park, and spent a week or more in Puerto Viejo at Hotel Puerto Viejo (the owner’s name is Kurt), where it was explained to me how the city water system works, where the water comes from, and why water is not available in many regions of the country. I was impressed to learn that the entire supply that the hotel uses, is collected rainwater, made possible by the systems Kurt built himself. He also built the hotel himself, using salvaged and industrial materials, and painted aluminum. In my mind it becomes a place that mirrors both a shantytown and ancient above ground community (as every building is on stilts) and each room is indeed a small “hut”, and the place was only $8-$10 a night. Additional cities visited: Puerto Jimenez, Golf to, Matapalo.

Since I was in Costa Rica for such an extended period of time and also took a holiday on my own account to the Pacific Coast of the country, touring small port towns, animal refuges, and sustainable and “green” lodges, there is much more that could be elaborated on and was indeed influential. Journal entries, pictures, and personal responses to culture and the people I met are available on my travel blog; Adventures in the Real: A Summer in Costa Rica at [http://therichcoast.blogspot.com](http://therichcoast.blogspot.com).

**Impacts of Costa Rica: Creative Work and Research**

Since my return to the University I have continued with research and creative work that focuses on water. It is clear that Costa Rica and Michigan have something in common: an abundance of water. Costa Rica is located in the rainforest, and Michigan is surrounded by the greatest amount of fresh water lakes in the world. Yet how are we addressing this abundance? By diverting our rainwater as if it is waste, allowing heavy metals into our rivers and lakes, often times sloppy sewer systems and rainwater runoff, while being member to a country that consumes the highest amount of fresh water in the entire world. We have much to learn about how we can
reconnect to our water sources, and rethink how we build our cities and homes. How might art play a role in this?

Currently in my studio on State Street, here in Ann Arbor, I have designed and put together a water-hydroponics-aquatic-eco-system that utilizes Michigan aquatic plants and fish to grow food and provide a soothing environment for the viewer. The system will be available for viewing at my current blog: Enviroteckie: An MFA Candidate at The University of Michigan [http://envirotekie.blogspot.com](http://envirotekie.blogspot.com), also at an open studio event scheduled for November 14th 7PM-Midnight I will be opening my studio to the public and explaining the project in depth. Additionally, how my work has been influenced by my trip to Costa Rica will be addressed and expanded upon in a panel discussion (thanks to Professor J. Marshall’s seminar), on December 2nd, 2008 (poster attached).

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Excerpts from Review Essay Post Costa Rica International Experience

THE CURRENT FUTURE
"ELLA ES VIDA"

"ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS CANNOT PREVAIL UNTIL THEY CONVINCE PEOPLE THAT CLEAN AIR AND WATER, SOLAR POWER, RECYCLING AND REFORESTATION ARE THE BEST SOLUTIONS FOR HUMAN NEEDS."

STEPHAN J. GOULD
The Golden Rule

...Water was everywhere. It rained non-stop. I experienced flash floods, instant rivers, and washed out roads. I saw what happens when a government does not or cannot provide running water, water treatment facilities, or waste and recycling facilities. I saw large gashes in the earth that were filled with plastic and metal. I saw what the people, plants, and animals look like that live downstream from the non-organic banana plantations of Dole and Chiquita, and I understood what Greta Guard, and many of the writers in her anthology, were talking about. I got to see how and where the people who work for these companies live...

I got to experience what “development” meant, by North American standards, in a Third World Country. I had the opportunity to dive with a team of biologists taking a fish count, and listen to the master diver tell stories of dying reef, and then see what happens to the reef and to the water when another Hilton hotel goes up on the edge of the Pacific ocean... I got to listen to the stories of locals and of how they have been waiting for years for running water, and then a hotel is built and the aquifer their town is built on, is tapped dry. I listened to locals explain to me how natural resources are becoming privatized by multi-million dollar corporations. I learned that North Americans currently own more land in Costa Rica (aside from National Parks), than Costa Ricans do.

This trip fueled the focus I needed, and while I experienced many things, I concentrated on water. How it was used, conserved, and collected. I questioned whom it was available to, and to whom it was not. I asked locals which water was the cleanest and why. I paid attention to what types of pollution are happening and who and what is being affected. I studied rainwater collection systems, and learned how they are built and utilized. I have brought these experiences home with me.

When I was interviewed for a position in the graduate program at the University of Michigan, I was asked Why the University of Michigan? I answered something close to: Because I am from Michigan and I feel a great responsibility to the protection and conservation of our Great Lakes. ...I said it because it was true, but I also said it because it was the first thing that came to mind.
Our water is indeed our most precious resource at our current moment in history, and will continue to be, increasingly so. “It has been said that if the twentieth century was the century of oil, then the twenty-first century will be the century of water.” Michigan is a precious gem, in the global sense, being surrounded with 20% of the fresh water in the entire world. It is modestly estimated that by the year 2025, two-thirds of the world’s population is expected to face water shortages, “the vast majority of them occurring in the developing world, and much of the world’s population growth is occurring in areas where water is far from abundant. . . during the last seventy years, as the world’s population has tripled, water use has increased six-fold... in the next one-hundred years the world will be increasingly divided into two groups: the water haves and the water have-nots.” Our Nation is already experiencing water supply crises, draught, and drying rivers. Today, by the time the great Colorado River reaches Mexico, it is merely a salty stream. Water is life, and therefore is everything that has lived or is living today. Water is connected to everything.

When I returned to Michigan from Costa Rica I visited many Michigan lakes and rivers, and thought deeply about the interconnectedness of ecology, people, and water. I read Peter Annin’s *The Great Lakes Water Wars*, brushed up on Michigan identification, and am happy to say; was taken off a long waiting list and enrolled in a course in the School of Natural Resource and Environment, titled *Ecological Restoration*.

The course description is as follows:

“The Society for Ecological Restoration defines ecological restoration as “the process of assisting the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged, or destroyed.” This course is designed to provide a practical overview of various facets of ecological restoration, particularly as related to restoring and managing the kinds of habitats found in Southeastern Michigan and the upper Midwest. Through a combination of lectures, readings, field trips, and project work, we will examine background theory and issues relating to ecological restoration and attempt to develop approaches for solving specific problems associated with local habitats. While most of the examples we’ll study will be local, the principles and processes will have applications throughout North America, and perhaps world-wide.”

The course in the NRE, *Ecological Restoration*, will help to inform my work with the language of ecology, and providing the hands on experience I need to pursue this work at an academic level. I have gained a deeper, more focused understanding of how my career as a professional artist and educator has a direct relationship to the interconnectedness of ecology, feminist theory, and ecological art on a local and global scale.

Annin, p.3.

Professor Robert E. Grese, (SNRE syllabus for Fall 2006).