I spent this past May and June in China and Bangladesh for my international experience. I was fortunate to be able to spend over two months in these countries through the generous funding of the School of Art and Design in combination with an International Institute Individual Fellowship for my internship in Beijing, China. My trip was divided into three sections. For the first part of my trip I traveled through northern China, seeing important cultural sights and becoming immersed in the culture. I then spent five weeks in Beijing. During this second portion of my trip I lived with local artists and worked full time at the branch of Red Gate Gallery located in the 798 art district. Finally I spent approximately three weeks in Bangladesh studying with the painter Jamal Ahmed. These experiences have deeply shaped my work this year, both in introducing me to new techniques in painting and in further defining my interests in urban landscapes in both China and the United States.

For the first part of my trip I had originally planned to intern with artists in a Tibetan village near Chengdu in southwestern China. However, due to the political turmoil preceding the Olympics I could not get permission to travel there. This allowed me to spend three weeks exploring important places of artistic, religious, and historic significance that I had not had a chance to see in my previous trips to southwestern China. I visited Pingyao, a Qing dynasty banking center that still had its original city walls and architecture intact. Here I got a much better understanding of the social and political conditions in the north that are considered traditionally “Chinese” and precipitated the fall of the Qing dynasty and the rise of communism. I also went to Wutaishan, an ancient pilgrimage center that has shaped Buddhism across Asia. Finally, I went to the Yungang caves which are not only famous examples of early Buddhist art in China but also contain the most stunning sculptures I have ever seen. Here I took a series of photographs that reflected on this monumental art and its current significance in Chinese society. I displayed one of these photographs in the Icon show at Work, Detroit.

During this part of my trip I also learned a great deal about mobility within China. I met both Chinese and foreign travelers who were there for reasons of pilgrimage, business, and curiosity. I met Buddhist nuns, migrant cooks, interns from the Swedish embassy, a filmmaker from Australia, women on vacation from southern China, and travelers from the Czech Republic and Israel, among many others. I have become very interested in how these groups of highly mobile people shape the places that I visited as much or more than those who stayed in place. These reflections have been a source of inspiration in my current paintings in which I explore mobility and transience in landscape.

During the second part of my trip I was very fortunate to be invited to stay in the studio-home of the artist Cao Yuanlin in the Huanline district of Beijing. Huanline was an amazing place to stay for five weeks because it was a complex of studio-homes of a very close-knit community of artists. Studios were almost always open and people would drop in at any time of the day or night to see work, start an impromptu project or look at piles of art magazines over tea and watermelon. During this time I helped a friend on a large
work that combined printmaking and painting techniques and started to experiment with ink painting. Both my hosts and I were deeply surprised by the similarities in our artistic techniques and interests. Chinese ink painting takes years to learn. However, many of my techniques I employed in printmaking had a resonance with Chinese forms. As a child of a Chinese professor I also shared an interest in the history of Chinese painting and printmaking. The Chinese artists I was working in were particularly interested in Western art. This gave us a great deal to talk about, and the artists’ encouragement finally freed me from the worry about my work being seen as too influenced by China. Here my work was taking part in a conversation, not exoticising the other nor conforming to western norms.

This realization was further reinforced by my work at Red Gate Gallery 798. This gallery was the first contemporary art gallery established in China and represents work by Chinese artists. It is run by Brian Wallace (an Australian) and a team of both Chinese and foreign employees. The international nature of the gallery was particularly evident in its client base that includes buyers in New York, London Sydney, Hong Kong, and Beijing. I was an intern during a transition period at Red Gate, when we were getting new employees and further expanding the functions of the gallery that already included two gallery locations, an international residency program, and a set of artist book publications. We were also at the time gearing up for the surge of attention paid to Chinese art that came with the Olympics. In order to facilitate this transition I created a database of our media outlets and contacts and organizing a system to deal with managing the international publicity for the gallery while strengthening its ties to the local art community. Through this job I learned a great deal about how a large gallery functions and also got a sense of a much broader international art world than I previously had been aware of.

Finally I went to Bangladesh for three weeks at the end of my trip. During this time I studied with the artist Jamal Ahmed and lived with his family. Jamal taught me techniques of painting with acrylic that uses very thin washes and plays with the wet quality of the medium. This technique comes from his study in Japan. I had never liked acrylic before because I did not like the quality of light on its surface, but Jamal’s technique allowed me to achieve the sort of effects I got from etching and ink painting but in color. I also got the chance to see a very new art scene (the country was established in the 70’s and the art scene is just beginning to form), and to meet a wide variety of artists and collectors. I was also fascinated by the sharp differences in mobility between China and Bangladesh, particularly in regards to class and gender. In China I was able to travel anywhere alone, by bicycle or taxicab. In Dhaka, however there were virtually no bicycles and people moved around the city on foot, if they were lower class or by hired Rickshaw or a car with a driver if they were of higher class. I did a series of paintings reflecting on the use of bicycle rickshaws as opposed to Bicycles while in Bangladesh.

In my current work I am continuing to explore the issues of urban mobility through a series of large ink paintings that draw on techniques I learned about in China and Bangladesh. At the same time I am studying urban planning theory and hope to tighten my focus to Beijing, Dhaka, and Detroit, weaving together these experiences in a reflection on urban landscapes. I showed some of my work from Dhaka in the show “We Breathe Air” in the Warren Robbins Gallery this fall.