“Though there was not much doubt as to what modern day ashure was composed of, still the components of this dessert weren’t entirely evident, and extra ingredients could be added into it any time. It was precisely this lack of a fixed recipe that made ashure so unlike other desserts. Neither the ingredients were restricted nor the measurements fixed. As such, it ultimately resembled a cosmopolitan city where foreigners would not be excluded and latecomers could swiftly mix with the natives. Ashure was limitlessness generated by limited options, affluence born from scarcity and vast assortment burgeoning out of extinction.”

~ Elif Shafak, *Flea Palace*

During June and July I visited Turkey for my A+D sponsored, international experience. I spent the first month in Istanbul interning for Euro Art magazine, a volunteer-based, online publication on contemporary art and renting a spare room in my boss’ apartment. I also spent my time exploring the architectural spaces of city. The histories of the Byzantine and Ottoman empires and modern Republic can be seen in the contradictory building facades like geologic strata. Istanbul was a cultural melting pot during the Ottoman Empire, which encompassed the Middle East, Northern Africa and most of Eastern Europe. It’s location between Europe and Asia reinforces this cultural hybridity. Istanbul is one of the largest cities in the world, and is growing rapidly due to immigration. There’s a lot of energy in the city from all this but it also illustrates very real political tensions due to an increasing distance between the wealthy few and the poor majority, as well as a struggle between cultural allegiances to the East or West. The conflicts that Istanbul faces make it resemble a microcosm of our global climate. It’s a fascinating city and I grew to really love it during the time I spent there.
While interning for Euro Art magazine, I was introduced to the contemporary art scene in Istanbul. Contemporary Turkish artists seem to be trying to re-define their own style, as something in-between the East and West. Historically there has been a vicious cycle of Turkish intellectuals wanting to be European, while Western tourists prefer the oriental Turkey. This led many Turkish artists to perpetuate their own stereotypes. After meeting artists, gallery directors, art historians, and critics, my assignment was to work as guest editor for the next issue of Euro Art, focusing on contemporary photography. I worked with Gozde Turrkan, a recent graduate from Bilgi University’s Photography program. Together we wrote an editorial outlining our own artistic influences and development. We contacted writers who had previously submitted articles to the magazine, and asked others for permission to republish their work. We also interviewed local artists and advertised current exhibitions around the globe. I wrote an article about Annette Merrild’s photography series The Room, which ties together photography as documentation, defining home through the living room, and experiencing the familiar and the exotic as a tourist. The issue will be published this fall on Euro Arts website and a printed copy will be on display as part of the ‘Made Internationally’ exhibition on campus.

During my internship I met Ali Peksin, a professor of visual communication and design (VCD) at Bilgi and was given a guided tour of their onsite museum, Santral Istanbul. This program was the first of it’s kind in Turkey and focuses on new technology and design. The student body (BFA and MFA) is roughly the same size as ours. Each year, senior undergraduates organize and curate a “Track” exhibit at Santral Istanbul. The students work together during the entire process, including choosing a theme, selecting work, display, and publishing a catalogue. This year’s theme was ‘data fragmentation’ and was exhibited through four large computer screens with multi-touch, interactive interfaces, allowing viewers to scroll through artists, select and expand their work, and move them all by touch. Some classes are taught in English and there could be potential for an exchange program here.
In addition to Track 08, there was a related exhibit called Uncharted: User Frames in Media Arts with work involving large-scale digital and interactive media. Working with the theme of interactivity, these works challenge the traditional role of artist as individual genius. Meaning is generated through the interaction between the user/viewer and the artwork, negating any difference between use value and artistic value and the typical divisions between art and design. The technology involved in the work was incredible and there seemed to be a joyful experimentation throughout. Most of the work seemed satisfied with discovering the possibilities of new media, although some of the pieces also raised important questions. The exhibit also brought up some tough questions for my own artistic practice, concerning my relationship to my audience, what the function of my work might be, and how important my own ego is to the meaning of my work.
My initial proposal was to study squatter settlements in Istanbul. These “gecekondus” are built quickly overnight, with available materials, due to an ancient legal loophole that allows any building standing by sunrise to be legally occupied. Unfortunately, it was difficult to achieve a meaningful access to these homes and residents. The contacts I made would occasionally point out a gecekondu as we passed on the bus, but weren’t comfortable taking me any further. Later I was introduced to Ali Taptik, a Turkish photographer who I interviewed for Euro Art. He has been photographing neighborhoods in Istanbul for years. After I told him about my interests he suggested three places for me to visit. They all had examples of the handmade architecture I was interested in, but each had a different atmosphere and received very different attitudes from governmental policy.

Two neighborhoods were part of Fatih municipality: Sulukule, a historic gypsy neighborhood, and Zeyrek. Both became part of urban redevelopment projects. Zeyrek’s residents have been greatly involved in the redevelopment and continue to live there. The Roma living in Sulukule were initially given some incentives to relocate, but when they resisted the government started sending bulldozers. The residents now struggle to maintain some sort of dwelling among the concrete rubble just to keep their claim to the land. But Zeyrek had a very different feel. I noticed kid’s toys, a new bike locked to a window grate, and the occasionally car. Their possessions seemed to indicate a sense of security and pride.

The third neighborhood, Gulensu, was about 45 minutes east of the city on a steep hill. It was a good example of a gecekondu. In the spaces between decent homes and apartment complexes, residents have begun adding on or creating new structures. Some are large and visible, but most are hidden behind plants or down alleys. This neighborhood also had a positive feeling. Although the location is far from the city center, the people living on this hill have a remarkable view overlooking the sea. Additionally, the community has made a deal with the municipality that none of these structures would be torn down without their consent.
I spent most of July traveling through Western Turkey following a line down the Aegean coast, then cutting inland and working my way back up through the capital before completing the circle back in Istanbul. During this time I visited Troy, Gallipoli, Bergama (Pergamum), Izmir, Ephesus, Pamukkale, Fethiye, Olympos, Konya, Goreme, Ankara, and Safranbolu. My goal was to see a broader view of Turkish culture outside of Istanbul. Unfortunately because I wanted to see so much, my time in each place was brief and my interaction with locals was limited.

However it gave me an opportunity to experience some of the ancient Greek, Roman, and Byzantine sites I recognized from art history surveys. The ruins at Pergamum and Ephesus showed how long this land has seen a mixture of cultures and civilizations. The calcium deposit travertines of Pamukkale were like mirrors at sunset, which turned the white landscape into a reverse reflection of the sky. The ghost town of Koyakay, which was abandoned during a population exchange following WWI, illustrated the continued friction between Greece and Turkey. In Goreme the soft tufa stone were carved into cave homes initially used by persecuted Christians and continue to be used today. I was also able to stay in a traditional Ottoman mansion in Safranbolu, which used ornate wooden cupboards to hide all domestic objects in the house. The clean use of space reminded me of modernist interior design, only centuries earlier and on the other side of the world.
What initially brought me to Turkey was my interest in how mobile people define ‘home’. Istanbul’s high level of immigration, patchwork culture and unique laws concerning squatters were all visually apparent in the architecture and urban planning of the city. The bricolage homes of Istanbul’s neighborhoods illustrate the historic and ethnic layers, as well as the way they clash and mix together. I saw in them a visual language for the personal and political nature of home building that could be useful in my own creative work. My challenge is to figure out how this becomes more than just combining two opposites, with a result that is more than just the sum of its parts. The gecekondu residents build their homes by hand with whatever materials are available. I’m attracted to their naive, although efficient methods and the necessity of means in their construction. There is also the political statement of building a home in a space that hasn’t been given. I’d like to find and use physical and metaphoric interstices as a site for my own ‘constructions’.

I was fascinated by the use of light and detail in Islamic architecture. The low, hanging lanterns in the Aya Sofya and Blue Mosque were incredible. Within these grand, triumphant arches, the intimate nature of the light gave the space a personal resonance. I was equally impressed with the honeycomb skylights in the harem of Topkapi palace. The way the light dappled across the off-white stucco and marble in the cool, damp baths made everything in the space seem slow and languorous. Using light and detail as abstraction was very meditative in these spaces. I’m wondering how I could use light to humanize the spaces in my own work.
Also, working with Euro Art rekindled my love of photography. I focused in the medium for my BFA, but eventually felt frustrated by its inability to address spatial experience. Over the last year I experimented and wrestled with 3 dimensional work and installation, but still have a tendency to approach objects as a photographer. In examining the meaning of ‘home’ I’m interested both in the physical space as well as the idealized meaning, and the conflicts between those two. I think photography might somehow be used to embody that desired, but distant ideal of home. I admired the way the Turkish photographers I met worked. They seemed to fearlessly follow their aesthetic impulses before conceptualizing them. I realized this last year I rarely made something without knowing how I would talk about it. While this was useful for critiques, the side effect was that my work rarely surprised me. I hope to challenge myself to make more and pursue instincts that I might not fully understand. It will also be important for me to negotiate to what extent photography, as a medium and process, will play a role in my work, and how best to incorporated my process into working with installation or sculpture.

“In caught as the city is between traditional culture and Western culture, inhabited as it is by an ultra-rich minority and an impoverished majority, overrun as it is by wave after wave of immigrants, divided as it has always been along the lines of it’s many ethnic groups, Istanbul is a place where, for the past one hundred and fifty years, no one has been able to feel completely at home.”

~ Orhan Pamuk Istanbul

In closing I would like to thank the University of Michigan School of Art & Design and the faculty who assisted me for their generous support of this project. Below are a list of websites that have further information about my trip and the contacts that I made in Istanbul. I also have email addresses, brochures, and catalogues of student and professional artists’ work. I would be happy to pass along advice or information to anyone with an interest in the country.

My travel blog- http://handmadehomes.wordpress.com
Euro Art magazine- www.euroartmagazine.com
Visual Communication Design @ Bilgi University- http://vcd.bilgi.edu.tr/2009/
Gozde Turkkan’s work- http://www.mimiko.net
Ali Taptik’s work- http://www.alitaptik.com