This summer I traveled through India for 7 weeks for my A&D sponsored International Experience. This was my first time traveling alone and only my second time traveling abroad; frankly, my excitement barely outweighed my anxiety in anticipation of my upcoming adventure. Upon my arrival in Delhi, I was completely overwhelmed by the congested, narrow streets, the endless blaring of car horns, the aggressive touts and beggars tugging at my sleeves, the pungent mingling aroma of spices, street food, urine, garbage and exhaust fumes filling my lungs and the overstimulation of a visually vibrant culture far removed from my own. By the second day, I had fallen in love with India.

After a few days in Delhi, I traveled south to the Vijnana Kala Vedi Cultural Centre in Aranmula, a small village located in the southwestern state of Kerala. Vijnana Kala Vedi (VKV) was a cultural institution dedicated to the teaching and promotion of traditional Indian arts and culture to foreign artists and visitors. I use the term “was” because after 32 years of growing success, they were forced to close their doors at the end of August due to a dispute with the landlord of their largest house. With my artistic research focusing on financial instability and unemployment, this unfortunate turn of events offered me an opportunity to enter discussions with many of my teachers about the hopes and fears for their futures after the closing of their beloved school.

Vijnana Kala Vedi was at full capacity when I arrived, with a tide of international artists engaging in courses lasting anywhere between a few days to several years. During my stay I took one-on-one classes in South Indian mural painting and cooking, and participated in the group classes for yoga, the dance-dramas of kathakali and the martial art of kalaripayattu. The course in mural paintings intrigued me because of its tradition of lavish ornamentation and patterning, thick layers of symbolism and the exaggeration and hybridization of human forms. I was also hoping to learn how to create natural paint from local plants and stones, but was told there was not enough time to undertake such an endeavor, and instead settled for verbal explanations. My teacher, Anil, dedicated the first week to teaching me to draw
the design embellishments and faces of the Hindu gods in traditional South Indian style. As an artist, it was both frustrating and humbling to have Anil constantly snatching the pencil from me to correct my imperfectly drawn lines. He spent the last two weeks teaching me the laboriously methodical process of layering washes of paint to create the luminous coloring characteristic of South Indian murals. Anil’s website: www.anilmural.com

Anil’s wife, Nisha, taught my South Indian cooking classes each morning. I have been teaching myself to cook North Indian food for the past five years and was excited to explore the vast differences between North and South Indian cuisine. With every recipe we created, Nisha educated me about the health benefits and homeopathic properties of each plant we used. I have been cooking Indian dishes every week since I have been back and am willing to share recipes with anyone interested. In addition to my classes, Nisha and Anil helped introduce me to Kerala’s language, Malayalam, so we could better communicate.

I was able to attend a few kathakali performances held at nearby village temples and eventually began taking classes in this extravagant ancient art form. Translated as “story play,” kathakali performances are all-night, Keralan dance-dramas that tell legends of the Hindu gods through dance, elaborate costumes, facial expressions and percussion-based music. As an artist working with figurative imagery, I was interested in the amount of visual symbolism employed to convey stories. The actors use only nine highly exaggerated facial expressions, or navarasams: love, humor, fear, sorrow, anger, courage, disgust, wonder, and peace. The color of an actor’s makeup reveals the personality traits and sex of their character. For example, a green face indicates a male character with a noble and kingly nature, yet adding a red mark reveals the character’s evil streak.

Kathakali performer as Lord Krishna; Kathakali teacher performing examples of navarasams
Living in a small village in Kerala provided a drastically different experience than my visits to larger cities. For the first time in my life I experienced living in a place where I was not only a racial minority but also faced a language barrier. Larger cities offered an increased likelihood of meeting people who spoke English, but in Aranmula, even communicating with the teachers at VKV posed a challenge. Small things like going to the tailor and asking to have pants mended, or figuring out which bus to take back from town became major triumphs for the day. Out of respect for local culture and traditions VKV students were asked to dress in traditional Indian attire, though this did not help me blend in. People in the village often stopped abruptly to stare at me as I walked past them. Riding bikes almost became a celebrity event as people ran from their houses to wave and shout friendly “hello’s” or “namaskaram’s” as the other foreigners and I passed through the village roads. I was self-conscious of the Western privilege my skin revealed, worried about showing disrespect as I gawked at the many cultural differences in daily life and hesitant to take pictures of scenes that as an outsider seemed wondrous.

Following my time at Vijnana Kala Vedi, I traveled further south through Varkala and Trivandrum, finally reaching Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of India that overlooks the confluence of the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal. Along the way I made important friendships with people who shared their stories about a caste system that is still thriving, discussing its impact on their occupations, education and relationships. Visiting Kerala and Tamil Nadu during monsoon season, I was worried that my trip would be sullied by incessant rain. However, the rain was a welcome relief to the tropical summer weather, enhancing the vibrant hues of the already dazzling landscape and usually only lasting between a few minutes and a couple hours.

I flew north to devote my last few weeks to traveling. In a stiflingly hot Delhi, I visited the National Gallery of Modern Art, a multitude of architectural gems and talked shop with artisans selling their handiwork at The Crafts Museum. In Varanasi I visited silk weaving workshops and marveled at the spectacle of life on the ghats along the holy River Ganges. Walking along the ghats, within a very short distance I could witness a wealth of life: boys playing cricket, men and women bathing in the river to cleanse their sins, touts vying for boat rides, water buffalo grazing, men cremating.
their loved ones, people washing laundry, actors shooting a film and crowds performing pujas and practicing yoga. It was both mindboggling and refreshing.

Moving westward, I traveled to see the notorious erotic stone temple carvings in Khajuraho before heading to Orchha, a small town boasting stunning palaces and architecture. I spent several days studying the beautifully preserved Hindu murals painted within the Rajmandir and the ornate designs adorning the facade of the Jahangir Mahal. Trading Hindu iconography for the rhythmic patterns adorning Islamic architecture, I caught a train to Agra to see the Agra Fort and the infamous Taj Mahal. I was captivated by the incised paintings along arched doorways and the intricate linear motifs scaling the Mughal architecture.

The final stop on my architectural tour was the Rajasthani city of Jaipur. Visiting the City Palace, Amber Fort and Hawa Mahal I was confronted with the best of both worlds: the harmonious fusion of the vibrant colors and animals of Hindu iconography with the elaborate decorative line work of Islam. The colors presented within the buildings were outshone only by the vibrant garments worn by local women which appeared even more vivid against the arid landscape. In an exploration of colors and patterns, I dedicated numerous hours in each city to the fabric shops found along winding networks of covered alleyways. I was invited to visit local hand block-printing and embroidery workshops, developing a deepened respect for the handmade.

With deepest sincerity, I would like to thank the generous support of the University of Michigan School of Art and Design and the wonderful people whose financial support make the International Experience a possibility. I will be eternally grateful for this opportunity.