International Experience Report  
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Blue Creek, Belize and Yaxunha, Mexico  
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Much of my artistic practice draws from my research and work in the fields of anthropology and museum studies, and for my international experience through the University of Michigan’s MFA program, I choose two summer projects that would help me tie these fields further into my artistic work. The projects I chose were perhaps less traditional, and more hands-on, in that they allowed me the direct opportunity to do work in these fields. Doing this type of work allowed me not only to gain more experience in these related fields, but also provided me with a larger understanding of the relationship of a culture to its own past, which is significant for my artistic work.

The projects I participated in are organized by the non-profit organization, the Maya Research Program. This organization was officially created in 1992, though it existing earlier in the mid 1980s under different parent organizations. The organization is divided into two programs, a cultural anthropology program that involves ethnographic fieldwork in the rural Maya community of Yaxunha in the Yucatan, and an archaeological program that involved excavation of Maya sites in Blue Creek, Belize. Each program is run under faculty from a range of US and International universities and institutions. The overall goal of the program is to organize and execute research that will add to the larger body of scholarly knowledge about the Maya in the past and the present. The program is supported by both tuition paid by students, and through the grants of National Geographic, the Heinz Foundation, and the National Science Foundation, amongst many others. The program offers tangible experience in the field of anthropology, and the educative components of the program are critical to its long-term success.

My first session of participation in the project was in Blue Creek, Belize. I was assigned to an excavation unit at the site of Nojol Na under the field supervisor Bill Brown of the University of Arizona. The remains of a Maya structure that we were focusing on had been excavated in the previous field season, and consisted of a multi-roomed residential structure located near another group of smaller residential structures and two chaltos (underground storage structures for water or grain). In the previous field season, burials had been recovered from the interior of the structure, and it was expected that more would be found this season. Early on a shell bead and a stone metate were found near a bench inside the larger room of the structure. Towards the end of the session, two burials were found inside that same stone bench.
I was lucky enough to be allowed to assist with the identification and removal of one of the burials, due to my osteology experience from working at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of Michigan. This process was both exciting and tense as first the skeleton was cleared of rubble from the bench, and then photographed and provenience taken. I provided a sketch of the skeleton in-situ that will be used for publication about the site (most likely in grey literature). After the skeleton was documented and drawn, we began carefully removing, identifying, labeling, and wrapping each piece in aluminum foil. Through this process I suggested that this burial contained two individuals, one older male (represented by the majority of the skeletal remains but primarily identified by tooth wear to the maxillae and mandible, and pelvic diagnostic features) and one adolescent possibly female (represented by a radius and ulna with unfused epiphyses). This initial analysis was supported by the field supervisor and later confirmed in the MRP lab. While the remains were poorly preserved, some long bones were intact, as were the majority of the crania and mandible with teeth, and the metacarpals and metatarsals. Between the cranium and other long bones was a single faunal tooth, drilled through the root – this was probably worn as a necklace. The opportunity to do this type of hands-on work in the field, to see and touch these things was quite compelling for me.

My work in Belize was a small contribution to the pursuit of a larger base of knowledge on the Maya, and the MRP project at Blue Creek and its surrounding regions is unique in its time span. Most excavations are conducted for one or two field seasons, however the Blue Creek complex has been excavated for over a decade, offering a rather substantial amount of raw data and analysis by researchers heavily invested in the region. With continued focus on the same district, MRP is able to offer a range of information about the Blue Creek Maya community helping to construct a more reliable and complex view of Maya life in the past.

From Blue Creek I traveled to the Yucatan, staying first in Merida and then in Yaxunha. My work in Yaxunha in the Yucatan was distinct in that rather than focusing on the Maya of the past, I was working directly with a contemporary Maya community in the present. MRP, through grants from the Mexican government, is working to create a local cultural heritage museum within the community. The goals of this museum are to help draw in tourist income as well as offer the community a forum for investigating the complexities of their own culture. Maya culture is current and thriving in the Yucatan, and there is a larger desire within this community to better preserve its traditions and tie its past to present culture.
The work I was assigned was to assess the museum space, collect supplies for movable walls and displays while in Merida, and build as much of these items as possible during my session in Yaxunha. The displays were to consist of a range of real objects and figures posed to demonstrate local festivals and rituals. Much of my work consisted of constructing chicken wire figures that were covered in paper-mâché, painted, and clothed in traditional garb. Unfortunately two weeks into this project, I fell ill with Dengue Fever and was sent home. This was done in an effort to avoid being quarantined, as at that time anyone in the Yucatan showing a fever for more than 24 hours at a hospital was then quarantined at the hospital for 20 days. Members of the community came together in my absence, and finished the displays and walls for the museum, which should open in January or February 2010.

What was perhaps the most significant thing I gained from this work was the deeper understanding of the relationship between culture and the landscape, a theme that has been central to my recent artistic work. The relationship between identity, place, and the past, as well as the reflections of a culture about their own history are the foundations of my thesis work, and so the experiences I gained through the Maya Research Program’s projects were unique and helpful for my work.

I would like to thank the University of Michigan School of Art and Design faculty and staff for both the opportunity and their help with this project. I would also like to thank those whose financial support made the International Experience project possible. I would gladly entertain any dialogue or questions about my work.
View from the platform at the Blue Creek complex site

The main structure from my site at Nojol Na.
Cranium from burial #12

The main temple at the Lamanai complex, near Blue Creek.
Monkeys!!!!

Church near Yaxunha.
14th century Spanish cathedral in Yaxunha.

Working in Yaxunha’s community center.
A figure in process.