International Experience Report
Lea Bult
The Greatmore Studios, Cape Town, South Africa
May 15 – July 25, 2010

My current artistic practice draws from my interest in postcolonial theory, and how the residual effects of colonialism manifest themselves in covert and unexpected ways. Coming from a religiously conservative upbringing, I often felt a sense of alienation in a community that harbored calloused attitudes about gender and race. These attitudes, I believe, were a direct result of the ideologies held within my family’s particular sect of Dutch Calvinist Christianity. I found this experience to be personally invalidating and at times very difficult. I remember learning about the events of apartheid South Africa and feeling invoked. When encountering stories of the South African struggle to end apartheid, I often felt a particular affiliation with those who devoted their lives to ending the oppressive regime. As the apartheid government relied on a colonial mindset with support from Dutch Calvinists, I would notice parallels between the apartheid government and experiences from my upbringing. Though the experiences of those who endured apartheid were different and far worse than my own, I wanted to experience South Africa to come to terms with a past that I, at times, still feel haunted by. I am also interested in the intersection of race, gender and class and how social hierarchies shift in relation to context. I wanted to see this intersection in action, in an extreme sense perhaps, so that I could better understand these dynamics in their more covert forms.

I spent ten weeks in Cape Town at the Greatmore Studios where I completed an artist residency and participated in the workshop, Thupelo 2010 Interventions. In addition, much of my free time was devoted to exploring and researching historical sites in the Cape Town area. I was drawn to Greatmore because of its commitment to outreach, and each resident is required to conduct an outreach project in addition to a body of work. My outreach project involved helping the surrounding community members get acquainted with the studios and strategizing ways of including them in a workshop and exhibition involving 25 artists from around the world. I also taught a photo transfer workshop to a group of elderly neighbors.

While in residency, I wanted to focus on a body of work that differed from my previous work. My past work involved taking pop culture imagery and icons and representing them in a way that elicits a sense of dark humor. The work relied heavily on American references and it was nice to be able to get out of the Americanized bubble I had become so accustomed to. Although I had the urge to make cultural criticism with South African imagery, I felt that it was not in my best interest to criticize a culture that I had very limited experience with.

The stunning natural beauty of the Cape Town area often struck me. However, many of these sites were places that had been marked by apartheid history, resulting in a feeling of emotional confliction. I constructed my work around these sites, and I tried to capture the feelings of turmoil that I encountered at these locations. The end product was a series of landscape paintings of places affected by the events of apartheid. I had the pleasure of sharing a house with the other artists in residence, who were from Barbados,
Nigeria, South Africa and Israel. It was enjoyable work with these artists, and to share each other’s culture and company.

During my stay at Greatmore, I had the opportunity to participate in Thupelo, an annual artist workshop held at the studios. Thupelo is a Swahili word that means, “to teach by example.” Greatmore Studios hosted the 30th Thupelo workshop from June 10 - 24 in Cape Town’s oldest suburb, Woodstock. This year, the workshop focused on site specific art works and brought together 25 artists from America, South Africa, Congo, Ghana, Great Britain, Holland, India, Iran, Nigeria, Serbia and Uganda. At the end of the workshop all of the works were exhibited in and around Greatmore Street as part of the *Great Walk and More Exhibition* which ran on the 25th and 26th of June.

The workshop focused on work in progress rather than the finished product. The activities were non-prescriptive and process-based, emphasizing experimentation and community interaction. We were encouraged to develop work that we might not do in own studios and to participate fully in the intense dynamic that develops when artists work alongside each other in a stimulating environment.

I often feel that arts organizations tend to be rather exclusive, in that they cater to a specific demographic or niche. Often they forget to involve the community surrounding them. I felt that Greatmore made a valiant effort in including everyone and I found the community interaction to be very rewarding. Thupelo has an inspiring history of endurance. During apartheid the Thupelo workshops were held in secret, as people of different ethnic backgrounds were not allowed to associate with one another. It was truly amazing to be a part of something with a history of such perseverance.

Bamanye, a visiting artist in residence in front of a mural by South African street artist Falco One.
Greatmore Studios Artist Residency May 15- July 25

The Greatmore Studios

Me at work in my studio at Greatmore

Visiting artists in residence

Sheena (Barbados), Ann (Israel), Director Kate Stone, Mufu (Nigeria), me, and Bamanye (South Africa)

To view the body of work I completed for this residency visit my website: www.leabult.com
The purpose of this workshop was for each artist to come up with an arts based project and to involve the surrounding community members of Woodstock, Cape Town in this project. Twenty-five artists from around the globe contributed to the event and the projects were as diverse as the people included. The workshop ended with a neighborhood event including performances, film screenings, live musical acts, and an art parade.

As a participant in this workshop, I approached the daunting task of creating site-specific work for an audience that was very diverse in age, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. In addition, this community was of a low-income status with limited exposure to the arts. I was often stuck by the neighborhood children and inspired by their feisty resilience. I wanted to create something that almost everyone could relate to, especially the kids. I came up with the idea of turning buildings into large, expressive creatures by drawing gigantic silly faces with tape onto the outer walls. As this neighborhood is rife with poverty and crime, I wanted to elicit a feeling of lightheartedness and joy in an otherwise hostile environment. I collaborated with a woman named Shariefa “Poppy” and a woman that everyone referred to as Auntie Yvonne or “Auntie.” They gladly let me use the sides of their houses for the project. I was especially honored that Poppy would let me use her house as it was positioned directly across from a vacant lot, the only space in the neighborhood the kids had to play in.

Poppy with her two eldest children
Vacant lot where the kids play

Me cutting out a big eye

Assembling a creature
Two finished creatures

Myself and several other Thupelo artists were also involved in a mural project with the neighborhood kids.

Kids’ Mural                                      Thupelo artist Maja, from Serbia
In addition to the residency and the Thupelo Workshop, I had the opportunity to visit and investigate historical sites in Cape Town, especially those related to apartheid. This was a profoundly sobering experience, though one that I am grateful for. I also had the privilege of meeting and working with Lionel Davis, one of Cape Town’s most cherished artists. As a former resident of District 6 and political prisoner at Robben Island, his willing resilience in the face inconceivable hardship, was truly inspiring.
What remains of District 6

Lionel Davis, a Thupelo contributing artist and founder, in front of his painting.
As I reflect on my experience in South Africa, I know that I am still digesting much of what I encountered. I am still making sense of what I saw, the images of apartheid aftermath etched into my mind. But even still, this experience acted as a means by which I could reflect on some personal experiences from my own past as I met and collaborated with individuals who had also been through challenging life experiences. Interestingly though, was how my attention was directed not to the past, but to the present. What was perhaps the most significant thing I gained from this experience was the realization that the past influences the present, only if one chooses to let it. As I interacted with the various people I encountered, I feel that I acquired a deeper understanding of the relationship between identity, place, and the past, and especially the remarkable possibilities that lay within each new moment.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the A&D community, and especially to the generous support of Susan Smucker-Wagstaff and Reid Wagstaff. This experience would also not have been possible without the help of the Greatmore Studios and the Triangle Arts Trust. And most importantly, I would like to thank the community of Woodstock, Cape Town for their charming company, openness and support.