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My current artistic practice is inspired by the relationships that occur between species existing in the same ecosystem. My background in ecology and evolutionary biology has led me to look at the world in terms of how these interactions impact one another. I find the infrastructure of the developed world insulates people from the small and large ecological consequences of their decisions. By traveling to Fiji, I wanted to immerse myself in a new culture, one that has a clear connection to its surrounding environment.

Fiji is home to more than 1,000 reefs—the largest and best-developed coral reef ecosystem in the South West Pacific. Like many tropical islands, the Fijian people’s sustenance and tourist industry are heavily locked into the surrounding marine resources, and a sustainable relationship between the Fijians and their environment is imperative for the survival of both. Fiji’s marine ecosystem is one of the most diverse in the world, partly because of the diversity in its surrounding geomorphology; the main geomorphologic feature is Fiji is on a shallow uplifted platform surrounded on all sides by deep oceanic conditions (attracting species from very different habitats to one place). Because of these combined factors, The World Wildlife Foundation has declared specific regions in Fiji sub-regionally, nationally, and globally vital for marine ecology conservation. The livelihood of Fijian inhabitants has been closely tied to the ocean for thousands of years. The ocean is integral in ancient and modern Fijian culture, making the Fijian people one of the oldest coastal cultures in the world. This relationship to the ocean—spans nearly 3,000 years.

Currently, many Fijian fisherman use destructive tools like dynamite and bleach to maximize their catch. Developers are compromising reefs to create ports, and draining wetlands for both tourist development and agriculture. From a conservationist perspective, clearly such practices are drastically changing the ecosystems in Fiji.

I traveled to Fiji to: further understand the relationship between humans, conservation and culture and use my body to directly connect to a vulnerable, yet crucial, ecosystem on which our species depends. To achieve this, I conducted interviews with local Fijians, and I completed a 34K open water swim in Fiji’s surrounding seas. This unguarded encounter with the ocean—in concert with immersing myself in Fijian culture—was the subtext for my research questions: 1) What roles do the ocean and it’s resources play in sustaining the Fijian way of life? 2) What is the state of Fijian reefs today? 3) How do Fijians experience the ocean and its resources? In particular, how do Fijians identify the biotic systems of their ocean and what role do they think people play in sustaining or disrupting those systems? 3) How does a people’s culture affect its relationship with the ocean?

My interviews took place in four different regions of Fiji: The Yasawa Group, southern coast of Viti Levu, Suva (the capital city), and The Lomitivi Group. The interviews were all different though common themes were: the ocean, tourism, politics, and the future of Fiji. Some interviews were recorded, some were not, and most questions varied according to who was being interviewed. In all of my interviews, however, I asked people to describe their relationship to the sea. Here are some highlights from my experiences in these regions:

I visited the Ratu Meli Memorial elementary school in the Yasawa Islands and spent time with elementary students. The conversations spanned from their favorite sport (Rugby), to their families, to fishing with their fathers, to playing in the ocean, all the way to marine ecology taught in their schools.
and enforced by the Chiefs. It is becoming more and more common for school curriculums to include marine biology and environmental science for young students.

In the capital city, Suva, I had conversations with artists at the Oceania Center for Arts and Culture. The Oceania Center was established in 1996 as an effort for the University of the South Pacific to start an art and culture program. This program’s goal is to discuss issues of culture and identity in the South Pacific while focusing on the ocean and their historical relationships with it. The founders use the term “Oceania” as a name given to the group of people whose cultures were truly oceanic (meaning shielded by the ocean from cultural influences that seeped across continental land masses and adjacent islands) before the arrival of Europeans into the Pacific. The Center founders believe that this isolation allowed for the emergence of “distinctive oceanic cultures, with the only non-oceanic influences being the original cultures that the earliest settlers brought with them when they entered the uninhabited region.” A lot of the work at the Oceania center focuses on how the present culture of Fiji interacts with its rich history, and how their relationship to the ocean has changed. Through these conversations, I gained some insight about the struggle to preserve culture in a country whose current main economic interests reside in tourism and the sea.

Students at the Oceania Centre created carvings out of large drift wood trunks; they were on display for the month of July.
At the Fiji Museum in Suva, I spent a lot of time learning about the state of Fiji before the ceding to England, and what has happened in the country’s history since. The images below are examples of photographs that blanket the walls of the Museum. Often, in front of these photos were extensive collections of cannibalistic tools. The most interesting artifacts in the Museum are those dating back from approximately 3,700 years ago. There is also a lot of exhibit space dedicated to the missionary trips and colonies that were established, attacked, and re-established many times in Fiji’s old Capital, Levuka, Ovalau.

These photos are hanging in the Fiji Museum in Suva and Levuka. The caption in the center photo reads: “the dwarf priest and two Lovoni warriors were sold to an American Circus” (Barnum & Baily Circus)

After staying in Suva, I traveled to Ovalau to see where Fijian Chief Ratu Seru Cakobau signed the Deed of Cession, ceding the Fiji islands to Great Britian in 1847. The town of Levuka, on Ovalau is the historical capital of Fiji. The capital was moved to Suva, on the island of Viti Levu in 1882. In Levuka, there are still remains of colonial rule: the buildings are evidence of this. In many of my interviews- I would hear about Levuka historically being the safe haven for Europeans; Ratu Seru Cakobau, banned the killing and harassment of European colonizers. Right now, the villagers on Ovalau are trying to establish Levuka and all of Ovalau a World Heritage Site recognized from UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).
Just down the road from the colonial buildings, the PAFCO tuna company sits on a jetty. PAFCO is in partnership with Bumblebee Tuna. Fishing boats from Asia drive out to international waters and longline for fish to deliver to the PAFCO Company for canning. Estimates from workers averaged around 6 tons of fish, 2-3 times a week. The cannery employs 80% of the island (total population of the island is approximately 9,000 people).

In order to develop my own relationship with the Pacific Ocean, I prepared for, and executed 34 kilometers of open water swimming across Fiji waters. Followed by a support boat, and accompanied by 5 other open water swimmers, I documented these experiences through video and photography. After being a little overwhelmed by swimming in unknown waters, more than anything I began to notice the evidence of human impact on this ecosystem. Examples of this included: seeing dynamite blast sites (for fishing), and coming in close contact with large pelagic species drawn to
the fish waste from the tuna-canning factory. This experience was grueling, exhilarating, and fantastic. I counted over a hundred fish species, and came in contact with banded sea snakes and manta rays. This unguarded encounter with the ocean forced me to think about human vulnerability and our limitations as a species.

In Fiji, I used photography, sound recording, and video. I have gained insight about species vulnerability (including human vulnerability) and interconnectivity. This experience is already inspiring print, installation, and sound pieces. I want to sincerely thank all who made this wonderful experience possible- I will never forget it.