During the summer of 2012, I set off alone for a two-month trip to Indonesia. The third most populated country in the world, it is a land made up of islands inhabited by diverse religions, traditions, food and stories. The purpose of my trip was to discover the magical quality in the place, hearing stories from the people, and understanding perhaps only in a small way the things that made the culture unique. I wanted dearly to let the experience of traveling determine the direction my feet would move, mimicking the process in which I make art.

I began my journey in Java landing in the huge city of Jakarta, heading by backpack east through Java. I stopped to see the botanical gardens in Bogor, continued to Yogyakarta to visit artist studios where traditional batik paintings were being made. I met up with artist and friend, I Made Dedok who introduced me to the active art scene in the city also taking me to the Buddhist monument, Borobudur to discuss his knowledge of the stone carving. After traveling further east, I woke up hours before dawn to be dropped off in a village high in the pitch black mountains with a gesture from my non English speaking driver to guide me up Gunnug Bromo to watch the sunrise. I hiked Igen Crater the next day to photograph the bright yellow sulfur that sat heavy in my lungs, and made the ascent back to the precipice.

Tired and road weary, I headed to the compact island of Bali. The Manly Hindu Island was a feast for the eyes with smiling Balinese, colorful streets and religion with a temple in every village,
shrine in every yard and offering at every corner. The highlights included Gunnung Catur and Munduk where I learned about the spices and edible plants grown in the mountains while hiking with “chicken feet” (barefoot). I shared lunch with a family to learn the art of traditional offerings made of palm leaves. I traveled by motorcycle through Taitiluwih rice terraces and on to the slopes of Gunung Batukau. My goal was to see Pura Luhur Batukau, the seven roofed meru dedicated to the mountain guardian spirit. Although Ubud is home to many artists, I found it unappealing, crowded, and touristy. I spent quite a bit of time getting to know the winding shop filled streets, museums and monuments.

I found that the island of Lambongan, off the coast of Bali offered two authentic and memorable experiences. Seaweed farms were plentiful; workers collect seaweed early in the morning before the sunrise. Observing the agricultural process, which I assumed happened naturally at sea, rather than on farms, was fascinating. Secondly, I experienced a never to be forgotten death ceremony. Once every five years, 25 bodies are exhumed, and the bones cleaned by hand. Hundreds of people gathered for this event, and watched while family members pass the skulls to one another, their foreheads touching the skulls. After much celebration and gifts the bones are cremated and sent to sea in a coconut shell.
I also spent an extended period of time on the Gili Islands. Here I got a taste of the underwater world on a snorkeling trip and was hooked. I received my open water certificate, as that allowed me to rent the deep-water camera and set to work taking photos. On a night dive, I saw moray eels hunting, squids squirting ink, an octopus that pushed its way through a crack that was several times too small. I was dazzled as my group and I turned off our flashlights, waved our arms around in the dark water and watched as the phosphorescent plankton lit up like blue stars all around us. On one of the dives, I was lying on the sandy bottom of the ocean watching a clump of coral and found a pair of eyes on what I thought was a rock that turned out to be a scorpion fish.

Sumatra was by far the harshest place I traveled due to the tsunami devastation visible on the land and felt by the people in the 2004. It also happened to be
Ramadan, where devout Muslims in Banda Aceh were observing laws for fasting. Without access to food during daylight hours, I found relief at Gunung Leuser National Park. Photographing orangutans in the wild reminded me of how people-like they are. I spent my final days on Lake Danau Toba, one of the largest mountain lakes, observing the weavings of the Beatak people.

The excitement of spending time watching and internalizing the interactions of nature and its surrounding culture offered surprising experiences. I traveled for the most part alone relying on myself. The solitary time made my choices seem intensely personal and significant. Three realizations especially stood out to me: the viability and abundance of trash, the huge amount of ants that appeared everywhere I journeyed, and the experience of visiting the coral reefs that were more colorful, pristine, and more alive than what I have ever experienced on dry land.
I found myself fleeing the local’s call of “Hey Mista” to try to sell their goods and services. I dodged the thick traffic and Bachuks (local bike taxi) in the cities for the equally trashed but slower paced villages. Meeting Indonesians, eating street food wrapped in banana leaves, taking pictures for hours while walking occupied a lot of my time. In a culture that appreciates craftsmanship and beautiful things, I was stunned by the amount of trash in the streets, rivers and along the beaches. Trash was everywhere, and there was little or no way to dispose of it besides burning it or throwing it to the ground when the need would arise. Leaving a history of waste for me to discover, plastic bags, sealed cups of water, bottles of all shapes and sizes, juice boxes, individually wrapped slices of bread, clove cigarette butts and old staple offering baskets dusted even the most picturesque views. I was so captivated by the lack of concern for the colorful trash confetti and how it seemed so out of place in a land with such awe-inspiring natural beauty.

The other thing I noticed in the slower pace of the villages was the sheer number of ants, trailing in lines up the walls, climbing through the books I read, in my back pack, food and on every surface where one might sit or lean. It seems like a connection to nature that is present in every moment of the day no matter the place. In the western world ants would be sprayed and
controlled but in Indonesia they seem to be as normal as the sun rising to the dozens of rosters in the morning. I spent a lot of time resenting and avoiding them but by the end of my trip, I had a realization that they were more important to my experience than most of the temples, shrines and art museums I visited. The ants seemed to be a constant reminder of the natural world that we are trying to separate ourselves from in western culture.

The underwater colors of the coral were also especially inspirational. The land in comparison, looked dry and dead especially the endless coral shards that lay like bones on the beach. I realized I don’t care about the grand picture unless I can see what it is made of. The little experiences, nuances and snippets that make up life as a whole are often dismissed, but on closer inspection capture the impact of its true essence.

The experiences I had, and people I met in Indonesia will inspire and feed my thesis work. I want to thank the School of Art and Design for funding this trip and making possible a trip of a lifetime. A question I will always remember from a friend I made in Ubud was, “How did you get to be so Balinese?” This unique opportunity has changed me forever, and I will always be grateful for it. During