For the Stamps International Project I decided to chase a material that I’d been exploring through my studio practice. The chase led me to Antigua Guatemala for a month and a half, and this material I was following, was sawdust!

Antigua is a 16th century Spanish Colonial town that rests in a valley surrounded by 3 volcanoes. It was originally Guatemala’s capital until the late 1700’s when an earthquake destroyed the entire city. Most of it’s inhabitants relocated to what is now Guatemala City, however some stayed behind to rebuild and because of their commitment to the region, Antigua is now the host of one of the largest Holy Week celebrations in the world. What intrigued me about the Holy Week tradition (referred to as Semana Santa) was the use of sawdust and the purposes for its use in this way. During Semana Santa artisans, alongside community members, create street coverings from dyed sawdust. Using colors found in traditional Mayan costumes and beautiful stencil patterns, the community constructs very large and extremely ornate sawdust carpets through the streets called Alfombras. The street coverings sometimes stretch up to a mile long and though they are very elaborate to build, they are only intended to last a short time.
After the carpets are constructed, often tirelessly through the night, a large procession carrying a float that illustrates stories from the bible comes and passes over the intricately placed dust. The footsteps from the members in the procession destroy and wipe away what was so delicately placed there. This tradition emphasizes the very temporal nature of all things and celebrates a fleeting beauty that is before us. This continues to take place throughout the entire week and almost immediately after the procession passes, the remaining sawdust is cleaned up and the construction of another alfombra begins.

- The Alfombra is blessed using incense before the Procession reaches it.
One of my goals for this international project was to connect with some local practitioners that have a deep knowledge of the Semana Santa traditions and a strong relationship with sawdust. This was one of my favorite experiences of the trip because of the relationships that were formed and have already extended beyond my purposes for going there. Within the first 3 days of arriving in Antigua I tracked down a 4th generation alfombra maker named Miguel Angel Armas. Miguel is only a few years older than me and he and his wife Jackie run a small hardware store and chocolate shop. It wasn’t even an hour after meeting with them that they were very generously offering their time to us and set up a workshop so I could experience the traditional processes of alfombra making! Throughout the rest of my stay Miguel and Jackie had me over for some very unique and intimate workshops that consisted of old family videos & photo albums that showed his grandfathers sawdust carpets, and also sharing the family’s secret techniques with me. They exceeded generosity and I cannot wait to work with them again.
Miguel’s hands after teaching me sawdust dying techniques.

- A photo from the Armas family’s album; Miguel’s grandfather with his alfombra.
Parallel Research; Cathedral Ruins

Since I began working with sawdust as a sculptural material I’ve become increasingly interested in structural or architectural forms. Because of the earthquakes that hit Antigua, the city just so happens to be built around an immense amount of architectural refuse. These sites have been turned into museums that now cost money to visit and are a large part of the city’s charm. It’s a confounding experience to stand in something that was once so beautiful but has since been largely reduced to rubble. These sites seemed to echo the sensibilities that are present in the alfombras. What I mean is that they seem to be a more monumental scale of the fleeting beauty that is illustrated through the sawdust carpets. Through my work I’m very interested in ideas of impermanence so being able to look at both the material uses of sawdust in Antigua, and what is left of another time in Antigua, was very impactful. These surroundings allowed me to discover physical evidence of what was mostly theory prior to my visit. Because of this it both confirmed older ideas I’d had for work I wanted to make, and gave me new areas to explore. One of these concepts pertaining to an undermining that exists from our most common and everyday actions; such as walking over a surface until the floor wears away.

- Ruins from a site called; La Recolection.
My Project – “A Visitor”

I decided I would do a sculpture that embodied what it was to visit a place. Of course I cannot divorce myself from how I perceive the experience of visiting a place from the work, but I tried to use examples of objects that I found around Antigua to represent what I believe one can find anywhere. The degradation of a place or an object begins immediately upon its placement in and against the world. Using sawdust I’m trying to reveal the transient nature of things and the ineffable movement of materials that seem to be always on their way to becoming something else.

I spent time researching the Semana Santa traditions, discovering their origins, reading about dust, testing some of the physical properties of sawdust, and studying Guatemalan sculpture. Based on my research and time here, I decided I would start collecting textures and forms from around the city using clay rubbings. These could later be used as molds for casting sawdust if I needed them. What I set out to collect were examples of surfaces or objects that were wearing away due to time, everyday use, or something quick and unforeseen. I created an archive of these impressions and new they would become content for something new. This is the whole nature of using sawdust anyways, taking the old refuse and pulling it back together again, though it may be brief, it’s long enough to become part of the history of the objects, place, and material.

- Clay impressions of sidewalk tiles that were slowly being erased from walking.
My intention was always to make work out of sawdust. It’s what I’ve been doing for a while, and it’s why I went to Antigua. However, I didn’t know that I would both make a work and employ a process that would destroy it. For me, this decision was most exciting because I knew it would activate what the work was talking about thereby making it a very real example. This meant that the work would be fully realized through both its manifestation of form, and its degradation back to raw material. Here one minute, and gone the next. Truly a visitor!

I carried this object around Antigua Guatemala while following a route that is used during Semana Santa by the processions. The object began falling apart as soon as it went up against the environment around it. The cobblestone streets only increased the agitation of the form while I carried it on my back through the city. Even the fabric matrix that determined its form, participated in its dismantling. As the fabric cradled the sculpture on my back and rocked back and forth during this procession, the same form that made it was wearing it apart.
-A Visitor; documentation of action. Walking with sculpture as it falls apart.
This is the end, where I began. Pictured below are the steps to the main entrance of the Catedral. This work is (on a small scale) reflective of the vanishing architecture within Antigua, Guatemala, and a way to participate in a very old tradition of using sawdust as a way to discuss a fleeing and fugitive existence. In this project I became interested in the references to Time, and the history of the material and the objects that were represented in it. It denies strength & durability. At best it exists as a vague recollection of mine, maybe an unclear image in a spectator’s mind that I passed by. The object and actions meager documentation is only a stand-in for something that is now gone. This truly was a visitor.

-A Visitor; this is the end, where it began, on the steps of the Catedral.

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