

Quarterly Report: Maria Coryell-Martin

Ties to the Land: Exploring Remote Regions through Art

I have begun to settle into the routines of travel throughout the past three months. Experiencing the environments of the South Pacific and the high Tibetan plateau, I have felt changes within myself and seen these reflected in my evolving art. As I embrace the landscapes' and cultures' specific and unique characteristics, I also seek to recognize common themes. While my travels and adventures have often been challenging, I find my experiences and art are continually enriching as I make friends and connections throughout the world. I am excited for more to come.

On Travel

I have some basic rules I try to follow.

- 1) Never pass up a chance to sit down, go to the bathroom, or fill up my waterbottle.
- 2) Never make decisions while feeling stressed, scared, or tired. Instead, rest, eat, relax (breathe!), and then address what needs to be addressed.
- 3) Go with the flow: The generosity and hospitality of people is more often than not genuine. The unexpected and unplanned can often be the most rewarding. A few examples: Homestays with families, galloping ponies on beaches, boat travel, winning prize money for playing tug-of-war and "sauter le sac" during Bastille Day festivities, sharing lunch on a mountain with nuns and exchanging stories, and a day at the Tibetan opera.
- 4) Be generous. It will be reciprocated. I try to share my art as much as possible. It opens doors to friendships and new experiences: Recently, the monk who bought me dinner after I sketched him and the nomads who fed me tsampa with chura (ground barley mixed with butter tea and yak cheese) as I sketched their tent.
- 5) Patience! It takes a while to get to remote regions. And once I get somewhere, if I like it- stay! If not- go away!

Art

I am continually amazed at the opportunities my art creates. My sketches not only offer people my perspectives of their land and surroundings, but initiates friendships while bridging language barriers. I always have something to share and people appreciate it.

I arrived on Nuku Hiva of the Marquesas Islands with the knowledge that I wanted to live with a family to immerse myself into the culture. Unsure of how the opportunity would materialize, I spent my first night in a large, lonely room of a family pension. The next morning I was anxious to sketch and explore the area. A hard rain was coming down, and while I love rain, it makes for difficult field art conditions. In spite of the weather, I wandered outside, keeping my eyes open for a sheltered spot to observe the bay of Taiohae. Just across the street, I found the ideal place: a building with a large, covered pavilion. I asked the boy under its cover if I could sketch there. "Sure," he nonchalantly replied. As I began to draw, other young folk arrived. Curious, they approached me to chat and see my work. As we exchanged stories, I learned that they were all counselors preparing for their work with a children's day camp. One lovely girl named Maite looked at me with a thoughtful expression on her face. "You should come stay with my family in another valley, Taipivai," she told me. "It's really beautiful there. My mom will pick me up tonight. I'll call and make sure it's ok if you come." "Wow," I responded. That sounds wonderful."

My art had immediately made the very connections I had hoped for.

Living with Maite's family in Taipivai opened my eyes up to the rhythms that lie beneath the daily routines. Learning Marquisian and through my sketches, I became aware of the local stories and significance of

certain names. I discovered that Taipivai has "la source," one of the only clean fresh water springs on the island. Exploring the region with my new friends, I felt their intimacy with the landscape: relatives buried just up the hill, horses bathed in the river, the accessibility of food from the land and from the water, and the strong sense of community and pride of their Marquisian identity.

Leaving Taipivai and boat hopping around other islands, my art initiated more dialogues and connections with people. Talking with fisherman, living on a ten meter sailboat for a week, and learning how to fish and prepare food from the islands, I felt the rhythms that underlie peoples' daily lives. Once I was sitting on a rock contemplating the ocean once when a man strolling by asked me, "What does the ocean tell you?" As he walked off, I reflected. The ocean reminds me of the greater rhythms of our planet: the waters that flow, the breath of the wind, the push and pull of the tides... the forces that can render our efforts and strengths insignificant. It's a beat, a pulse... it smooths rough edges and clears my mind.

From the islands to traveling through Asia to Tibet, I have felt and seen my art change. In the islands, rich with detail and deep colors, I often sought detail and precision. This may reflect the Marquisian tradition of pattern, repetition, and detail within their art. Geometric patterns of tattoo and many wood and bone carvings are based on those of the traditional tiki. I also find their designs reflected in the patterns of nature: the simple repetition of palm fronds, ferns, banana trees, the noni fruit, fish scales, etc... Other art forms are also completely based on the natural resources: shell necklaces, house walls woven from palm fronds, flower leis and other adornments, monoi oil (coconut based and scented with any number of flowers or fragrant woods, used for everything from hair and body oil, bug repellent, and sun screen). The details and richness of nature are reflected and found in everything.

I was dealt a blow of culture shock as I left the french speaking islands for the densely populated, concrete and neon-lit urban jungle of Tokyo, Japan. It made me appreciate all the more the richness of color and nature that I experienced in the South Pacific. Meeting with my brush-maker friend, Sakuma-san, for the first time in nearly eight years, was a significant experience. He, his wife, and another brush-maker friend Owada-san, not only critiqued my work from the Marqueses Islands, but gave me more than \$400 worth of brushes and paints. They declared that I would need them around the world and needed to explore their different techniques. To feel such support and friendship is both inspiring and affirming. "You know," Owada-san told me, "you need to do at least 10,000 drawings and paintings before you can even begin to master your work." I remind myself of this when I sometimes feel unsatisfied or frustrated with a piece of work. Everything is simply part of the process of learning. I left Japan feeling loved and ready to push my art in new directions.

In Tibet, my art styles and techniques loosened up. While due in part to my gained confidence the islands and Japan, it also began reflect the rugged, open space of the high, Tibetan plateau (and was probably initially influenced by my altitude induced light-headedness). While the art here is also very ornate and the colors rich as with the islands, it is a contrast to the simple and bleached colors of the open landscape. I notice this in particular whenever I enter a dimly candle-lit monastery and remark the vivid colors of the paintings, woodwork, and buddha statues veiled by shadows. My senses always take a few moments to adjust to the change in environment from the bright outdoors.

One locale, Lake Namsto, was particularly remarkable to me. Sketching, I noticed that the colors and tones were simply the complimentary bleached orange-browns of the ground and the blue sky and water. The environment is incredibly open and stark, comprised of the huge, salty lake and plains cradled by distant mountains. While working, I reacted to the space (and the cold wind blowing across the open land, burning my cheeks- "atchooo..." -cold in Tibetan) with a combination of free and gestural drawings and minimalist watercolors. The sky in particular moved me: it was continually and dramatically changing, a contrast to the simple and often abstracted terrain. I find I react to vast space with a sense of freedom

yet vulnerability. The Tibetans whom I met out there would often sing and whistle, their cries clearly carried by the wind over the open space. Lake Namsto was one of the most intense environments I have ever experienced and my art evolved in response to it.

Sometimes I wonder how my drawings would be different if there were not always the eyes of strangers (sometimes few, sometimes MANY) upon me. It can take courage to experiment when everyone sees the process.

Touchstones

I think about the idea of touchstones frequently as I reflect on ties to the land. What elements define and identify us? What do we rely on as a piece of our identity? Example: with mountains, I think of Mt. Rainier, Mt. Kailash and Everest, and Mt. Fuji. Also, how do perceptions and ideas define a place? The idea of paradise and the romance of the High Tibetan Plateau... We are shaped by the land and we shape the land.

In the Marquesas Islands, people are proud of their heritage, language, and land (of what knowledge survived the anvil of colonialism). Names are important: they may signify royal heritage, historical ties to land, and may be appropriate for only certain people or locales. (Names- what's in a name? Recognition, understanding, identity, comprehension: I have been trying to learn as many names as possible. The effort has helped both my Marquisian and Tibetan language skills.) Stories provide a touchstone to the land. In Taipivai, I learned the story of Koeenui and Koeiti, the two large eels that used live in river. Jewelry- many men wear large, wild pig teeth necklaces, a fierce, warrior image that connects with their warrior heritage. Dance and song, again a touchstone to heritage that both energizes and inspires people. The innumerable old "pae pae" (house platforms and sacred site) also serve to remind the people of their past, despite however many stories and traditions may have been lost under colonialism. For festivals, many sites are renovated to be used once again as gathering sites.

In Tibet, I was immediately confronted by the incredible religious faith of the Tibetan people. My first day here I walked around the Jokhang temple and, tired and light-headed, was overwhelmed by the site of prostrating pilgrims, prayer wheels, and market activity. There seem to be countless religious touchstones here, intimately connected to the land. Sacred stones, sacred mountains, the ritual of circumambulation, sacred paintings and images... I have simply been trying to immerse myself in it and learn as much as possible. I have also remarked elements that identify people such as their adornments and tools: The red tasseled rope wrapped around the hair of "Dropkas," the 108 braids and extensive jewelry of the Amdo women, the striped cloth that adorns the front of married women's skirts, the "sora"- a curved knife used for harvesting barley, "groto"- the braided yak hair sling shot used for herding animals (yak, zno- 1/2yak and 1/2 cow, cows, sheep, and goats), the "chadon"- the barrel/press used to make butter tea, and "domo"- a larger version of the chadon used to churn butter...

Ties to the Land: Ties to the Yak: while living in the small village of Hepu I was exposed directly to the importance of the yak (and other animals-but in particular the yak). From food to shelter, clothing, blankets, and transportation, the yak is invaluable to the nomadic life. Traditional painting also uses yak glue to mix with the ground mineral pigments. Monasteries also used to use yak butter to burn with their candles, but after a difficult winter a few years ago wiped out nearly 40% of the yak population, they now use ghee imported from Nepal.

Other Artists

It has been a pleasure to meet with other artists and see the variety of work. I find similarities in some of the Marquisian and Tibetan work. With some carvings and paintings (in particular the religious Tibetan

paintings) there is no artistic freedom. The artists adhere to a model of traditional patterns and designs. Other modern artists reference traditions while commenting on modern times. A gallery I recently visited in Lhasa, the Gedunchoephel Artists' Guild, has work by an artist named Gade that I find particularly moving. He uses images of Buddha superimposed and layered over newspaper clippings and photographs that refer to political events.

I have also met a number of foreign artists. Last week I met the Slovenian photographer Matjaz Krivic (www.krivic.com). He has been working lately with a beautiful, large, panoramic format. This wide angle format is effective in capturing elements of the stark space that I often react to in remote regions and we discussed how it affects others as well.

There is so much more and I am just beginning to process everything. My experiences have been incredible and I have grown in so many directions. I feel incredibly fortunate to have the opportunity to pursue my adventures.

Thank you again for your support!
Best, Maria