

## Quarterly Report II: Maria Coryell-Martin

*Ties to the Land: Exploring Remote Regions through Art*

These past three months have brought me to a number of extremely different and environments, involving some of the most challenging travel conditions I have experienced. Beginning in October I left Lhasa for three weeks of bouncing around in a 4x4, forging out to the far corners of Western Tibet where I encountered some of the most rugged and vast country I have ever seen. Returning to Lhasa, I recuperated and relaxed before leaving Tibet proper to explore a region of cultural Tibet known as Amdo, located in the western regions of Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan province. Amdo opened my eyes to the range of Tibetan culture as well as to some major inconsistencies regarding the Chinese treatment of Tibetans. Leaving Amdo, I traveled overland back to Beijing where I did my best to rest and prepare for transplanting myself to West Africa. I have spent the last month in Mali, adjusting to the heat, dust, languages, and rhythms of life here. Based out of Bamako, I have made a number of small trips to outlying towns while also preparing for travel up north and to some music festivals. My travels have been far ranging and rewarding, but I have also learned to remind myself of the necessity for down-time to recharge!

### **Western Tibet**

I left Lhasa for a three week trip by 4x4 to the far corners of Tibet to experience the high desert, salt lakes, ancient ruined kingdoms, the sacred Mt. Kailash, Mt. Everest, and to explore monasteries throughout. In Western Tibet, I became truly aware as to the extent that the country is a high altitude desert. I was without trees for weeks, among only snow dusted sand dunes and the land stretching across the long horizon line, (broken at times only by dramatic dry mountains, cliffs, and occasional towns). I was struck by the sense of antiquity that I felt all around. First, there was a sense of timelessness in the windswept high plains, punctuated by the bluest lakes I have ever seen. Then out at the far western frontier where the desert cliffs were sculpted and carved by waters long gone.

Walking the kora around Mt. Kailash was a profound experience. People have been walking around it for thousands of years and one of its four faces is scarred with a gouge that is purported to be the origin of the swastika and the prevalence of Buddhism in Tibet. The ascent of the 5,640m pass Droma-la was also one of the most challenging mountain experiences I have had. The high altitude and snowy environment dictated a slow pace of step, breathe, step, step, breathe... rest, step, breathe.... It's worth noting however, that the Tibetans, young and old alike, wearing worn canvas shoes would sashay past me with a cheerful hello as they completed the kora in a fraction of the time I took.

### **Amdo**

My trip overland from Xining to Chengdu through Amdo revealed to me a Tibetan culture that felt much less threatened than that of Tibet proper. Monasteries were often in fantastic shape and I almost cried the first time I saw photographs of the 14th Dalai Lama openly displayed. The art also grew more rich and varied (the paintings in particular) as they reflected the variety of cultural influences and exchanges that have occurred.

A note on HATS: I love hats and saw some of the most wonderful hats while out and about in Tibet. I gave in and bought a fox hair one which I wore almost continually for weeks to keep warm. Embroidered and wearable in many styles, they signify certain places and pride. I was delighted to learn to identify people by their hats and enjoyed the responses people gave me to my own.

I came to China and Tibet with no grasp of the language and just an inkling of the religion and culture. By the end of my stay, my Tibetan was basically conversational and I felt familiar and comfortable with the

surroundings and religion. When I first arrived in Lhasa, I remember trying to process the impressive religious faith. I felt like an outsider as I understood so little of the rituals and meanings. At some point though, I left the role of an observer and became a participant, discovering that I could be involved with my own sense of spirituality. From circumambulations to throwing "loon-ta" into the air from high mountains to the giving of "kata" (prayer scarves), the experience and religious elements became much more personal. I remember the first time I tied one of my own kata to a collection up high on mountain pass. The wind was roaring and the scarves whipping in the wind. I left the 4x4 and, leaning into the wind, strode out to the point. I tied my kata on with the others, thinking my own prayer for humanity, and watched it for a moment as it joined the hundreds of other kata and prayer flags, straining with the wind. As I returned to the car, I felt a sense of contentment in knowing that although I was leaving, my kata and prayer would remain, the prayers carried by the wind.

Feeling and seeing the seasons change from summer to fall to winter was also a significant part of my experience. The morning rains ceased, the air grew crisp and cold, and finally there was the occasional snow. As the barley harvest was completed in the fall, the fields grew barren and people flocked to Lhasa, colorful in their layered outfits protecting them against the elements. Coming down off the plateau in November not only brought me down from altitude, but also made me feel as if I was going back in time as the ground grew greener, barren trees appeared, and then the colors of fall leaves also emerged. Shortly thereafter, though, everything was hidden in a shroud of smog and pollution of cities.

#### **IV Mali**

In Mali, the environment again dictated a slow pace, although here it's the heat. Coming from China to Africa was a big change and I took some time to rest, reflect, and habituate myself to the different languages and people. Also, I have finally articulated why in part I am so attracted to certain environments. Too much around me is overwhelming; I like engaging with people and things around me too much. When my environment limits and permits certain activities, I can reach a higher level of immersion and concentration, delving more thoroughly into both my environment and myself. Vast spaces quiet and free my mind. Cities, with their crowds, traffic, and fast pace tucker me out.

I spent the month of December making small trips out of Bamako and developing contacts and friends to travel up north with the Tuareg.

#### **V Art**

My art has been growing and evolving. I've been trying to experiment with different styles and materials. I have amassed a significant collection to share with folks which continually helps me bridge language barriers. While sending originals to the States, I have kept photo records of my favorite pieces which I keep with me as a record of my work and travels. In Tibet it was particularly poignant to share drawings of sacred places, mountains, monasteries, and special locales. The art of Tibet was also beautiful, founded in functionality and religion, reinforcing identity. Considering religion and art, I thought about art and meditation. In monasteries, I was often overwhelmed by the sheer number of images repeated, both in paintings and lavish sculptures. The large stupa of Gyantse in Tibet with 9 stories and dozens of rooms was particularly powerful. As I slowly circumambulated each story, stopping in each room, I felt a sense of calm through the repetition and steady pace.

Here in Mali, my work has continued to help me learn languages, make friends, and feel respected by the communities I visit. The most poignant image I have created thus far was at the village of Siby, an hour's drive from Bamako. I reconstituted a damaged photograph of a deceased elder, Kaminakan Camara, who was a significant village chief.

While the photo was missing an eye and his forehead, I did my best to draw it. People loved it. "There are so many relatives who cannot remember his face," they told me. "Now they will have the chance to see it once again." It was meaningful for me to give something back to the village that was so personal.

From both Tibet and Mali, I have grown to appreciate making the most out of materials available. Pigments that come from the earth and environment: ground stones, yak butter sculptures, earth dyes... I have been inspired to paint and draw more with found objects and to experiment with different materials. vivid pigments that come from the earth- what a process!

In my last report, I raised the idea of touchstones: elements that define us and create our identity along with pride in who we are. Touchstones lend themselves to pride in who we are and where we come from. A couple of weeks ago, I was waxing philosophic with a friend of mine. "What are you afraid of?" I asked him. Immediately he replied, "Honte. J'ai peur d'honte." Shame. He is afraid of shame. We discussed it further and I found myself agreeing with him. Shame is a terrible emotion: to be ashamed of yourself, ashamed of your identity, or ashamed of your country. Pride and dignity are antidotes to shame and touchstones are fundamental to this, being elements that reinforce our identity and sense of self.

This experience continues to be incredible. As always, thank you for your support.