December 8, 2009

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT GRANT REPORT
Submitted by Holly Tempo, Associate Professor of Painting
Fine Arts Department

Funded Project: Attendance at the Can Serrat Artist Residency Program in El Bruc, Spain, October 1-31, 2009 to explore the relationship between color and dystopia and create an artist book.

I have always wanted to visit Spain, and finally got an opportunity to do so in October. I took a month off from teaching and spent time at the Masia Can Serrat, a creative enclave established by 12 Norwegian artists some 20 years ago. Can Serrat is located in the small town of El Bruc and is 45 minutes by bus from Barcelona.

I went to Spain to work on an artist book about color and dystopia. A dystopia is defined as an undesirable society where the quality of life is both defined and compromised by oppression, poverty, violence, and disease, resulting in unhappiness, suffering and pain. A dystopic society may also be a society that self-identifies as a utopia, but suffers from one fatal flaw.

I went to Can Serrat, expecting to intellectually consider unhappiness while living and working in a pastoral setting with other creative people. What I found when I arrived was that I was to reside in close proximity to a clique of misanthropes; and, by default, experience dystopic living first-hand. As the saying goes: Be careful what you go looking for as you may find it...

Raging alcoholism was the fatal flaw that transformed the Masia Can Serrat from a lovely, rambling farmhouse with cheerful hosts into a labyrinth of horrors populated by ghouls and monsters than moaned in the night. Fortunately, there were several other artists at the residency that became valued friends and colleagues, including a German photographer, three Americans (two painters and a mixed media artist) and a Norwegian writer. We looked to each other for support during the hard times and enjoyed many wonderful exchanges when things were calm.

I was unable to work on my original project while there and instead retreated into sending missives about my experiences to my students, family and friends. I also painted, gleaning sustenance and meaning from the colors of Spain. Using the language of abstraction and the
materiality of paint, I created seven canvases that tell color stories about the landscape, street life, fashion—anything that imparts significance to personal experience within a globalized context. These paintings were exhibited in Spain as part of a group show of residency artists entitled 5: Five-Cinco-Cinc (see attached show flyer).

Now that I have successfully quit the chaos of the residency, and having amassed quite a bit of personal experience and creative material, I can finish the book—albeit, with caution and a profound clarity about my subject matter. A copy will be gifted to the Otis Library in January 2010. The attached “Notes from Spain” are both research notes and testimonials; and are illustrated with photographs.

**Afterward:** This residency experience has resulted in a number of activities upon my return to the US. They are as follows:

1. Paintings created in Spain were presented to the public during the Third Annual Inglewood Artwalk on November 14 and 15. A great deal of enthusiasm about the paintings and pending artist book was expressed by visitors during this event.
2. I had a special meeting on November 17 with Fine Arts Seniors interested in travel and residency programs. I spoke to them about my experiences (both positive and negative) and gave them advice and information on how to research travel opportunities for artists.
3. Based on my research about and experiences dealing with dystopia, I gave the students in the course I am teaching this fall, Maximalism: Seeking Truth in Embellishment, a final project where they were asked to explore the relationship between maximalism and dystopia. The project was presented as an exhibition, CIPHER, at Chuco’s, a social justice center for youth (see attached statement).
4. I plan to update my e-portfolio on O-Space with images of work created at the residency program.

I would like to thank the Faculty Development Committee for supporting this activity. Even with the challenges, it was a fruitful experience that has invigorated both my studio practice and teaching.
5 five
cinco cinc
dan callis
amy guion clay
erik gonzales
holly tempo
katharina zeitler

ajuntament del bruc
el bruc, barcelona

viernes:
30 de octubre, 2009
17:00-19:00 hrs
NOTES FROM SPAIN

2009-10-07

The day is growing cool with a hint that rain is to come. The bursting foliage has softened a bit as mist makes a mid-morning visit. The birds have subdued their riot of song and the artists are working. There are plein-air painters in the courtyard and on the lawn, dreaming the landscape. I’ve been told that they are hobbyists, Norwegian “ladies who lunch” and go on vacation to paint: Not serious like the rest of us. They spend all day painting, though…

My hands are covered with gesso. It feels good to be messy. The studio is clean and bright with many windows, brick floors and wooden-beamed ceilings. A dead dragonfly rests in the corner like a small green phoenix. It is serene here, full. I feel hopeful about the new work that is to come; carefully careening, as I work, around the doubt that comes from having gone too long without creating. I recite my daily mantra: It will come. It will come. Work, think, look. Work, think, look. It will come.

§

Yesterday I was in Barcelona with Katharina, my new friend from Berlin. We bought art supplies, maps and cheap jewelry. We wandered through the narrow streets with tall buildings and graffiti-painted doors of the gothic quarter. Only the doors of buildings bear the marks of youth-anarchists-vandals-artists. They are like mouths on the blank faces of long-suffering wives, that one day fly open and spew curses, little truths, and flecks of spittle in the faces of their flabbergasted husbands and passersby. No one ever imagines their distress—not even the workman who carefully paints out the graffiti on the walls and leaves only the doors to tell the story.

Graffiti in Barcelona

§

The feet record my journey. Each blister is a capsule of the days’ events; the torn toenail, an old flyer from a dance party.

§

Color story: dusty brown, blue-violet, chartreuse, scarlet, tangerine, bright white, blue-black, lime.
There has been a lot of drama the past few days between the Norwegian plein-air group and the other artists here. The Norwegians annoy because they are homogenous and inconsiderate as a group. They are a noisy, presumptuous tribe led by the artist, Markus. We have been told that Markus’s work is the favorite of the Queen of Norway. With Buddy Holly eyeglasses, black tee, slim jeans, and close-cropped silver hair, he looks like an aging hipster. From viewing a catalog of his work, I see that he is a proficient painter and a less interesting performance artist. Not brilliant, not terrible.

Two of the Norwegian women seem very nice, so I tend to interact with them the most and avoid the less friendly, more imperious ones. Another Norwegian, Björnar, one of the regular resident artists and a writer, is very sweet. He has a great laugh that surprises because it bursts out from behind such a calm demeanor. Björnar is very self-contained and thoughtful, but also gregarious—a nice combination.

The other artists here, dismiss the Norwegians as being not really artists; and, thus, are duly offended by their lack of consciousness about studio protocol. I’ve been told about unpleasant interactions and creative violations. Fortunately I’ve managed to avoid most of this stuff. Maybe I have better boundaries. Maybe it’s because my studio is upstairs and away from most of the action. Who knows?

I think that it reached a boiling point two nights ago when Markus and his friend Gundtorm (phonetic spelling, means snake man in Norwegian; I call him “worm boy”) were drinking, getting high and making fun of Erik (an American artist from Phoenix). I didn’t witness this but it all sounded very juvenile—especially for men in their 30s and 40s. Today though, the Norwegians were doing stretching exercises in the morning and have been very well-behaved. Maybe they needed to get the kinks out… I also saw just now that Markus and Erik are having a talk, moderated by the residency manager: a lasagna summit of sorts (that was lunch today).

§

I visited Yamandu Canosa’s studio yesterday. Yamandu was the 2006 Artist-in-Residence at Otis. He is originally from Uruguay, but lives in Barcelona. We talked and he made me a nice lunch, taking care to add garlic and vegetable broth to help combat my stomach distress (Not quite used to those Spanish microbes. Feisty little devils). Yamandu has a great voice. It starts soft, but can erupt in a moment to a deep cadence; rolling out of his stomach and lungs like a wave that suddenly crashes on rocks. I can feel it in my toes when he speaks.
We also watched the NASA mission to the moon in real time on his computer. I gather that they launched an empty missile to the lunar surface for some kind of research project. Happily they nixed a previous plan to send up a fully-loaded nuclear weapon. Sometimes I wonder how much of this is scientifically legitimate and how much is about boys who like to watch things blow up. If there is a man in the moon, he must be very annoyed.

I also learned while at Yamandu’s studio that President Obama was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. And just when I was ready to write off the Norwegians!

§

**Color story:** ochre, gray-green, cream, pink, yellow, brick, bright green, eggplant, dark gray, maroon.
In a fog of creation the last couple of days. Working, thinking, looking… Dusky paintings: espresso ground with periwinkle drips and pigeon gray bands. Contemplating chartreuse. Color pulses through the paintings, bringing them into this world. I can’t live without it.

Being here reminds me of being in grad school, but without the seminars and critiques. Everyone is working. We lead parallel lives in private spaces, convening in the afternoon for the main meal and again at twilight when one by one we drift out for food, coffee, wine, conversation. Then we drift back into our studios or huddle in small groups that convulse with laughter and music and the occasional pop of a cork.

In the mirror a new face looks back at me, occupying the space where the old one used to hover. She has brown eyes and wears a head scarf. She looks curious, alert, calm, happy. Hello.
I spent the afternoon with Antoni Gaudí yesterday: Casa Batlló and Casa Milà. I paid the €16.50 to visit the interior of Batlló. What a labyrinth of undulations, shimmers and soft recesses! It is both a home and a womb.

I want to make a pilgrimage to the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid to see Guernica by Picasso; and to the Prado for Velasquez, but money is tight. How to make it happen…

Color story: dove gray, lavender, sky blue, cobalt, gold, burnt umber, leaf green, white, amber, bronze, yellow.
On Friday while it rained outside, I visited the Museo D’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). Singing from one wall was a blue Clyford Stil; murmuring like a shadow of a shadow from another, a black Ad Reinhardt. Antoni Tapies’ earthy whispers greeted me in yet another room as did the exclamations and rolling purrs of Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell. I witnessed with surprise the rumbling pink destruction of bulldozers moving rocks in a video of the making of Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty. And most startling was footage of Gordon Matta-Clark’s Sisyphean efforts to cut a house in two in Splitting.

On another floor, the exhibition Modernologies interrogated, discoursed, postulated, examined, reified, appropriated, codified and otherwise tried to squeeze every last drop out of the turnip of Modernism; and, in doing so, bled dry its Post-Modern self. Is curator Sabine Breitwieser making canonical room for the next best thing? I wonder.

§

I had an interview with a vampire on Saturday night. Thorlief, one of the owners of Can Serrat, dropped heavily onto the bench next to me and with wine-stained lips asked if I had ever stolen anything. “?” I said. “Have you ever stolen anything—except from your parents that is. Everyone steals from their parents.” To which I replied: “I don’t steal; and never from my parents as my family was poor.” So began a verbal exchange in which “The Ghoul” as I call him, alternately tried to impress, seduce, bully and finally demean. And he accomplished his goals, I think—albeit if only with himself...

The Ghoul (TG): What color is the sky?  
Moi (HT): Indigo.  
TG: Pause. Smile. What is 24 multiplied four times?  
HT: 108—I mean 96.  
TG: Ahhhh. I see you are a very intelligent woman. You see that one (nodding towards Vilde, another one of the owners), She is stupid. I can say she is stupid and she will agree with me. Hey Vilde! Are you not stupid?  
Vilde (V): Yes I am stupid and it’s great!  

I look at him and then at her and frown.

TG: You are a stupid, cheap whore—eh, Vilde?  
V: Yes I am.  
HT: Pause and then to TG. I will have a special art project while at Can Serrat. I will build a large cage. Place you in it, and give her (nodding to V) the key.

I turn my back on him and start speaking to someone else. He lurches up and staggers away, looking for fresh meat. I try to avoid him the next day and he leaves finally on Monday; but not without cornering me by the kitchen sink to
say “Madam, I vish to apologize. I have been told that I behaved very badly last night—but I had fun.” I thank him for apologizing and walk away, secretly *vishing* that I had some sage to burn.

Old photos of the 12 owners of Can Serrat when they were young, beautiful and happy…

§

There was danger in the house last night. Vilde and her boyfriend tumbled into the kitchen while some of us where talking about Existentialism and Francis Bacon. They were stumblebum and the man had baleful eyes. I got up and walked out. Many hours later, I heard screaming from the roof. One of the artists came to my door and said that the boyfriend had hit Vilde and punched Vibeke (yet another owner of the property. There are 12 in all.) and had hidden somewhere in the house, before appearing on the roof and moaning like a lunatic. The police were called. There were tears, curses and jangled nerves. The residency manager was told by one of the artists that if the boyfriend returned or Vilde stayed we would all leave. We all sat together for a bit and talked about our options, if the situation was not resolved. Today we are still here. The boyfriend is in a Spanish jail, awaiting a court appearance and then deportation to Poland, his home country. Vilde moved out. It rained all day and the electricity and water went out. I could really use some sage. Having none, I paint a bit, nap, read, write, nap, and write some more.

One of the woman artists, comes to my room in tears; asking if I can bring her a plate of food at mealtime. The violence in the night has brought up memories of
having been battered, much like the storm has forced brown water from the faucets. She does not want to be around the others. We sit and talk. I give her a tissue, wondering what foul water will seep out of my memories. In a while, I bring her a tray of food. She thanks me with red eyes.

§

Berlin in five days or less: Helmut Newton, Nan Goldin, Robert Frank; apfel scharle (apple juice and selzer water—my new favorite drink), coffee, soup and strudel; gray skies, wind chill and cold ears; remnants of the Wall; riding the metro; the Reichstrag and Brandenburg Gate; strong-jawed, steely-eyed men and very tall women; great thrift shops; watching the new series Mad Men with my friend James in his fabulous apartment; kunst, kunst, kunst!

Color Story: Burgundy, gray, ice blue, rust, orange, purple, soft pink, black.
CIPHER

The genesis for this show was the final project assigned to students in Maximalism: Seeking Truth in Embellishment, an elective course that I am teaching this fall at Otis College of Art and Design. Maximalism is an aesthetic approach and contemporary movement that attempts to decriminalize ornament & reflects the diversity of our Post-modern experience. It is characterized as being bold, graphic, media-conscious, fantastical, spectacular, multi-layered, visceral, and intense. Maximalist works can range from the decorative and ghetto-fabulous paintings of Kehinde Wiley to the dizzying novels of John Barth and the absurd and complex musical compositions of Frank Zappa.

While in the process of searching for a space to have this show, Chuco’s staff Gloria Alvarez visited my studio during the Inglewood Artwalk in November. During the course of our conversation, I learned that she worked at Chuco’s where there was exhibition space available. Realizing that fate had intervened in favor of my class, I jumped at the chance to exhibit my student’s work there. Gloria hooked me up with Kruti Parekh, the center’s director; and after showing my students the space, they quickly agreed that this was the place, in fact the only place, to have our show.

For this project, sited as it is at Chuco’s, an organization dedicated to providing social justice for youth as well as a safe place for young people to take classes and make art, Otis students were asked to address the notion of dystopic excess in an artwork. A dystopia is defined as an undesirable society where the quality of life is both defined and compromised by oppression, poverty, violence, and disease, resulting in unhappiness, suffering and pain—much like the mean streets many of the kids who come to Chuco’s navigate daily. In the works on exhibit, my students explored the relationship between maximalism and dystopia. They rose to the challenge, generating beautiful and compelling works, including paintings, photographs, prints, sculpture and video. Otis student artists include Maricela Avina, Rebecca Edwards, Paul Jebian, Anastacia Kayne, Alexandra Kornblum, Caroline Lee, Soo Lim, Sarah Pankow, Amanda Prather, Jaynie Sanchez, Melba Saunders, Hye Joo Son, Vickie Thomas and Albert Valdez.

The show’s title, in hip-hop parlance, refers to an event where artists go one at a time displaying their talent in an unbroken circle. In mainstream English, it also refers to a secret code. Cipher gives a nod to the urban culture which has shaped so many lives globally and the crucial role that hip-hop has played in allowing artists of color to respond to the oppressive practices, environments, and belief systems that still plague society today. Many thanks to Chuco’s staff and volunteers who made this exhibition possible.

Peace out,

Holly Tempo, Associate Professor of Painting
School of Fine Arts
Otis College of Art and Design

December 7, 2009