

Autobiography: Sylvia Charczuk

My twenties have been marked by a number of journeys, not only stretching across geographical planes, but ideological, spiritual, and educational ones as well. In 1997, and at the age of 22, I spent 6 months in Tabasco, Mexico. This trip was propelled by the completion of my undergraduate training in Visual Arts at York University. To me, this was not simply closure, but rather a point of departure into my own self-discovery in context of the world at large.

In Mexico, I learned to navigate myself in a different cultural plane, immersing myself in the language and local customs. I taught English for a company called PEMEX Petroleum Company, and consequently found myself entrenched within an economic and political battle between the global interests of a powerful corporation, and the local interests of a local village. My stay was set by political strife, guerrilla warfare, road brigades, violence, and escalating economic hardship within this local community. This provided a far greater education than formal postsecondary training could ever offer, as I, for the first time, became deeply conscious of the struggles within the developing world. Outside of my employment, I made it my mission to teach English to local children and adults in Tabasco, in exchange for the simple purity of cultural exchange itself.

Because of the language barrier, and my only budding grasp of the Spanish language, the use of art revealed itself as a primordial and universal means of communication. Bridges and simple joy emerged from the co-creation of pieces of art between the villagers and myself, even if merely through sketches of nouns we could not otherwise express through language. By sharing my own love of visual art, whether from the simple sketches in my scrapbook, or the more serious pieces I worked on during my

stay, I was able to respectfully communicate my own appreciation for the culture and people, in a way that superseded the harsh circumstances that polarized us otherwise.

Upon returning to Toronto, I embarked on another two month journey to Indonesia and Thailand, where I further developed my passion for art, the creative expressions of local cultures, and the pursuit of social justice within the developing world—ironically a world far more developed than the very cultures that deem it ‘developing’. The beauty of Thai people and culture and the vibrant colours that illuminated the magnificence of this land inspired me in ways that I never anticipated. My experience of this culture communicated the purest form of artistic expression, never before captured by formal art theory, and classroom learning. The artistic expressions within my trip to Thailand healed me of my early adulthood angst, unleashing a desire to spread peace and knowledge around the world.

Once in Indonesia, the many rituals and ceremonies that envelope the people’s lives made a big impression on me. I felt compelled to join in and experience the beauty and vibrancy of the traditional clothing, incense infused flower and rice offerings to Gods, and worship rituals and chants that infiltrated everything from the sky to my very lungs. During one Cremation Ceremony, I found myself sitting on a tombstone from which only one of hundreds of bodies was excavated, then washed in the sea, rolled in cloth into a corn-like shape, and finally tossed into a huge papier-mâché cow, and burned in the night, lighting up the entire sky with flying stars of ash. The fiber of this magnificent culture is in itself the very brush that paints its reality. Despite warfare, bombings, revolutions and political strife coated with severe natural disasters, the spirit of the people never dulls. Knowing that art imitates life and life imitates art is one thing,

but being it and living it with ones whole being is quite another. Indonesia reassembled my heart, and inspired in me an inner textile of textures and colors.

My latest move to Tokyo, Japan in early 2001, proved to be the holster for all my experiences, thus far. From a cultural standpoint, it was the exact reverse of the west. Western and Eastern behaviors, mentality, traditions, morals, ethics and beliefs are virtually incomparable. Parts of my Self blossomed in ways I had never envisioned. Despite the challenges of the first year, I found salvation in painting women of the world. Tokyo loosened its grip on me by the second year, and I found myself researching South East Asia, primarily Laos. At this time, I also began teaching art to Japanese youth in my apartment studio. We connected on a plane that transcended limitations of speech. Using the elements and principles of art, I was able to reach the students psyche and help them execute work that spoke volumes without the need for language. Aside from full time work, I found myself engulfed in teaching art, painting, learning Reiki from the Usui lineage, and developing a fascination with Laos.

In the summer of 2003, I executed a plan to travel to Laos and find a village that could use my help. Lao PDR is a communist country hamstrung by bureaucracy. By going there by myself, I was challenging the modus operandi of the International Institutions and Organizations and Lao officials who had a vested interest in preserving existing methods of aid distribution. During my first few days there, I met a young woman who spoke some English and offered to help me. We wrote out a letter in Lao describing my offer to help with whatever disadvantages they faced. Mainly, concentrating on education and health. The letter states that I would like to speak to the chief and organize a way to help the village while maintaining its self-sustainability. I

kept the letter in my 20kg backpack, full of educational toys, school supplies and medical supplies from Tokyo until it was time to share it.

I stumbled upon many villages that were all in desperate need of help, but the village of Ban Kiukacham had so many children that collectively surrounded me and perhaps intrinsically knew I had a purpose beyond passing through. I sat down, ate some curry, played with the children and saw a woman smiling and looking at me, as if waiting to see what I would do next. I handed her my letter, and as she read it with tears in her eyes, she ran off and minutes later came back with the chief of the village. At this point, several village leaders amalgamated around the letter, and as we all smiled with teary eyes, we knew it was just the beginning.

I returned to Tokyo with a lighter bag, but a head full of ideas as to how to deliver this project to people who may want to help and join in a worthy cause. As all my friends were artists and poets mainly, and I had previously emceed several poetry readings in various galleries and venues, I thought of uniting these elements together. I put together a website with information on Laos, the village project outline, and pictures. Then, I organized an art exhibition of my paintings, with a list of poets who would read, and a small auction to raise money for supplies towards the village. I raised \$1000 dollars that night, and that week I went out, bought medical supplies, school supplies, towels and soap, plus many other things, and sent them to the address they gave me, hoping it would reach them.

In the months to follow, I put together other shows with artists, poets, musicians and performers to raise money for the village project. My main objective was to give all the money to the village, and avoid doing as all charities do, which is to diversify the

funds and leave a miniscule percentage for the government to do with as they see fit. Hence, the oppressed see nothing of these “charitable” funds. The shows proved to inspire in people a desire to change the world for the better, one by one, regardless of size.

In June Of 2004, I went back to Ban Kiukacham, this time; I hired a doctor, driver and translator in Vientiane. Upon our arrival, I reintroduced myself, and my comrades. They had remembered me and welcomed us like family. That night, I wrote a speech to present the next morning to the village chiefs, schoolteacher, and other heads of the village. The next morning, the women of the village had built a beautiful Buddhist centerpiece used for ceremonies. They were preparing a ceremony for me to show gratitude for my return and dedication to them. After the introductions and some Lao formalities, I gave my speech. The villagers and I agreed to work together towards sending children from the village to a larger village called Luang Prabang. I created an education program for them to have the opportunity to travel to Canada if they received good grades. The challenge now continues with my move back to Toronto, and the continuation of this project.

Holstered with all these tools of life, I believe the road to self is paved with love, and the scenery is the reality we create. I love bringing art to life and painting my path. I love bringing life to art and watching it unfold. This is the true meaning of healing in my life. Helping people is my vocation, and the exaltation comes from knowing art and healing are one.