

## Laura Cavanagh's Integrative Project Thesis

As is often the case with travel, people look back on their trips through rose-colored glasses, focusing on the positive experiences and forgetting the negative ones. While I too am guilty of coloring my memories of a place and falsely placing every moment in a favorable light, for my integrative project I forced myself to remember both the good and bad times I had in Berlin, Germany. These experiences—sharing a traditional German meal of eggs in a mustard sauce (complete with cheap Prosecco) with my roommate; going to a Columbian restaurant to watch a German *Fußball*, or soccer, game during the World Cup; visiting world-renowned museums on Thursday nights; being sniffed by a homeless man; getting lost on a return walk home from work; running home from a movie in the park through buckets of freezing rain—coalesce to form my own Berlin.

These visual and sensory experiences conjure up a place in my mind that is somewhat of a hybrid of my physical orientation and my mental state of being there. So much of being in Berlin was about orienting myself within the city and navigating where I was going and how I would get there. This in itself brought about varying degrees of disbelief, awe, anxiety and stupor. Using a map as my project format serves as a helpful tool for me to organize this space I have built in my memory. In my map I attempt to reincarnate this memory into elaborate paper forms that occupy a real space.

My Berlin depicts an image of the city that includes tangible city elements, like Berlin's iconographic television tower and its 15<sup>th</sup> century Berlin Cathedral, as well as intangible feelings of awe, bliss, loneliness and anxiety. What began as the desire to create a cute paper map of Berlin, Germany has turned into a more meaningful work that presents my varying emotions while there and how these emotions affected



*my Berlin*: Detail of television tower

my experiences, which in turn shaped the way I now view the city and myself. This work takes the form of a large-scale paper collaged map with found and purchased papers applied both flat to the surface and in ways that are more sculptural.

It is not important that viewers recognize this place as Berlin upon first glance but it is important that viewers are aware that they are looking at a specific place, and connected to that place are my own sensations. To convey some of the aforementioned feelings like disbelief and awe, for example, I use distortion of scale and proportions and have certain elements come away from the surface at varying angles. I also experiment with the way I apply my papers to heighten these sensations.



*my Berlin*: Detail of Berlin Cathedral

The actual cutting of paper is a very meditative process and is a crucial component of my project. Each part of my city takes a long time to make, and because of this, I find myself thinking about my experiences in those specific locations as I'm constructing them. *Der Berliner Dom* is a 15<sup>th</sup>-century cathedral that is located in the middle of Berlin in *der*

*Lustgarten*, an open, garden-like area that serves as a popular hangout for young couples and tourists. *Der Lustgarten* contains a fountain surrounded by perfectly maintained plots of grass, divided by sidewalks and framed by museums—in a word, beautiful. As I was making my paper version of *der Berliner Dom*, which took upwards of 20 hours, I was thinking about this lovely

place and remembering my evenings spent there sketching and people watching, and I came to the realization that serenity is the emotion I associate with this cathedral.

Spending so many hours creating these collages requires tremendous focus. This is an aspect about working with paper I find both challenging and rewarding. I also find the physical cutting of very intricate paper pieces and the working through of mechanics, like the order in which I need to attach certain papers or how to select which glues to use, to be very stimulating. While I was in Berlin I amassed a wide and varied range of papers, including museum literature, receipts, ticket stubs and food wrappers, and I used as many of these papers as possible to create



*my Berlin*: Detail of subway car

example, are made using my old train tickets.

Kaiser's, my neighborhood grocery store, is made out of an empty, bright red potato chip bag that I purchased at the actual store in Berlin. I enjoy these playful connections. In



*my Berlin*: Detail of Kaiser's

areas that lack "authentic" Berlin papers, I am rely on the pattern and how I attach the paper to my surface to evoke more sensory associations.

My city embodies elaborateness reminiscent of former Prussian rulers' affinity for the grand. Berlin, which was the former capital of Prussia, is home to some dazzling examples of architectural grandeur, including the Berlin State Opera, the State Library Berlin, St. Hedwig's

Cathedral and Humboldt University<sup>1</sup>. These buildings exhibit ornamented facades with intricate bas-reliefs, Corinthian columns, detailed window trims and statues that line the perimeter of the buildings' roofs. By drawing this parallel, I hope to make my connection with Berlin even more visually salient and entice people to linger on my map and take in its intricacy.

Berlin is a large city, inhabiting 3.4 million people and covering nearly 900 square kilometers<sup>2</sup>, and as such, I am representing only the sections of the city with which I am most familiar: *Prenzlauer Berg* and *Mitte*. I held an internship in Berlin this past summer and though I had traveled to Europe before, never had I traveled alone, not to mention for three entire months. Prior to my departure I had to find and secure my own living accommodations and make travel arrangements, and once there I had to communicate my needs and navigate the city entirely on my own. As a result, I came away from Berlin endowed with an improved sense of independence, self-fulfillment and most importantly, confidence.



my Berlin: Detail of Marianne

The biggest contributor to these newfound feelings was knowing that I could speak and understand another language not just well enough to survive in that foreign environment but to make jokes with my roommate, Marianne, and order a “luxury Döner Kebab” with the works minus onions and cabbage and a Beck’s to go with it. Though small, these instances are, to me, immensely gratifying and are anything but insignificant.

Aside from my work’s conceptual content—that is, the moods I am trying to express and my predilection towards certain areas and experiences—are its formal qualities. I explore the relationship of forms and how they interact with each other in a way that is dynamic and engaging. In past oil painting classes I acquired a greater sensitivity to shape, color and scale,

<sup>1</sup> "Frederick II of Prussia." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. Web. 07 Jan. 2011. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick\\_II\\_of\\_Prussia#Architecture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_II_of_Prussia#Architecture)>.

<sup>2</sup> "Berlin." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. Web. 07 Jan. 2011. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin>>.

and by working through my project I gained a greater understanding of these formal properties to ensure they be a component of my final product.

It is important and relevant to list below some artists whose work inspires me. The first of these artists is painter, Elizabeth Murray. I am an admirer of her work because she creates seemingly unrelated shapes in a wide array of colors to cohabitate a space. She does this through interaction, with each shape character somehow communicating with its neighbor. This playfulness is something I wholeheartedly respond to, not to mention it appeals to my own artistic aesthetic. Her use of negative space is also engaging because it becomes just the opposite: a *positive* component of the composition.



Murray, Elizabeth. *Bop*. 2003. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

The work of Romare Bearden has also greatly influenced my own. Bearden works with cut paper collage as a vehicle to reflect upon his identity as an African American. Bearden has created many large-scale murals of urban cityscapes, which are rich visual source material for my



Bearden, Romare. *The Block*. Detail. 1971. Cut and pasted printed, colored and metallic papers, photostats, pencil, ink, marker, gouache, watercolor, and pen and ink on Masonite. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

own project. One particularly inspiring work of Bearden's is his 1971 cityscape mural, *The Block*, which depicts Harlem<sup>3</sup>. The concept of this work is similar to my own, and I have been continually referring to it, in particular, because *The Block* is an example of pattern and color successfully working together in one space to create a kind of dialogue. The bold, solid blocks of color that break up the denser brick areas speak with one another because of their proximity while also providing the composition with visual balance. The black and white figures also help to decongest the overall saturation of color and texture while presenting a social commentary on race. Additionally, *The Block* captures, or freezes, energy and dynamism into a static space. These are all characteristics I hope my finished work possesses.



Kozloff, Joyce. *China Is Near*. Detail. 2010. Digital inkjet print, graphite, found papers. DC Moore Gallery, New York.

The last artist I would like to mention is Joyce Kozloff. I only recently learned about her work but it is very relevant to my own. Kozloff creates maps that are more implicit in nature than that of my Berlin but she too uses collage as her means of execution. I am drawn to her work because it possesses a graphic-like quality that maintains a sense of elegance. One

particular body of work titled, *China Is Near*, is about a trip to China Kozloff did *not* take. The series consists of lush mixed media maps of China based off of the artist's own photographs taken in Chinatowns throughout the United States<sup>4</sup>.

Aside from looking at the work of others<sup>3</sup>, reflecting on my own past work has also proven fruitful. Looking back has sparked ideas for future projects and has reminded me of the set of high standards to which I constantly hold myself in all my artistic endeavors. Some of

<sup>3</sup> "Romare Bearden: The Block (1978.61.1-6)". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000. <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1978.61.1-6> (October 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Kozloff, Joyce. "China Is Near." Joyce Kozloff. Web. 08 Jan. 2011. <<http://www.joycekozloff.net/>>.

these standards include impeccable craftsmanship and overall quality of execution. I have worked with paper before and because I know what I can achieve—I can cut letters out of paper that are smaller than a thumbtack—I tried to explore other, more sculptural, ways that would challenge me with the medium.

Upon completion of my project, having created paper samples, having sketched, having written down notes of what to incorporate into my map, and having re-read journals I kept while in Berlin, I find it difficult to think about my Berlin as a representation of the city I visited because the image that now exists is not *that* city. It is a newly imagined city based off of the memories I have of my time in Berlin. When I really ask myself the question, *Why Berlin?*, it is because I love what happened to me there. Of course I found awe in the actual appearance of the

city—the fresh produce stands everywhere, the over-abundance of bicyclists, the crowded outdoor cafés, the bold graffiti—but the real reason I cherish Berlin is because my experiences there returned me to the U.S. a changed individual who had lost some of her insecurities and gained some confidence. This



*my Berlin*

project acknowledges this transformation, and it serves as a visual reminder of how Berlin will always mean more to me than the physical attributes that adorn its landscape.