

Chasing the Light

Singapore to Denpasar and on to Lombok

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The visual and emotional transition from Singapore to Lombok is like chasing a glass of exceptional Sancerre with a bucket full of fraternity boy trash can punch. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing, we've all done it, but it's important to prepare yourself mentally. As a painter, the latter offers an experience that really can't be topped. The section of Indonesia that includes Lombok and the surrounding Gili islands encompasses an energy driven both by ancient tradition and a noticeable "seize the moment," approach. The local Indonesians have a proclivity for innovation and acceptance all at once. (they call it Sama-Sama) I have always found them to be kind, bright, generous and incredibly curious. The streets are often unpaved, if there are roads at all. Motorcycles and bicycles are used to transport entire families all at once, and after dark the passenger(s) will be carrying a flaming torch in order to be seen in a world without street lights or even electricity. Cooking fires line the roads and goats, cattle and chickens roam free with only a single colored string tied around their neck to identify who they belong to. This is a world that exists on the edge of an active volcano (Ringani) and they take nothing for granted. Therefore the arrival of a new face and the unpacking of an art satchel can and will attract the attention of the entire village and often create an interest that spreads to neighboring villages.

The landscape is extreme, volcanic peaks, steep sloping tobacco plantations, and equatorial flowers in all the right colors. The water shifts from aquamarine in the morning to absolute cobalt blue in the afternoon and is cluttered with all the local fishing craft, each painted in bright colorful stripes with Felucca style sails and outrigger poles on the sides. There are coral reefs full of vivid blue

starfish, brilliant orange Clownfish, giant striped Trevally, green and blue Parrot Fish and about five thousand other sparkling forms of sea life. The Gili islands have lovely sheltered coves so the opportunity to create reflective water studies is epic. My descriptions of the landscape could go on forever, but I'm no travel writer, and I'm certainly not trying to sell the "trip," to anyone (it's not for the feint hearted), so I will move on to painting the experience.

An important practice when working in a culture different from your own is to connect with someone who understands the practices, courtesies and possible offenses that visitors must be aware of. For example, some Islamic cultures practice aniconism which forbids the representation or replication of any sentient being. In Lombok the two primary religions are Hindu and Islam, and I had the good luck to be granted permission to sketch some of the children and local residents of the village on Gili Gedde, but I was asked to omit any distinct facial features. It is imperative to make yourself aware and honor local restrictions because the repercussions could fall on the shoulders of someone totally innocent that didn't even know they were being photographed or drawn.

So, start like this, get up early in the morning, get to know the light, especially along the edge of the sea and beneath the tropical canopy. The colors change with each passing hour, but because you are on the equator, the light of each day almost repeats itself. Next, make yourself aware of the predominant colors. These may be the flowers, the foliage, the water and sky, or they may represent the local colors of dress. It's not forbidden to create color studies. Think Rothko; set your page up with sections of color that represent all that you see. Once you've become familiar and comfortable with the shifting light and richness of color (because it will be rich and bold) start playing with the horizon line and the cloud formations, the edge of the sea where it meets the shore, create a whole series of simple shifting lines that describe the edges.

After a few days of this you will have made some acquaintances, and that is the connection needed to begin connecting with local culture and custom. There are always willing subjects, just make sure to be respectful and ask permission. Another additional gesture is to offer a couple of your sketches as gifts. I have traveled to places so remote that those who sat for me have never had a photograph or portrait of themselves before. A simple hand sketch that is purely informational to the visiting artist can be of immense value to someone that will never go farther than the limits of their small island or village. The act of drawing or painting the essence of place is also the act of capturing something, so the idea of gifting a sketch in return creates a rare shared experience.

There is one more thing I'd like to include as an important practice for traveling artists. Each day, each sketch even, make a small note in the corner of your page of the day, the date, the location and then in just a couple of words, describe the weather, scene or landscape. It might seem like overkill at the time, but a few weeks or months later, in the studio when you thought you would, but can't quite remember all of the details, those words will be invaluable clues.

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