ALOHA, BLISS – REFLECTION

Looking back at the four months spent in Maui, Hawaii for my Co-operative Education experience (also known as Co-op), I realized how much my life has been changed forever. It is not just a saying, but I know I am not the same person that I had been before January 2013, when I started embarking on my journey in the exotic land of Hawaii as a design intern, or studio assistant, for an inspirational artist named Tom Sewell.

For those who have no idea what I am talking about, I was working and living in Maui, Hawaii for four months from January to May 2013. It was my first Co-op and definitely one of my best life experiences that I have gone through so far. During my time in Hawaii, I kept a blog that recorded moments and lessons of life I learned (the link is http://hawaianh.tumblr.com). There, I had a chance to discover many things that I personally had not done or had the time to pursue before, including various design tasks, stand-up paddle surfing, and, most importantly, photography. Along the way, I slowly filled in the missing pieces of me and eventually managed to transform into a different person, one that is aware what she is doing in life.

One of my biggest goals during my time in Hawaii was learning proper photography and improving my skills. Photography has always been something I am truly passionate about but have not had the time to pursue. My background in art has pushed me to look at the world with as many perspectives as possible. Beauty could be found everywhere and it is the job of the artist to express that beauty through a medium. I don’t call myself an artist, but I wish to show the world my perspectives on life in my own ways. Photographs, to me, are the perfect way to capture life in smaller frames, realistic and “true” enough for the audience to experience the moment. The chance to work with an artist/photographer was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I definitely could not miss. It was the time that I could think outside the box and experience things I do not normally do. In such an environment where everything flows in a different pace from the life on the mainland, I did not feel the rush to achieve a certain goal. Instead, I wanted to gradually absorb the things I was going to learn. Skills should not be forced; instead, they should be gradually learned and absorbed.

The project, *Aloha, Bliss,* was meant to be a photography project that recorded and documented the beauty of the people, the scenery and the life in Maui and Honolulu, Hawaii. All I needed were my loyal Nikon D90 camera and my eyes. I have been teaching myself how to use my DSLR, through online tutorials and tips from fellow amateur photographers since I first got it three years ago. One of the best ways for me to learn photography is to experiment from the theories I was provided with. Sometimes, the mistakes I made turned out to be some of the better shots I have taken. When I found out later that it was how my boss, Tom Sewell, learned photography, I was encouraged to try even harder to improve my photography skills. During my time in Hawaii, I did read many books featuring photographs by Man Ray, a famous photographer with a unique style in which he could capture very intriguing moments of the human body. It is unlikely to derive the techniques of the photographer from the pictures he took, but it is possible to learn composition and lighting from them. After all, learning from visual sources can benefit visual learners like me better.

 After the project, I am now more confident in taking photographs that I feel can represent my aesthetics and perspectives. I have spent time to learn about different camera models, including Nikon, Canon and Sony, all of which my employer asked me to study to assist him in photo-shoots. I have made myself more familiarized with various types of camera. Even if I am not, I am able to figure out the settings and how to function the machine. The tip to taking good photos, however, does not rely merely on what professional camera one is using; it is about how well one can utilize the camera to capture the right moment. Most of the times, one needs to take at least ten photos to get one good photo. There is no “right” good angle. A photographer needs to examine all possible angles and work from there. Even though I have had my DSLR for almost three years, I realized I had not had a chance to truly understand how it works. Sometimes, it is frustrating when the pictures do not turn out the way I picture them in my head. However, that failure to produce a good photograph pushes me even harder to figure out what did and did not work out. In the end, it is all about experimenting and trials when it comes to photography.

 Tom Sewell, my internship supervisor/employer/boss, was a self-taught photographer himself. The magic in Tom’s work is entirely thanks to his natural instinct. He never stops shooting photos, literally. It was always a pleasure observing how Tom takes photographs. The old man turned into a young child, passionate and enthusiastic about what he was seeing through the camera, his fingering constantly snapping. Tom would go around the subject of the picture, trying every possible angle and distance. He did not have particular idea of how he wanted his pictures to turn out, but he knew he wanted to capture that very object, that very moment. The beauty is already there; the next step is to capture the essence of them in motionless picture form.

 I have learned that photography is architecture. I am very well aware that my internship in Maui was not a typical architecture co-op that any architecture student would expect to have. However, this photography experience has given me an opportunity to look at architecture and design with a different viewpoint. Just like architecture, photography is an art form that requires the technicality of the machine to work with the creativity of the brain. They both transform conceptual ideas into a real product that showcase the skills and talents of the artist/photographer/architect. They both explore details and potentially aesthetic aspects of an object/idea. It is not enough what the eyes see or what the brain thinks; the photographer/architect needs to be able to present his perspectives to the audience.

 The only thing I would have done differently had I a chance to repeat this internship with Tom would be to explore other criteria of photographs. During my time in Maui and Honolulu, I did experiment with portrait and landscape photography, but not too much of black and white and micro-photography. I pushed myself hard to learn as much as I could; yet I do believe I could have gone a bit further to explore my potentials. One more thing that I learned from Tom and this photography experience is the ability to ask people for what I want. Tom has an amazing people skill that I wish I could have naturally. I did manage to come to people and confidently ask them if I could take their pictures (which most of the times did work out very well). To all those young people like me, who are trying to pursue a passion, do not be afraid to step outside of your comfort zones. You never know what could happen if you do, but I always think it is better to regret doing something than not doing it. You try, you fail; the experience from the failure means more than anything. This is what I have been trying to tell all of my friends, fellow students, and strangers on the Internet. I feel very accomplished to know that people still are reading my blog, and getting inspired by it. In the end, that is one of the reasons why I keep a blog whenever I start a new journey. I want people to understand that, however impossible something might seem, there is always a way as long as there is a will. Career wise, this experience has taught me that I was born to be in the creative/design field. I am not sure if architecture will be my final destination, but I know that thanks to it, I had the chance to do live one of the best life experiences I have ever had in my first 20 years of life. Creativity exists in all possible ways, and it is ours job as a learner to figure out how to bring out the beauty in every day’s ordinary objects.

 Besides my Tumblr blog, <http://hawaianh.tumblr.com>, I have managed to put up my photography on my new Honors E-Portfolio, <http://anhtranatuc.weebly.com>. The page is a working process, and I have been putting more and more each day. Everything that I have established to friends and family, be it via Social media like Facebook or conversational emails with friends who are interested in the internship, is how I share with people what I have been learning. So far, I am proud to say that I have got 3 of my friends to do an internship with Tom Sewell. Tom still sends my blog to potential interns and I have been getting emails from them asking about the internship. I want them all to know that, the experience is priceless, but it is you who makes it worthwhile. Never do an experience just because it sounds “cool” or “awesome” (or just because it is in Hawaii); do it if you are looking for yourself in this crazy race that we call life. I was lost a few months ago, then I found myself and my passions in the land of Aloha, Bliss.