Interview with Artist Jim Drain
RISD/Morocco Embassy course

Can you describe the RISD/Morocco Embassy course you just taught? How did you approach it and how did you prepare?

I approached the class not as an expert on Morocco or as a diplomat. I was ready to learn and explore with the students a place I was equally unfamiliar. As much as I was the lead artist, I was also the lead educator. This meant that we were all in it together and that I needed to make sure that the students were getting as much out of the class as me.

To prepare for the class, a wordpress page was created. It pulled together articles and resources onto a single site. While Morocco is a huge, ancient and multi-faceted culture, the site helped to both establish the parameters for discussion within the class but also became a convenient way to interface with the students.

The RISD/Morocco Embassy course I just taught needed to accomplish a few things. First, we needed to gain an understanding of the place where the work was going to be placed. To accomplish this, we invited a number of guest lecturers to come and discuss their experiences in Morocco. Our visitors become the eyes and ears of a culture we could never visit as a class together. The architects of the project came and outlined the design of the embassy. Together we discussed their take on how the design of the embassy was shaped by both security concerns and cultural sensitivities. Third, the class needed to make something. Students worked on one-part molds to formalize the ideas and discussions of the previous weeks. The emphasis was on 'process' over a finished form.

Can you discuss the collaborative environment of the class?

With Dave Sharp, my T.A., Allison Roberts, the super-liaison and Jo Sittenfeld, the photo documentarian, we really were thirteen explorers of Morocco vis-à-vis Providence, Rhode Island. Collaborations are not easy situations. It allows a group of people to get to a new place together- a place one person cannot get to alone. Think: the Rolling Stones. However, the compromise necessary in collaborations can be ego-crushing. See also: the Rolling Stones.

Throughout the course, activities were created to intentionally pair different people together. The proximity of the workroom enabled collaborations to

happen without my intervention. We also traveled throughout the campus to visit each other's studios to enable a cross-pollination of ideas. A final goal can inhibit collaborative efforts because collaboration itself dearly undermines the individualized talent.

What was the most surprising moment of the course?

The most surprising moment of the course was to see my 1st year Grad architect, Yuan, sit and sculpt with my senior Jewelry major, Simone. Yuan is stunning on the computer but I responded more to the figures he made with Simone. Working with wax models is something Yuan has never done previous to this class.

Did the class have any visitors or take any trips? Are there one or two visitors that stand out-why?

We had a number of visitors. Renowned New York painter, Katherine Bernhardt visited to discuss how her visits to Morocco have directly affected her practice. Rachelle Giard came and spoke about her two years in Morocco as a peace corps volunteer. Brian Shimkovitz of the blog Awesome Tapes of Africa came brought music from Morocco. The class was able to hear the different regions and cultures of the country, something that cannot be done as effectively visually. Chris Bardt, RISD Architecture professor came and assessed our progress. The architects, Donnie Seale and Steven Cohen came and discussed their plans for the embassy. Brian Chippendale and Jungil Hong, two artists from Providence came during our late-night work night to inspect the buzz of activity.

Any trips that happened stayed on campus. We visited the Nature Lab's Loeb Collection. It is the archive of Dr. Arthur Loeb's geometric models, collection of books and silk-screen prints of geometric designs and patterns. Dr. Loeb founded the Design Science program at Harvard University. We visited the glass department with glass senior, Cooper O'Brien. We visited the Rapid prototyping lab, the textiles weaving studio and the senior jewelry studio. We also visited the RISD museum as well as the RISD's print archive with Emily Peters (with help from print professor, Andrew Raftery).

Each was integral to the class and informed the discussion within the class uniquely. For me, Rachelle Giard's account of her time in Morocco stood out as being the most informative and helpful to layout the culture of Morocco

most effectively. She gave a gritty and first-person account of her experiences. It greatly helped elucidate a 'real life' (as opposed to touristic) perspective.

The other great moment was paging through Tauba Auerbach's newest pop-up book of geometric forms at the RISD print archive. We were all amazed to see the shapes rise from the flattened page.

What was your main objective in teaching this course?

My main objective was to provide necessary tools for thinking independently. The emphasis was one of development, process and conceptualization.

Now that the course is finished-what is the next step? What are you thinking about going forward with the project?

The next step is to consider the forms and drawings we created in the six weeks together and to outline the form the final work will take. Conceptually, the final work could not have been conceived without the students' input. The work will be fabricated in Providence. Outlining how this will work, both financially and in terms of timing will be necessary. Clearly, a discussion between RISD, myself and AIE will be a priority to facilitate this end.