

How a residency in the jungle taught this artist how to open herself up to the unexpected

When faced with a health crisis, Erin Loree went deep into the Amazon to go deep within herself

By Lizzy Hill | January 10, 2017



"Red Moon" by Erin Loree. (Erin Loree)

Artist Erin Loree can still vividly recall streams of ants charging through where she was staying in the Peruvian jungle. "I remember every once in a while this river of ants would pass through — you'd have to just let it pass through your home and you couldn't really do anything about it," she tells CBC Arts. "Everybody was so comfortable with these ants coming and basically taking over their home for a few hours."

Much of the inspiration for Loree's latest body of paintings — which she began during NSCAD University's Bill and Isabel Pope Painting Residence in Halifax — takes inspiration from her experiences in the Amazon. She did an unstructured artist residency at a center called the Sachaqa Centro De Arte in San Roque de Cumbaza, Peru — an experience that taught her how to let go of the things she couldn't control and open herself up to the unexpected.

It's a mindset that's visibly crept into her paintings. Her works — which were on view in her exhibition *93 Curves* at NSCAD's Anna Leonowen's Gallery — feature thick slapped-on-layers of paint, with bright colours from the layers underneath bleeding

through. The light seems to bounce off of these paintings, illuminating hidden colours. It's like looking at an oil-filled puddle as the sun hits it, revealing an unexpectedly vibrant palette. The paint has a life of its own, hardening and bulging out at the edges of each layer like candy-coloured scar tissue.



"Search Inside" by Erin Loree. (Erin Loree)

Loree greets me at the entrance of the massive West Queen West warehouse in Toronto where she has a studio space — which has housed a colorful roster of Canadian artists before her, like Kim Dorland, Nicole Collins, Michael Davidson, Stanzie Tooth and Liz Pead. A paint-splattered Loree offers me a tea, and chats about building upon the body of work she created at NSCAD for her upcoming exhibition at Toronto's Angell Gallery, The Good Glazier.

She talks excitedly about those who inspire her, like David Altmejd ("You literally can discover new passageways from every angle!") and Laura Owens ("It is about responding to that moment and that particular work instead of striving to connect it to the others in a contrived way").

One of the threads tying Loree's own works together lately continues to be her experiences in the jungle, which ultimately led to a four day boat ride down the Amazon River, where she met a shaman who she lived with for 30 days. "I experienced really profound, very concrete changes. I went there because I had a health problem that wasn't going away despite all my efforts to live a healthy lifestyle. And it occurred to me that the solution wasn't to be found at the level of the problem. I had to go deeper to find an answer."



"Subtle Sensations" by Erin Loree. (Erin Loree)

And deeper she went. During one of the ceremonies, her intention was to figure out why she had this issue and why her body wasn't healing. And Loree — who prefers to keep her health issue private — realized that she needed to fundamentally restructure her thinking, to accept that "there's an entire world that we cannot perceive with our senses," a world that goes beyond the minutiae of our day-to-day lives. "Literally in a few days the issue resolved itself and hasn't come back since."

The residency at NSCAD gave her a chance to work intensely for two months, to ruminate on past experiences as they reemerged on her canvases. She enjoyed having the opportunity to sit in on MFA presentations and undergrad critiques, as it challenged her to look at her own work with fresh eyes and broke up her usual routine:

"When you're a practicing artist, you're alone in your studio all day and you're not really thinking of [art] in terms of attaching language to it most of the time. Language runs a parallel existence to art, and it can never describe it completely accurately," she says. "But I'm working on closing the gap between those two languages and my time at NSCAD really helped."



"Cosmic Handheld" by Erin Loree. (Erin Loree)

An avid student of all things, Loree opens up about her meditation practice, and how a 10 day silent meditation retreat she took in 2012, which taught her how to be "an observer" of her own thoughts, at the Ontario Vipassana Centre continues to inform her experiments in abstraction to this day.

"I wanted the work to surprise me and I wanted to allow anything to happen from moment to moment. The meditation also taught me not to attach to anything that occurred — positive or negative — because everything's always in flux."

The Good Glazier by Erin Loree. January 13 to 28 at Angell Gallery, Toronto.
www.angellgallery.com