

# LOUISE SAXTON - AN AUSSIE ARTIST IN MEXICO

With a full calendar of group exhibitions in 2014 and a solo in 2015 that I had begun working towards, an overseas residency was not on my agenda for 2014. But that all changed when a sublime sunset over Lake Chapala appeared on my screen, via one of Janet De Boer's e-bulletins, with the caption "Free Artist Residency in Mexico".

And so it was that I applied for, was granted and attended a magical month-long residency on the shores of the largest fresh water lake in Mexico in August 2014. I was the inaugural Australian artist to be awarded this unique residency, which is made possible by the patronage of Deborah Kruger<sup>1</sup>, an established artist originally from the USA, but now living and making art permanently in Mexico. Two other artists were also on residency in August – Gloria Clunie, a playwright from Chicago and Yen Hua, a porcelain/installation artist from Taiwan.

Apart from the draw-card of the residency's mission, 'To support artists, writers and musicians who would benefit from having uninterrupted time to devote to their creativity and make artistic progress without the stress and distractions of daily life', I was also keen for the Jurors to become aware of my work. They were Deborah Kruger, residency owner and mixed-media installation artist, and Jeanine Falino, a prominent writer and curator based in New York.

The basis of my application, apart from the opportunity for uninterrupted creative time, was to experience a culture that still has a living, albeit fragile tradition of embroidery. Mexico is renowned for its needlework and other centuries-old artisan traditions and I am drawn in particular to the brightly coloured floral embroidery of the *Tehuantepec* people of Oaxaca and the floral and animal embroidery of the *Otomi* people of Hidalgo and of Querétaro.

Unfortunately, lack of time before I left for this unexpected residency meant that I was unable to undertake detailed research on Mexican embroidery – or to learn any real Spanish. The residency is located in Central West Mexico in the State of Jalisco (where Mariachi bands and Tequila come from) and the embroidery I was able to find locally was made primarily for the commercial market, such as machine embroidered clothing and household linens.

One of the joys of being on residency in another country and culture is the support you receive for your practice from people associated with the residency, and the kindness of strangers. One month is a very short time in a new country, and there was so much to experience in Chapala and at other pueblos along the Lake. The generous gift of people's time and knowledge meant I was able to search out some of the embroidery I was looking for without having to embark on time-consuming travel further afield in Mexico. Chapala is less than one hour from Mexico's second biggest city, Guadalajara, where I was fortunate to source some exquisite *Tehuantepec* and *Otomi* embroideries ("bordados" in Spanish) for my collection.

The residency provided a beautifully refurbished and fabulously located casita which doubled as a small studio. On the third floor



in a group of three, my casita had views to the lake, the mountain range surrounding Chapala and the 24-hour Red Cross Clinic. Hundreds of barn swallows chased an abundance of insects outside my windows every day and in the distance white cranes and egrets, kingfishers and pelicans arrived and departed over the lake at regular intervals.

Music of all kinds filled the air, including the famous Mariachi bands, which frequented restaurants situated on the Malacon (the lake's esplanade), along with other everyday noises – dogs barking, people talking and singing, cars, trucks and even horses galloping over the cobble-stoned streets below. Chapala is a vibrant community and a favourite weekend destination for many Guadalaran families. The year-round temperate climate and incredible landscape have also made it a paradise for retirees from North America.

There were no expectations from the residency program for an outcome as such, and while some artists work to a deadline back home or produce a body of exhibition work during their time in Chapala, my residency was less structured. I produced a number of experimental pieces including a group of works which respond to Mexico's *Los Dias del Muertos* / The Day of the Dead.

The time spent on residency in Chapala was inspiring on an everyday level, simply experiencing the changing vista of the lake, wandering and documenting the back streets filled with colourful houses and exploring the markets loaded with local produce and handicrafts. Many doors opened to me, creative connections were made and friendships formed. If I return to Mexico I will make sure to have more Spanish, enabling even more doors to open.

I am grateful for the opportunity to experience life in Mexico for a month and for the support and friendship I received during this wonderful residency – *360 Xochi Quetzal*, so named for the Aztec Goddess of Artisans and in particular of embroiderers and weavers. □

<sup>1</sup>An interview with Deborah Kruger appears in the December 2014 issue of 'Textile Fibre Forum' for 2014 (#116). For more information on these special residences, she can be contacted at [www.deborahkruger.com/1/art-residency.html](http://www.deborahkruger.com/1/art-residency.html)

Above, Louise Saxton is shown at work on *Madeira's Lyre* for her exhibition, 'Sanctuary' at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne (see inside front cover, the May 2012 issue of Textile Fibre Forum).





Themes that Louise Saxton worked on while in Chapala are indicated top right ('Day of the Dead') and also with the 'lung flowers' shown bottom, right, juxtaposed against the Mexican landscape. Her 'lung flowers' are especially meaningful to Saxton and one pair will return to Deborah Kruger in Mexico for the 360 Xochi Quetzal collection.