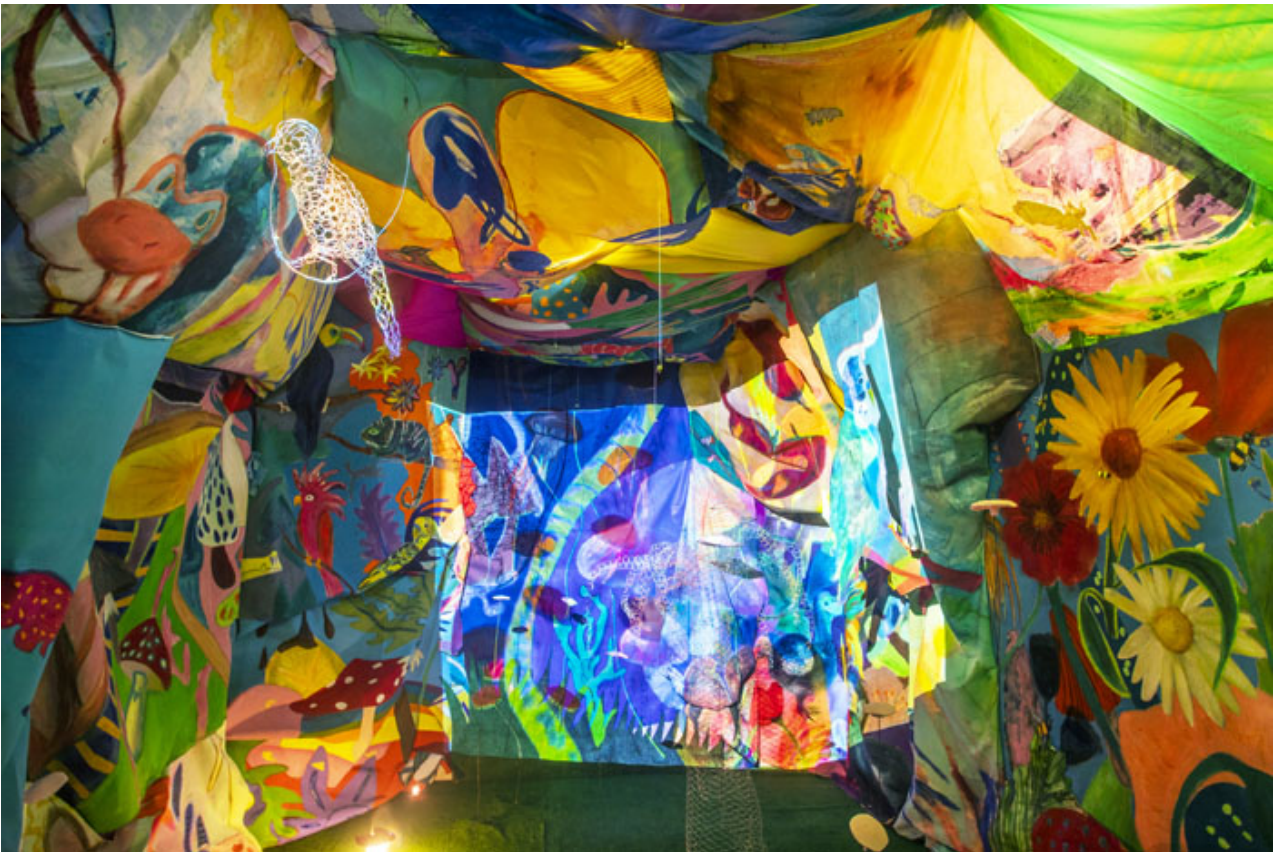




FLASH NONFICTION

I read Roland Barthes on my Costa Rica vacation and saw signs everywhere around me

by Hantian Zhang



"Fake paradise" by Val Smets | Immersive environment | Mixed media installation, sound, fragrance diffusion | This work has been part of „KuvanKevät“ Exhibition, Project Room, Helsinki, Finland, 2020.

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Take the families of howler monkeys waking me up in the morning, five, six, or up to ten of them scuttling through the inter-palm-tree freeways of power lines; a circus of boisterous stunt performers tightroping to their morning forage, or the notes of a cacophony unfolding against the rain-washed sky. Signified: an urban dweller's wonderment; interspecies harmony. —

Then, these tanned Caucasian bodies milling around the surf shops or lounging on the embowered hotel porches, their filing in and out of the gated retreats that offer yoga classes and ayahuasca cleansing sessions: the escapist idea of vacation time at an exotic, tropical location; the middle class longing for spirituality without forsaking material comfort. —

The burned, sweet scent perfuming the air after torrential rain, seemingly leaping from the caramel puddles dotting the potholed roads: a riveting mystery, a faint worry. Then, the delight of illumination by the local interpretation: molasses had been spilled on the ground during the dry season, for no purposes other than taming the dust. —

The guide who led me through the second-growth jungle to spot sloths, snippets of her life like that her father and her son were both in the same business, and that she had been supplementing her salary with an income from Amway; or my surf coach wearing a dry expression on his face when describing how Nosara had become so unaffordable, the real estate price doubled in two years, he himself couldn't afford his own service: the realization of our different but shared struggle for livelihood; the evocation of the center-periphery model of the global economy. —

And the slope rolling languidly down toward San José from where I stood in Escazú, its smooth rise on the other side of the city, then the acceleration into another mountain, and finally the shapeshifting into a grey quilt of clouds. A cool breeze whisked me away, traversing the neighborhoods of red-roofed bungalows, the cobweb of streets and alleyways, the evergreen backyards festooned by Corona de Cristo's scarlet bursts: the feeling of peace and tranquility; the wish of holding on to this moment for as long as I could.