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## Border Crossing

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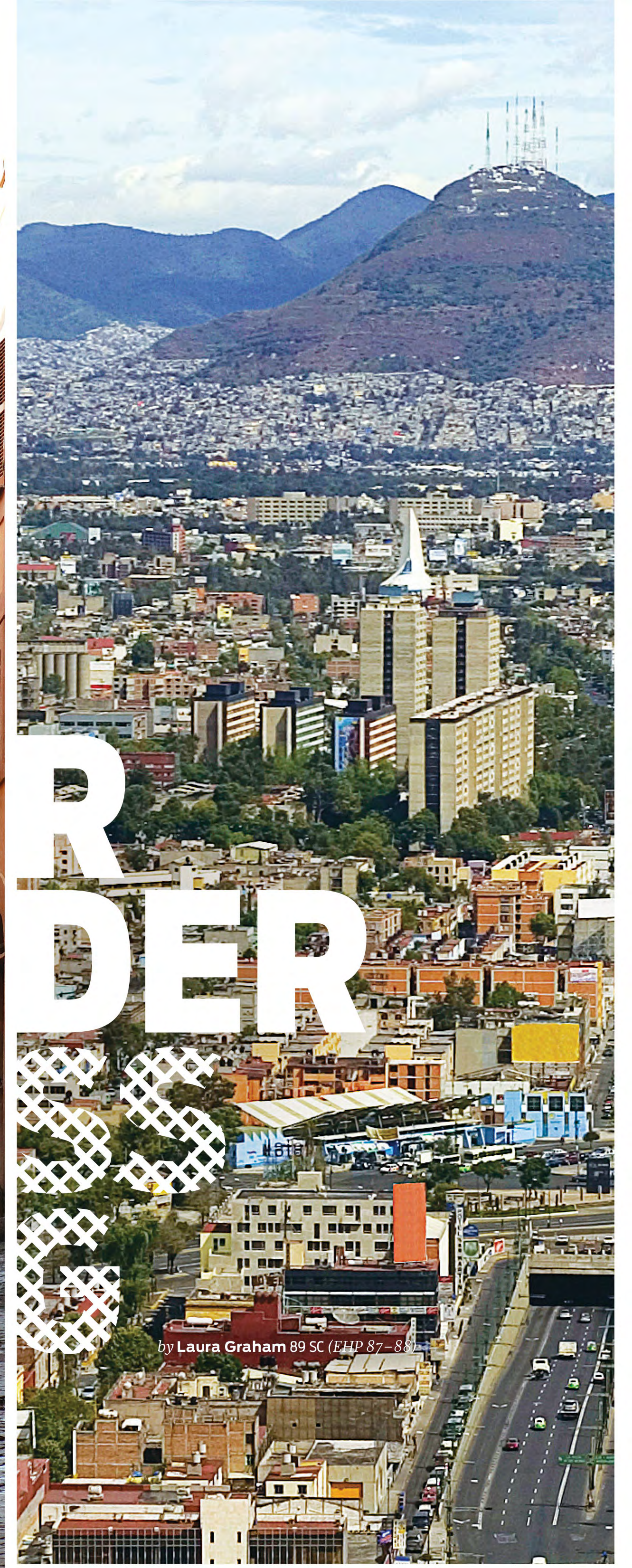
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# BORDER CROSSING

by Laura Graham 89 SC (EHP 87-88)

“The process of diving deep into your work and developing mature inner resources is accentuated abroad – and that’s a process that every creative thinker needs to go through to actually find something of value.”

Maureen Jeram 93 PT

Five EHP alumni discover that one year in Rome only whet their appetites for living abroad.

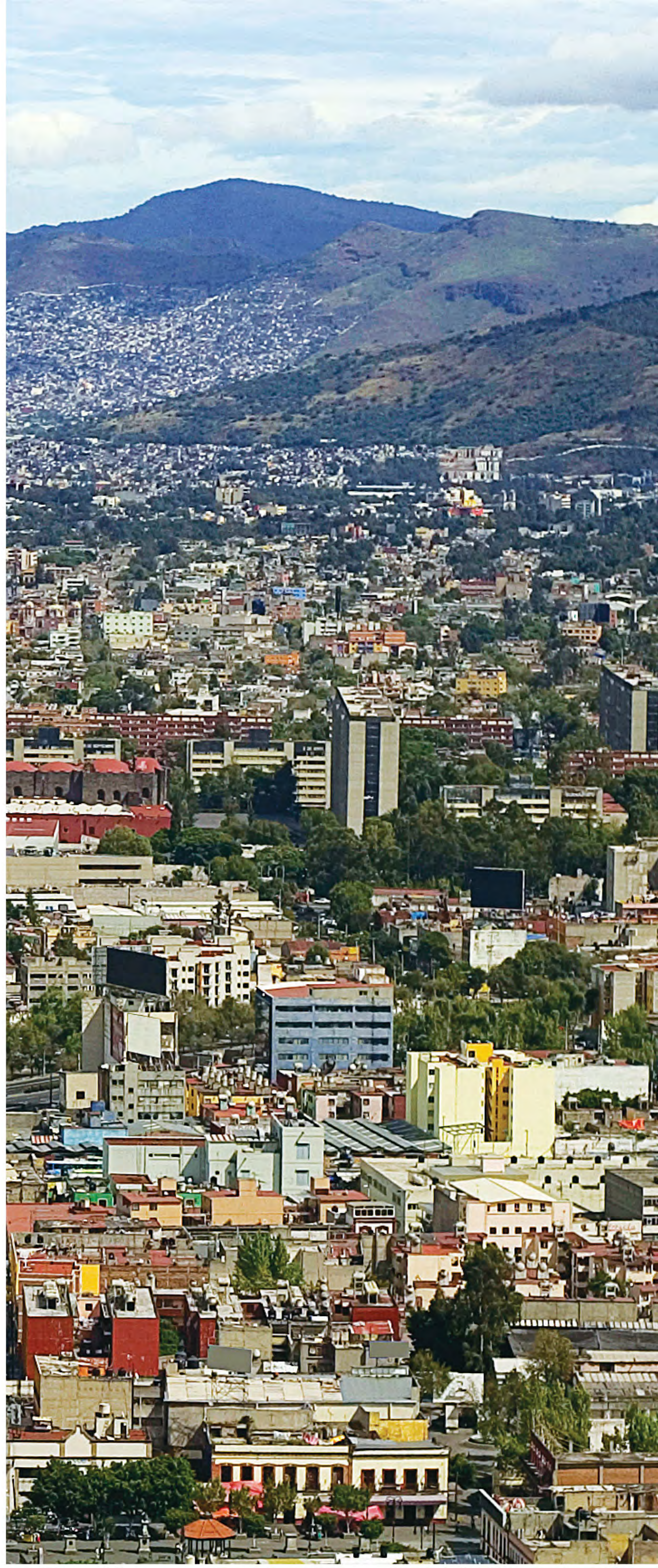
**LIVING OVERSEAS IS A BIT LIKE BECOMING A PROFESSIONAL** artist or designer. It’s something a lot of people dream about, but never actually do – unless they went to RISD.

I’ve been an expat for 20 years and always love hearing the stories of fellow European Honors Program (EHP) alumni who fell in love with living abroad and gained the creative confidence and courage in Rome to pursue that dream afterwards.

Consider **Maureen Jeram 93 PT**, **Jonathan Janson 72 PT**, **Maryann Fennimore Kranis 00 IL**, **Kathy Kokkinides BArch 99** and **PJ Rountree 08 SC** – all professional artists, architects and designers who began their overseas journeys in the same place I did: a 16th-century palazzo in the center of Rome.

Affectionately known as “The Cenci” (that’s CHEN-chee, if you’re new to Italian), Palazzetto Cenci was built in the 1570s and to this day is still owned by the Cenci family. The palazzo was made famous by Beatrice Cenci, a beautiful 16-year-old who was decapitated in 1599 after Pope Clement VIII condemned her for patricide. Her tragedy was later immortalized in Percy Blythe Shelley’s 1819 play *The Cenci*.

Home to EHP since just after it was founded in 1960, the Cenci has introduced many RISD students to the joys and challenges of living overseas. For many, it offers the first experience beyond the more structured campus life in Providence. Add to this the inspiration of being with a group of highly motivated students from every other department at RISD and you get a life-altering experience.





After years of perfecting her fresco painting techniques in Italy, **Maureen Jeram** is now living in Berlin, where she's pursuing new directions with interior still lifes like these (*left*).

A lifelong love of Rembrandt, Vermeer and other European masters inspired **Jonathan Janson** to establish his artistic career abroad and make evocative paintings like this (*right*).

### WONDERFULLY DISORIENTED

Painter **Maureen Jeram** (EHP 91–92) says her EHP year was like falling through the rabbit hole. “Just like Alice, I awoke in a new place where nothing made sense—the art, architecture, culture, people, language, food.... This momentary disorientation transported me to a more open state of mind and helped me transcend my former reality and learned patterns.”

Instead of following her peers to New York after graduation, Jeram decided to try Assisi instead, assuming that she could always backtrack to Brooklyn if necessary. “It was not only my love of Giotto’s frescoes in the Basilica of St. Francis that brought me to this spiritual, but sleepy Umbrian town,” she says. “During my EHP homestay, I had also had the opportunity to build relationships with the locals and immerse myself in their lifestyle.”

Jeram’s fascination with Italy centered not only on individual works of art, but on installations and the relationship of frescoes to specific architectural settings. She soon began apprenticing with an American fresco painter living in Assisi, working on a project in the Basilica of St. Claire. That led to a four-year apprenticeship painting frescoes in churches in the Tuscan hillsides, where she immersed herself in fresco painting, old master drawings and other classical approaches.

“This was an unforgettable time in my life,” Jeram says. “Every day I was walking past the Duomo, visiting the Uffizi and the Brancacci Chapel, soaking up as much of this environment as possible.”

### CLASSICAL INFUSION

More than 40 years after he first discovered Rome, **Jonathan Janson** (EHP 71–72) wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. He says that Professor Emeritus **James Fowle**, who served as EHP director from 1971–72 and again from 1982–84, was a huge influence. Fowle still owns a home on the Sicilian island of Ortigia, where he spends several months each year escaping the cold Vermont winters and perhaps more importantly, enjoying one of the most beautiful places on earth.

“Thinking about and discussing the works of such painters as Vermeer, Rembrandt, Titian and Monet with Professor Fowle revealed the fundamental differences between European and American art,” Janson says, adding that “as a budding painter, the latter hardly satisfied my spiritual needs or aspirations.” After graduation and a brief stint at home in Florida, he returned to Rome, where he went on to marry, have children, paint, show internationally and draw endless inspiration from his artistic heroes, Vermeer and Rembrandt (check out his websites *Essential Vermeer* and *Rembrandt Van Rijn*).

“Unlike in the US, in Italy I’ve felt more relaxed as a citizen and very much at home as an artist, owing to the country’s deep tradition in the arts,” Janson says. “Needless to say, great art is ubiquitous here—and the national focus on good cooking is a plus, too.” One look at his work shows precisely how much he has benefitted from “absorbing European art firsthand.”

Janson confirms that living in Italy has enabled him to become an artist whose work is now included at the RISD Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A few artists in Rome also proved to be helpful as he worked to gain “a deeper understanding of classical works of art” and to acquire “the indispensable technical knowledge of fine realist oil painting”—something he says wasn’t encouraged when he was at RISD.



“In Italy I’ve felt more relaxed as a citizen and very much at home as an artist.”

Jonathan Janson 72 PT



Inspired by her EHP year in Rome, **Maryann Fennimore Kranis** vowed to return to Italy. She now lives in Rome, where she teaches and regularly performs with her band Mary and the Strays.

**TOTALLY CAPTIVATING**

**Maryann Fennimore Kranis** (EHP 98–99) actually came to RISD specifically hoping to attend EHP: “I wanted the freedom and time to explore every avenue of my curiosity,” she says. While at the Cenci, she combined her art and songwriting skills to create an *a cappella* musical about an imagined relationship between Botticelli and Savonarola, which her classmates performed in the Sala Beatrice.

Before leaving, Kranis cut off her hair and threw it in the Tiber River. “I made a promise to Rome that I would be back—hoping somehow that tangle of hair would become a net that might catch me and swirl me back into the history, beauty and legacy of the most incredible city I have ever known.” Sure enough, years later she returned as a mature artist and musician.

Kranis now teaches art at the Ambrit International School and performs regularly with her new band Mary and the Strays. “Today when I leave Rome, I miss it like it’s a friend,” she says. “I could never have imagined when I started that journey as a junior at RISD that its beams of possibility would still be guiding me today.”

“I wanted the freedom and time to explore every avenue of my curiosity.”

**Maryann Fennimore Kranis 00 IL**



Once she arrived in Italy as an EHP student, **Kathy Kokkinedes** never looked back. She and her Italian husband now have three children and adore their down-to-earth lifestyle in Umbria.



above, far left: photo by Sham Hinkey; top: photo by Tom Kelly, 2011

“I love being able to get away for an afternoon or weekend to visit the other beautiful hill towns in our region.”

Kathy Kokkinides BArch 99



#### LOVING THE LIFESTYLE

**Kathy Kokkinides** (EHP 97–98), who now lives in the Italian countryside in Umbria, also found EHP to be life altering: “I know it may sound corny, but during my year in Rome, I fell in love,” she explains. “During my two-week homestay with an Italian family near Assisi, I met the love of my life—at first sight!” She and her Italian husband married right after graduation and have since had three children and designed and constructed their own home together.

Now an architect at METEX Design Group, which has studios in both Assisi and Istanbul, Kokkinides frequently travels as part of her job. “Our studio designs mostly high-end hospitality, retail and educational facilities in Turkey, Europe and Africa,” she says. But it’s the beautiful balance between work and home life that she cherishes.

“At home in Umbria we have a family farm and olive orchard,” Kokkinides says. “I enjoy finding time to design my children’s school library, and to help paint it and put it together with the other mothers. I love being able to show my children firsthand what most American kids only get to see in textbooks. Every day on my way to work, I see the stone walls of the Basilica of St. Francis rise up above the valley towards the mountains above Assisi. I love being able to get away for an afternoon or weekend to visit the other beautiful hill towns in our region. I love having a large multigenerational family that eats together. We make homemade pasta and enjoy homegrown vegetables and fruits. I enjoy the laidback Italian lifestyle. Beautiful surroundings, family life and delicious food create a peaceful way of life.”



Ever since his EHP year in Rome, **PJ Rountree 08 SC** has drawn inspiration from the culture in which he's living and has facilely moved between media. A still from one of his videos is shown at the top, with pieces from his *Flags* restaurant project with his partner Kenny shown above and to the right.

**“My constant has been creating artwork that reflects my relationship with the city.”**

**PJ Rountree 08 SC**

#### **EXHILARATING AND TERRIFYING**

As a student **PJ Rountree** (EHP 06–07) wasn't sure that going to Rome would be a good idea. He worried about the difficulty of learning a new language and missing out on things in Providence. But in the end he thought, “How will I ever know what it's like to live abroad unless I just go now?”

Of course, as many other EHP alumni will confirm, “what followed was the most intellectually and creatively fertile year of my life,” as Rountree puts it. “**Ezio Genovesi** [current EHP director and art history professor] guided us through the intertwining layers of Rome's history. And he encouraged us to explore on our own, collect materials and let the city inspire us.”

For Rountree, the opportunity to work alongside students from diverse disciplines was invaluable. “We learned from each other,” he says, noting that he experimented with printmaking, sewing and advanced Photoshop techniques. He was so energized by the entire experience that he stayed on, working a summer job and living at the Cenci. “I didn't want to go home,” he says. “I *was* home.”

“Eventually, they had to kick me out,” Rountree says. But he left with an enormous sense of accomplishment: “I had learned to speak Italian, made lifelong friends and exhibited my artwork. It was hard to leave, but I had learned to lived abroad and knew I could do it again.”



Just a year after graduation, Rountree and his boyfriend Kenny decided to “try something crazy” when the lease on their New York apartment ended. “I had visited Mexico City—or DF [Distrito Federal]—for a week a couple of years earlier and the colors and density and vibrant energy of the city cast a spell on me,” he says. “Like Rome, it’s one of these places that collects time in a tangible sense. You can find Aztec carvings embedded in the walls of Spanish colonial palaces. I was intrigued, to say the least.”

The move to the giant metropolis south of the border proved to be both “exhilarating and terrifying. We didn’t know Spanish, we didn’t know anyone who lived here and there were certainly no jobs waiting for us when we arrived.”

But because of his experience in Rome, Rountree knew they could make the adventure work. As he had done during EHP, he “went out and photographed the city, researched its history and collected materials.” Of course this time, there was the added pressure of needing to support himself.

Rountree learned to speak Spanish while waiting tables at a popular Japanese restaurant and notes that each subsequent work experience has enabled him to become more deeply entwined with his new home. “My constant has been creating artwork that reflects my relationship with the city,” says the multidisciplinary artist. “The DF offers such a variety of materials and services for artists. It costs very little to print large-scale photographs or posters, and there are entire markets dedicated to different kinds of paper. I love having the freedom to realize projects that just wouldn’t have been practical back in New York.”

After almost four years of working to establish a new life in Mexico, Rountree says: “Kenny and I started from scratch, but our patience is paying off. We have a supportive network of young creative people.... And for now, there’s nowhere we’d rather be than Mexico City.”



### EMBRACING MOBILITY

As much as Maureen Jeram loved learning to master the old ways, after a few years in Florence she realized it lacked what she was looking for in contemporary art—so she resolved to see if she could find it in Berlin.

“During my last year in Florence, I received a Fulbright grant for my work in fresco,” Jeram explains. While at a related conference in Berlin, she “became intrigued with the city, especially with the atmosphere, which was quite the opposite of Florence.” In Italy she had also become friends with two Germans—an architect and an art historian—whose move back to Berlin provided an added incentive.

“A virtual construction site, Berlin was everything Florence and NYC were not,” Jeram says. After initially working for three American artists—Sarah Morris, Rita McBride and Glenn Rubsamen—she decided to stay and study with Georg Baselitz at the Universität der Künste Berlin.

Now settled in Berlin and showing there and beyond, Jeram says, “I love living in Europe. Berlin is eclectic and still constantly evolving, hosting a large international community. It offers many creative spaces and exchanges with other artists, without huge financial pressures.”

Jeram also sums up what she and many other EHP alums have discovered, namely that: “The mobility an artist has is a key advantage, especially in today’s globalized world. My education at RISD, which focused on developing creative, out-of-the-box thinking, made these foreign opportunities seem quite natural. EHP further developed this sense of risk taking and independence.

“By being displaced in a foreign culture and challenged to study and learn in a less structured academic environment, we dealt with solving problems and learning from failures, but also found unexpected successes. The process of diving deep into your work and developing mature inner resources is accentuated abroad—and that’s a process that every creative thinker needs to go through in order to actually find something of value.” ■

**“The mobility an artist has is a key advantage, especially in today’s globalized world.”**

**Maureen Jeram 93 PT**