

## I Saw a Thousand Buddhas Dance

An Oriental aesthetic pervades Belinda Fox's printed works, and like rich silt accumulated at a fertile river delta, it has been borne via journeys to India, Nepal, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Burma. Sifted into Fox's Australian post-modern sensibility, this intercultural residue conveys her struggle with personal and global notions of despair and hope, destruction and renewal—and her philosophical and artistic desire to hold them in some kind of equilibrium.

The artist attempts to make sense of an increasingly dislocated world, which, in its very global fragmentation, paradoxically fuses cultural symbols of the East and West into new forms and meanings. Unlike many Australian artists inspired by European and American art traditions, Fox draws on material from the Asia-Pacific region. She combines Japanese textile designs (derived from ancient Chinese models), Vietnamese Hill Tribe fabrics depicting guns and helicopters, lotus flowers (borrowed from the ceramic figures of Australian-Chinese artist, Ah Xian), and the Japanese-designed *Space Invaders* game recalled from her Melbourne childhood, to draw attention to this mix.

Belinda Fox's impressive exhibition *Shadow of a Doubt* reflects these influences, but they are tempered by the artist's overriding theoretical concerns. Indeed the arrangement of the work as an installation at Art House Gallery, Sydney, increases the intensity of her message and invites the viewer to experience the whole as well as its parts—so that one begins the journey with *What lies beneath* (2005), an image of positive and negative forces, is then led on into the dynamic space, and finally, on the way out, is left with the memory of *Rise II* (2005).

The fluidity and confluence of the current work is not new. Fox's graduate prints linked travel to landscape, and an idea conceived in a boat on the Mekong River in Laos in 1998 spawned the earthy intaglio editions *Traverse*, *Negotiation* and *Episode* (2000), which, in turn, informed the transcendental linocuts *Dream Shadow* (2002) and *Phusi-Pulse* (2002), and the related Print Council of Australia Commission, *Pulse Mountain Dream II* (2003). For the latter group, the artist drew inspiration from the *Pulse* drawings of Louise Bourgeois and images of Mt Phusi in Laos and Mt Kailas in Western Tibet.

The snow-clad rock pyramid of Mt Kailas<sup>1</sup> has particularly preoccupied the artist. The mountain is so sacred that it is never been scaled. In *the shadows of great mountains II* (2003) Fox collides a black smear with floating concentric symbols against a backdrop of Hundred Buddha stamps—perhaps the monastic musical equivalent of resonant gongs overlaying tiny tinkling bells—to represent the dualities of anguish and hope, place and memory, time and infinity. For the artist, the printing of the Buddha motif has become a meaningful ritual act. In stamping it over and over again, Fox makes sustained 'prayers' for a better world as she intentionally re-enacts the East's earliest printmaking process. The intaglio image *Nekorwa-SF*, made by the artist at Crown Point Press, San Francisco, in 2003, continues the theme of pilgrimages around holy mountains, and the emotionally rendered Cambodian *twong* which swings in the wind to one side of the print emphasises a thousand years of prayerful devotion.

As the War on Terror has unfolded, Fox has had to fight harder to maintain her optimism. In adopting larger formats and increasingly diverse imagery/media for the *Search-Light* series, it is as if she is harnessing yet more powerful means to convey her concerns. These grand, horizontal panoramas—formally and symbolically poised between darkness and light—play off pale inner cores of serene and tenderly decorated terrain against menacing bands of gloom.

In the earlier *Search-Light I* and *Search-Light II* (2004), circular shapes float free above the illuminated landscapes, but version II is infested with war hardware and lotus are engulfed by rising black liquid. Fox's lotus plants are potent presences; whether etched as broad masses in *Tilt* (2005) or delineated in flowing gradations in *Rise II* (2005), their rhythmic stems, fleshy leaves and sharp-edged blooms pervade the work. Though they are traditional symbols of hope and renewal in traditional Eastern art, here their message is less certain.

*Search-Light III* and *Search-Light IV* (2005), the major works of *Shadow of a Doubt*, radiate greater belief; in *III* the lotus push through their oily mire and helicopters depart, while in *IV*, joyous phoenix, symbols of resurrection, finally inhabit a flourishing environment devoid of human intervention. Smaller vertical panels from *the Tread-Lightly series* (2005) placed either side of *Search-Light III* subtly inform the panorama but they also operate independently, striking a different note in the exhibition. A similar association is set up between *Search-Light IV* and the flanking Bodhi tree images.

In form, the Bodhi is the Tree of Wisdom, under which Siddhartha Gautama attained Buddha hood. The tree's iconic nature recalls traditional Eastern and Western religious beliefs in its life-giving and immortal powers, and as a mystical symbol of the universe, it is surely an image of hope. Although Fox's safe Australian foundations have been shaken by world events, and a 'shadow of a doubt' has crept in, it is clear that the artist has also seen a thousand Buddhas dance.

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<sup>1</sup> Mt Kailas is often referred to as the *Axis Mundi*, that is, ...it is the stable pivot around which the universe revolves. Massive and unmoving, it represents that which transcends change... (A Shearer, *The Spirit of Asia*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2000, p.23.)