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INTERVIEWED BY
ROBERT SVOBODA

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DOUBLE TAKE

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AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT BEER

January 9, 2008, Oxford, United Kingdom

DR. ROBERT E. SVOBODA



Dr. Robert E. Svoboda with Robert Beer.

ROBERT BEER HAS STUDIED TIBETAN *Rthangka* painting for more than thirty years. One of the first Westerners to become actively involved in this art form, he initially studied for a period of five years in India and Nepal with several of the finest Tibetan artists living at the time. Since 1975, he has lived in England, working consistently on developing the artistic skills, vision, patience, and understanding of this highly complex subject as well as the historical and cultural contexts within which it arises. He is the author and illustrator of *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* and *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*. His work has appeared in numerous publications around the world.

Robert Svoboda was introduced to Robert Beer's work in the mid-eighties, when Robert Beer provided the artwork for the cover of Svoboda's book *Aghora*. Shortly thereafter, they met in the isolated Scottish village where Robert Beer and his family were then living and have since remained in regular contact.

ROBERT SVOBODA: If you could start off just by speaking a little about your background and what brought you to where you are.

ROBERT BEER: What brought me to where I am? Going back right to the beginning?

RS: Far enough back as seems useful.

RB: Basically the strongest event of my childhood was the death of my sister, who died when I was fourteen. She died of hydrocephalus when she was three years old; her head grew to an enormous size and was filled with cerebrospinal fluid. She was kind of the center of the family, and because of this our whole family broke up soon after

her death. Two days after she died, I had a dream in which my sister and I were flying through the sky together, and she was no longer deformed; she was actually perfect in form; it was so real. As we were flying together through a very beautiful clear sky I heard a church bell ringing, and then I woke up to our doorbell ringing; it was my mother and father just coming back from church.

When my sister died, her face had an agonized expression, but when I actually went into the front room to look at her in her coffin that morning, she had the same expression that she had had in the dream. Her face was smiling and very beautiful, so I realized that something actually survives death. From then on I essentially became somewhat obsessed with death, and trying to understand what life is all about.

I spent a couple of years living homeless and on the road after this, because I didn't really have a home anymore. This was the period of the beatnik generation in Britain, but there were few of them on the road then. I began to meet people involved with Buddhism, people who were older than me who were looking into Eastern religions. From the time I was sixteen years old I strongly gravitated toward Hinduism and Buddhism. In 1965 I set out for the East with the romantic notion of becoming a Buddhist monk. I was eighteen years old at that time.

RS: Did you finish school?

RB: No, I left school at sixteen. I was basically not in school much from age fifteen onwards, and I was living in friends' houses because I didn't have a home. From age sixteen to eighteen, I was more or less on the road until I set out for the East to

become a Buddhist monk, because that seemed the brightest option.

But in Istanbul I was turned onto LSD, and LSD became the center of my life for the next three years or so. It was during this period that I really started painting, after I had returned to the UK. Then I became very involved with Hindu and Buddhist imagery and symbolism, Indian music (*sitar*), and Gnostic Christianity. The mid and late '60s were a very creative period in my life, as they were for many others, when the transmission of the language of symbolism became very potent and meaningful for me.

But when I was twenty-two I flipped out on acid, and that's when I left for India and really became deeply involved with Tibetan art and Indian music, because I was quite honestly no longer able to function on any other level. The vehicle of Tibetan art and its imagery became a way for me to identify strongly with my own internal process. It was an aboriginal or primeval instinct, rather than an intellectual impetus, that actually propelled me into this world. Its reality resonated very deeply, and in time I began to find a valid sense of understanding through the drawing and painting of Buddhist deities. The imagery resonated with what was taking place inside of my psyche; some kind of transmission was taking place. That's basically how I started on this path.

RS: So there you were in India, at twenty-two.

RB: Yes. I spent five years in India, the winters in Varanasi studying Indian music, and the summers in the Kangra and Kulu Valleys studying Tibetan art. I also spent a year in Kathmandu,



Manjuśrī, an oil painting by Samundra Man Singh Shrestha. 2003

where I studied Indian music with a lovely blind *sarod* player named Mohan Sundar Shrestha. I also became involved with Newar art in Kathmandu. Although my main discipline was Indo-Tibetan Buddhist art, I have always been fascinated with Newar art (the indigenous Hindu-Buddhist art of the Kathmandu Valley). It was during this time, 1973-74, that I met the Newar artist Siddhimuni Shakya (1933-2001) who was my greatest inspiration. The work that he was producing at that time was unbelievable and exquisite; it was quite revolutionary for me.

RS: It's probably fair to say few Westerners have heard of Newar art, even among those who have heard of Tibetan Buddhist art...

RB: Yes, Tibetan Buddhist art has become very popular. When I came back to the West in 1976 not many people had heard of Tibetan Buddhist art. But the Tibetans are very good travelers through time and space. They came to the West and have now established many monasteries and centers. They are very good at being a race in exile; as nomads and traders they have been able to take care of themselves. While Tibetan Buddhism has been taking firm root in the West, Newar art has remained somewhat neglected in Nepal. Like Tibet, Nepal was also a closed country for many years, until the early '50s in fact. A friend of mine was there in 1965, when it first started to open to foreign tourists; and the British consul in Kathmandu invited every Westerner in the city to Christmas dinner in the embassy.

RS: When did Newar art originate?

RB: Buddhism originated in India. The Buddha lived in the heartland of Magadha (now Bihar), and from here his teachings spread eastward into Bengal, westward into Gandhara, southward to Sri Lanka, and northward into Central Asia. But the final flowering of Indian *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana* Buddhism remained vital in Bengal and Bihar until its great monastic academies were finally destroyed by Muslim invaders at the end of the twelfth century.

The great transmission of these teachings from India into Tibet had

taken place between the seventh and twelfth centuries, and the main route of this transmission passed through the Kathmandu Valley. The Kingdom of Nepal thus became the main staging post for the transmission of Buddhism between Eastern India and Tibet.

A vibrant renaissance in Buddhist art had developed during the late dynasty of the Pala Kings of Eastern India, who patronized many of the Buddhist monasteries and Hindu Temples of Bengal and Bihar. With the demise of the Pala Dynasty, Nepal became the direct inheritor of this ancient and highly evolved artistic tradition. And the Newars, who were the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, essentially became the Buddhist artists and artisans who actually instigated much of what we now recognize as Early Tibetan Buddhist Art. The influence of the Newars, particularly on early Central Tibetan art, was simply enormous, with the three great cities of the Nepal Valley, Bhaktapur (Bhadgaon), Patan (Lalitpur) and Kathmandu (Kantipur), respectively being known for their technical skills in woodcarving, bronze casting and painting.

Many Newar artisans and merchants maintained a presence in Central Tibet until the Chinese invasion of the '50s, even though Buddhism in Nepal had declined greatly since the three cities of the Valley had been conquered by the Gorkhas in the late eighteenth century, when the country became predominantly a Hindu nation.

RS: How would you define art?

RB: Art is outside and heart is inside.

RS: Very good.

RB: Art is the outward expression of the inner heart. To me art should convey beauty and devotion, and skill and time, and all of the things that are fine; art should be spiritually uplifting. The Western trend is often for art to portray neurosis. In the West art is often a product of neurosis; the artist somehow has to be tormented or demented. It's all become too conceptual—conceptual art—just thoughts that flash in the mind. Thoughts and ideas are so easy to come by. But to portray beauty, to

produce something that carries real peace, tranquility, beauty, grace—to me that's art, that's really art. For me art is uplifting, art is spiritual.

RS: Is there any part of modern art that you find uplifting or artistic?

RB: Artistic? Oh yeah, I think it's artistic. I wouldn't necessarily say that it is uplifting though. I think modern or conceptual art is extremely overrated. As an artist myself I've only met a small number of people who I believe can really see paintings; almost everybody can read books, but very few people can see—can actually absorb essence with their own eyes and interpret. Really, it's a handful of people I've met in my life, a very small number. When you have a very fine Newar or Tibetan painting, people will often say, "I could look at this for hours." But after maybe two or three minutes their attention lapses. These big exhibitions that take place now in the West, of the famous artists of the last century; people go there and they try to see, but I think most people don't really see that much. They try to educate themselves in a way of seeing perhaps, but it is usually more of a cultural event, something that they believe they should see. At most gallery openings people tend to pay more attention to the wine and the snacks than the paintings. For me art comes from the inside, from within, if that makes sense; but I think this may sound somewhat arrogant.

RS: When you look at a piece of art what do you see?

RB: I actually see it. I see what's really there; certainly in terms of the art I'm familiar with. But I wouldn't say this about abstract art, because like most people, I can't often see its point. I don't think you can see something in it until somebody explains what you're supposed to see, which may be conceptual or conjectural.

You remember Richard Buhler? When I visited him in Las Vegas a couple of years ago he showed me a Tibetan painting he had bought, and he wanted me to tell him what it was about. So I explained it to him and he said, "My god, it's like you are reading



Black and white photograph of Siddhimuni Shakyā's last painting of Padmāpāṇī Lokeśvara. 1998

hieroglyphics! You read it as though you are reading some strange language.” And I said, “Yes, that’s what it’s like. My kind of visual awareness is basically like I have learned an ancient language.” I’ve learned a language of line and I’ve learned a language of symbols, but these are very specific. I have a very good understanding of Tibetan art, and if I look at a thangka I can usually explain or understand everything in it. I may not be able to identify historical characters, but as regards most of the deities, I understand what they are holding, why they are holding them, why they are this, why they are that, it’s all pretty clear on this level.

But Newar art is somewhat different from Tibetan art; it’s a different tradition—so now I’m exploring Newar art. But unlike Tibetan art, there are very few people left who are able to understand and convey the actual meanings within Newar art. So I’m kind of trying to decode Newar art at the present time, trying to understand it, and to help the artist in Nepal to understand what they are painting, and to make the art known. This too sounds a bit arrogant, but really it is like this.

RS: Have you found that at least some people are becoming able to understand it?

RB: Yes, in Nepal, are we talking about Newar art?

RS: Yes.

RB: The Newars themselves, they have this unique skill of being able to reproduce most anything. You walk around Kathmandu City and many restaurants are now making hummus, salads and pizzas. They’ve learned how to prepare and cook such things. And when they play rock music, they’ve learned all the riffs from Eric Clapton, or Pink Floyd, or whoever. They have this perfect ability to replicate things. Newar artists likewise have this innate ability in casting bronzes, in woodcarving, mask making, in painting, to basically get it right. It’s an innate thing they grow up with in their culture; it’s in their unique genetic codes. They basically get it right. But artistically there are some things they don’t get right; like when there is

a specific deity offering, they don’t really understand what that offering should contain, because they don’t hold that tradition anymore. So there are facets of their art that are sometimes inaccurate or weak, like a right-hand attribute erroneously appearing in the left hand of a deity; or a deity sitting on a golden sun disc, when he or she should appear upon a white moon disc. They can usually replicate perfectly, and innovate to an astonishing degree, but a sophisticated understanding of iconography is rare amongst the artistic community.

To me these artists are very beautiful people, and I love them dearly. They are usually very humble and intelligent; but not highly educated, not highly trained; a lot of their tradition knowledge has been lost over the last few centuries. Most of the artists are quite young, and it is easy for me to identify with them. As an artist myself I had a very tough life financially, but I chose to do what I wanted to do, what I felt I was destined to do. And it is easy for me to recognize my younger self in many of these artists, to inspire them with an ability to really ‘see’ and appreciate their work, and sometimes to dazzle them with an iconographical description of every aspect of a deity that they have just painted.

More than anything I can recognize what their skills and talents are, and how, given the opportunity to paint what they really want to paint, they can create really incredible masterpieces. This they would love to do, but they have been held in bondage by the need to produce works for the market, especially to reproduce deity images that have become very popular. So in the past they have often kept making versions of popular images, but this stifles the artists’ creative talents. Given the chance to paint what they would like to paint, and paying them adequately for their work, so that instead of spending three weeks on a painting they could spend four months, their work will reach a much higher standard. This also gives them a greater sense of meaning and inspiration—of hope really. So that’s what I’m involved with at the moment: trying to nourish that creative energy

and talent, because it is a very, very beautiful legacy.

Tibetan Buddhist art is meditative; people want thangkas because they are doing a meditational practice of Tara or the Medicine Buddha, or some similar deity. I would define Newar art as devotional, not meditative; it kindles a strong devotional feeling, which is why I say heart is inside and art is outside. It resonates very strongly with the human ideal of the divine, of something that’s much more potent in its initial impact than it is in any symbolic meaning or esoteric sense.

RS: The modern world is not a particularly devotional place. Do you think that it is more difficult today than it might have been earlier for people who are involved in Newar art, which is, as you put it, more devotional than meditative, to tap into a devotional reality?

RB: It’s still possible; I find this ability in most of the good young artists, the ones in their twenties and thirties. You know, forty years old is quite old for a painter; after forty, your eyes begin to go. When you get to forty years old you are considered to be a senior Newar artist, and there is a great respect from the younger artists toward those whom they consider their seniors, the ones who blazed the trail. We don’t seem to have this in the West, where it’s much more competitive. There’s often a little jealousy among these young Newar artists, but you don’t have the kind of gross, “This is me, I’m a great artist attitude” that you often find in the West. There is instead a strong humility.

Newar society is quite difficult to penetrate; it has its own language (Newari), castes, annual festivals and complex rituals. And as the artists have come to know me over the past ten years or so, I’ve on occasion been in a situation with a couple of them where they have made a painting that they ask me to appraise, and I talk about the quality of the art, and then I start to talk about the symbolism, and they can’t believe how I know all of those things. Then they’ll find a reproduction in a book, and I’ll explain everything in the painting, and

they can't believe that anybody carries this knowledge anymore. So on that level they have begun to respect me, not just for what I know but also for who I am. I self-identify with them because I know how hard it was for me at that time in my own life, and how little help I actually had, and how little I still actually have. The painters of Newar *paubhas* and Tibetan thangkas have traditionally always been anonymous, and rarely ever accorded the respect of a scholar, lama or pandit. I can identify with them because they also have had so little help, but times are changing and the artists of Nepal now commonly sign their own works. So I'm there to help them on these levels. I think the best thing I can do in the latter part of my life is to help nourish these artists, both in terms of patronage, of giving them the freedom to create what they want to create, and of helping them understand their own art form better and learn more about their own Newar tradition themselves. And they facilitate that now, so if I'm with some of the more knowledgeable artists—and there are only a few that I consider really knowledgeable—then an incredible transmission of information takes place between us. And that's real transmission for me, that's real guru-disciple transmission, whoever is the guru in that relationship. Sometimes it's me, sometimes it's somebody else, but it does take place and I bow to its beauty. There is a life force behind everything; and this world is very alive and dynamic from my perspective.

RS: Yes, it does sound like this sort of art is alive, and that the tradition behind it is alive. The art itself comes alive in the artist, then it manifests externally and has the potential to live outside.

RB: And this is reflected in the thangka shops in Kathmandu, which now have Newar art in them, whereas four or five years ago you wouldn't see Newar art there, only Tibetan art. Now you see Newar art everywhere, including many copies of paintings that I have bought the originals of. It's becoming much more popular.

RS: From what you've seen does any of the art they carry in the shops have any artistic merit to it?

RB: There are often some good artists' paintings in the shops of Thamel; the skill of the Tamang artists who copy most of the Tibetan thangkas is often very good. Unfortunately, virtually all of the shopkeepers in Kathmandu have very little knowledge whatsoever about Buddhist or Newar art, even though some of them have been in the business for thirty years. When I was there recently I went to visit a shopkeeper I know who has been selling Buddhist art for the last thirty years and is now selling pashmina shawls—and it's no different for him, he said—shawls are better business. So none of the art had any real meaning for him although he is a very sweet man; it's an industry, essentially. And customers go to the shops and they obviously think that the shopkeepers know something about what they sell, but they don't. And you should know that most of the Buddhist art in commercial shops in Kathmandu is never actually painted by 'Buddhist monks,' so there are often many mistakes in these Buddhist paintings, particularly with the more complex wrathful deities and their mandalas.

RS: Given how many mistakes are being made now in this industry, do you think there will always be a separation between the more commercial art and the actual art that maintains the symbolism and the accuracy of the symbols?

RB: Yes. I think it's very hard to influence the Tamang artists. There are various things I've said to no avail to some of the people who own these shops. One of the biggest sellers of art in Kathmandu has several hundred Tamang artists working for him. But just by telling the shop owner "You should change this," or "Make Amitabha a much darker red," it will never happen, because that advice will never penetrate from him to the working artist. So I can't influence things on that level. They work mainly

from copies, you know; they copy copies. These young Tamang boys are making copies of photographs, photocopies, or sketches made by other artists. They keep copying and then they begin to lose details. What is held in one hand of a deity—maybe it is a *vajra*, or a club—suddenly becomes a trident, and then next time it is copied as a trident, and it goes on like this. It is a bit like coins that were made in the Roman Empire: the farther away from Rome they were minted, the more abstract the image of the emperor became on the coin.

There is no real source of knowledge, as such. Even among the young Tibetan lamas who go to buy thangkas there, they often really don't understand the iconography themselves. And amongst their students there are probably very few who really understand the art well. It's such a complicated subject: the iconography, the imagery, it's just too much for people to learn or even attempt to learn—unless you're a painter yourself. Then there's a real need to learn these things.

This is a complex discussion of course.

RS: Of course. ❖

Robert Beer is the author and illustrator of *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*. He has studied Tibetan thangka painting for more than thirty years. One of the first Westerners to become actively involved in this art form, he initially studied for a period of five years in India and Nepal with several of the finest Tibetan artists living at the time. He resides in Oxford, England.

Dr. Robert E. Svoboda While in India, received a degree in Āyurvedic medicine and was tutored by the Aghori Vimalānanda in Āyurveda, Yoga, Jyotiṣ, Tantra, and other forms of classical Indian lore.