

Visionary Realms

An interview with Robert Beer

I've heard it said that there are many doorways into the dharma: some students enter through reading texts, some through listening to teachings, and some through art. A number of teachers, including the mystic G. I. Gurdjieff and the meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, have spoken of artworks that embody higher consciousness and have the ability to transmit this awareness just by their visual presence. Robert Beer's own paintings and drawings, and the work by contemporary Newar masters he discusses here, may be such art. I first encountered Beer's work when in the late 1980s I came across a copy of *Masters of Enchantment: The Lives and Legends of the Mahasiddhas* translated by Keith Dowman and illustrated by Beer. Beer's dazzling paintings were based on traditional Tibetan iconography, but were done

with an airbrush and colors that aren't otherwise used in thangkas—soft but vibrant peaches, electric pinks, minty greens and such. I'd never seen that combination of Western and Eastern techniques—and I haven't seen it since. Beer's work, at that time, took me to another world. And it continues to do so. Check out his *Encyclopedia of Symbols and Tibetan Motifs*, from 1999.

I first met Beer in 2001, on the occasion of an exhibition of his work at Tibet House in New York City; I met him again in late 2009 when he returned to Tibet House, this time for an exhibition of Newar and Tibetan master paintings from his personal collection. You'll find some of those paintings in these pages. As you will see, Beer is many things; boring is not one of them.

—Frank Olinsky

Tell me a bit about your early art background—art school and so on. When I was a child my father sometimes drew airplanes and sailing ships for me, and I learned to copy these from memory. Later I inherited a book called *Tanks and How to Draw Them*, and I learned a lot about perspective and illustrative techniques from this military manual, which strangely had much in common with the imagery of wrathful deities. I also was good at model making, which later led to the acquisition of skills such as grinding mirrors for telescopes and building a harpsichord. But most of all I was interested in drawing, especially narrative illustration, which first began to develop from the epic poems and ballads that we learned to memorize in school.

Unfortunately, I could not enter art college because I was red-green colorblind. In retrospect this was probably a good thing, for it was at this time that I met a very eccentric artist named John F. B. Miles, who was destined to become my mentor and lifelong friend. “Eccentric” is a mild word to describe John, whose father was a landscape painter and a rationalist intellectual and militant socialist; and whose mother was an ex-Carmelite nun with strong spiritual, religious, and sexual yearnings. John was the real thing, a true artist in every cell of his being and certainly one of the finest visionary painters of our

time. He wasn't just larger than life; he was gigantic and, like Rasputin, egotistical, fearless, and outrageous in his devilish wit and sensuality. I was seventeen and homeless when I was absorbed into this alchemical crucible of art, where the passions were volcanic and often volatile beneath its dome of many-colored glass. Yet somehow I managed to retain my innocence.

Can you tell us about an experience you had with him that illustrates his influence on you? Maybe it's better here to illustrate his influence on other people. In his later years, one of John's students was a young Tibetan who had lost his original documents from Lhasa. From a few crumpled photocopies of these papers, John was easily able to reproduce them in their original form, using red and blue pigments for the official headings and seals in both Chinese and Tibetan characters, and black ink for the handwritten text and signatures. John had never tried to copy any of these cursive scripts before, but they were absolutely perfect in their calligraphic precision, and as always there was no hesitation in the dexterity of his brushstrokes.

A similar incident took place at Dartington Hall in Devon, where one summer a Japanese Zen artist was invited to teach a week-long course. On the open day, John went along with two

of his Japanese girlfriends, and they sat at the back of a hall full of cross-legged students, who were mesmerized by the spontaneous and rapier like brushstrokes of the Zen master. At the end of the demonstration, there was a complete silence when members of the audience were invited to try their hand with a Japanese brush, until John shouted out from back, "I'll have a go!" So in front of this meditative assembly John loaded the brush with ink, took one look at the Zen master's last piece and duplicated it with the exact same sequence of brushstrokes. Within the space of a few swift minutes he made copies of all of the master's previous calligraphic drawings. That evening, John and the Zen master both got very drunk on saki together, much to the dismay of the master's more restrained and serious new students.

Describe your first encounter with Buddhist art. When I was fourteen, my sister died from hydrocephalus. She was three years old and severely cranially deformed. On the day after she died, she came back to me in a dream to reveal that not only does the spirit or soul survive beyond death, but that its nature is timeless, incorruptible, and perfect; can assume any form; and that its essence consists of pure love, intelligence, luminosity, and blissful awareness.

This sublime experience, or "after-death communication," was to change the course of my life, for the doors of spiritual inquiry were thrown wide open. I soon began to gravitate toward the doctrines of Gnostic Christianity, Hinduism, Sufism, and Buddhism, which of course also find expression through the visual arts of pattern, symbols, and iconic forms. The narrative element, especially concerning the lives of saints, also provided a fertile ground for the play of imagination and inspiration, which also coincided with the advent of the psychedelic culture of the mid-sixties. So I was already painting my own imaginative forms of divine beings and mandalas before I actually encountered authentic Buddhist art, even to the extent of drawing multiple-armed figures with an eye in each palm.

Then, in 1969, at the age of twenty-two, I underwent a psychedelically induced psychosis, which I would more accurately describe as a "kundalini crisis," as it was instigated by my attempt to open the "central channel" of my psychic nerve system. This crisis was to endure in its severity for many years, as it unleashed a terrifying array of perceptual distortions and psychic states that are still hard to describe. It was in this condition that I left overland in 1970 for India, where I was to remain



for the next five years, with another year in Nepal. And it was here that I began to practice thangka painting with some of the finest Tibetan artists who were then living in exile. The vivid imagery of the Vajrayana deities resonated deeply with my own internal or "otherworldly" processes at this time. It was more of a primeval or aboriginal instinct, rather than any intellectual impetus, that propelled me toward these visionary realms of benign peace and ruthless wrath. For unlike most Westerners I was not seeking to attain enlightenment—I just wanted to find a way back to the safety of conventional reality. Of course, there wasn't a way back, but there was a way forward. This was a long journey, and most of it was internal.

For many years you created—and in fact became famous for creating—traditional Buddhist art. Your show at Tibet House last Winter did not feature works painted by you, but instead showed works by other artists. Have you

stopped painting? Can you say something about being both an artist and collector of works in the same genre? This is a long story, and most of it happened in the twenty-five years or more that I spent at the drawing board. I wasn't really that naturally gifted as a draftsman. But I persevered until there came a point when I felt that I had tapped into the tradition, or was connected to its source. Then things really began to arise and make sense on a deep intuitive level. The entire Buddhist path is encapsulated within the symbolism of its vast pantheon of Vajrayana deities, and much more besides. So all the "traditional Buddhist art" that I am credited with creating and explaining, I tend to perceive as a by-product of my own internal search for clarity and meaning, which mainly arose within the mystical context of ancient Indian culture.

Art is outside, heart is inside, and I believe the real purpose of art is to transform the heart. This process of transformation is completely unhindered or "autonomous" for me now, so I stopped painting and drawing about fifteen years ago after my marriage broke up. For the relentless demands of the Tibetan Buddhist bandwagon, with its multitude of charitable causes, had a devastating impact on my personal life, with an ever-increasing amount of requested work projects and a constant lack of funding.

Many of my finest drawings and texts on deity symbolism have not been published, because the lack of support and funding inevitably tends to lead to a lack of ambition, and, dare I say it, to a lack of respect for the motivation of some individuals.

Anyway, I could never really afford to take my family out for a meal, let alone buy thangka, nor did I feel it was ethical for me to deal in Tibetan "sacred art," as so much of it had been pilfered. However, I did get to see a lot of incredible art and learn from it. Yet I still only possess two late Tibetan thangka, a Wheel of Life and a Gelugpa Refuge Tree, both of which I have recently reproduced as giclee [ink -jet] prints. So all the Newar and Tibetan paintings I now collect are contemporary pieces, most of which are made by artists I know personally.

Say something about the lives of these painters who produce this traditional art while living in the so-called modern world. The Newars were the original inhabitants (circa 6th century B.C.E.) of the Kathmandu Valley, whose unique artistic and architectural styles were directly inherited from the late Pala dynasties of Eastern India (8th to 12th century C.E.). The Newar influence on much of what is now recognized as Early



ARTWORK BY SAMUNDRA MAN SINGH SHRESTHA, COURTESY OF ROBERT BEER

Tibetan Art was simply enormous, but with the increasing absorption of Hindu influences over the last few centuries its art traditions became somewhat static and neglected.

However, the commercial market for Tibetan art has continued to expand over the last forty years, and there are now several thousand ethnic Tamang painters producing Tibetan thangka, most of whom work together in small groups under the guidance of their teacher or supervisor. Unfortunately, most of these painters are poorly educated and have little understanding about the imagery they are painting, like virtually all of the shopkeepers who sell these thangka in the tourist areas of Kathmandu. I think the lives of most of these Tamang artists are similar to those of other poorly paid artisans who produce goods for the tourist market, where thangka are

nothing more than just another saleable commodity. There are quite a few highly trained and excellent Tamang and Tibetan artists working in Nepal, but monasteries and centers usually commission their paintings, so they rarely appear on the open market.

By contrast, Newar art is still relatively little known, and only in the last ten years or so have their traditional paintings, or *paubhas*, began to appear in the tourist shops. But most of these are poor-quality copies of original works produced by the artists whose work I have been collecting. There are probably still less than a hundred established Newar artists in the Valley, but their number increases each year as new artists are trained. The community of Newar painters is a bit like an artist's guild, with exhibitions being held on an annual basis at the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and several other smaller venues. A similar community spirit exists between the Newar statue makers, who are equally as talented and skilful in their work.

I feel that the living conditions of most of these artists are quite good, and they will continue to improve as their work becomes more recognized and as their prices continue to increase. The structure of Newar society is quite complex and antiquated, with an astronomical number of festivals and rituals that have to be observed throughout their calendar year. They have their own language, Newari, and caste systems, which exist within an overlapping Buddhist and Hindu hierarchical framework, where the borders of both faiths often appear to be quite blurred. This is reflected in the unique pantheon of Newar dei-

ties, which were essentially either Hindu or Buddhist in origin but now have become so intermixed that they frequently face each other across the same shrines or temple courtyards. To the Newars, the gods are gods, so they paint Hindu and Buddhist deities with the same devotion, and will equally petition their help when divine intervention is called for.

How did you come in contact with these artists, and what is your relationship with them?

I first became interested in Newar art while I was living in Kathmandu between 1973 and 1974, when I came across the work of Siddhimuni Shakya (1933–2001), who is regarded by the Newars as one of the greatest artists that ever lived, as indeed he was. Siddhimuni's father, Anandamuni Shakya (1901–44), was an equally legendary figure, who revolutionized Newar art by using techniques of photorealism in his depiction of deities. His style was heavily influenced by plate photography and the work of Botticelli, so many of his paintings looked like black-and-white photographs from the god realms. In 1941 Anandamuni opened Nepal's first art gallery, which closed in 1944 when he died. He only managed to sell one painting during this time.

I was very inspired by Siddhimuni's meticulous work and dedication, but I had also developed my own style of painting by this time, which was different but similarly meticulous. Then, in 1988, I went back to Kathmandu and was surprised to discover how much my published drawings and paintings had influenced the burgeoning Tibetan art market there. At this time I also met an artist named Phunsok Tsering, from Sikkim, who was the person that really enabled me to contact all the Newar and Tibetan artists whose work I have since collected. Without Phunsok's help none of this would actually have been possible, so I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to this wonderful man.

Phunsok died in November 2008, at the age of fifty-one. For the last fifteen years of his life we worked together trying to help improve the quality and skills of the Newar artists and to promote their work. This essentially also meant that I had to become their main patron, which came about from my selling much of my own work at my first Tibet House exhibition in 2001, from which I was able to acquire several of Siddhimuni's greatest masterpieces, along with works by some of the other



ARTWORK BY JOHN MILES, COURTESY OF ROBERT BEER

finest Newar artists. Thus my reputation as a “collector” was quite easily established. But what was often difficult for many artists to comprehend was the fact that not only did I know how to paint as well as they could, but that I also seemed to possess an uncanny knowledge about the deities themselves. Only a few of the “senior artists” have this kind of knowledge, the most notable being Udaya Charan Shrestha, whom I recognize as the true genius of the modern Newar art movement.

So my relationship with these artists is wonderful. Many of them are young and extremely brilliant. They are fine, honest, and upright people, with a lot of humility and an eagerness to learn and develop. They are also great fun to be with, and many of them have become close friends. But more than anything, they remind me of how I was at their age, and of all the difficulties that I had to go through as an inspired but impoverished artist. It's easy for me to identify with them; they remind me of everything that I have ever loved and aspired to in this life.

What is the most important thing the average viewer should know about this work? The questions I am most commonly asked are: Do the artists use magnifying glasses, single-haired brushes, or mineral pigments? How long does a painting take to make? And the inevitable: How much does it cost, and what does it all mean?

The artists do not use magnifying glasses. A single-haired brush is a myth, as a single hair cannot hold pigment. Mineral pigments, or “stone colors,” are also largely mythical, as only a few Newar artists have access to this range of natural pigments. Indian poster colors are commonly used by most Newar artists, and in recent years [they have used] oil colors for their modern paintings on canvas.

A painting can take anything from a few weeks to few years to complete. Many of the finer single-deity paintings I have collected take on average about two or three months to complete. Some of the more complex compositions took more than a year, while two of Siddhimuni's masterpieces each took over three years to complete. Siddhimuni's son recently finished a painting of Vishvarupa Lokeshvara that took six years to paint. This is devotion.

I think these are relevant technical points, but the main thing I would emphasize is the beneficial effect that this work invariably has on the

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“average viewer.” Many of the finest Newar artists have the gift of being able to capture the “presence” of the deities they depict, almost as if the divine essence and qualities of the deity are actually embodied in its painted form. The peaceful compositions are full of beauty, compassion, tranquillity, and grace, and the more wrathful ones are both majestic and awe-inspiring in their startling realism. They are exquisite images to live with, sublime and radiant, but they are essentially devotional icons rather than meditational supports. This is one of the main differences between modern Newar and traditional Tibetan art. Another obvious difference is that Tibetan art tends to be cartoonlike in its two-dimensional and stylized simplicity, whereas Newar art is much more photographic in its three-dimensional innovation, complexity, and realism, so it is much closer to Bollywood than to Shangri-la.

How do you see your role in terms of presenting this work to a Western audience? Given the qualities I have just alluded to, I think these images can easily present themselves without my help. However, I have put on several exhibitions over the last ten years or so. Exhibitions require a lot of work and preparation, and since they depend upon publicity, they are also quite risky, and I am not an entrepreneur or publicist. So I wouldn't say most of them have been that successful—but then I tend to think of success as the ability to withstand failure. Of course, it would have been wonderful to exhibit at the Royal Academy in London or the Rubin Museum in New York, but as yet this

doesn't seem to be in my destiny.

So recently I launched a website—www.tibetanart.com—in conjunction with Wisdom Books in the UK; hopefully this will be a more enduring “virtual exhibition,” with lots of interesting and exciting galleries. So far we have reproduced about fifty-five of my finest Tibetan and Newar paintings in the form of archival or giclee prints, which are virtually identical to the original paintings. This website will also include John Miles's work. I believe this website will be my most rich and meaningful legacy, for I still have a lot to say.

How do you feel about being a Westerner with such a vast knowledge of traditional Buddhist iconography? Quite honestly, I don't feel that different from anyone else. Knowledge is just knowledge, and a vast knowledge of any subject can't help to alleviate a toothache. Being a mental process, knowledge can also easily dissipate or completely disappear from memory, and for a proud scholar the onset of Alzheimer's disease may be like dying before you die. Fortunately I do not have this problem as yet, and can access a seemingly endless stream of information when I need to. But I am not proud of this ability; my memory can often be flawed and fickle. This knowledge is just something that's there, something that lies dormant most of the time

As Dumas wrote, “There are the learners and there are the learned. Memory maketh the one, philosophy the other.” It's the philosophical context that I cleave to, for this is the realm of the soul, of insight, intuition, and imagination. This realm is where

I choose to dwell, for I believe that the knowledge of the soul and the love we bestow upon others are the two things we take with us when we leave this world. The rest is just commentary.

Yet I know these “commentaries” are important for people, so I always try to provide information when asked and often undertake lengthy research, which is always unpaid and rarely acknowledged. I like Rumi’s phrase: “The worker is hidden in the workshop.” Answering these kind of questions now takes up most of my time. Request emails are the bane of my life, sad but true.

I’d like to hear your comments on contemporary traditional Buddhist art and how it relates to the larger scheme of contemporary art in general. There are some excellent young Buddhist artists working right now in both the Tibetan and Newar traditions, and I’m sure the same is true in other Buddhist cultures, such as in the Thai, Korean, and Japanese traditions. This certainly wasn’t the case when I first began to study thangka painting in India, when only a few Tibetan artists were able to earn a living from painting instead of working on road crews. Now there are several thousand Tamang and Tibetan artists working commercially in Kathmandu alone. Much of this work is good, but few have the iconographic knowledge and humility that the old masters from Tibet possessed. However, I hear that some artists from Lhasa and Repkong (Tongren), in Eastern Tibet, have managed to retain many of their artistic traditions.

How this relates to contemporary art in general I cannot really say. I think tantric imagery is far too esoteric for general consumption, but it certainly is becoming mainstream among tattoo artists. Soon its wrathful charnel-ground imagery will probably impact the modern craze for vampires and zombies, for it was in India rather than Transylvania where these legends first arose.

One of my teachers said that the function of art is to relieve suffering. What do you think the function of art is? Art is a small word in comparison to the multitude of meanings and functions that can be applied to it. I feel a lot of modern conceptual art depends upon neurosis and obsession for its generation, such as the “shock of the new” and all the surgical, clinical, morbid, loveless, and cruel imagery it often engenders. Maybe this is some kind of exorcism that relieves suffering, but I think not. It just tends to exploit the truth of suffering, which is the first of the Four Noble Truths. The other three Noble Truths would perhaps be more inspirational in terms of their artistic relevance to the transcendence of suffering. As I said earlier, art is outside, heart is inside, and for me the real function of art is to transform the human heart itself into a work of great beauty. But this is only my opinion.

How do you see the relationship between Buddhist art and Buddhist practice? For anyone involved in Buddhist deity practices, this relationship is crucial. This is an area where the

iconographical details of a visualized deity, assembly, or mandala have to be accurately depicted. And the extensive use of visualized imagery in Vajrayana deity-yoga practices is in itself an art form, where the images are internally generated in the mind. On this level, an advanced tantric practitioner would not differentiate between a physical consort and an imaginary consort. The internal reality can become this real. There is that pithy saying from Jesus: “Whoever looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his own heart.”


On a didactic level, thangkas are also used to illustrate philosophical concepts, such as the conditions of cyclic existence, pictorial compendiums on medicine, cosmology and astrology, and the biographies of various gurus and teachers. Then the various groups of auspicious symbols appear virtually everywhere throughout the Buddhist world. Everybody wants good fortune. So the practice of painting deities certainly helps enable one to visualize their forms more vividly, and the “clear appearance” of the generated deity is an important aspect of many tantric practices.

What about painting as practice? Some say that thangka painting is not really a spiritual practice, but I sure learned a lot from it. I think any discipline can be utilized as a meditational practice, as the biographies of the eighty-four Indian *mahasiddhas* so clearly exemplify. Many of the great Tibetan lamas were also highly accomplished artists, such as the Tenth Karmapa, the Eighth Situ Rinpoche, and the Mongolian sculptor Zanabazar. One of my own main teachers, the Eighth Khamtrul

Rinpoche, was a highly gifted visionary artist, and I sure learned a lot from him too.

Once, when I was laboriously counting my way through a daily quota of five hundred prostrations, I became so furious with the pointlessness of this practice that I threw my heavy wooden prostration board at the altar. In the clear air that swiftly followed this thunderstorm, I went straight to see Khamtrul Rinpoche and told him how I felt and what I had just done. He thought this was very funny. Then he told me a story about a simple Tibetan he once knew who felt that even the so-called preliminary practices were too advanced for him, so he chose instead to just concentrate on the four contemplations of the precious human body, impermanence, suffering, and karma. In time, this seemingly simple practice resulted in this man attaining a deep realization.

Rinpoche then told me what the practice of painting meant to him, of how much he loved doing it, and of how it is a perfect vehicle for the Mahamudra practice of directly realizing the mind’s innate nature or purity. This was the most profound teaching I ever received from Khamtrul Rinpoche, and it also let me off the hook about finishing my prostrations. So my “practice” began at this point and has never stopped, which is why I like to use the word “autonomous.” ▼

 To view a slideshow of Robert Beer’s collection of artwork, visit tricycle.com. Learn more about Tibetan and Newar tantric art at www.tibetanart.com.