

Painting the Mystery - Exploring Color, Culture and Ideas

Date : February 21, 2019

British artist Jennifer Baird describes how her point of view as an artist has changed and evolved over time interwoven with her experiences and ideas.



I grew up in an artistic family, particularly on my father's side so there were often highly artistic aunts, uncles and older cousins around, influencing me. My father was a really good teacher so extremely early on, when I was about 2 years old, I was painting.

And right from the beginning I always wanted to portray the inner worlds, things that were mysterious to me even at 2 years of age. As I grew older and read stories such as C. S. Lewis etc, stories that yearn for the luminous, the mysterious, a spiritual guide – those archetypal symbols and narratives came in quite early on in my painting. I never really decided that I was going to become an artist. It's just what I always did.

Then I went more or less straight from school to Lama Chime's meditation centre near Saffron Walden. In those days it was called Kham Tibetan House. I met Lama Chime when I was 17 and spent a lot of time there. He would only let people stay for a year at a time and then they had to go back into the world for a while. In those early days I was assistant cook to Deirdre, as she was known then, but later became Pema Chödrön. It was a really wonderful time and we all lived together in the house with Chime Rinpoche, until he and his family got their own house in the village. While I was there I learned to read and write Tibetan and discovered Tibetan iconography

which all nourished my art. I've often put some written Tibetan in paintings, particularly the Lantsascript and more recently Phags-pascript because I think they are aesthetically so beautiful.

When I was around 23 I went to Tobago. I was living at Kham House at the time and my parents came to visit me. They were planning the holiday of a lifetime and brought all these brochures of exotic tropical islands. I thought the one of Tobago looked nicest even though I'd never heard of it. So they booked their holiday there and a couple of weeks before they left they invited me to come with them since my time at Kham House was drawing to an end and, of course, I did! On my second day there I met a boy on the beach and fell madly in love, as I probably would have done on Tahiti, The Seychelles or Mauritius or any other island. It was the idea of the noble native and the beautiful scenario. So I ended up living in Tobago for about 34 years, painting all the time and exhibiting often, both in Trinidad and Tobago.

As soon as I got there, I was intrigued by the vast difference of the culture and all the influences that made it up – from very strong African influences to the Amerindian Carib and Arawak cultures. It was easy to find shards of pottery with fantastic animal heads andscraffitomarkings in gorgeous designs and so all of this wove into my art as well as the various mystical interests that I had in Buddhism, Quantum physics and cosmology and ancient mythologies such as Greek, Egyptian, Norse, Celtic etc. I've always read a great deal and everything that provokes my curiosity or inspires me is integrated into the paintings. So that period of more than 30 years painting in Tobago took me on a course that was very very different from anything I would have come across if I had remained in England or the modern western world. I think I was able to avoid, to some degree, the conditioning of post-modernism – particularly in the world of art.



ORNAMENTS OF THE NATURAL STATE On a background of a clear, starry sky the freely brushed 'Enso'- symbolising the 'Natural State' – is ornamented with intricate jewel-like geometries representing all the experiences of our senses in wonder and amazement at the great mystery of being.



DEEP TIME 8. PROTOLANGUAGE FLOW

One of a series of 8 paintings exploring vast time spans as the earth evolves through the aeons – forming and reforming, becoming ever more complex as dimensions and matrices emerge and then become enfolded and encoded. Shifting, morphing, throwing up ever more complex novelty.

It also gave me a lot of opportunity to continue my Vajrayana practices in an untainted environment, neither eastern nor western, it was something quite different.

It was in 2004 that a friend in England sent me a cutting from the Snow Lion newspaper on the back of which was an advertisement for Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's teaching in Margarita. I had heard about Namkhai Norbu from very early days and I knew that he was a great Dzogchen Master. I just couldn't believe it, that this incredible teacher was going to be in Margarita, which is so close to Tobago. At that time I was living as a recluse in the rainforest where I spent the last 16 years of my time in Tobago – high up in the mountains in a very isolated place; painting and doing one of those very long Anuttarayoga Tantra practices that requires a retreat situation. I was coming to the end of that, in the last stages of the completion stage, when I got this newspaper cutting and I didn't think, I just knew that I had to go there.

So I packed my backpack and took my passport and set off and as luck would have it Namkhai Norbu had just returned from Mexico where he had been looking at some land someone wanted to give to the Community. And he was there! There wasn't a retreat going on so there were not many

people but the folk there were from all over the world. I met Rinpoche personally and spent 4 or 5 days there, returned to Tobago to finish the completion stage of my practice and then went straight back to Margarita. I went back and forth quite a bit – it wasn't expensive to get there and I would take a tent and my paints.

It was fantastic there. I found the whole international community there was great. It was really eye-opening as to how practitioners from radically different cultures can work and practice together and that itself was a huge asset. People weren't restrained by their own cultural point of view, they were more open and interactive.

In 2009 I began to feel that my time in Tobago was coming to an end and that I needed to move more into the world. I also had the feeling that something was going on in the world, some kind of waking up process possibly that I needed to have my finger on the pulse of. I wasn't sure how to be involved in it, probably through art. I still don't know. So there was a period of going backwards and forwards to discover what England was like now – it had changed hugely – and to find out where in the country I felt drawn to. So in 2012 I came to live in Hastings, knowing instantly that that was the place. Its kind of edgy and bohemian and has an extraordinarily vibrant music and art scene.

My point of view as an artist has changed and evolved over time interwoven with my experiences and ideas. For me it was a radical change coming to live in England. First of all the color themes changed. I noticed that people in England don't wear such bright colors as they do in the Caribbean and the color schemes in people's houses are a lot more subdued so for a time I toned my colors right down although in a few years color started to reassert itself once again. I'm enchanted with color and experimenting with it. I feel that there are no limits to the discoveries one can make.



OPENING THE WISDOM EYE

On a background of multiple OM AH HUM seed syllables, 2 forest leaves embedded with jewels open to reveal the wisdom eye. The Eye Of Horus.



JOY AT SUNSET

This painting depicts the utter joy and bliss I often felt – living wild and free in the lush, unspoiled rainforest of a tropical isle. Curious about ancient cultures that celebrated harmony with nature whilst exploring direct freedom with no cultural interface at all.

Then there is a theme in art that particularly interests me. There is this whole idea (I guess it has been in art since art has been documented although it's not talked about enough at the moment) – of the spiritual in art and how the consciousness of the artist affects the power of the final finished piece, as well as all the techniques that the artist has learned, built up and experimented with during their artistic life. All their complex knowledge of how to use colour, line, form, ratio and the layering and texturing of colors to get particular effects. For the last few decades there has been a fashion in art to be very spontaneous and emotional and to throw, splash and dribble paint around a lot and whatever arises, whether it's accidental or intentional, that is it. I can understand how that evolved and how that needed to happen, but it's become so normal now that people don't even question where the actual ability of the artist comes in or how to be able to discern that, or how to view the capacities that the artist has, to be able to produce something intentionally or at least produce an intended effect on the consciousness of the viewer. So I'm very interested in that dynamic. When I had a show in May I tried to get people to talk about this subject a bit more but because of this view or attitude in contemporary art at the moment that anything goes and anything can be called art, it's all subjective etc – it seems taboo to question too much.

Since I came back to England, I've had two successful solo art exhibitions both in Hastings where I chose to live. I also took part in shows in San Francisco and Hungary. As far as another exhibition goes – I'm not sure. The way I've always worked is to intensely paint for about four years, accumulating a body of work to exhibit. That's the way I like to do it rather than having dribs and drabs here and there. For my art in particular, 50 or more paintings exhibited at a solo show in a gallery 'talk' in great depth to each other and build a 'field'. That way it's easier for people to get into the work.



ANUPRAVISHTA

This painting has an 'other-worldly feel. An alien sky. Galaxies are forming in what might be an island coastline, seen from high above. This Sanskrit word translates as 'interpenetrate' – as in all realities interpenetrating and containing each other. An ancient Buddhist concept but also hinted at in some interpretations of Quantum mechanics and Unified Field physics.

I brought a book out called 'The Enchantment Aesthetic' to coincide with my last show. I dedicated it to my teachers Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and Kyabje Chime Rinpoche. It's more than just a catalogue, with about 100 pages – including a foreword by an art professor and philosopher, an in-depth introduction, biography and full color images with statements on all the paintings. At the moment there is a trend among some artists in that they do not want to talk about their works – it's up to the viewer to decide. In my case, I think that people need a portal into the work because often there are interesting stories behind pieces or symbols I've used or esoteric meanings in a painting that most folk would miss. At the same time they can make their own interpretation. Or certain aspects of a work might have a very personal meaning to them. I like people to have the opportunity to read what I have to say about it. The two approaches don't have to be mutually exclusive.

I'm 63 now and not sure whether I want to spend four years accumulating works for a show. But I do want to explore the ideas I mentioned earlier: the connection between the consciousness of the artist, their spiritual and artistic development through life and their capacity to be able to produce a work that has a direct effect. Say, for example, that someone gave Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche some paper and paints; would whatever he did, even if he deliberately (or accidentally) tipped the paint over the paper, would that finished piece carry the vibe of his wakeful state so that whoever saw it, it would have the power to transmit something? Or in order for that to happen, would he also need the technical skills and understanding of how a color affects other colors etc, the entire background of an artist's training. The whole idea is very interesting and I would like to explore that more.

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