

# Karma Phuntsok

3rd of April - 8th of May : Karma Phuntsok, solo exhibit

In the corner of his studio, mounted on the wall around eye level, is a simple shelf made of pressed steel. On the shelf are several copper bowls of water, a burning candle, two small statues and a picture of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. For Karma Phuntsok, water is the simplest offering, it is pure and free, the candle gives light, the statues are reminders of finer manifestations and the picture of the Dalai Lama is there because he is unquestionably Phuntsok's hero. He recalls childhood memories of tears streaming from his eyes when he was privileged enough to be in the presence of the man who gradually influences the world in the appreciation of goodness and beauty. The small shelf shows a deep reverence for all that this artist experiences. He expresses gratitude quietly and easily.

Phuntsok is not really sure of his age. He fled the city of Lhasa, Tibet, with his parents in the same year that the Dalai Lama went into exile. That was 1959 and his mother thinks he was seven years old. Like most Tibetans of that period, his family was penniless upon arriving in Sikkim, India. However, the Tibetan mind is not poor and though humble the Phuntsoks soon enjoyed the relative comfort of their new home. Formal education came from a system of refugee schools set up for Tibetans; this period was a generous 10 years. True to the nature of his race, work was carried out

with enthusiasm and the young Phuntsok showed himself to have a broad appreciation of what it took to hold down a job. Driving a bus meant also being a mechanic; practical dexterity grew to be his constant companion.

As time passed, his interest in art grew, leading him into an intense apprenticeship under a master Thanka painter. The Thanka discipline is the painting of images depicting deities. The images are "tools" for meditation and each is painted in accordance with ancient tradition. There is nothing mystical about these Thankas to the Tibetan, it is real feet on the ground stuff. The body is guided by a mind in control; it is all a matter of practice and refinement for the common good. As a chosen student showing great promise, Phuntsok lived with the master 24 hours a day. Preparation of materials was a time-consuming task. Colour for paints came from a variety of stones collected over a wide area; then using simple, traditional tools such as a mortar and pestle, ingredients were ground, a process that sometimes took days. Cloth had to be neatly hemmed then strung inside a wooden frame, primed with a concoction of rabbit skin glue and chalk, then stretched until it resounded as a drum. A good all-round education.

The master was, in the best Eastern tradition, a businessman; the student, in the best Eastern tradition, was quick to learn. Phuntsok's need to earn a living soon led him into the world of professional painting; a lucrative occupation in the land of snow-capped peaks.

In 1978, while still living in Nepal, Phuntsok met an American who was visiting from her second home, Australia. Carol, a native of Kalispell in Montana, introduced him to the realm of Guru Rinpoche, the great Indian master who brought the Buddhist teaching to Tibet in the eighth century. According to legend, Guru Rinpoche's realm is centred in the Island of the Copper Coloured Mountain. One of the earlier works produced by Phuntsok, entitled Guru Rinpoche, has been reproduced as a greeting card, and is one of the most popular items published in his "Karma Art Series". Arriving in Australia unleashed boundless inspiration in Phuntsok's work. Experimentation with method became entwined with extension of Tibetan artistic tradition into the Australian genre.

The traditional skills he acquired in India were enhanced by his discovery of the airbrush, a tool for which he has mustered considerable skill. His technique refined as he painted a series of night skies, each begging the third dimension, sometimes presenting the viewer an effect of soaring space. One work hanging in the writer's home was a practice run of concepts Phuntsok later employed in a series of nine illustrations for a yet unpublished children's book on the life of the great Tibetan yogi, Milarepa, who lived in Tibet around the time that those on the other side of the world penned Magna Carta. The "practice run" oozes symbolism and undoubtedly would keep an allegorist occupied for hours; for Phuntsok, he was 'trying out ideas' for fun. With each work he exercises experimentation, introducing elements that dance across visual form into the infinite, more often than not subjecting the viewer to his sense of humour. An entirely positive pastime.

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An early commission in Australia, between 1982 and 1984, was the position of artist-in-residence at Chenrezig Institute,

a Buddhist establishment in Eudlo, Queensland. There he embellished the meditation hall (Gonpa) with hundreds of colourful images, as well as teaching interested students the skills of traditional Thangka painting. In 1985 he moved to 'Vajradhara Gonpa', high in the mountains above Collins Creak and Clear Springs near Kyogle, northern NSW. The central structure on the Gonpa is a traditional temple of respectable proportions, the interior walls of which are appropriately decorated with a series of nine paintings, up to eight by four feet (244 x 122 cm), painted by Phuntsok. The work was completed in 1989 and introduced some Australian concepts. During that period Phuntsok began exhibiting in significant local exhibitions around the Northern Rivers region of NSW and then at various Tibetan festivals and functions further afield, including the Tibet Himalaya Festival in Melbourne, 1989; the Year of Tibet, at Sydney University, 1990; and the Tibetan Fair, Sydney University in 1991 and 1992.

Late in 1992, Phuntsok's work gained significant exposure to a wider audience as part of the Biennale of Sydney at the Art Gallery of NSW, and also at the Mori Gallery in Leichhardt, Sydney. In the same year, Phuntsok received a request to hang several paintings in The Access Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria, for an exhibition in honour of the Dalai Lama's 1992 Australian visit. Unbeknown to him the five works submitted became the centrepiece of the exhibition, entitled "The Living Mandala". On viewing them the Dalai Lama expressed delight. The curator of the show recalls the pealing laughter of their special guest. The occasion is of immense significance to Phuntsok.

Painting is allocated a generous amount of time in the Phuntsok household, punctuated with the building of a charming cottage in the middle of a verdant clearing on the rolling bushland of Green Pigeon, north of Kyogle. Power is solar generated and all the trappings of the 1990s are at hand; father and son like to meddle with electronics. Power for the airbrush compressor arrives via a fuel fired generator only when needed; in use the air in the compressor's reservoir lasts for a satisfying length of time. Located under the floor, the mechanical device would seem a little incongruous in the simple studio. The portal of the free-standing room open onto dense bushland and ferny forest floor, an encyclopaedia of colour and fantastic form. The richness of the location complements the vast world of mind that this artist gains access to, stretching reality and inviting fantasy.

David Lake

(press review...)