Stationary Transport: Innocent Suitcases

Deborah Walker

What Dionysian revelation reveals is not a ground of determination but the dissolution of ground and of determination. What is reveals is not ground but rather – and I use the word very cautiously - abyss.

Apollonian truth, the figure of Apollo in which the limits of individuation are drawn, the Olympian images in which one is reflected back to oneself, such truth can cover over the abysmal Dionysian truth but can never cease being threatened by it.

John Sallis, Dionysos – In Excess of Metaphysics

India

This article explores the ideas surrounding a creative unknowing, a characteristic at the heart of my use of enigmatic painting. During an extended period travelling in India, a place that for many years has occupied my dreams, my writing and drawing; it became a kind of reflective space. The numerous diary entries I made, some of which follow, record the interior experience of this overwhelming country, while the drawings and sketches where an attempt to interpret my experience.

I went to India because I was intrigued with the idea that Nietzschean philosophy which has informed earlier paintings bore some kind of interconnection with Hinduism. I recognised that philosophically there seemed to be more contradictions between the two perspectives and yet there was something about Hindu treatment of chaos that resonated with my philosophical interest in Nietzschean thought (Walker/McCulloch, 2002) Hinduism have gods that come in multifarious representations whether relating to destruction, love; contradiction, sacrifice , truth et al- for example Shiva is the god of all-encompassing contradiction inherent in the act of living and the contemplation of living.

My next series of paintings will continue my struggle and experiment with de-figuring figurative representations. What I was aware of about Indian art is that the figurative representation it employs is not a representation of the god but instead a kind of manifestation of all and yet nothing pertaining to that god. So one’s experience of the art is a recognition of elements of the religion and philosophy of Hinduism.

As Alistaire Shearer (1993, p. 10) explains:

Hindu Art by contrast, is by no way anthropocentric. It celebrates not the perfectability of man but the already perfect realms of the gods; it eschews the clear certainties of daylight reality and floats in the shadowy enigmas of the dream; it pays homage to the rationality of the world of the extroverted senses, but to the irrationality of the oneiric and invisible realm opened up by inward contemplation. Its figures are androgenously sensuous celebrating the beauty not seen on earth.

This article attempts to share the experiences I had whilst in pursuit of my images. As Art for me is never separate from my visualisation of what it evokes or my actual experience of living in the moment as an active participator as well as a spectator, these notes will attempt to take you with me to those moments of illumination or puzzlement which will inform my final art products.

I try to take a philosophical attitude when travelling, free of itinerary or goals, even though part of me has counter arguments. If I can stifle the desire for something determined then I know I will satisfy a deeper need.
If a traveller wants stability, nowhere is more challenging than India because there are places and sights that open a door onto the abyss (both philosophically and emotionally). India does the abyss. Just like it does perfection and utter degradation, all in equal proportion! But unlike many other places I have been, India also does pinnacles of beauty, of intellectual, creative perfection and for some reason they makes it all, not just acceptable, but consoling.

Mumbai International Terminal

Walking into the baggage collection area in Mumbai explained everything I needed to know. Just the sight of it told me. Piles and piles of suitcases, not only lying on top of each other, but tumbling off the revolving carousel. This made me smile and I thought of all the times in my art-making I have been obsessed by the ‘suit-case’. To me they have such a resonance as an image in that they suggest departure, containment, mystery, memory and how filling a suit-case for a journey makes that ‘box’ a kind of container of a life; selection has been made, identity has been narrowed and an objective is in place. These suit-cases tumbling everywhere seemingly without ownership at Mumbai gave me a sense of overwhelming reassurance. No body around them, not even passengers, no one interested, no security – I liked this familiar psychological state.

Scan in suit-case paintings

When we were walking along the exit corridor from the plane, the Indian boy who sat in my row knelt down and put his face close to the carpet. He said it smelt like home. I found this touching.

Elephanta Island

Sitting on the ferry heading towards Elephanta is wonderful; cheerful, very loud, Indian music pervades the space and the boat, filled largely with Indian families. The passengers emanate their usual mix of paradoxical intensity and casual indifference. I am both insignificant in their midst and yet an object that draws intense scrutiny. This combination of contradictory qualities is difficult to assimilate.

I have longed to come here and see the Shiva caves and these hand carved rock caves.

Elephanta caves is devoted to the strange and complex god Shiva. He is not easily described except by contradictions and ambivalence. This probably accounts for my attraction to him, I relate to those self-contradictory qualities in my own nature. He is supposed to “embody all life, every detail, every minute, nothing is alien to him; as a consequence, whatever Shiva is, he is also its opposite” (Shearer, 15).

I am interested in making images of Shiva and here is one of the best examples of rock cut sculptures in India. I am drawn to not only the mystery of Shiva but to the enigmatic origins of this Hindu temple island. There are few inscription at the temple site that explain their purpose, who built them or why. Completing carvings in this manner, from ground up, unlike most temples which are built up from the foundations, these remarkable statues are chiselled from the roof downwards, without error, or the statue is a total loss. I want to attempt visualizing Shiva’s
When finally I find a corner to sit and draw, I attract the usual band of site-seers, usually children, who seem to have no reserve in their physical closeness. All my usual social understandings are now being challenged. I feel open, vulnerable and perhaps a little frightened at my state of difference and, perhaps, alienation.

I can see how the present rawness I felt evolved. It is not just the children’s innocence and enthusiasm, there is some quality enacted that shames me given my reserve and my guarded privacy. This is a place where you must trust the insight that here in India it is the heart that rules, not the head.

Prince of Wales Museum Chhatrapati Shieji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya

I stand at the gates with swarms of Indian families on Christmas day waiting for the museum to open. This museum was one of the main reasons I made the trip to Mumbai.

As I waited in the queues I watched the street seller and his wife, first sweep, then wash down the pavement with small buckets of water, another sweep and then lay down numerous sheets of clean, carefully folded plastic. They are both so serious and intent. Every time I watch one of these scenarios I can’t help but feel it is heroic.

The museum is overwhelming. I have longed to come here. The miniatures up stairs hold me for hours. These Indian miniatures are fine examples of the school of miniature paintings. One of Shiva and the elephant god Ganesh intrigued me and needs to be understood in terms of the myth. Shearer gives one version of the story:

One day when Shiva was away, Parvati (Shiva’s wife) took a bath. Fearing she might be disturbed, she fashioned a child out of the soap suds and set him outside her chamber door as a guard. Shiva returned unexpectedly, and learning that his wife was bathing, came to join her. The child-guard forbade him entrance despite his pleadings. Furious, Shiva burned off the head of the impudent child with a glance of his third eye. Emerging from her bath, Parvati was distraught. Just as Shiva vowed to replace the head with that of the first creature he saw, an elephant came lumbering into the courtyard; Shiva removed its head with a single blow of his trident, and set it on the child’s body. Thus was born elephant-headed Ganesh (‘Lord of Categories’). (Shearer, p. 48)

The following watercolour is inspired by not only my interest in Ganesh but the watercolours and paintings that were part of the museums collection.

Return to Contents