ABORIGINES AND THE BAMIYAN BUDDHAS

Peter Cleverley

Cyclone Tracy came into existence in the Indian Ocean off Australia's Northern Territory at 10am on the 21st of December 1974. On December 24th, Xmas Eve, she swerved in towards Darwin town and then back out to sea, only to turn round, head straight for Darwin and within three hours completely destroyed the town. All Darwin's suburbs where flattened, there remained several large structures in the Town Centre area, a Supermarket, the Koala Hotel, the Police Station and cells and several other of the more substantial structures. I was in Bali, Indonesia, oblivious to this catastrophic force of nature; I had made an overland return journey through Java and Sumatra to Singapore so that I could renew my visa for another month in Bali. I returned about two weeks after Xmas 1974 to talk of the cyclone hitting Darwin, the total destruction and the availability of work rebuilding this town. Within days I was with other males winging our way back to Darwin, Australia, in the quest for work. We were flying Garuda, Indonesian Airways, and unbeknownst to anyone beforehand, we landed in East Timor, Indonesia, supposedly to refuel. But, at the airport all Westerners were taken off the plane and searched. I could tell there were all sorts of desperation there, with hundreds of local people at the airport, some armed soldiers, and mayhem basically. If any passengers had what officials deemed incorrect documents or contraband they were held and their seats taken by wealthy Timorese attempting to flee their homeland and escape, what I realise now, were the beginnings of civil war. The Darwin Airport building was non-existent, no Customs, nothing. One was guided off the tarmac by security people and there was a bus to town.

Nothing could have prepared me for what we saw: steel reinforced concrete lamp-posts where knotted up on themselves, completely buckled every which-way. The only thing that remained of housing were those items that were attached to the ground by pipes, like toilets and bathtubs and sinks. Everything else had just simply disappeared; it wasn't even lying around, just gone completely. I never heard anyone that had been through the Cyclone mention it, like there was nothing more to say. I asked a cab driver how many people had been killed, he didn't reply. It is said that people took the opportunity to disappear from the life they had, pretend to have been one of the fatalities perhaps, and create a new identity somewhere else. All women where shifted to camps set up by the Australian Army, the entire re-building programme was organised straight away, and male workers poured in from all over the world. Something that really amazed me was that twenty four hours before the Cyclone struck all the Aboriginal people living in the area left and went inland several kilometres and returned several days later. Not one Aborigine was even injured. I was told later that local Aborigine elders had noticed the mass inland movement of reptiles: snakes, lizards and goannas; had recognised the signs and followed them into the hinterland.

There was no accommodation of any type so people migrated to the beaches and estuaries and I spent seven days living on a beach, searching for work during the day and returning in the evening to rest. A group of Aboriginal people took care of me, they didn't ask for alcohol, but I supplied them with some in exchange for their kindship. It was very dangerous, animals, including the human, would have had my pack and worldly possessions in no time if these wonderful people hadn't kept vigilance over them. Despite the supportive surroundings it was a huge learning curve for an average white boy. About a week went by and several of the group got work with an American construction company. They were contracted to build Tracy Village, which is comprised of a Medical Centre, a gymnasium with swimming pools, shops and a pub. I was a builder's labourer and the Aboriginal men

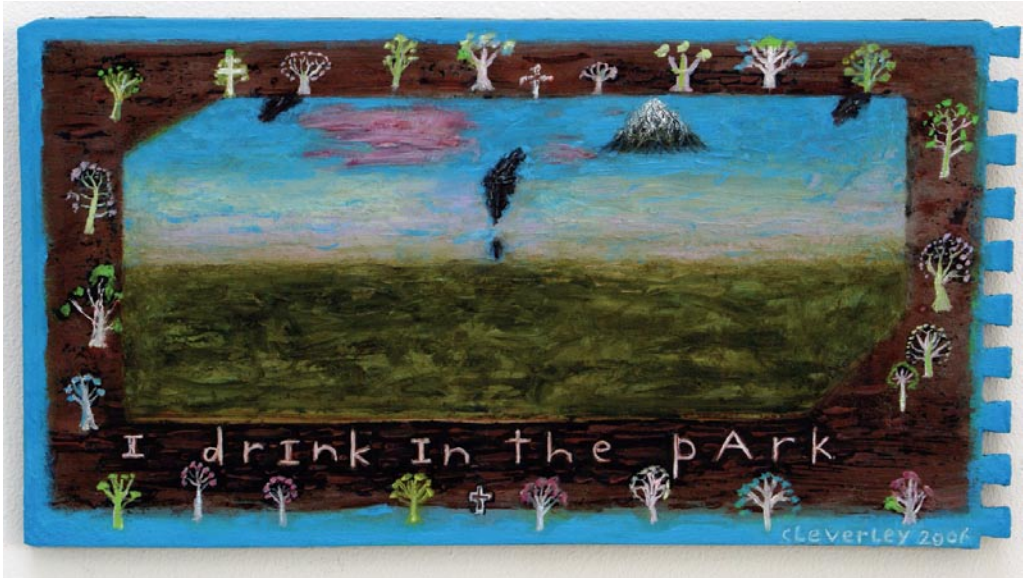

Image above: *I Drink in the Park*, oil paint on wood, 8 x 38 cm, 2006 (courtesy of the artist).
Image below: *Off the Back of a Truck*, oil paint on wood, 8.5 x 38.5 cm, 2006 (courtesy of the artist).

were employed as riggers (steel workers). The buildings weren't exactly highrise, but two-storied, and they worked without any safety gear and barefooted. They all had their riggers' tickets as they had worked like this many times previously. Every so-called 'Cyclone Season', they would move to where their expertise was required in the Northern Territory. One very hot midday we heard hooting and yelling and all the Aboriginal riggers literally ran along the girders, jumped to the ground, and chased down what

we later realised was a goanna. They caught it, killed it, hung it in a tree till knock-off time and took it back to the beach to eat with their friends. Not one ate with us at the camp that night. We were all accommodated in working quarters, with all food supplied. I did four months, making enough money to continue my so-called 'overseas experience', after which I said my goodbye to these workmates whose cultural heritage plays out in their everyday relationships with the world around them: their empathy with nature shone through their cooking, their catching of animals; and was manifest through their everyday lives. After I left, they stayed on there, really happy to have good employment on their home ground, and I will never forget their education of me and their kindship.

Approximately three years later, in 1977, on my overland return journey home from England and some of Europe via the Greek Island, Samos, and via Istanbul across Turkey, and through Iran, I stayed for a month in Afghanistan, an amazing country with wonderful people. I travelled into the Northern regions of Bandamia and Bamiyan where the largest art works on the face of the earth existed until March 2001. These were the two very famous 1500-year old idols dedicated to Buddha. Even though these mammoth sculptures were freestanding there were entire villages carved out of the cliff-side; and elaborate tunnels led to a multitude of cave-like abodes, the top ones so high that you could see right through to the Russian border on the horizon. With guides we climbed up through the tunnels that led to the heads of the Buddhas, and with a leap of approximately a metre you could land on the flat of the head. If you missed you would have fallen to your death, an unforgettable experience made even more difficult as one was then obliged to partake in a ritualistic smoking of hashish through a chillum (pipe), with other people perched up there,(some for days), and then you had to make the precarious leap back and descend without killing yourself. I stayed in Afghanistan for as long as my visa would allow and then left over the Khyber Pass into Pakistan, India, Nepal, stayed seven days in Burma, then on to Thailand and Malaysia, and flew to Perth in West Australia from Kuala Lumpur in November 1978.

Later, in 2001, I made a series of works called *Lilac Sky over Bamiyan* in response to the Taliban's total deliberate destruction of the Buddhas despite an outcry from within the country and from every quarter of the globe. (See for example, the article, "Buddha Bashing", by Robert Hughes, in *Time Magazine*, 23rd March 2001.) This series of paintings was discussed in a column, "Art Beat", by Peter Entwisle, in *The Otago Daily Times*, 28th May 2001 (page 9), in the context of discourse about similar art destructions, perhaps not as iconoclastic as in the case of the Bambiyan Buddhas, but nevertheless disturbing. Entwisle concluded by stating that my paintings would also be thrown on the Taliban's bonfire of false gods!

The two experiences I write about above are connected in my memory. Reflecting on this connection I now realise that I felt a kinship with the Aborigines and with the ancient makers of the Bamiyan Buddhas because I am also a maker of images, as they are. Maybe what we have in common on one level is a vulnerability in the face of any fundamentalism which tries to censor and thus to force us to become mouthpieces for a particular brand of propaganda. My own paintings include motifs that come to me from memory – for example the Australian eucalyptus tree – and they remind me of situations in which I was confronted with the everyday actions that bring people together: drinking in a park, working on a building site, living off the casual benefits of things that come our way in random fashion ('off the back of a truck').

Aotearoa/New Zealand is a young country prone to volcanic eruptions (see my work titled *Today*) and this makes me think that we need to live in the moment, in the *now*, sharing things that are really important rather than eschewing those things for the sake of an abstract idea about gods and ideologies that destroy our commonalities and kindships with other people.

This country is still so young, it's still smoking! We have the chance to change things rather than to buy into old hatreds. Using the cross in my paintings is an ironic strategy and perhaps this is suggested through its small scale in the face of eruptions and landscapes much larger than its influence can ever be. When painting I deploy my memory of experiences in the past; and when writing I reflect on these and realise

Image below: *Today*, oil paint on wood, 8.5 x 38.5 cm, 2006 (courtesy of the artist).
Image above: *God Box Dog Box*, oil paint on wood, 8.5 x 38.5 cm, 2006 (courtesy of the artist).

that my intuitive use of motifs are actually based on connections with other image-makers in other parts of the world regardless of race, colour or creed.

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