

BOOK REVIEW

Robert Powell. *Himalayan Drawings*. Edited by Michael Oppitz, with contributions from Peter Herbstreuth, Niels Gutschow, Götz Hagmüller, Clare Harris, Heather Stoddard, Charles Ramble, Annegret Nippa and Michael Oppitz. Published by the Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich, 2001. 304 pages, 283 colour illustrations, 59 black and white, 1 map. ISBN 3-909105-41-6. Price: Swiss Francs (sFr) 78, approx. USD \$50.

“I don’t like catalogues, I don’t even like the word catalogue” said Dr. Michael (Mark) Oppitz, Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Völkerkundemuseum at Zurich University, as he leafed through Robert Powell’s *Himalayan Drawings*. And after taking in the 300 pages of this ‘retrospective panorama’ of Powell’s work, I can see why Oppitz might resent the term.

Instead, *Himalayan Drawings* is a total book, a complete meal in published format which edifies the visual senses as much as it does the intellect. The high quality of the photographic reproductions match the intensity of Powell’s art, and the full page plates which make up two thirds of the publication have a depth of colour almost indistinguishable from that of Powell’s original drawings. The most prominent feature of Powell’s signature style, now frequently seen in the posters adorning restaurants and middle-class homes in Kathmandu, is his unique form of fantastical hyper-realism. On first viewing, many people take his drawings to be doctored photographs, only later realising that the life-like shadows and hairline cracks were created by pen and brush. It is all the more fitting, then, that the printed reproductions of Powell’s work which appear in the beautifully-produced *Himalayan Drawings* should be so true to his original works. When studying the House of Tsuk, for example, which graces the dust jacket, one is hard-pressed to remember that this is a photographic replica of a pictorial representation, and not the house itself.

The publication of *Himalayan Drawings* was timed to coincide with the first ever retrospective of Robert Powell's oeuvre. The exhibition, with the same title as the accompanying book, was organised by and housed at the Ethnographic Museum of Zürich University in Switzerland and ran from July 13, 2001 to March 3, 2002. While previous shows of Powell's work, both in Kathmandu where he lives and works, and at the Sackler Gallery in Washington D.C., have focused on specific geographical locations depicted in his art, the *Himalayan Drawings* exhibit was more expansive in its vision. On display were 142 pieces spanning 25 years of Powell's work in the Himalayas (Nepal, India, Pakistan and China), which he had created using a range of different media (watercolour, ink and pencil).

It becomes apparent when reading the book that Powell's admirers are also his patrons, benefactors, clients, and critics. The exhibition was organised by Michael Oppitz, a long-time friend of Powell's, who also edits the publication and contributes one of the longest chapters. The exhibit was opened on July 12, 2001, by Niels Gutschow and Götz Hagmüller, both respected architects and scholars and sometime residents of Nepal, and key figures in Powell's professional life and development as an artist. On reading the captions for the plates (pages 279-296), one can't help noticing that a significant number of the pieces are owned by none other than Michael Oppitz, Götz Hagmüller and Niels Gutschow.

While readers unfamiliar with the lifestyle of expatriates in Nepal between the 1960s and 1990s would be forgiven for finding these overlapping coincidences a little too self-referential, the explanation is really quite simple. As becomes clear from the personal recollections shared within the chapters of *Himalayan Drawings*, the atmosphere of Kathmandu during this era was one of convivial cohabitation, with expatriate scholars, writers, travellers and artists intermingling and working on exciting new projects together. It comes as no surprise to learn, then, that the very same people who commissioned Powell's drawings should be the ones to appreciate them. In his personal Preface, Michael Oppitz describes the contributors to the book as a 'well-matched team. Some are old companions of the artist about whom they write...Others have joined the club later' (p. 8).

The first chapter is by Peter Herbstreuth, an art critic and curator, who masterfully intertwines excerpts from an interview he conducted with Powell and his own intellectual appreciation of the artist's work. According to Herbstreuth, Powell 'extracts pieces from his real surroundings, reconstructs them and shows the detail on the picture surface' (page 11), a

technique which Herbstreuth himself emulates in his writing. The interview with the artist is fascinating, and Powell comes across as modest and thoughtful. According to Powell, in 'any traditional architecture you see the passage of time...And that is what I found boring about so much modern architecture. There is nothing designed within the building to allow for the effect of time on a structure.' (page 14). With Powell's comment in mind, it is hard to disagree when one looks around the modern skyline of Kathmandu. Later in the interview Powell touches on a central feature of his work to which many commentators call attention: the notable absence of humans. Powell again states:

They [people] distract from the basic image of the building and it becomes too easy. It becomes picturesque with that »some-locals-in-costume-in-front-of-the-building« type of thing. This is not what I mean to show. (page 16)

The absence of human figures in Powell's work is indeed striking, but perhaps only because the structures he depicts are so clearly shaped by humans. To return for a moment to the dust jacket which bears the House of Tsuk: everything about the painting speaks of human involvement and daily use. The absence of people from this painting comes is quite natural, in fact, since their presence is so palpably felt and acknowledged in the structure itself.

Herbstreuth concludes his chapter with a carefully-worded critique of the clichés that abound in popular Western imaginings of Mustang, representations which are partially fuelled by the exoticising and sensationalist press reports of the region as a land of mystery. While art critics and journalists are quick to conscript Powell's Mustang paintings for their Orientalist imaginings, Herbstreuth makes a persuasive case for reading Powell's art as precisely the opposite: 'Contrary to their ascribed ›mystery‹, Powell's works demonstrate clarity and legibility. He has grasped the architectural culture in precisely constructed pictures' (page 27). For Herbstreuth, then, Powell is an artist who addresses transformation: he creates 'a picture taken from a reality that insists on its verisimilitude, without being veristic' (page 11).

The architect and conservation expert Niels Gutschow structures his chapter around the theme of 'imaginary documentation', a phrase coined by Robert Powell to describe his own work. For Gutschow, Powell's

‘imaginary documentation’ actually ‘crosses the line of the imagination to achieve a narrative quality’ (page 32). Gutschow offers a tightly-written overview of architectural documentation, surmising that measured drawing is not truly documentary since ‘every line on paper requires a decision’ (page 30). He uses this brief discussion as a reflective backdrop onto which he projects Powell’s drawings and paintings. Detail is of the essence in Gutschow’s presentation, and the reader learns that Powell counted the courses of bricks in the courtyard façade of Kuthu Math in Bhaktapur in order to maintain the correct scale in his drawing. Echoing his earlier comments to Herbstreuth, Powell confides to Gutschow that “traces of decay produce a texture that attracts me”, a feature particular apparent in his drawing of the Panauti Agamachen. Furthermore, Gutschow is highly attuned to the technical aspects of Powell’s art. He observes that light always enters from the left in Powell’s drawings, and that while perspective makes a brief appearance in Powell’s earlier work, it only resurfaces many years later in his Mustang collection. Documenting Mustang was clearly an exciting challenge for Powell, and one which encouraged him to experiment more freely with water colours and fine pencil outlines. The contrast between the architectural techniques and styles of urban Newar buildings and the wildness of Mustang is mirrored in Powell’s work. After working in the Kathmandu valley for many years, Mustang offered Powell ‘something more basic, almost modern architecture’ (page 38).

In his chapter entitled Fact and Fiction, Götz Hagmüller analyses eleven of Powell’s flights of fancy: drawings and paintings which lean rather more heavily towards the ‘imaginary’ in the ‘imaginary documentation’ continuum. Hagmüller states at the outset that ‘visual documentation of the material aspects of a culture...is never without a degree of subjectivity and imaginary content’ (page 43), challenging the misconception that Powell’s work can be neatly divided between the super-real on the one hand, and the illusory on the other:

While Bob is certainly a meticulous draughtsman, even his documentary pictures go beyond the reality they depict. (page 44)

Hagmüller, the Chief architect of the Patan Museum, goes on to narrate a charming anecdote. During the 1995 exhibition of Powell’s Mustang paintings held in Patan, visitors from Mustang attending the show asked the

artist where certain structures could be found in their villages. Powell was obliged to reply that some of them existed only in his own mind and 'on paper' (page 44-45).

Clare Harris, a specialist in visual anthropology, concentrates on Powell's images of Ladakh. She takes the reader on a brief historical jaunt through the ages by invoking the imperial draughtsmen who documented places they never actually visited. Harris finds some of Powell's work reminiscent of an 'archaeological excavation in which the artist has used his eye to unearth the significance of each rock and object encompassed by his vision' (page 56). Her insights are compelling, and she concludes that while 'human presence is rarely represented figuratively in Powell's Ladakh pictures...we are presented with the material evidence of thought and action' (page 56). Heather Stoddard's short contribution is an artistic treatise rendered as a personal monologue. The eminent Tibetologist's stream of consciousness is punctuated with observations and insights about Powell's methods and aims:

Each image breathes a quiet unselfconscious respect for the culture it takes as its object; the artist's wonder at the way the people have adapted to their mountains, to the rough and ready materials at hand. (page 63)

Entitled *Art without Artists*, the anthropologist and Tibetologist Charles Ramble begins his chapter with an overview of the history of Mustang and a discussion of the difference between so-called 'high' and 'low' culture. Through a careful analysis of Rigsun Gonpo, or Protectors from the Three Buddha-families, pervasive architectural features in both the territory of Mustang and in Powell's depictions of this landscape, Ramble illustrates how anthropologists' preconceptions about meaning and continuity are not always shared by locals. Ramble's chapter is brimming with context: from the environment in which Powell's art may be viewed, to the dusty and harsh reality of daily life in Mustang which contrasts with many foreigners' perceptions of an enchanted land. Some of Ramble's musings are worth citing in full:

The exactitude of the reproduction tricks us into thinking that we should observe them with the same clinical detachment as convention once enjoined on frock-coated visitors to ethnographic museums. And then we remember that, unlike our

grandfathers, we aren't obliged to hide our enjoyment. (page 74)

Annegret Nippa's chapter offers an intensive examination of a mosque which Powell documented in the spring of 1980. Nippa, Director of the Museum of Ethnography in Dresden, uses her comparative and historical learning to demonstrate that the mosque of Gabral Jaba, located in Swat-Kohistan, is an extraordinary construction with a remarkable heritage. Powell's instinct was spot on when he chose to focus his artistic attention on this mosque which "while not the biggest or most spectacular by any means, did have something very special in its atmosphere, its remote location and its evident non-Islamic details" (page 89). According to Nippa, Powell's images of the structure preserve a secret which has remained hidden from the missionaries: 'Gabral Jaba reminds people of the old days and the old gods' (page 88).

Michael Oppitz's chapter, the final one in the collection, is one of the most rewarding. In this contribution, Oppitz does what he does best, blending detailed ethnographic insight with comparative anthropology, and topping it off with his deep understanding of the visual arts. Oppitz and Powell first collaborated in the 1980s when the anthropologist asked the artist to illustrate a book on the northern Magar populations of Nepal. Oppitz singles out one of Powell's drawings to show how the artist's focus on documentation resulted in the artistic aspects of the drawing being understated. The emphasis lay in its 'auxiliary service to ethnographic explanation. In a sense, the painting was on its way towards mutation into a descriptive chart' (page 92).

However, Oppitz points out that Powell's creations are often images beyond the documentary, which collapse space, cut through solid walls to expose structural features of buildings, or simply capture angles impossible with a camera. In some of Powell's drawings, in fact, the viewer can find back the photo that he should have taken but never actually did. Oppitz punctuates his analysis with pairs of images, usually a photograph of an object accompanied by Powell's rendition of the same, and the author shows how time after time he prefers the artist's interpretation to the photograph. Discussing a gagri beer pot, for example, Oppitz concludes that Powell's ink version 'had more material presence than the corresponding photograph' (page 97), a presence which is actually intensified through its decontextualisation. Oppitz again:

Unlike corresponding photographs which cannot but catch everything upon which they are focussed, Bob's drawings are extremely selective, radically omitting anything secondary. They stand alone on the sheet, undisturbed, undistracted, demanding an exclusive and solitary dialogue with the observer, on the isolated ethnographic subject they capture. (p. 99)

After comparing drawings with photos, Oppitz further contrasts Powell's drawings of Kalash material culture from Chitral in Pakistan with the same objects drawn by Uwe Topper in 1962. The profound differences in understanding on the part of the two artists, each of whom perceive patterns of geometric lines in Kalash culture quite differently, re-enforces for Oppitz that writing, seeing and drawing are all 'acts of conceptualisation and interpretation' (p. 100). Engaging with the debate on Powell's representation of people, Oppitz concludes that 'the human body appears in the finished works of Bob Powell only where he attempts to copy (and transform) given pieces of art' (p. 109). And while Powell is primarily a studio artist, Oppitz coins the catchy term 'ethnographic draughtsman' to describe the artist's way of focussing in on images of intrinsic anthropological interest, while, at the same time 'humbly following the rules of likeness' (p. 113).

Oppitz concludes his stimulating chapter by turning to Powell's Mustang oeuvre, which he notes is considerably larger and more colourful than his earlier drawings. Colour is central, argues Oppitz, in understanding how Powell conceptualises Mustang. The artist collected samples of Mustang soil used by local colourists to extract pigment, examples of which are reproduced in the book. We further learn that Powell does not 'paint white; rather, he leaves blank, so that ›white‹ is the white of the paper' (p. 115). Even more than in earlier work, the physical conditions and travel restrictions of Mustang obliged Powell to paint in his studio in Kathmandu. Nevertheless, the photographs that he necessarily took of his objects of study never extend beyond the functional. As Oppitz writes, 'for Powell photography will always be a research tool, an auxiliary activity to his vocation as draughtsman' (p. 117-118). As the reader learns from this wonderful collection, Powell would rather use a careful brush, a precise hand and his fertile imagination to assist him in his imaginary documentation. While some may find Powell's adherence to realism and accurate representation outdated, the artist himself is not unduly concerned:

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'In Kathmandu many in the modern art scene think my work is totally old-fashioned. They are stuck in this 1960's idea of what modern art should be' (page 18). The publication of *Himalayan Drawings* comes a long way in illustrating both how and why Powell works in the way he does, and in so doing provides the reader with a feast for the eyes and mind.

— **Mark Turin**

Note

Published in *Himal South Asian*, October 2002. *Nepali Times*, #112, 20-26, September 2002.