

Figuring Compassion:

The Healing Art of Julie Oakes

It is no surprise that White Tara, the goddess of compassion in the cosmology of Tibetan Buddhism, is also the deity who presides over the artwork of Julie Oakes. Tara's love is a healing love, her gestures are generous gestures and her smile is a radiant smile. Her love heals all. She represents the quintessential wellspring of health, strength, beauty and, above all, extended life. For this gifted painter and multi-dimensional artist, Tara represents nothing less than the most hopeful face for the ongoing spiritual evolution of the human species.

This British Columbia-born, Toronto-based artist draws upon her continuing study of Buddhism in these vivacious new works that depict various Tibetan Buddhist entities, including her beloved Tara, with stunning virtuosity. Beyond the technical virtuosity evident in every square centimetre of their facture, however, is Oakes' enviable ability to figure said entities with a very knowing, supple and welcome painterly twist.

While she preserves with ardour and care their specific meanings and their significations within the Buddhist tradition, her bold figuration lends them a decidedly contemporary and even cutting-edge interpretation. Hers is a contemporary retelling of Buddhist verities as daring and insightful in its way as Quebec photographer Emmanuelle Leonard's recent retelling of the Mystery, that is, the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic faith, in the medium of photographic images. Just as you don't have to be a practicing Catholic to appreciate Leonard's retelling of the Mystery, so too there is no requirement that you know Buddhism to appreciate the phenomenal imagistic restlessness and magic of Oakes's inspired work.

Still, that having been said, Oakes' paintings and drawings pay a debt to her spiritual practice while at the same time demonstrating the in-folding

and prismatic nature of her art, albeit with that practice as fundament. Indeed, these haunting and seminal images both introduce us to the cosmology of Tibetan Buddhism as understood by an insider yet excite us by virtue of their lively and telling engagement with a host of timely, pressing contemporary political, social, sexual, environmental, philosophical and gender-related issues.

In her outsized and wildly eloquent painting *The White Tara Stays Calm in a Whirlwind of Fecundity* (2007, 130" x 120"), this is certainly the case. Oakes depicts Tara in the upper panel as a veritable cornucopia of positive mantras and mudras — scattering the pomegranates and papayas on the face of the void as though seeding it with healing signs, which then fall like pearls from the lintel of the lived-world, distending down into the darkness of the nameless gulf in the lower panel, where they disturb the passage of a fangs-bared inhabitant of Eden's nightside as it walks a tightrope into deeper darkness still.

Oakes' *White Tara* is a goddess who embodies the very spirit of Compassion. She is depicted wearing the Bodhisattva vestments. Her devotion and her clarion call to and for the enlightenment of all sentient beings are transparent. The white of her spiritual light shines through the spectroscopic polyprism of Oakes' artmaking with all the effulgence of the divine Buddhist radiance of wisdom and enlightenment. She is the ancient enemy of division. Her omniscience stems from this sense of Oneness and she carries health and prolonged life in her wake like the most profound of blessings. Herein, the painting plane itself embodies the infinite space of her compassionate love and it is Oakes' great strength to figure it — I mean, *her* — without saccharine surfeit or the baroque integers associated with either an overly or heavy-handed (I mean, overtly) metaphorical or literal bent.

Instead, it is figured in positive, not negative, terms here. It is said that the myth of the White Tara had its inception when she first appeared as the living teardrop of *Avalokiteshvara*, the Buddhist God of Compassion. (This entity is also known as *Chenzereng*, reincarnated as the Dali Lama himself.) Her first flowering is then in the living folklore of the moment when *Avalokiteshvara*, Buddha of all Buddhas, embodied in an instant of being an absolute state of compassion when he shed a single tear. In a very real

sense, then, Tara is the living embodiment and expression of compassion so pure that it can transform the universe, and lead us all out of darkness.

Tara figures in several of Oakes' other groundbreaking new paintings, all of which are based on traditional Tibetan iconography, and one suspects that she is also something of a self-portrait. *White Mahakala* is also depicted there, as are a number of other lesser and well-known Buddhist entities and saints. While it is impracticable here to discuss the many different entities that populate, animate and invigorate Oakes' resplendent paintings, we should look for a moment at the mighty Mahakala himself.

In *White Mahakala Relishes the Datura Plant* (2006, 99" x 44"), the entity is depicted as protector of the wish-granting gem that secures all heart's desires. Thus, he is depicted in the midst of the *datura* plant, a potent nightshade-genus hallucinogen and narcotic agent used in sundry ritualistic invocations of his being. Ingesting the narcotic means freedom from being and non-being, and hence from desire, above all else.

Mahakala is inherent, revered and worshipped in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. However, he wears a number of different, if related and relatable, guises whereby different qualities and aspects are highlighted. He is seen and appreciated as the emanation of different beings, namely *Avalokiteshvara* or *Chakrasamvara*, in different contexts.

Mahakala is usually depicted as being black in colour, which effectively signifies his essential nature as most supreme reality. (This principle is known in Sanskrit as 'nirguna', meaning a state beyond all quality and form.) Furthermore, he is usually depicted with a crown of five skulls. These skulls embody the transformation of the five *kleshas* or negative afflictions into the five wisdoms. However, there are also Mahakalas in white apparitions, and Oakes has figured this version of the deity in the aforementioned painting with her characteristically lovely and remarkably assured handling of line and pigment. Here, he is a proverbial "wealth deity", ensuring the sanity, comfort and welfare of all *tantrikas*. The following description is discoverable in his sadhana: "His body is white. His face is wrathful and he has three eyes. He has six arms. His main right hand holds a wish-fulfilling jewel (*cintamani*)...." The karmas or actions associated with Mahakala that dovetail with Oakes' positive aspirations as

a painter who is also a Buddhist practitioner might include 1) Eliminate sickness, hindrance, trouble, 2) Extend life, benign qualities and wisdom, 3) Perform as a magnet for whatever Dharma practitioners need and attract persons to the Dharma, and, not least, 4) Destroy confusion, hate, doubt, ignorance and other human deficiencies and deadly sins.

There are a number of drawings in the exhibition, as well, from the series collectively entitled *100 Syllables*. These selected paper works serve as a symbolic completion of the second stage of Oakes' four-stage Gnondro meditation spiritual practice. The first stage began with 100,000 full-length body prostrations done with a visualization and mantra. This required no less than four solid months of prostrating for four hours a day, which is, after all, a severe discipline.

Oakes relates in her own words: "In 1972, I completed 100,000 prostrations while studying *thangka* painting under Sherab Palden Berut. Following this, I began 100,000 repetitions of the 100-syllable mantra under the guidance of Akong Rimpoche — the next phase of the Gnondro — but didn't complete this Tibetan Buddhist practice. These new drawings (100) will form a symbolic completion."

It is interesting to note that one of Oakes' formative experiences as a young person was the *Thangka* studies she speaks of above, under master Lhasa court *Thangka* painter, Sherab Palden Berut, between 1971 and 1973. If the works selected for this exhibition are excerpts from her completion of a subsequent stage of her spiritual practice, it must be said that they share the vivacity of her paintings, and have a metamorphic fluidity to them that seduces the eye effortlessly and well. If these new works constitute a symbolic completion of a further stage in her Tibetan Buddhist practice, they also show her full range and command. They also update *Thangka* painting itself, and imbue it with new life and vibrancy.

The artist continues: "I use henna to color my hair. With the henna residue, I make gesture drawings of Buddha. On top of this Buddha image, I superimpose imagery from photographs of India taken in 2003 and then collage from a journal of postcards, Tibetan paintings and prints, drawings and writings that were assembled on my first visit to India in 1970."

In *11 Syllable* (2005, 30" x 23") and executed in henna, pencil and collage on paper, the phantasmatic entity that emerges from or recedes into the backdrop stakes an eerie claim upon us, and resembles one of the metamorphic desire figures from the work of the early 20th Century British occult master painter and magician Austin Osman Spare (d. 1956). Its magnetic pull on retina, forebrain and spinal column is almost palpable. A fertile collision of imagery in these magisterial drawings affords an open conduit to the unconscious, and the binary presences of a vestigial Third Eye and the Kundalini firesnake are always close at hand.

In all her creative work, Oakes effortlessly parses the divide between spirituality and sexuality, sacred and profane, heaven and Hell. If her painting has a full measure of sweetness and light, it also has a darker side, like Thanka painting itself, rife with fierce entities and horrific imagery, in order to break the chain of selfishness and spiritual myopia.

Of course, when we invoke Heaven and Hell (should these be italicized?) we do not mean to suggest that hers' are Buddhistic visual counterparts to the Christian domains of deliverance for the pure of heart and everlasting hellfire for the willful sinner. The lush, verdant life of her imagery often hides a barely-concealed serpent's sting — all the better to shake her viewers from their complacency. Here is an artist who despises myopia. She wants us to see *the* universe — not *her* universe, but *our* universe — with all its verities exposed and underlying principles laid bare, at least for those with eyes to see and minds to understand.

Oakes draws upon a daunting inventory of images in the execution of her paintings, from masterworks of Buddhist iconography that can be found at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and the Metropolitan Museum in New York and a thousand other institutions and sources between and betwixt them. Oakes's visual art suggests the undertow of the cosmic law of karma that is integral to Tibetan Buddhism. In Buddhism, your karma is simply inescapable. One might suggest that in these works, Oakes, searcher and savant, has surrendered herself to her own karma. She paints without any escape clause, caveat, if-then conditional — or empty codicil. She simply gives us, her viewers, everything, and thus we are the willing beneficiaries of all that she has in mind to say, hand to express — and heart to heal.

A maverick artist who has stubbornly refused to shy away from controversy and provocation over the course of almost 40 years, Julie Oakes is one of a handful of Westerners who have succeeded in translating all the sophistication and complexity of the Buddhist spiritual system into a radiant painting world that is as engrossing as it is challenging for believers and non-believers alike. She is that rarest of creative beings, a Buddhist who expresses her spiritual practice in figures which cut across all cultural antipodes, belief oases and trans-celestial divides, and speaks to us in one voice from the very heart of *self* and *selflessness* and *self-surrender*.

James D. Campbell
Montreal, May 14, 2008