JOHN DUGGER

'And I made a rural pen'

The Story of Mountain Banners

In the early 1970s I began drawing landscapes; then after acquiring some basic climbing skills, I drew mountainscapes as well. I always carried a small portfolio on my climbs, sketching on the run, learning to capture the profiles and defiles with a stroke of my pen, recording the concourses of rock, snow and sky. I found my true drawing school in the open fields, climbing and rambling the hills of Snowdonia, the Lake District and the Scottish Highlands. My first Mountain Banner, the *South Cluanie Ridge 1985*, depicts five Munros in Glen Shiel, traversed with some friends on New Year's Day, and was based on three original drawings sketched during our approach and climb. It was made using the cut-fabric appliqué style of my early strip-banners but it was especially fabricated in Nylon Cordura – complete with climbing rope and prussic-knot rigging. While initially pleased with the result, I felt the need for a technique capable of a sharper rendering – something more akin to the mountainscapes I was drawing in the field.

A significant advance came in 1988 while I was working with discharge-dye techniques, trying to achieve what was then my 'holy grail' – a cheap, simple and low-tech method for making permanent original drawings on fabric. My method, which uses an oxidizing agent to burn out the image on canvas, has the added advantage of being a two-stage process – so work on-site in the out-of-doors is dry and only requires the liquid discharge to develop the field drawings once back in the studio. From 1988 to 1991 I did a first set of new-style Mountain Banners, using canvases carried into the mountains on several climbing trips to the Swiss and Italian Alps, and finished in my strip-banner format. The initial success of these early works suggested the correct tools and techniques were at hand – all that was needed was that rare gift of free time to build upon these discoveries.

In 1991, during the International Year of Tibet, I was asked to make a large-scale banner artwork for the public address that His Holiness the Dalai Lama would make at the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York as part of the *Kalachakra for World Peace*. The Sanskrit word *Kalachakra* means 'wheel of time' and it is a teaching that originated in India, spread throughout Central Asia and is considered a jewel in the crown of Tibetan Buddhism. The *Kalachakra* ceremony includes beautiful rituals such as the 'earth pacification dance' and the construction of a great multi-coloured sand *mandala* depicting three levels of temporal existence. Related to these

themes of earth and time is the *Kalachakra* legend of *Shambhala*, a legendary city of the Central Asian plateau hidden in the great mountains, where the population is blessed with good crops, good health and good governance. In ancient texts the flag of *Shambhala* was described as a 'plaque of snowy mountains surrounded by peacock feathers'. So it was this that I set out to make.

I selected as two 'snowy mountains' the Himalayan peaks of Mount Everest and Mount Kailas, both of which attract human participation in a distinctive way. Mount Everest is the target of repeated attempts on its summit, in a motion of up and down, whereas Mount Kailas is the centre of an ancient pilgrim's *kora* (or circling) of this sacred mountain, moving round and round. Mount Everest is the 'summit of achievement' whereas Mount Kailas is a 'centre of being'; together they represent the balanced whole that fulfills our potential as human beings. This serendipitous project provided me with the perfect opportunity to try out my newly developed fabric technique on a major artwork, creating a great mountainscape of Tibet and banner of *Shambhala* in modern form. The Cathedral event was a great success and looking back I can see that it achieved something beyond my ability to measure.

The year after making the *Shambhala* banner I was invited to meet the Dalai Lama at the Namgyal Monastery in Dharamsala, India. Before the meeting his Private Aide advised me that it was customary to have a question to pose to His Holiness. This stumped me and became a source of some discomfort for several days before the interview as I could think of very little he didn't know about most subjects as compared to the very little I knew about anything. After much soul searching I decided to ask what was an intriguing question to me: considering the complexities of Tibetan Buddhist iconography in the context of the ever-increasing interest taken by Westerners in Tibetan Buddhism, had His Holiness had any thoughts on what a modern Buddhist art would look like? 'What a fine question!' exclaimed the Aide on the day of the interview as I waited anxiously in the anteroom, but it was still with some trepidation that I was escorted into the Dalai Lama's private study. After the formal introductions and some small talk, his Aide said, 'Holiness, John-la has a special question for you.' So I repeated my question again; considering the complexities of Tibetan Buddhist iconography in the context of ever-increasing interest by Westerners in Tibetan Buddhism, had His Holiness had any thoughts on what a modern Buddhist art would look like? A deep, extended and anticipatory silence was followed by His Holiness slowly looking at me with a smile, and saying most matter-of-factly, 'No'. In the profound emptiness that followed, I was caught for words and embarrassed beyond belief and wished only that this honour would be over quickly so that I might run back and hide in my lodgings. Soon enough the interview was wound-up; the Dalai Lama personally took my hand and walked me to the door of his study where he spoke quietly to his Aide.

122. *South Cluanie Ridge 1985.* Appliqué strip banner, from an original on-site drawing in Scotland, made of nylon with prusik knot rigging. 72 sq.ft. (*John Dugger*)

123. HH the XIVth Dalai Lama speaking at the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York, in front of the *Shambhala Banner 1991.* 324 sq. ft. (*John Dugger*)

I was relieved to have lived through that awkward moment and I forlornly followed his Aide back through the monastery. On the way, he knocked on a side door and a young Tibetan monk appeared. They exchanged a few words and then the monk turned to me and said, 'I will be pleased to have you.' In my confusion I turned to the Aide and he said, 'His Holiness the Dalai Lama has invited you to stay at the Namgyal monastery with the young banner-master, Dorjee Wangdue.' I replied in a somewhat surprised and stumbling manner, that it would certainly be an honour to come here and study Tibetan banner-making. 'Oh no,' he explained, 'you misunderstand, you've been invited to come here to share what you know!' There began my long friendship with banner-master Dorjee Wangdue. I revisited California to put my affairs in order and returned to the Namgyal Monastery to begin my stay there at the beginning of 1993.

At the monastery Dorjee Wangdue lived apart from the other monks as he was given a special instruction by the Dalai Lama to forgo the general prayers and duties of the other monks so that he could concentrate on his art. We would rise early and have breakfast, and then he would go to his studio and with his assistants make banners all day. His art is the amazing hand-sewn traditional banners – called *thangkas* – which are used for decorating temples and monasteries as well as serving as the sacred images for Buddhist ceremonies. They are planned as large, complex iconic drawings; the individual figures are hand-cut as small individual pieces and then appliquéd onto a fabric base, the whole image afterwards finished with a series of fabric-frames which add both colour and shape to the final artwork.

I could observe all I wanted to of the design and processing of these traditional masterpieces but I was also free to leave the monastery to explore the district and climb the local hills to view the great Dhauladhar Himalaya just behind Dharamsala. I organized several long trips to the Himalayan districts of India, travelling to Kangra, Kulu, Darjeeling, Kashmir and Ladakh. I always carried my beat-up portfolio, filled with a sheaf of sturdy brown paper, my Parker pen and a handful of white pencils. On these trips I would spend my days hiking and drawing, visiting *gompas* and drinking *chai* in little ramshackle *dabbhas* (tea stalls) on the mountain paths. Before the monsoon arrived Dorjee-la and I made a special pilgrimage to *Alchi Gompa,* on the upper reaches of the Indus River in Ladakh, to view the tantric murals painted there more than 900 years ago. Here I drew the large canvas that became my *Himalaya Banner 1993.* Travelling with a monk is a special experience as they are on a timetable that would undo most tightly-wound adventurers, but this worked wonderfully for me, as there was always time to make a drawing or for the longer job of putting down a sketch on canvas. So often the 'timelessness' of an ascent to altitude, or just an afternoon spent on an alp, is lost in a hasty return to our 'velocitized' world, and travelling with Dorjee-la made for a journey that stretched beyond its limit of weeks into a passage happily lost of a perception of time.

124. *Himalaya Banner 1993.* Original on-site drawing in Ladakh on canvas mounted with nylon frame. 108 sq.ft. Exhibited at the Alpine Club, 2004. (*John Dugger*)

I made more than a hundred drawings during my stay at the monastery – it was certainly one of the most enjoyable and artistically productive times of my life and it gave me time to consider what I was learning at the monastery about my work and about my question to the Dalai Lama.

I had studied a little of Tibetan art over the years, so I was already aware of some of the influences operating through it, and something of the history of Tibet that had made it the repository of precious teachings through direct lineages going back to the great Buddhist universities of ancient India. But what I gained firsthand from my stay in Dharamsala was a living experience of the Tibetan's commitment to an art that is both beautiful and sacred – a union so utterly lacking in our own commodity art-culture. Namgyal monastery is dedicated to the arts, so most of the monks are artists in their own right as painters, musicians, chanters and dancers or makers of the ritual *tormas* and sand *mandalas*. Their artworks are appealing not only to the eye and ear – they are also psychologically and philosophically appealing to the mind. They seem to combine a profound aesthetic density with a visionary translucence born of the high mountains. Like all great art, it possesses the quality of being very still yet very active at one and the same time – what James Joyce called the 'luminous silent stasis of aesthetic pleasure'.

Returning from India, I recognized that over the years four cardinal sources have served as points of reference as I worked on my new Mountain Banner series. Besides the direct influence of the Tibetan there has been

the tradition of Chinese mountainscape painting, the Western Classical tradition and more recently, the Alpinist legacy of field sketches and mountainscapes.

The most ancient mountainscape tradition directly available to us is that of China. Great painters such as the 'Four Wangs', Mi Fei, Ni Tsan and Ma Yuan are all fertile sources for understanding the language of mountainscapes and the 'way of the brush'. What is significant about Chinese painting style is the systematic codification of brush-strokes, the 'idea-writing', which is related to the Han calligraphic character. This codification has both an *interpretive* aspect and a *placement* aspect. The *interpretive* element shapes the brush-stroke so as to represent a rock, a ridge, and a tree in a gully or a mountain beck. The *placement* element enables the artist to write a kind of geographic-shorthand of the actual mountain. It is this codification of brush strokes that speeds the hand of the master painter forward, allowing the timely completion of a painting while paying attention to every detail and achieving a freshness of style that allows the artwork always to live in the present. There is also the striking phenomenon that most Chinese mountainscapes have shared the same scroll-format for more than a thousand years – thus there is a continuum of form that all, even the most contemporary landscape painters, share. This gives a sense of antiquity to the artwork that contrasts effectively with the spontaneity of the brush work. This quite accurately corresponds to the feeling we have in the mountains – of walking in an ancient landscape, through 'geological eras' – where nevertheless everything lives in a total freshness in the here and now.

When visiting China in 1972 (I believe as the first American artist since the 1949 revolution), I made a small study of the manner in which traditional landscape painting had been influenced by the cultural changes of that turbulent era. I interviewed traditional painting master Sung Wen Chih in Nanjing. He explained that whereas the traditional landscape painters of the old society rarely, if ever, left their studios, in the new post-revolutionary society the artists were encouraged to make a close-up study of their subject, for instance by climbing on the mountain or walking the length of a valley landscape, but that on-site sketches were seldom made. Rather the artist would return to the studio and create the landscape or mountainscape from a memory of first-hand observations. Master Sung said that they didn't paint like Western painters – from a viewpoint in the field – but rather made what we would call *synthetic* landscapes. Asked how the Cultural Revolution had affected his work, he said painters added red flags to their mountainscapes and painted historical sites or used their painting skills to visualize the outcome of major construction projects. This is an example of mountainscape painting serving the ends of the *scenic* and the *prosaic*.

However, Chinese landscape painting has traditionally also served the ends of the *symbolic* and the *poetic*. By this mode Ching Dynasty artist Pa-Ta Shen-Jen (literally, 'Eight Great Mountain Man') created his *political*

mountainscapes – paintings of impossibly balanced, precariously up-ended boulders symbolic of the top-heavy imperial court – and Sung Dynasty artist-scholar Mi Fei created his *psychological* mountainscapes that challenge us to see the Tao in great rock faces floating amidst the clouds. As a metaphor of the mind itself – the cranial shape and local topology of the mountains recall the convolutions of the brain surface – the clinging trees are like the synaptic connections outlining habitual energies, and the rushing waterfall suggests the ceaseless flow of thoughts and desires. The 'moods' of mountain weather reflect fluctuations similar to our own changeable emotions and feelings, especially at high altitudes and under physical stress. In these areas, Chinese mountainscape and landscape paintings are unparalleled and their cultural influence was significant in the national artistic styles and traditions of Korea and Japan.

In our Western Classical tradition I have been fascinated by the 'little blue mountainscapes' that appear in the background of many Renaissance religious paintings by such masters as Leonardo da Vinci and Bellini. In these paintings, the foreground figures represent allegorical or religious figures of social convention, whereas the 'little blue mountainscapes' seem to reveal a perception of the world of objective reality, the fertile seed of Western natural philosophy, in the process of shedding its mythological husk. Over time, these background mountainscapes moved into the foreground and became the central theme of the painting, forming the basis for our Western landscape traditions. John Ruskin's remarkable study in Volume Four of *Modern Painters (1843)*, concerning the formation of the mountains by the very *forces of nature* (then a novel concept), had an important influence in promoting an increasingly scientific observation of the mountains, as it were elevating the *objective viewpoint*. Moreover Ruskin was a true scientific observer and despite his deeply held Christian world-view (he suggested that God put the best mountains in the best countries - rather the reverse of what most climbers would think today!) he was a revolutionary modernist when he identified the mountain as 'giving motion to water, giving motion to air and giving motion to earth'. We can see his influence not only in the English landscape tradition of his time, but likewise in the very competent artworks made by climbers and explorers most often on-site – what we call 'expeditionary drawing' – as seen in the Alpine Club's own noteworthy collection of drawings and paintings. With the Modernist movement in painting, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, two trends developed, each of which represented an elevation of the *subjective viewpoint* in the painting of mountainscapes. The first trend could be characterized as the *proto-cubist* style, seen first in the paintings of Paul Cezanne in his *Mont Sainte Victoire* series, and later, for example, in the work of climber-artist T H Somervell. The second trend corresponds to the *symbolist* style – such as the paintings of Nicholas Roerich, who travelled widely in mountainous regions and led a major expedition to Central Asia in the 1930s.

A contemporary practice from which I have drawn inspiration, shared both by alpinists and trekkers, is that of sketching rudimentary pictographs of mountains and passes (often on-site using the back of an envelope or a scrap of found paper) to use as a navigational aid when one is too close to the rock face to get perspective on the path up or around the mountain. These are different from 'expeditionary drawings', being instead field diagrams used to describe the routes, footpaths, markers, cairns and obstacles (such as waterfalls or glacial crevasses) that the climbers will encounter. In a sense, these loosely made charts are more like a 'musical score' of the mountain than a picture or a map. Even the terminology reflects this melodic quality – pitch, run, bridge, scale, ascent and descent, high and low. I find this *'first-hand, free-hand'* notation of the mountain and its jazz-like nomenclature a kind of post-modernist document blending the 'romantic and the pragmatic', not unlike a kid's treasure map complete with cautionary skulls and a beaconing 'X' marking the goal.

Over time, I have been moved to assimilate some of the ideas from all these traditions into my own artwork. When creating a Mountain Banner, I will hike into the field to make an original *'first-hand, free-hand'* drawing directly onto canvas – rendering it in what Robert Macfarlane refers to as the mountain's 'austere, Manichean colour scheme of black and white'. While making the drawing I will seek to capture for myself, as much as for the viewer, that sense of expanded proportion and exalted awareness we often feel as we experience the freedom of the hills – to touch what John Hunt called 'the realm of lasting values'. At that point I always search about for a local stick or twig – to carve into what William Blake calls 'a rural pen'– that I will use back in the studio to apply the 'holy grail' mixture to my canvas. This process permanently fixes the original drawing in the exact moment of freshness, investing the artwork with an authenticity that I think is present in all the best mountainscapes – the dual qualities of *being fresh* and of *being there*. I have tried to differentiate the Mountain Banners from my 'expeditionary drawings' by creating a more concentrated, visually striking form and working on a larger scale. Finishing the artwork with a fabric-frame that I learned from Dorjee Wangdue, but using the most modern heavy Nylon Cordura fabric (similar to my first Mountain Banner) makes for an artwork that more accurately reflects our own technology and mode of production. This gives rise to the apparently contradictory image of the dark, sometimes brooding mountain within the bright framing – a quality that makes the Mountain Banners so modernist in form – serving as a contemplative device as much as a dazzling banner celebrating the mountaineer's ideal. (*Excelsior!*)

I think the success of a good mountainscape in artistic terms, its function if you will, is to challenge and provoke the imagination, initiating a moment when the mind of the observer pauses between the *scenic* and the *contextual* – between what Descartes referred to as the difference of *situation* (place) and of *magnitude* (space). Schopenhauer wrote that the sight of a mountain

range rising before our eyes suddenly 'puts us into a serious, even sublime mood', and indeed it is this sombre quality, provoked by the stark and often terrifying beauty of great mountains, that awakens us to our planetary reality – to what Robert Macfarlane calls 'deep time', to what the Tibetans call *Kalachakra*, 'the wheel of time'. It is true that there is something of the mountains that appeals to both the realist and the mystic. Drawn up to altitude by different paths, into that geometric apex, they nevertheless share the same awe, the same sense of 'deep time'. This awareness acts to caution us on the fragility of our existence and the ultimate, infinitely precious nature of life on earth – as it yet beckons us to reach for the physical, as well as an intellectual and spiritual, summit. Perhaps when we, in our culture and by our actions, appreciate the mountains sufficiently to preserve their natural content as well as their scenic beauty, and honour their symbolic function as much as we seek to gain from our sporting or scientific knowledge of them – when we have allowed them, as Chris Smith writes, to 'speak to the heart' – only then will we have touched the snowy peak with our art and succeeded in our long climb.

The development of my Mountain Banners series has been encouraged by the American Himalayan Foundation for more than a dozen years by its Chairman Richard Blum and President Erica Stone. As well, the Alpine Club presented the first one-man show of these works in 2004 at their London Gallery, to be followed by exhibitions at the Mountain Festivals of Kendal (2004), Banff, Canada (2005) and Telluride, Colorado (2006). I owe a great debt to all of these institutions for their support. For the wonderful opportunity of staying at the Namgyal Monastery, and its profound influence on my art, I shall always be grateful for the great kindness shown to me on that day in 1992 by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Did I get my question answered? 'Yes'.

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