
Arts



160.Simon Pierse, *Smile of The Buddha*, 1997, watercolour, 53.5 x 58.5cm

SIMON PIERSE

Out of Thin Air

On painting Ladakh
(. . .and three poems by John Gimblett)

The journey to Ladakh is not to be undertaken lightly: by road it is a long and arduous journey across the Himalaya, either from Srinagar, or now more commonly from Manali in Himachal Pradesh. Either way it takes about three days, a trek over some of the highest road passes in the world. By air it is a short hop from Delhi to Leh, but even then there is no certainty of arriving. Pilots have to fly by sight, since radar is rendered useless in the mountain passes; and due to poor visibility, planes are sometimes forced to turn around and return without landing at their destination. My first flight to Leh was cancelled due to bad weather conditions and it was four days later before I finally arrived, and then only after intervention from a local travel agent that facilitated my way onto an overbooked flight from Srinagar. During the short time we were air-borne, K2 was briefly visible through the window, its summit poking above the clouds. As we came in to land, the plane circled, lurched alarmingly, and finally touched down on a steeply sloping runway – a small sliver of land between mountainous valley sides. I knew instantly that I had come to a very special place: a remote land in the rain-shadow of the Himalaya, politically part of India but geographically part of the Tibetan plateau – a place literally beyond the mountains and the clouds. What immediately struck me as I stepped off the plane were the sharp clear light and the intense cobalt blue of the sky, both due to the high altitude and thin air (Leh is 3500m above sea level). No doubt altitude was also behind the heady, breathless feeling I experienced as I made my way to the hotel. In the space of an hour I had escaped monsoon-ridden India and arrived somewhere midway between the clouds and terra firma. Already I could feel my nostrils drying out in the thin air.

I went out later later same afternoon and made a sketchbook study of the deserted and half-ruined royal palace, situated on a promontory above the old town. Already I began to realize that what I wanted to say about Ladakh's landscape was not to be found through slavish topography. The sun was scorching hot and there was precious little shade. Light penetrated the thin atmosphere, exposing the landscape, cutting its edges like a laser. In my head the landscape seemed to be full of colour and yet when I looked, the dry rock, earth and mud-brick architecture were an almost uniform shade of buff-brown. Colour there was, but only in the intensely



161. *Chortens below Tikse Gompa*, 1997, watercolour and gouache, 53 x 73cm

blue sky, the gaily coloured, ubiquitous prayer flags, the emerald snippets of irrigated barley fields along the Indus valley, and the crimson robes of the Buddhist monks in the monasteries or *gompas*.

Two days later I was overwhelmed by the huge gilded Buddhas I saw on visits to *gompas* at Shey and Tikse, where the stark contrast between austere exterior and richly decorated interior reminded me of a geode – a hollow rock split open to reveal a glittering treasure of amethyst or quartz crystals. Slowly, I began to sense a way of painting Ladakh as I saw and felt it. In the presence of the giant *Sakyamuni* at Shey, transfixed by the mesmerising smile that shimmered in the semi-darkness, it slowly dawned on me that the swirls of the Buddha's hair were of a pure and glowing ultramarine blue: a colour, together with ochre and a darkish blood-red, that became a *leitmotiv* in all the Buddha paintings that I made on returning home. I found another kind of *visual essence* in Ladakh's arid and airless landscape with colours such as cobalt violet, cerulean blue and Naples yellow: pigments chosen for their opacity and granulating properties.

Ladakh's landscape has been shaped by more than two thousand years of Buddhism - the whole landscape resounds with praises to the Buddha: countless thousands of acts of devotion make up the mile-long walls of mani-stones, each one engraved with the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum*. The same endless invocation is spread on the wind by the prayer flags that flutter from every high place. Whitewashed chortens dot the grey-brown desert, dissolving slowly back into the landscape like forgotten sandcastles.

The most awe-inspiring views are from the roofs of the monasteries, where the visitor looks down, as if from an aircraft window, on the Indus valley or across towards the Zaskar Range. I made sketches and took many photographs from these vantage points, often choosing a high horizon line to open up the composition. Tikse Gompa perches like a miniature Potala Palace on a rocky promontory above the coffee-brown, silt-laden Indus where feelings of elation and vertigo intermingle. In *Climbing to Rizong Gompa*, I combined a number of different viewpoints in order to convey the memory of a walk made to one of the most isolated *gompas* in Ladakh, where the only way is on foot, making every journey up and down the steep track a simple daily pilgrimage for the monks who sing and tell their beads along the way. As if the vertiginous landscape itself were not enough, there are also mountainous cloudscapes in the skies above Ladakh. In summer, the clouds roll in around mid afternoon, building into fantastic shapes that appear surreally sharp and sculptural in the thin atmosphere. In *Chortens below Tikse Gompa*, clouds form a dominant part of the composition - applied in white gouache, and while still wet, flooded with stains of grey.

After the second of two journeys to Ladakh lasting around three weeks, travelling on public transport and later by taxi (even to the top of Khardung La at 5350m), the return journey overland to Manali was as spectacular as it was hazardous: the road just cleared of snow and a bridge destroyed by floods only repaired the day before we set out. Back in the studio, a series of small paintings grew out of my attempt to achieve a synthesis of Ladakh's visual and cultural identity. *Alchi fragments* are paintings derived from the ancient mural paintings of the monastery of Alchi: a rare survivor of the invading forces that destroyed so many of Ladakh's monasteries over the centuries. The faded colours and patination of these fragments acknowledge the importance that visual manifestations of Buddhism such as *mani-walls*, prayer flags and mural decorations have in shaping the identity of Ladakh's landscape. Their various rhythms, colours and textures are something that I have drawn on in my work, not in a literal way, but as a means of coming closer to a visual and emotional truth.

I am grateful to the poet John Gimblett, who paid the warmest tribute to my work with three poems written in response to the Ladakh paintings in 2003. He has kindly given permission for these poems to be published here for the first time alongside the paintings where, with enviable economy of style, they eloquently touch on the still and timeless qualities of Ladakh. When I led a cultural tour to Ladakh in the summer of 1996, our small group included the author and art critic Marina Vaizey, who described mountains as 'a state of mind', and later wrote of her experience 'at high altitude, beyond the clouds':

Surrounded by mountains, we drive over the high desert, visiting *gompas*, looking for Buddhas, escorted by Buddhist monks. Some of the temples and monasteries are very old: Alchi is a thousand years old, Tikse is half a millennium ... The views are almost clearer than the eye can cope with; sharp-edged mountains framing, under the achingly blue sky, the valley of

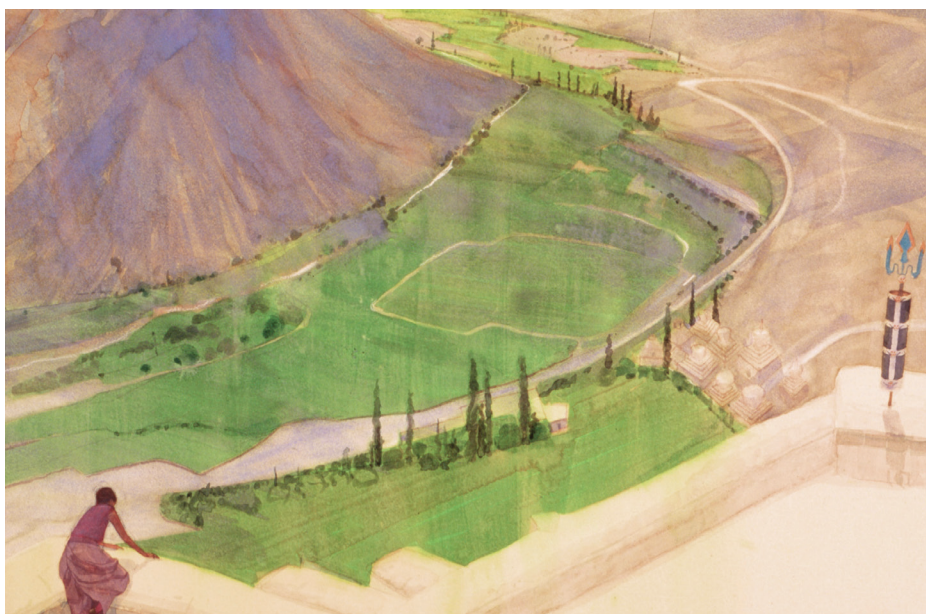


162. Simon Pierse, *Tikse Gompa*, 1997, watercolour, 61 x 91cm

Tikse Gompa

*Tikse: a city
of alleys, black
cells steeped
in the whisper
of yak-bells.
Etiolate, racks
of scrolls
rain a holy
snow; where we
go it's winter.*

the Indus in Ladakh. The air in this high desert valley of the western Himalaya is thin, its life supported by the narrow strips of cultivation by the great river, curiously heightening the visitor's awareness and apprehension, not only of his own physical self and all around him, but of something beyond. Thin air makes the visitor dizzy; we walk as though through glue, very slowly. Our hosts run, seemingly lighter than air. And our eyes are open, looking on unimaginable vistas.



163. Simon Pierse, *From Lamayuru*, 1998, watercolour with some pastel, 54 x 81cm

From Lamayuru

*A trickle of river
to Moonland. Great
yaks, cold clouds of
grey mass, fumble
along pasture. Back
at the gompa, Milarepa
holds the cave in his
fist. A mist hugs the
river to Moonland.*

Ladakh's desert landscape continues to have a powerful attraction for me, for reasons I cannot fully explain. Extremely barren but, in a cultural sense, also very rich, the difficulty of getting there, whether overland, or by taking the hair-raising flight over the Himalaya, will always contribute to the visitor's feeling of timelessness and isolation and is surely one of the reasons that Ladakh's fragile culture and customs have survived for so long.



164. Simon Pierce, *Walking to Rizong Gompa*, 1997, watercolour, 61 x 91cm

Walking to Rizong Gompa

*Clockwise at the foot
of the hill, bypass the
chorten, a young boy with
a yoke drips Indus onto
the shale snake path,
thudding upwards: a
metronome.*

*Past the apricot garden
of the nuns, a crack
in the wall hides flat
sunlight, stealing it
from the incisor ridge
of the Zanskar mountains.*

*At Rizong, we touch the
foul cups to our mouths,
a lone monk watching us
slip butter tea into parched
throats that want to repel it.*

*I think of a buddha at
Shey: a mischievous smile
like a secret kept to oneself.
We drink thirstily.*

A new book by JOHN GIMBLETT: *Monkey: Selected India Poems*, is available from Cinnamon Press, ISBN: 978-1-905614-66-0 (www.cinnamonpress.co.uk).