SUMERU

by

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Sumeru is a body of work that metaphorically illustrates the mental journey that is undertaken in Zen Buddhist training and practice. In Zen literature, the word 'land' is commonly used as a symbol for the 'mind', and through my images I have envisioned an exploration into the depths of this metaphorical 'mind-world'. The narrative follows a spiritual quest as the storyline symbolically wanders through various states of consciousness and perceptions. My conceptual inspiration for this project is in the existential drama of searching for personal truth, and the main themes I am portraying are awakening and rebirth.

In this project I am referencing Zen Buddhism, and in particular what I have learned from koan study. Basically, koans are stories about ancient Zen masters that use beautiful and mysterious literary imagery to describe what happens in the mind, and Zen students often meditate on these paradoxical verses to help them gain insight. 1700 koans comprise the whole of Zen folklore and were most notably recorded in *The Blue Cliff Records*, *The Gateless Barrier*, *The Book of Equanimity*, and *Transmission of Light* in the 12th and 13th centuries. I have been inspired by one verse more than anything to conceive of this project, it is from *The Blue Cliff Records* and it reads,

> Taking no notice of others,
> Throwing his staff over his shoulder,
> He goes straight ahead and journeys
> Deep into the recesses of the hundred thousand mountains. (1)

Through my images I have created this metaphorical realm of the hundred thousand mountains, and the narrative illustrates a journey to reach its highest peak. In Buddhist mythology this mountain, known as Mt. Sumeru, stands at the center of the world and is surrounded by nine impenetrable mountain ranges called the Cakravala. This central mountain is symbolic of ultimate truth, and legend says that the secrets of the universe can be found at its peak. My images show all the trials that are faced in the attempt to scale this mountain, depicting an epic spiritual quest to find truth.

The main motivation behind this project is in laying out a path for the viewer to follow, and to have them contemplate these profound mysteries. Zen study is purely a matter of personal attainment; its truth is found inside of oneself and cannot be transmitted by others. It is said to be a school of thought that is beyond words and letters, and a common analogy is that Buddhist teaching is merely a finger pointing to the moon. The ancient wisdom of Zen is truly inexpressible and can only be discovered through one's own insight. I am inspired by the words of Zen Master Dogen who writes, "The great road has no gate. It leaps out of the heads of all of you." (2)

The practice of Zen Buddhism mainly focuses on the experience of *kensho*, seeing into one's true nature. The main theme I am conveying through my body of work is the awakening of this dormant potential that is inherent inside of every sentient being. The images illustrate a metaphorical journey through the mind, showing the path of realization into one's true nature. Zen literature refers to this spiritual rebirth as returning to your original mind, or in other words, returning to your 'homeland'.

CHAPTER 2

NARRATIVE STORYLINE

The narrative progression of this project is greatly inspired by an influential series of Zen

paintings known as the *Ten Ox-Herding Pictures*. There have been many successive

versions, but the first of these paintings first appeared in 12th century China and are

attributed to the Rinzai school. This series of paintings metaphorically depict ten stages

of realization that are experienced in Zen discipline. Using the Ox as a symbol of

enlightenment, they illustrate a story about a man's struggle to catch and then tame it.

(Figure 1) The images begin with *Searching for the Ox, Seeing the Traces, Seeing the Ox,*

Catching the Ox, Herding the Ox, Coming Home on the Ox's Back, The Ox Forgotten -

Leaving the Man Alone, The Ox and the Man Both Gone out of Sight, Returning to the

Origin - Back to the Source, and finally *Entering the City with Bliss Bestowing Hands*.

Fig. 1. Shubun, Tensho *Ten Ox-Herding Pictures*. 15th Century.

In my work, I also wanted to illustrate this journey of the truth-seeker using metaphoric imagery based on Zen teachings. It was very important to me that my depiction of this narrative was true to my conceptual references, and genuinely represented the philosophy of Zen Buddhism. The character designs, environments, and all other imagery were directly influenced by the literary verses that symbolically described these stages of realization. My goal was to take these metaphors and make them visible, to create a personal visual narrative that illustrated the path which is undertaken in Zen training.

The goal of Zen practice is to cultivate what is called *jishu-zammai*, or 'self-mastery'. Conceptually, in this project the main character symbolizes the 'self', who is exploring the depths of the mind to discover its true nature. I wanted the design of the character's outfit to be completely authentic to Zen culture, and so all of the garments and other accessories I had custom made in Japan. The seven-piece robe is traditionally worn by practicing Zen monks, who also carry a bamboo staff when traveling on a pilgrimage. The straw hat is called a *komuso-gasa*, which is worn by certain sects of Zen Buddhists and covers the face to denote an egoless state. Finally, the sword is purely symbolic, representing the essence of Zen spirit and is metaphorically said to cut through all complications and entanglements.

While the character is representative of the 'self', the environments represent the landscape of the 'mind'. Zen Buddhists recognize three main psychological states, known as the three mysteries, or the three barriers. The series of images represent a

journey through each of these in the struggle for understanding. The first stage is the 'body of reality', the relative world of attachment where one can be caught up in outer entanglements. The second stage is 'transcendental insight', the absolute world of emptiness where one dwells in an inner void. Finally, the third stage is 'great liberation', where one surpasses this duality of the relative/absolute worlds and goes beyond.

The first part of the journey is about the struggle to reach the highest mountain, and the images show all the barriers that must be passed in order to get there. In Zen thought, these barriers represent the delusions that hinder insight into one's true nature. It is said that, "Practice is not a matter of far or near, but if you are confused, mountains and rivers block your way." (3) This state represents the worldly, superficial self that is affected by external conditions, searching for truth outwardly, and endlessly desiring to become free. To surpass this realm of consciousness, it is said that you must face many symbolic trials such as *Trudging Through the Mire*, or *Passing Through the Forest of Thorns*. Things like the mire and the forest of thorns are mental manifestations created in the mind, blocking your own path towards liberation. Because of this, it is also said, "You create the river and the mountain for yourself. They don't exist." (4)

The second part of the journey is about the events that unfold upon reaching the top of the highest peak in the universe. This is the site of transcendental insight, where one experiences the original, universal self that is connected in oneness to everything in the world. In this stage of absolute reality there can be no duality, no self or others, everything is seen as equally empty in its true nature. To realize this state, the goal of Zen

meditation is to drop off body and mind, and experience what is known as *The Great Death*. The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures depict this in the painting, *Returning to the Origin – Back to the Source* (Figure 2), as a circle representing the emptiness of the void, the source of all things. It is essential to metaphorically leap into this abyss in order to annihilate the ego and become completely selfless. It is often said that, "One needs to give up everything in order to open oneself to ultimate truth." (5)
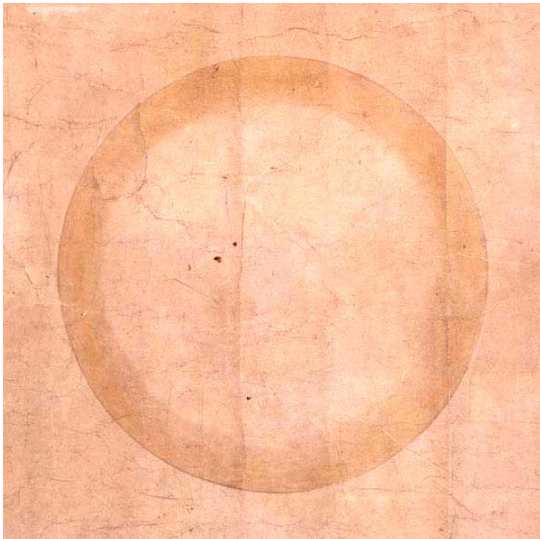
Fig. 2. Shubun, Tensho
Returning to the Source. 15th Century.

Fig. 3. Shubun, Tensho
Entering the City with Bliss Bestowing Hands.
15th Century.

Finally, the last part of the journey is about descending from the mountaintop and returning back to life. This experience is said to reveal the awakened, true self, incorporating both of the relative and absolute realities. The accomplished Zen practitioner is able to go freely between the realms of attachment and detachment, mind and no-mind, by understanding the true nature of reality. In this rebirth it is said that, "Even beyond the ultimate limits there exists a passageway, whereby he comes back

among the six realms of existence." (6) The last image in the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures, *Entering the City with Bliss Bestowing Hands (Figure 3),* illustrates this concept of emerging from the void and returning to the self. After coming back to this realm of great liberation, everything is clear and illuminated with *A Thousand Eyes Suddenly Opened*, and they say you have entered *A World of Blossoming Flowers, Under the Blue Sky* and so on.

The narrative of the storyline shows the life, death, and rebirth of the self as the character travels through the mind-world and undergoes these three transformations. With this body of work, I have envisioned an epic spiritual journey along this path in the mind of the truth-seeker, and the images show all of the mental struggles that are involved in this metaphorical quest. It is said that one should, "Pursue not the outer entanglements, dwell not in the inner void; be serene in the oneness of things, and dualism vanishes by itself." (7) In this project I have illustrated a narrative of Zen thought, becoming caught in the world of forms, losing everything in the world of emptiness, and finally awakening in the world of liberation. I have studied and practiced Zen Buddhism for nearly ten years and I can honestly say that it has profoundly affected my life. I wanted to create these images as a symbolic reflection of my own experience, while authentically portraying the esoteric philosophy of the Zen tradition.

CHAPTER 3

BODY OF WORK

This chapter exhibits the entire product of my thesis work, which is a series of 30 images set in a narrative progression. These images metaphorically illustrate a struggle to reach the mythological peak known as Mt. Sumeru, which is a symbol for ultimate truth. Each of the images shows a trial that is faced along the way, and every element in each scene has a specific symbolic meaning reflecting the philosophy of Zen Buddhism.

For example, the tiger is an important symbol in Zen lore and you often hear sayings like "the savage tiger sits - watching the path" (8), or you must "run even through a wilderness infested with lurking tigers" (9). It is something that must be faced, and they say you must "pluck out the savage tiger's whiskers!" (10) to continue on the path. The symbol of the tiger is also used to describe the accomplished Zen master that has passed through these barriers. So, the tiger is one of the trials that must be faced, but in the end it becomes an ally and spiritual guide in the quest and is symbolic of an attainment.

There are many more symbols involved throughout the storyline such as a forest of trees or a herd of deer, and everything in this project is meant to be symbolic of Zen thought, from the mountains and water to the sky and moon. In this body of work I wanted to create a space for the contemplation and subjective interpretation of this ancient esoteric symbolism. My goal was to provide access for the viewer into this metaphorical world, to create a path for them to follow and have them explore and discover its deeper layers.

CHAPTER 4

AESTHETIC INFLUENCES

With this body of work, my main goal was to achieve a high-quality aesthetic of photographic believability in composite images that were based on fantasy. I wanted to create these illustrations as a seamless montage, to build a convincing illusion that would suspend the viewer's disbelief. The most important thing for me was that each of the images would be seen as a photograph, as the record of a reality.

The power of photography is in its documentary ability to represent the real, to show that something happened at a certain place in a certain time. Since its invention, the photograph has become invariably linked to the index that it represents, and the viewer has come to associate photography with reality. In this project I haven taken advantage of photographic truth by presenting a manipulated collage of images as a single photograph in each illustration. By constructing a new reality through multiple photographs I have given viewers an immersive experience into an imaginary world.

Aside from wanting to create a believable photomontage, another major aspect was to develop a distinctive style that suited this body of work. To visually convey the conceptual theme of the project, my main aesthetic inspiration was taken from Chinese landscape painting. I was especially influenced by painters from the Song and Yuan Dynasties (960 – 1368), who depicted scenes with "emphasis placed on the spiritual qualities of the painting and the ability of the artist to reveal the inner harmony of man and nature, as perceived by Taoist and Buddhist concepts" (11). In my work I also sought

to portray the connection between nature and spirituality through metaphorical landscapes. I was greatly inspired by the idealized imagery found in pieces like the beautifully painted mountains of Guo Xi (Figure 4) and Qu Ding (Figure 5), and I wanted to translate this aesthetic into my photographic style.
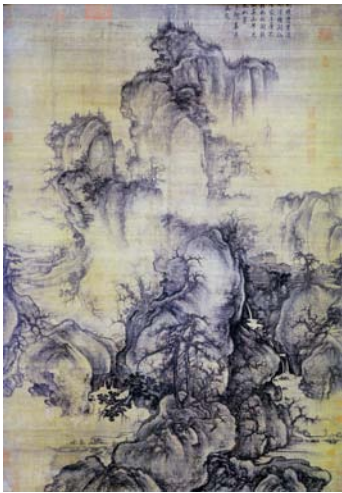

Fig. 4. Xi, Guo *Early Spring*. 11th Century.

Fig. 5. Ding, Qu *Summer Mountains*. 11th Century.

Another important aesthetic influence for me was the work of the great 19th century French illustrator Gustave Doré (Figure 6). His literary illustrations of famous books like Dante's *Inferno* were incredibly inspiring in their use of atmospheric depth to convey a story. In my images I also wanted to achieve the same highly detailed quality that is seen in Doré's elaborate engravings. More contemporarily, the artist who has had the biggest influence on my work has been Robert ParkeHarrison (Figure 7). His series of platinum prints entitled *The Architect's Brother* incorporate an intricate use of photomontage to portray scenes that are very dreamlike and surreal. The powerful depth

of his images comes from this high quality of photographic believability through

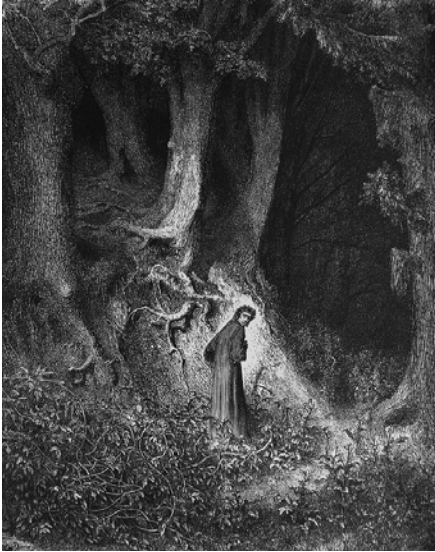photomontage, and this is something I have strived for in my own work.

Fig. 6. Dore, Gustave
Dante's Inferno: Plate 1. 1857.

Fig. 7. ParkeHarrison, Robert *Edison's Light*. 2000.

All of these influences were taken into account to create the overall aesthetic of the

illustrations in this project. To create this body of work I used many advanced digital

imaging and compositing techniques, but it was essential that the tools used in the

creation of these images were hidden in their final presentation. I wanted to fabricate a

seamless montage using the photographic medium to realistically depict a fantasy world I

had envisioned. The most important aspect for me was to composite images that were so

visually seductive they transported the viewer into this imaginary reality.

CHAPTER 5

TECHNICAL DETAILS

This project largely comprised of incorporating a recent innovation in digital

photography known as High Dynamic Range Imaging. Basically, HDRI is a method of

digitally combining all the tonal ranges of a scene into a single image, and the results are

so detailed that they look hyper-real. Over the past few years I have collected hundreds of

these images as source material for this work, and they were primarily photographed in

the mountains, forests, and deserts of the Rocky Mountain west. The HDRI photographs

are the most high quality images I have ever captured, and they were the foundation of

this entire project. (Figures 8, 9)

Fig. 8. Pedersen, Nick
Trinity Canyon 1, Grand Canyon. 2008

Fig. 9. Pedersen, Nick
Trinity Canyon 2, Grand Canyon. 2008

To create images like this, I started by capturing seven bracketed photographs of

each picture, ranging from three f-stops overexposed to three f-stops underexposed. It

was essential to photograph with my camera on a tripod and set at the highest depth of

field (f-22) to achieve maximum quality. Also, most of these digital images were created

as panoramic composites using the photo-merge feature in Adobe Bridge. In order to get the highest possible detail, each of the HDR images actually consists of up to sixty-three digital photos merged together.

To combine these digital photographs into an HDR image, I used Bridge to select them all and then applied Photoshop tools > convert to HDR to open the 32-bit image in Adobe Photoshop. The HDR image opens tonally flat and it was very helpful to utilize a plug-in filter called Photomatix Tone-Mapping to be able to blend the layers how I wanted. Using a noise reduction plug-in called Imagenomic Noiseware improved the quality as well. After that I would make all the necessary image adjustments in Photoshop: converting to black and white using channel mixer, increasing the contrast with curves and levels, adding sharpening with unsharp mask and high pass filters, etc.

To create the illustrated images I had envisioned, next came the difficult task of digitally compositing many of these photographs together in Photoshop. First, I started by building the landscape of each illustration with a complex arrangement of multiple layers using layer masks. The pen tool was essential for making selections to cut out elements and merge them seamlessly. Another plug-in filter that was very useful for resizing elements so they fit into the imagery without a loss in quality was Genuine Fractals. I also incorporated many layers by using various blending modes such as multiply and screen, and the soft light mode was especially helpful for lighting effects. Other light elements such as lightning, stars, fireflies, etc. were created using special effects techniques in Photoshop as well as rendering from Autodesk Maya.

After creating the landscape scene in an image, I focused on adding in the various characters, animals, and other details. The character images were photographed in the studio using two strobe lights with soft-boxes, set up to match the lighting in each scene. It was much more difficult to get the correct lighting on the animals because they were mainly photographed in museums, zoos, and in the wild. The most useful tool I found to integrate these elements successfully was a plug-in filter called Topaz Adjust that mimics the appearance of an HDR image. The images below are an example from one of my works showing the compositing process step by step. (Figure 10)

Fig.10. Pedersen, Nick *The Forest of Thorns* (Image in Process). 2011

To achieve the maximum print quality, each of these illustrations were created as a 16-bit digital image at a size of 20" x 30" with 300 dpi. The images were printed using an Epson 9900 digital printer on Epson Somerset Velvet Fine Art Paper, then matted and framed for presentation. Accompanying the print exhibition was also a self-published, illustrated book featuring these images.

EQUIPMENT LIST

Equipment:
Canon 7D digital SLR camera
Canon EOS 1 Mark II digital SLR camera
Canon L-series lenses: 16-35 mm, 28-70 mm, 70-200 mm
2 Elinchrom D-Lite 4 strobe lights w/ soft-boxes
Apple MacBook Pro

Software:
Adobe Photoshop CS3, CS4, CS5
Adobe Bridge CS3, CS4, CS5
Autodesk Maya 2010, 2011

Plug-ins:
Photomatix: Tone-Mapping
(www.hdrsoft.com)
Imagenomic: Noiseware 4
(www.imagenomic.com)
OnOne: Genuine Fractals 6.0
(www.ononesoftware.com)
Topaz Labs: Topaz Adjust 3
(www.topazlabs.com)

Printing:
Epson 9900 Digital Printer
Epson Somerset Velvet Fine Art Paper

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude my thesis paper with a quote that has greatly inspired me in my life and has helped me especially in working on this project. It is a line from a famous verse known as the *Sandokai*, which was written by the 8th Zen patriarch and is recited daily in Zen Buddhist temples. It reads,

> "I respectfully urge you who study the mystery,
>
> do not spend your days and nights in vain." (12)

Fig. 11. Pedersen, Nick *Sumeru: MFA Thesis Show* (Installation View). 2011

With this body of work my main motivation was to visually portray my own understanding of the mystery, and to metaphorically illustrate the path that is undertaken in Zen study to discover it. In Buddhist philosophy this mystery is said to be completely inexpressible, which is why such methods as the paradoxical literature of koans are often used to forestall simple conceptual understanding. When meeting with a Zen teacher to discuss koan study, in what is called *daisan*, your answer to the koan is meant to express that which is inexpressible. I have created this installation as a visual koan, as something to be pondered over for subjective interpretations and meanings. (Figure 11) It is an expression of the inexpressible, and in the end it is my answer to the mystery.

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