

In Residence Winter 2015: Strangely beautiful'

By Lorene Taurerewa

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Tokoroa-born, Brooklyn-based artist, Lorene Taurerewa, has recently returned from a Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre residency. She writes about the months she spent there, and how the place and people began to creep into her work.

I flew over the Kathmandu valley with the rising sun, the mountainous Himalayas glowing soft pink as the morning light touched their towering peaks, Mount Everest the highest of all. As we descended into the valley I could see the city below, a congested sprawl spreading out and up into green and fertile hills. I didn't know what to expect. But I was aware of an inner excitement, a sense of new adventure.

How to describe the scenes as our taxi bumped along the dry potholed streets of Kathmandu; a riot of strange and unfamiliar sights, the air polluted, scenes of poverty and crowds of people, stray dogs covered in layers of dust, cows lying in the middle of the roads, buses and trucks and taxis and cars and a million motorbikes all jostling and honking and kicking up dirt and dust as we raced along.

The sky was a cloudless brilliant blue against the many-hued buildings, which seemed to climb ever higher into the air. I felt I was looking out onto a vast movie set. I could feel a creeping dread, but there was no going back. We were on our way to the centre of Kathmandu where I would take up a Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre (CKAC) residency in the old palace grounds of Patan – the city of beauty, art and architecture. I would be there for three months, drawn by the art and a culture different to my own.

But first I would spend time getting to know Kathmandu, taxi-ing across the city to see Hindu temples, Buddhist stupas and ancient old palaces, braving the chaotic traffic, aimlessly wandering for hours the many back streets and alleys, taking in the sights, observing the everyday lives of the people and getting a feel for the culture. I would spend most of my time in Patan, working in the studio all day and meeting up with friends after dark, going to art openings, studio visits, and hanging with the locals.

My studio was based in the old royal palace, now the Patan Museum, which holds the most sacred arts of Nepal. It is a dominant feature of the palace grounds, one of the oldest museums in South Asia and a UNESCO heritage site. Some time in its distant past three princes competed against each other to create the most beautiful palace, and even though Patan is small by comparison, in my mind it is the best of the three. I particularly loved its temples sitting side by side in the Durbar Square, ancient and beautiful, the gods and goddesses exquisitely carved in stone and wood.

Hindu religion plays a major role in Nepalese life; everything revolves around it but it is accepting of Buddhism, the religions existing together in harmony. Places of worship are at every turn, from the hard ground in front of domestic dwellings where small offerings of saffron and rice are made to a god or goddess in the crevice of a wall touched by many loving hands, to the major temples that are a thriving hub of activity and worship at all times of the day and night. Every morning I was woken early by the temple bells ringing in the square and the sounds of a hawker selling his wares in the lane outside my window, his calls taking me back to a bygone age. Temple drumming and singing could go on for hours into the night, often the last thing I heard before drifting into sleep. The sounds of the people following the age-old rhythms of their secular lives are some of my most treasured memories.

And where there is religion there is art, and in Kathmandu the two are inseparable. There are makers of religious metal sculptures of all the gods and goddesses, artisans of great skill and ability working in copper and bronze. I often saw the craftsmen at work, sitting together on the floor in small dark shops, covered in grime and dust from blow-torches and grinders or else hand-working the forms like the artisans of old. I was particularly interested in the Buddhist Thangka painters, seated on the floor of their studios lining the streets to my house. I would often sit and chat with them, drink tea, listen to their stories about the making of a painting, the meaning of a hand gesture, the gods and goddesses, watching as they worked. The paintings made for meditation and religious study, easily rolled and carried by monks, but are now more often sold for the tourist market. In Nepal there is a caste of artists, and family names are associated with them, which many of these artists belonged to.

THIS IS NO FANTASY

+ DIANNE TANZER GALLERY

The Newari, the indigenous people of Kathmandu have their own style of Thangka called Paubha, similar to Buddhist Thangka but more gestural, colourful, lively and engaging. The paintings were originally made to earn religious merit both for the artist and his patron. I was lucky to meet a master Paubha painter who invited me to his studio where I saw the most beautiful paintings, stretched onto frames and painted in the traditional style, these large paintings that took up to 15 years to complete. His process involving mortar and pestle to make his colours, grinding down minerals and plants, the colours rich and vibrant, the paintings the purest and most exquisite works of art I have ever seen.

There were festivals of every kind almost every day and I arrived during the wedding season. I was always happy to hear an approaching wedding procession, with crowds of people and flower-bedecked cars following the bride and groom, weaving through the narrow streets, the women kohl-eyed and beautiful in silver-and gold-threaded red saris, the men tipsy and dancing to a loud drumming and trumpeting band at the rear.

But it was the Shivaratri festival that stays in my mind, an annual event to worship Shiva at Pashupatinath, one of the biggest temple grounds in Kathmandu, where the dead are cremated on the banks of the Baghmati River.