

THE GROUND BENEATH HIS FEET

An Artist's Sacred Sojourn in Western Tibet

Modern life has made us busy every waking hour. The pervasive running out of time has become a sport befitting the strongest of urbanites. Success is measured by the ability to stay on top and we find purpose for our daily existence in the order and accumulation of things, which make us too preoccupied and anxious in the first place¹. Then all of a sudden some tragic event with irreversible consequences turns everything on its head and shakes up the security of this hard-earned status quo at its foundation. The void left in the aftermath creates an opening for a new vision to emerge in the mind's awareness. It is often a desire for a more peaceful and spiritually focused way of being. The thought of this newfound horizon becomes so overwhelmingly vivid, and the urge to reach it so profound, that one takes in stride to make it a reality—above all else.

Such a seismic shift catapulted Arthur Liou in search of something greater than life—he became a pilgrim on a quest. The vision to embark on an epic spiritual and creative journey into the Himalayan Mountains was triggered by the mysterious voice of a Tibetan singer heard in a bookstore in Taiwan. The soulfulness of her voice resonated deeply within his grieving heart, sparking an inner inkling for the distant land it came from. Not long after, a Buddhist monk friend showed him a photograph of Mount Kailash: the image looked astonishingly familiar to him despite having never been to this remote part of the world. At this point it became unequivocally clear that the trip to the sacred mountain was to become the most important challenge in the artist's life in coming years. In the summer of 2011 Arthur Liou set off for Western Tibet.

The presence of mountains always inspires a sense of greatness. Invariably ancient people revered them as spiritual sanctuaries: mountain sites were used as nature's temples; majestic peaks were worshipped as the seats of the gods, and legends mythologized heroes and sages who had made it to the top by displaying

¹ De Botton, A, *Status Anxiety*, Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Books, 2004

supernatural physical and mental powers². People often honoured the *anima loci* (soul of the place) in the rocks, trees, springs, and rivers, and performed sacred rituals by which the positive energy of the environment was maintained. The seer and the scenery were understood as one.

In the Tibetan Buddhist and Hindu traditions the Himalayan Mountains are regarded as a place of enlightenment, of which Mount Kailash is the holiest. According to religious belief setting foot on its slopes is sacrilege and legend has it that anyone who has defied the taboo has perished. For the faithful its snow-covered peak is the stairway to heaven and a pilgrim who completes a walk around its base along a 52 km-long path can cleanse the sins of a lifetime. Known as *kora*, the walk can be performed clockwise around any sacred site such as a stupa, temple or mountain, and it can be interpreted as a symbolic re-enactment of the eternal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth³.

Although inspired by a moment of a deeply felt connection with the place, Liou's preparations for his Tibetan expedition had been long coming through earlier filming trips to sacred landscapes in Japan around the ancient Buddhist temples in Kamakura and the southern Kii peninsula. The artist produced a number of works including the four-channel installation with interactive sound *Nachi* (2010). The work features a rumbling creek running downstream over mountain rocks and a wall-sized waterfall with a loud, immersive roar. But the trip to the Himalayan Mountains was a whole new challenge, the scale of which required physical fitness and strong determination to complete. It covered a 2300-kilometer circular path across the Tibetan plateau starting from Lhasa and making important stops at Mount Everest as well as Mount Kailash where Liou completed a four-day *kora*. The resulting installation *Sacred Sojourn* takes us closer to the people, places and piety of the most worshipped—and most feared—of mountains.

Three points of view are presented for reflection, the first being a time-lapse sequence of vivid images of deep blue sky and distant snow-caps, opening a window into the majestic allure of Mount Everest. Its otherworldliness is breathtaking. And frightening. Penetrating into the stratosphere its peak—the highest summit on

² Evola, J. *Meditations on the Peaks: Mountain Climbing as Metaphor for the Spiritual Quest*, PLa Spezia, Ed. Del Tridente; English Translation Edition (1998), Inner Traditions International Ltd.

³ Davidson L.; Gitlitz, D (eds), *Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland: An Encyclopedia*, Volume 1, BC-CLIO; Two-Volume edition, 2002

Earth—is an inhospitable place. The oxygen here is only one third of that at sea level, which would force an unaided body to use up its own reserve faster than breathing can replenish it, resulting in hallucinations and eventually death. The weather is merciless and it can change suddenly and drastically: temperatures drop below -70°C and the jet stream can move with a wind speed of 320 km/ph. The top of the world is the rein of the primordial elements of the universe: a realm predating the existence of language, religion and culture. There is no merit or propriety; no ‘me’, no ‘mine’. Time stands still.

Tibetans worship the mountain as *Holy Mother* (Chomolungma): mother of the world. The spiritual reverence to the giver of all of life, indeed, reflects a geological fact. The seasonal water running off from its glaciers supplies most of the *major river* systems in Asia, including the mighty Ganga, sustaining the existence of hundreds of millions of people, let alone bio-diversity. In recent years the global climactic changes have had a devastating impact on this frozen region. Images of the Himalayas’ receding glaciers have become a stark representation of the ancient wisdom that, when disturbed, Nature’s wrath and fury would descend upon the faithless.

The second perspective in the installation is of the most important Tibetan Buddhist festival, which the artist had the exceptional opportunity to observe during his trip. *Saga Dawa*—meaning ‘fourth month’ [on the Tibetan calendar]—is the time of the year when believers celebrate both Buddha’s birth and the day he died and attained Nirvana. Presenting it across 4 screens, Arthur Liou takes us into the mise-en-scene of the festivities, following pilgrims and tourists as they flock towards an incense-burning stupa. The footage is slowed down and defused by a soft focus and incense smoke. Colourful prayer-papers offset the sepia images. Every now and then direct sunlight catches the lens making the revolving scene even more hypnotic.

But this is far from being a dreamy place. If one looks carefully a different perspective emerges. Uniform police is everywhere, and soldiers stomping around the stupa get caught in the view-frame. It is a reminder that in the political environment of the region such festivities are sensitive days. The gathering of groups—small or large—is treated as an act of political rebellion by the authorities. The ‘karma’ of a person whose only existential sustenance is the communal practice of their faith could be one of severe punishment. Through sensitive camera direction and postproduction, Liou presents the two realities of the place in one seamless take. Far from romanticising life in Tibet, his artwork becomes an uncanny reflection on the Buddhist teaching of the right of all to

exist in peace and harmony. Embodied in these rituals are the memory of place, the wisdom of ancestors, and the timeless presence of nature. In this sense *Saga Dawa* is not a mere documentary but an insight into a deeply felt reverie for the continuum of all of life.

The first two components of the installation are contrasted by the third and most enchanting element of Arthur Liou's expedition: the Kailash kora. Again, the footage is deliberately shot and edited from a first person perspective, placing the viewer on the path of a pilgrim. The thin air of the dizzying altitude is made palpable through the hand-held camera technique. Only that which is closest in view has defined edges; the mountain remains a mirage reseeding into the heavens. The slowly unfolding composition of expansive electronic sounds and string instruments gradually brings one's attention upon the present moment of the solitary hike. While the moving image is revelatory of the grand symphony of the natural scenery, the sound conveys the expansive interiority of one's being. Following Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the gentle pitch of prayer bells flows into the sonic scape as a wake up call to slumbering minds. At times Nature's silence feels catatonic; at others, the sense of communion with it rests the mind in a deep exaltation in Spirit. Occasionally we come across the lone figure of a prostrating pilgrim dwarfed to an ant size by the surrounding landscape. Prayer flags strung between the rocks create multi-coloured fluttering carpets. The wind carries their blessings skyward then scatters them across the world as an offering from the Tibetan Buddhists for the good of all.

The kora has no destination, only a path: taken one breath and one step at a time. Anyone who has walked the hard and arduous hike of the *Kailash kora* has had to rise above the flatlands of the mundane to face the existential peak of the purpose of life. For that courage is needed. To endure the mountain one must give in to a complete—even if temporary—surrender to a force greater than the self and trust its guidance. What was really going on through the artist's mind: did he struggle against his inner demons; did he overcome his deepest fears; did he feel divinity as described in the Buddhist scriptures; did his private universe further collapse into chaos or attain lasting peace. We shall never know, and perhaps Liou's determination to create such monumental works of art is an indication of all of the above. *Sacred Sojourn* reveals one thing for certain: the universal truth that in the timeless and grand presence of Nature one cannot be anything else but humble.

Filmed at ultra high-resolution and utilising a multi-screen blending technology to create an IMAX like environment in a gallery setting, *Kora* engrosses the viewer in the sublime splendour of the Himalayan Mountains⁴. In the early 1990s Canadian artist Char Davies, a pioneer of virtual reality art, created two VR installations motivated by an experience of feeling completely immersed within a natural landscape. She has described the phenomenon as an intertwined sense of external spatiality felt within the interiority of the body. Her seminal works *Osmose* (1995) and *Ephemere* (1998) are the closest to what an artist can offer audiences to experience this concept⁵. Similarly, Liou uses high-end digital technology and projection system to depict the expansiveness of nature as being a part of one's embodied awareness. The installation visually and sonically immerses the viewer in the Kailash pilgrimage.

As one settles into the delirium of *Sacred Sojourn*, one would slowly come to the realisation that to walk the path of a pilgrim is to accept that there is an unknown—perhaps unknowable—reality, which every human being would eventually cross. There is the conscious realisation that all things arise and fall within a primordial emptiness: the Heart of the Universe, as spoken of by Tibetan Buddhists. It is a revelation—which only a communion with Nature's miracles can bring into the mind's awareness—that each and everyone is a pilgrim taking a walk into eternity.

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⁴ Kant, I. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Trans. John T. Goldthwait. University of California Press, 1961, 2003.

⁵ McRobert L., *Char Davies's Immersive Virtual Art and the Essence of Spatiality*, University of Toronto Press; 2nd Revised edition, 2007