



THREE VIEWS OF EMPTINESS: BUDDHISM AND THE ART OF TIM JOHNSON, LINDY LEE AND PETER TYNDALL

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Reflective of the increased Western interest in Eastern philosophies and religions, Buddhism has become one of the most rapidly growing religions in Australia. In this exhibition, Australian artists Tim Johnson, Lindy Lee and Peter Tyndall use their talents to present a local interpretation of Buddhist thought, until recently a leitmotif of the Asian Other.

To link the artists' works, exhibition curator Linda Michael has focused on the Buddhist concept of 'Emptiness' or Sunyata. Unlike the negative connotations this concept often carries in Western contexts, 'Emptiness' in a Buddhist milieu connotes a space rich in possibility and spiritual liberation. As Michael explains, the concept emerges from an understanding that, '... all entities are part of an ever-changing causal chain of growth and decay. All things emerge as "dependent arisings" from a matrix of conditions, in turn becoming part of another momentary cluster of causes and effects and so on to infinity. All dharmas (every mental and physical entity, even the Buddha) are interconnected and therefore without essence ... Emptiness is thus the unbroken ground of being that is egoless, conceptless and unobjectifiable ... Things exist, yet without endurance or inherent substance.'^[1]

For Johnson, Lee and Tyndall, the concept of 'Emptiness' offers a liberating paradigm within which to develop their art. For all three artists, the conceptual art movement of the 1960s marks a formative stage in their art practice. All three began their careers within an environment of critical engagement with established artistic norms, particularly the inherited concept of the nexus between artistic originality and self-expression. This process of questioning the integrity of 'the original' or 'authentic' work of art and the related idea of the primacy of the 'individual' bears a strong affinity to the Buddhist worldview in which nothing has an autonomous self-identity, everything is impermanent and time and space are not linear but are interconnected with everything else in a complex system of interdependency.

While the idea of liberating the artist from art itself is important to all three artists, Lindy Lee's work is perhaps the most concerned with this issue. From the beginning of her art practice, Lee's art has reflected a deep fascination with the concept of self. Lee is an Asian-Australian who has said that she once felt 'caught' between Western and Chinese identities and a 'bad copy' of both Western and Chinese cultures. However, in this exhibition her motif has evolved to a disavowal of ambiguity and it suggests that she has finally reached a peace with her own sense of authenticity.

In *Lily-amah* (2001), Lee portrays the face of a close family member. She again uses a style characteristic of her artistic oeuvre, with the portrait photocopied and re-presented several times in a grid format. Yet the work also marks a change from the artist's earlier explorations of identity wherein she appropriated well-known portraits from Western art history. Earlier works saw Lee photocopy portraits of the great masters in an attempt to 'declare her belonging' and stake a place in the pantheon of Western artistic development. In this work however, her Chinese ancestry squarely confronts the viewer. There is no need to explore the ambiguity of belonging - Lee's Chineseness is presented as fact.

Another of Lee's works, *First Principle* (2001), continues the theme. It provides a good example of Lee's recent 'splat' paintings whereby she 'surrenders her ... creative self to open up to forces from the outside world.' [2] For these paintings, Lee 'splats' wax and ink across the surface of several panels, separates them, and then rearranges the panels into a new gridded configuration to form a new artwork. In line with the Buddhist principle of 'interdependent co-arising', the final gridded grouping of the panels reveals a sense of the interconnected parts of the whole painting. Moreover, the 'completed painting is a moment in itself that nevertheless evinces a strong interrelationship with other moments.' [3]

Converging interests in Aboriginal and Buddhist art provide the basis for much of Tim Johnson's recent works. For Johnson, Aboriginal and Buddhist art images provide an answer to the crisis of representation in Western art. In particular, Johnson's art addresses the questions of authenticity and originality. As Michael explains, 'In Buddhist and Aboriginal art images are encoded and iconic, not representations but archetypes that a viewer uses to go beyond the level of the image ... The focus is on the accuracy of the design and the story the painting portrays. Aesthetic quality and originality are unimportant "because it could be the design itself that has the power."' [4]

In *Maitreya Paradise* (1983), Johnson appropriates a Chinese cave painting, a representation of the paradise world of Maitreya (the future Buddha) found in the Tun Huang caves. Johnson challenges the tendency to treat this image as a cultural snapshot frozen in time by reconfiguring it in the traditional dot painting style of Aboriginal western desert art. The synthesis of Buddhist imagery and Aboriginal artistic style suggests a dream-like world where images usually regarded as unrelated in our waking existence find easy partnership and interconnectedness. In this painting, Johnson urges the viewer to consider an 'image of impossible unity', to focus on similarities and interconnectedness rather than distance and difference. [5]

'Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form.' [6] The Buddhist acceptance of the relative and absolute worlds is suggested in Johnson's *Dewachin* (1987), in which a transient and hallucinatory world is created through the interplay of various unidentifiable images amid a dazzling array of yellow and white dots. What at first appear to be recognisable images, upon closer inspection turn out to be nothing in particular. As with the Buddhist concept of interdependent arising, 'everything seems to have meaning but flows into everything else.' [7]

Peter Tyndall's paintings depict a world understood within a dizzying connection of frames. Unlike usual associations of 'the frame' with ideas of separation, containment and boundedness, Tyndall's seemingly endless multiplication and superimposition of frames implies a spiral of fundamentally interconnected relationships with no beginning and no end. In so doing, the artist gives figurative form to the Buddhist view of the never-ending cycle of death and rebirth. In addition, the fact that no single frame has a self-identity but is integrally dependent on all the others bears affinities to the central Buddhist concept of 'no-self' (anatman). The vibrant yellow diamond matrix, which vibrates through all of Tyndall's works reinforces further this idea of interdependency, as it suggests a pulsating energy, which unites and moves through all things.

Since 1974 Tyndall has applied the following line as part of the title of all his works, revealing the importance of the viewer in the artist's practice:

detail

A Person Looks At A Work of Art/someone looks at something ...

The Buddhist notion of 'dependent arising' here informs the artist's considerations of the viewer and the viewer's relationship to the work of art. Yet again, Tyndall makes an important connection, this time linking the art and the viewer into a symbiotic interpretative relationship.

Through their work, Johnson, Lee and Tyndall ask us to contemplate the consequences and possibilities for the artist, the art object, art practice and art observation from three different but thoroughly interconnected and impermanent views of Emptiness. A challenging yet worthy aim in

an era where hostile notions of separateness have reemerged to deal yet another blow to the 1960s ideal of the oneness of humankind.

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[1] Michael, Linda, 'Three Views of Emptiness', exhibition catalogue essay, Monash University Museum of Art: Monash University, Clayton, 2001, p.7.

[2] 'Three Views of Emptiness', exhibition information sheet, Monash University Museum of Art: Monash University. Clayton, 2001.

[3] Op. cit., Michael, 'Three Views of Emptiness', p.15

[4] Ibid., p.10.

[5] Ibid., p.10.

[6] Ibid., as quoted in the Heart Sutra, p.7.

[7] Ibid., p. 12.