

DIGITAL MANTRA

by Adam Lucas

"As above, so below, " goes the Hermetic dictum of the alchemists. It refers to the belief that there are correspondences, both physical and imaginary, between microcosm and macrocosm, between earthly objects and the celestial sphere, between the human body and the universe. This cohesive vision derives from ancient beliefs which are shared by numerous cultures.

In the Jewish mystical tradition of the cabbala, which provides the metaphysical basis for Western alchemy, the Sephiroth , or Tree of Life, is symbolic of the different parts of the human mind and body, the different emanations of the Godhead, and the different metaphysical planes of existence. In Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism, the human form is also regarded as corresponding symbolically to the shape of the universe. In the more distant past, the Celts and Babylonians believed that Earth was the body of the Goddess, and that each region or territory manifested a different aspect of Her. Similarly, the magic diagrams and paintings of indigenous people throughout the world acknowledge diverse correspondences that exist between the mundane and the heavenly spheres.

These sacred interconnections between different cultural beliefs inspire the work of Sydney- based artist Phillip George, whose hybrid images are an expression of the confluence of traditions within his life. Georges heavily layered paintings reflect his formative influences and interests: his Greek Orthodox heritage, modern science, Eastern and Western spirituality, and an upbringing in the vast and ancient land that is now called Australia He combines images of the human body with medieval Greek iconography, tantric symbolism, Celtic mazes and satellite imagery (among other things) to create richly evocative mosaics.

Though he has been exhibiting since 1976, Georges distinctive pursuit of the universal practices underlying different cultural traditions began after a visit to the monasteries of northern Greece in 1979. At one particular service on Mt Athos- a place for centuries solely dedicated to religious devotion- it struck him that the chanting of the monks and the rotation of the great candelabra could have taken place just as easily in some Buddhist or Tantric temple. The startling landscape and sense of otherworldliness surrounding Mt Athos reminded him of the Australian landscape. Since that experience, George has attempted to articulate his sense of such relationships through his art.

"I've been particularly interested in using the seven chakras as an analogy to power sites in the landscape, which relate to the same kind of power sites in the human body, he says. I've also been interested in looking at things like Aboriginal and Native American sand paintings and their organisational functions; these marks that are made in the sand also relate to the human body and humans' relationship to the landscape." His early paintings, which also featured the landscape, avoided classic Western perspective in favour of aerial views of the landscape: satellite photos, topographic maps and nautical charts. An abiding passion for photography eventually led him from his paint to the digital canvas of high- resolution computer imagery, which led to his participation in such hi-tech events as Imagina (1993), SIGGRAPH (1992), ISEA (1994) and the Casino Container Project at the Venice Biennale (1993).

Although the tools he now uses- a high-powered PC and a laser scanner- may be at the edge of cutting technology, the means by which George constructed his earliest series of digital images, Mnemonic Notations, was similar to a technique used by European painters since the Renaissance. The physical constraints of screen size and the limited capacity of the computer to output a highly detailed image dictated that these images were Ôbuilt upÕ within a matrix. Consequently, George worked on only a single block of the total image at any one time. Advances in graphics technology over the last couple of years mean that he can now work on the whole image at once, saving time and allowing greater fluidity in the creative process.

There are limitations to working with new technology, but George claims that the digital nature of the image allows a kind of control which is not possible with other media. "The pixels in a digital image are like atoms. By going into the image you can modify it: atom by atom, pixel by pixel," says George. "In this way, you can manipulate the atomic structure of the image."

Another advantage of using this technology is that the memory function of the computer allows the artist to rework or paint over the same canvas again and again. The images from Mnemonic Notations, for example, "all started as the back of a head decomposed into an abstracted junk pile. Now it looks like an archaeological site, a pile of mnemonic debris, like a mapping of my mental landscape. As the work has developed, you can see that the original image has disintegrated and turned into other things; those starting points were dissolved and something else became important in the work. There's something like 35 images in the series. It's difficult to get an idea of what I was trying to do by just looking at one image, because the work is an ongoing process. You really need to look at three to five images in order to see that continuity." Continually readdressing the work in this way has led George to a consideration of his own thought processes. He finds that the hardwired memory of the computer reveals the structure of his own thoughts, in a manner not dissimilar to some of the mediative and yogic techniques he practices.

"The computer acts like a diary; it's a denotation of the time at which the work was done. Instead of writing, I dump images onto the computer. These images act as a visual notational manuscript. Often the finished image looks quite cluttered, which is a good metaphor for real mental processes. Even when you're awake, the mind wanders all over the place. Dropping all these images onto the computer is like centering your mind."

Georges interest in the processes of human memory has drawn him towards the work of Henri Bergson and Henri Focillon, two Frenchmen who attacked the positivism that dominated philosophy after World War 1, and who explored the role of memory in the creative unfolding of matter: Bergson through his explorations of evolutionary theory of art and creativity.

Both men were convinced that an understanding of the stability of some phenomena must be reconciled with an understanding of the developmental metamorphoses undergone by others, because these two apparently contradictory tendencies constitute the fundamental realities of experience and perception. The basis for this awareness is the intuition of movement and time. It is this intuition of ceaseless change and flow that is captured by memory. According to Bergson, there are two forms of memory: habit-

memory, which is mediated through the animal brain; and pure memory, which is the persisting, integral retention of past experience embedded in all matter.

Bergson's and Focillon's work recalls aspects of the Pre-Socratic, Epicurean, Peripatetic and Stoic philosophies of the ancient world, offering a point of entry to dynamic perceptions within the Western tradition, a point too often forgotten by contemporary critics sensitised to cultural imperialism but sadly ignorant of their own cultural heritage.

George says that it follows from these ideas that there is a consensual nature to what is perceived as reality. "The very notion of reality relies heavily on memory: not just a personal memory, but a collective memory. Presented with the same event, different people will focus on different features and remember things in different ways. Only when a group of people congregate and discuss a shared experience and come to some agreement can something be called 'reality', which in turn may be written as 'history', which becomes part of 'culture'.

The role of memory is therefore to bring the past into the present in order for it to be reflected upon, interpreted and assimilated, both at an individual and collective level. The existence of recording media overcomes some of the fallibilities of human memory and oral culture and extends the possibilities for human communication, while simultaneously expanding the content of cultural activity. The invention and proliferation of computing technology can thus be seen as analogous to the invention of the Greek alphabet, in that it has enabled an extension of our analytical and synthetic skills through extending our ability to record and interpret human experience.

But how should we conceive of our own memories? "The science writer John McCrone draws an analogy between what Bergson would call 'habit-memory' and a net, a memory net stretched out just below the surface of the sea, which can be seen as the totality of our experiences," George says. "Our consciousness drifts above it like a fisherman in a boat. To bring a particular memory to the light, we have to plunge our hands into the water and drag up a heavy handful of the net. As we pull the mesh to the surface, we can see the watery wriggling of the fish trapped in the net- these are our memories."