

THE LOTUS WITHIN

By Olivia Fraser, May 2018

The paintings in this show have developed out of my interest in and practice of yoga. With yoga's current global popularity as a fitness regime and a means towards a perfect body, it's easy to forget its ancient historical roots in India which reveal yoga to have a far more wide-ranging spiritual and philosophical practice and meaning.

The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit term meaning 'union' and is etymologically linked to the English word 'yoke'. It is about connecting the mind, body and soul and harnessing the senses in an ever-flowing movement towards liberation, or the Absolute, which in yogic philosophy lies as much within the body as without. One of the pathways to achieving this is meditation and within that the practice of visualization using images from landscape, in particular lotuses, and linking them with the metaphysical. This is partly to shut out everyday thoughts and emotions, but also partly as an aid in themselves to propelling one's inner focus forwards and upwards. This results in a clarity and peace far removed from the distractions and stresses of the everyday world.

In Indian art there is a tradition of assisting yoga practitioners to achieve this by providing what are in effect spiritual roadmaps to enlightenment. These take many different forms, ranging from mandalas and yantras, which are believed to store and generate positive energies, to maps of the Subtle Body, which show the idea of the body as a microcosm of the universe. Inspired by this, I have painted a form of spiritual roadmap, Jambudvipa: Map for Lost Souls - and during the course of the show there is a visual, almost narrative development of the pathway towards enlightenment using the lotus within as the driving force and moving from ideas associated with gross meditation to the subtle and luminous and ultimately to creation.

I've drawn on tradition in a variety of ways all of which are linked to the symbol of the lotus as the archetypal icon of yoga used as a tool for visualization with its association with perfection, renunciation and spiritual growth. In different paintings I pull the lotus apart, deconstructing it, iterating it, expanding and contracting it, unraveling it, isolating it into icons both large and small, exploring its association with colour and with the senses and its connection to the ground and the cosmos and to Indian philosophy and poetry. I am concerned with inner landscapes rather than external ones, so the majority of my works are painted or enclosed within a square format reflecting the idea of a mandala with its associations of energized space and meditation.

I'm interested in investigating these ideas using the materials, techniques and vocabulary I learnt in a traditional Indian miniature painting studio. This is a slow art form. Everything is hand-made from materials I don't have to go far to see in the world around me: whether it is my handmade jute wasli paper, the *kharia* or chalk white from the cliffs around Jaipur, nuts and sap from local trees, soot black from oil lamps or semi-precious stones like malachite or lapis garnered as off-cuts from the gemstone markets in Jaipur. I create imagery of the landscape using elements from the landscape crushed, ground, mixed and polished. Surfaces are flat but the process is highly tactile and textural.

I feel there is a natural affinity between a traditional Indian artistic aesthetic, whether it be Tantric Art or miniature painting, and Western ideas of Minimalism, Op Art and Geometric Abstraction. All explore essence, sensation and perception. I have sought to combine these perspectives, by focusing in on the iterative, pairing it down to the minimal and ultimately striving to reach for an essence while also pursuing the idea of movement which is innate in the texts and practices of yoga.

In an ever accelerating world hell-bent on accentuating our differences, I feel this slow art form and my subject matter of yoga is a wonderful antidote, emphasizing as it does the importance of slowing down and connecting.