

## KASHI: AFTERIMAGES and REFLECTIONS

*“Kashi...the still centre which anchors the perpetual movement of time and space without participating in the ever turning world of samsara.”(1)*



Assi Ghat, Jan 2018

This was my first artist residency and with no pressure to complete a body of work, I had the freedom to explore and absorb my surroundings at leisure allowing thoughts and art to materialise at their own pace through observation, reflection and action.

The Alice Boner Institute (ABI) has a quiet, welcoming air of stillness about it. As Alice Boner described her house: “it is so familiar, so welcoming, so warm. It encloses me with love and opens the world for me... I feel fulfilled, happy, settled and supported, like on a gentle stream.” (2) I too felt happy and at ease there. Situated right on the ghats although set back a little, it’s a unique building instantly recognisable by the yellow ochre and Indian-red coloured walls.



Alice Boner Institute, Assi Ghat 2018

The entrance is at the the side of the house through a black wooden door, which opens at times as if by magic by means of an ingenious rope pulley operated manually from one of the upper floors. Once inside, there is a pretty inner open courtyard painted Indian red and white with more shiny black doors to rooms leading off from the three floors.

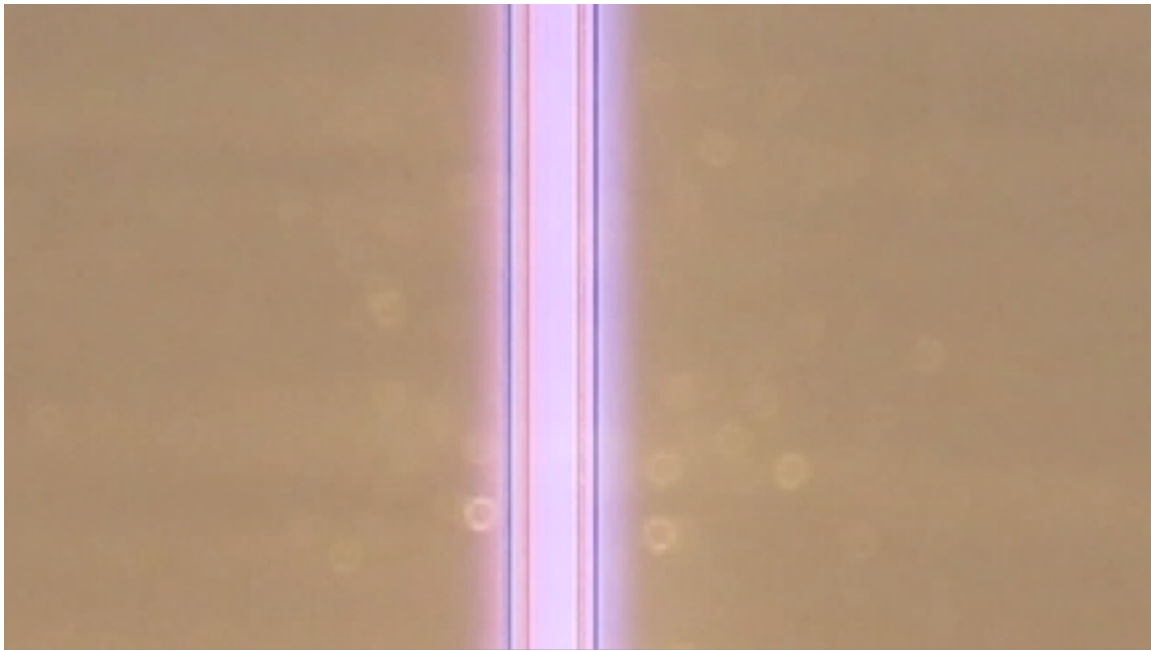
My room was on the ground floor opening out onto a small garden space beside the ghats and the ABI office, I felt immediately at home. Adjoining my room was a small, white windowless room, which Alice Boner used as her meditation room. In those days, a shaft of sunlight, coming through a small slit in the wall, would have dramatically beamed down early morning illuminating the room. Sadly this feature doesn't occur any more due to the encroaching building next door.

Assi Ghat is quite different from when I first visited in 1988. Since Modi came to power, this whole area has been renovated and, amongst other things, a cultural programme has been introduced for every day of the year called 'Subah-e-Banaras'. Every morning I would leave the house around 5.20am and head straight to the ghats to attend the morning Aarti followed by Morning Ragas and Yoga. Aarti is said to have descended from the Vedic concept of fire rituals and young pandits wearing saffron robes conduct this early morning ritual in front of the Ganges. Conch shells are blown, then in succession, multi-tiered oil lamps, snake hood lamps, peacock feathers and Yak Tail fans are circulated in slow,

synchronised motion, accompanied by the repetitive sound of a gong, bells and Vedic chanting by girls instead of young boys (breaking hundreds of years of tradition). Going beyond the current politics that may shape this programme, I found it mesmerising to watch, absorbing through sight, sound and smell this most ancient of ceremonies set against the backdrop of the Ganges (Ganga-Ji) with twilight gradually merging into daylight.

Walking on the ghats early morning in January, I often needed a torch as the fog was thick and visibility limited and on those cold, dark, foggy mornings with hardly a soul around (apart from the festival days), it held such a timeless aura of mystery. It was only towards the end of January, one month into my stay, that the sun could be seen rising and this is when, by chance, I made some short 'abstract' films. Using an old broken digital camera, intended simply for archival photos, I sat at the helm of a boat anchored to the bank of the river, waves rocking gently, facing the sun rising and its reflection in the water.

*24th Jan 2018 zooming in on the water at sunrise I enter the scene - लीला (LILA) (3) - bubbles, waves interweaving - multiple suns transform into one pink stripe then a single shaft of light - strips of multi coloured lines shooting vertically down like a watery "Zip" painting or perhaps as Kashi's 'LINGA of LIGHT'(4) (extract from notebook)*



At Varanasi it is said that the Ganges flows backwards, from south to north, towards its source of origin in the Himalayas, a phenomenon considered to be very auspicious by the Hindus. Filling a large plastic container (sold specifically for this purpose) with Ganges water I began a series of drawings and paintings combining this sacred water with water-colour. Using a single colour, I soaked

Indian handmade paper a number of times watching the chemistry of inactive pigment come to life in the water, colour gradually increasing in density. Some of these paintings have been/will be used as a background for fine line drawings and the others remain as themselves: 'Monochromes'.



Having straddled Abstract, Figurative and Conceptual art for the past 30 years, this is the first time I explored total abstraction; reducing the painting to its purest physical elements; colour, form, texture and the conceptual manner in which it was made. I also became increasingly interested in Sacred Geometry and bought a Helix geometry set (just like the one I had at school), copying diagrams from books found in the ABI library and elsewhere:

*30th Jan Tuesday - first attempt here at drawing a yantra - working things out - a spark of pleasure when ends meet, triangles fit, circles enclose - all seemingly correct. No need to prove anything for anyone and anyway for whom? (extract from notebook)*

Just a few doors down from ABI is the renowned Harmony bookshop which holds the most extraordinary collection of books squeezed into every inch of shelving in a very small space. The first book I bought was by French Musicologist/Indologist Alain Danielou, who was a close friend and neighbour of Alice Boner at Assi Ghat for many

years. 'The Raga-s of North Indian Indian Music' traces the history of Indian music and the continuity of its theory and practice for more than two thousand years, it also transcribes in detail 50 typical Raga-s. Having already made references to Indian notation in a few of my Graphic Notations, I had decided beforehand to do some



research on Indian Classical music and it was therefore fortuitous that I was able to share this interest with fellow ABI resident, Claudio Danuser, opera singer and musicologist from Switzerland. Together we went for lessons in Indian Classical Music at the home of Sitar Maestro Pandit Shivnath Mishra and Deobrat Mishra. I had Indian Classical Vocal music lessons from Ragini Mishra twice a week and would practise daily.

*11/02/18 Opening up - SOUND - outwardly + INWARDLY... moving/circulating within the chamber of s/Self (extract from notebook)*



*I was grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Miniature Painting workshop, which had been organised by the Museum Rietberg with artist Vijay Sharma from Chamba in Himachal Pradesh (a follower of the Basholi and Kangra styles of Pahari Painting). I spent time watching his assistant Parikshit Sharma draw exquisite lines using a fine squirrel brush. He explained how he had learnt to draw in this way, by spending many hours/years simply watching his master Vijay Sharma work. He spoke of the necessity to always keep the*

*form within a geometric form and that "the first line is most important, it should be like the very last line."*

During my residency, I also took the opportunity to visit local areas of interest. Located within the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) Campus is the art and archeological museum Bharat Kala Bhavan. Downstairs houses a wonderful collection of Indian sculpture and miniature paintings, while upstairs there are

stunning examples of small clay sculptures from Mohenjo-daro (Indus Valley Civilisation, built around 2500 BCE) and a room designated to Alice Boner with some of her own paintings and sculptures, alongside extracts from her diary: “The primary purpose of sacred images is not to give aesthetic enjoyment but to serve as focusing points for the spirit. Born in meditation and visualisation they should, and that is their ultimate intent, lead back to meditation and to the comprehension of that transcendent reality from which they were born. If they are beautiful, it is because they are true.”<sup>(5)</sup> I felt welcomed by students and staff at BHU and was happy to give a presentation on my work spanning 30 years and three countries (Britain, France and India) to Fine Art students in a large auditorium, which was well received.

It was while visiting the art and archeological collection that I met Swtantra PhD Student in Prehistoric Rock Art at BHU. I've always been deeply interested in the nature and concept of line throughout ages and it was therefore inspiring to talk with him and gain some knowledge on Prehistoric Art in India. Swtantra invited me to accompany him to the Panch Mukhi rock shelters near Robertsganj in Sonbhadra district (90kms from Varanasi) where there are some extraordinary examples of Mesolithic rock art.



Robertsganj Panch Mukhi rock shelter, Feb 2018

On the uneven walls and roofs of these open rock shelters are rock paintings representing men with bows and arrows, spears and hatchets hunting animals alongside mysterious symbols. I was immediately struck by the fragility and beauty of these simple small line drawings drawn with red colour (geru), which have lasted so well these past 10,000 years quite open to the elements. Clambering up and over the rocks, in one area Swtantra pointed out a number of small broken arrowheads scattered around; it was as if we had found ourselves in a mini time capsule. While still in that region, we also visited the fossil park at Salkhan with algae and stromatolites fossils 1400 million years old, supposedly the 'world's oldest fossils site'.

There are apparently around 2,000 temples in Varanasi and countless Shiva Lingas. <sup>(6)</sup> Some of the lesser known temples I visited were Panchakroshi Temple, with its 108 wall reliefs, Sultankeshwar, Kardameshvara and Omkara.



Omkara Temple, Varanasi

I also spent two afternoons in a potters' village on the outskirts of Varanasi watching a 90 year old potter endlessly throwing clay on the wheel making cups

'off the hump'. These small, delicate disposable cups for drinking 'earthy' chai were sun-dried in rows, then placed in expanding circles for firing.



Chai cups, post firing

Through my time in Varanasi I discovered a link between Alice Boner and me. Perhaps a similar one felt by Shelagh Cluett on her journey.

*Feb 2018 It's there, it's here - clarity - things becoming clear - this desire - final desire to return to the Source - and a/the means to the END/BEGINNING is through ART in its widest form/field. (extract from note book)*

I feel deeply privileged to have stayed in Alice's beautiful home at Assi Ghat especially with our shared fascination, love and interest in Indian Art and Philosophy.





Hindu Deity, Alice Boner Institute

## POST-SCRIPT

*Weds: Tomorrow I will drink some Ganga jal...*

*Sunday: the water...felt cool as it flowed down my throat like a small stream/rivulet reaching its source...can still feel the coolness - after-effect. Stomach makes a small sound, a welcoming groan then a tiny burp - "LIQUID SAKTI" (7) (extract from notebook)*

- (1) Diana Eck, Banaras: An Introduction p 24 City of Light - Kashi - Kāśī (काशी) - also known as Banaras or Varanasi. From Sanskrit *kash*, to shine. Translates as 'the luminous one' or 'city of light' - Samsara Sanskrit: "flowing around": the ongoing cycle of birth, death, and rebirth endured by human beings and all other mortal beings
- (2) Alice Boner: Diary extract 1935
- (3) लीला - LILA Sanskrit: "play," "sport", "spontaneity," "drama"
- (4) Kashi, Linga of Light "Jyotirlinga" p298 Diana Eck, City of Light
- (5) Alice Boner: Introduction p 17 Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture: Cave Temple Period,
- (6) Lingam or Linga in Sanskrit: "sign" or "distinguishing symbol" also means "phallus" "emblem" and symbolizes the god Shiva
- (7) 'Liquid Shakti' p218 Diana Eck, City of Light

