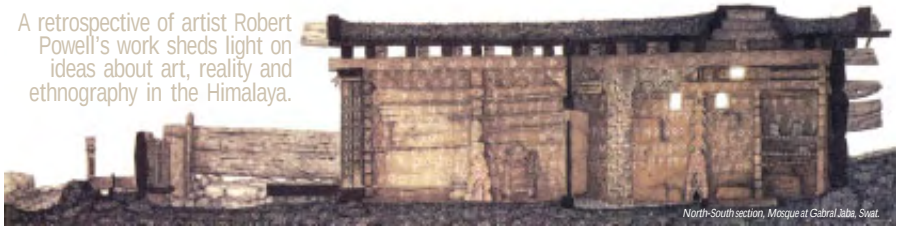
Imaginary documentation

A retrospective of artist Robert Powell's work sheds light on ideas about art, reality and ethnography in the Himalaya.



North-South section, Mosque at Gabral Jaba, Swat.

MARK TURIN

A 300-page 'retrospective panorama' of Robert Powell's work, *Himalayan Drawings* is a total book that edifies the visual senses as much as it does the intellect. The high quality of the photographic reproductions match the intensity of Powell's art, and the full page plates which make up two-thirds of the publication have a depth of colour almost indistinguishable from that of Powell's original drawings. The most prominent feature of Powell's signature style, now frequently seen in the posters adorning restaurants and middle-class homes in Kathmandu, is his unique form of fantastical hyperrealism. Many people at first take his drawings to be doctored photographs, only later realising that the life-like shadows and hairline cracks were created by pen and brush. It is fitting that the reproductions of Powell's work in this beautifully produced volume should be so true to the originals.

When studying the House of Tsuk, for example, which graces the dust jacket, one is hard-pressed to remember that this is a photographic replica of a pictorial representation, and not the house itself.

The publication of *Himalayan Drawings* was timed to coincide with the first ever retrospective of Robert Powell's oeuvre. The exhibition, with the same title as the accompanying book, was organised by and housed at the Ethnographic Museum of Zürich University in Switzerland and ran from 13 July, 2001 to 3 March, 2002. While previous shows of Powell's work, in Kathmandu where he lives and works, and at the Sackler Gallery in Washington DC, have focused on specific geographical locations depicted in his art, the *Himalayan Drawings* exhibit was more expansive. On display were 142 pieces spanning 25 years of Powell's work in the Himalaya (Nepal, India, Pakistan and China), which he had created using a range of different media (watercolour, ink and pencil).

The first chapter is by Peter Herbstreuth, an art critic and curator, who masterfully intertwines excerpts from an interview he conducted with Powell and his own intellectual appreciation of the artist's work. According to Herbstreuth, Powell "extracts pieces from his real surroundings, reconstructs them and shows the detail on the picture surface", a technique Herbstreuth emulates in his writing. Powell himself comes across as modest and thoughtful. According to Powell, in "any traditional architecture you see the passage of time…And that is what I found boring about so much modern architecture. There is nothing designed within the building to allow for the effect of time on a structure". It is hard to disagree when one looks around the modern skyline of Kathmandu. Powell also touches on a central feature of his work to which many commentators call attention: the notable absence of humans. Powell again states:

They [people] distract from the basic image of the building and it becomes too easy. It becomes picturesque with that some-locals-in-costume-in-front-of-the-building type of thing. This is not what I mean to show.

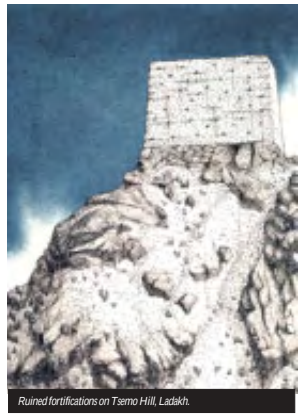
The absence of human figures in Powell's work is striking, perhaps only because the structures he depicts are so clearly shaped by humans. To return for a moment to the House of Tsuk on the dust jacket: everything about it speaks of human involvement and daily use. The absence of people from this painting is quite natural, since their presence is so palpably felt and acknowledged in the structure itself.

Herbstreuth concludes his chapter with a carefully-worded critique of the clichés that abound in popular western imaginings of Mustang, representations partially fuelled by the exoticising and sensationalist press reports of the region as a land of mystery. While art critics and journalists are quick to conscript Powell's Mustang paintings for their Orientalist imaginings, Herbstreuth makes a persuasive case for reading Powell's art as precisely the opposite: "Contrary to their ascribed 'mystery', Powell's works demonstrate clarity and legibility. He has grasped the architectural culture in precisely constructed pictures" (page 27). For Herbstreuth Powell is an artist who addresses transformation: he creates "a picture taken from a reality that insists on its verisimilitude, without being veristic".

Architect and conservation expert Niels Gutschow structures his chapter around the theme of 'imaginary documentation', a phrase coined by Powell to describe his own work. For Gutschow, Powell's 'imaginary documentation' actually "crosses the line of the imagination to achieve a narrative quality". Gutschow offers a tightly-written overview of architectural documentation, surmising that measured drawing is not truly documentary, as "every line on paper requires a decision". He uses this discussion as a reflective backdrop onto which he projects Powell's drawings and paintings. Detail is of the essence in Gutschow's presentation, and the reader learns that Powell counted the courses of bricks in the courtyard façade of Kuthu Math in Bhaktapur in order to maintain the correct scale in his drawing.

Gutschow is also highly attuned to the technical aspects of Powell's art. He observes that light always enters from the left in Powell's drawings, and that while perspective makes a brief appearance in Powell's earlier work, it only resurfaces many years later in his Mustang

collection. Documenting Mustang was clearly an exciting challenge for Powell, and one which encouraged him to experiment more freely with water colours and fine pencil outlines. The contrast between the architectural techniques and styles of urban Newar buildings and the wildness of Mustang is mirrored in Powell's work.



Ruined fortifications on Tsarno Hill, Ladakh.

In his chapter entitled *Fact and Fiction*, Götz Hagmüller analyses eleven of Powell's flights of fancy: drawings and paintings which lean rather more heavily towards the 'imaginary' in the 'imaginary documentation' continuum. Hagmüller states at the outset that "visual documentation of the material aspects of a culture…is never without a degree of subjectivity and imaginary content", challenging the misconception that Powell's work can be neatly divided between the super-real on the one hand, and the illusory on the other. Hagmüller, chief architect of the Patan Museum, narrates a charming anecdote. During the 1995 exhibition of Powell's Mustang paintings held in Patan, visitors from Mustang attending the show asked the artist where certain structures could be found in their villages. Powell was obliged to reply that some of them existed only in his own mind and "on paper".

Clare Harris, a specialist in visual anthropology, concentrates on Powell's images of Ladakh. She takes the reader on a brief historical jaunt through the ages by invoking the imperial draughtsmen who documented places they never actually visited. Harris finds some of Powell's work reminiscent of an "archaeological excavation in which the artist has used his eye to unearth the significance of each rock and object encompassed by his vision". Her insights are compelling, and she concludes that while "human presence is rarely represented figuratively in Powell's Ladakh pictures…we are presented with the material evidence of thought and action".

Anthropologist and Tibetologist Charles Ramble begins his chapter entitled *Art without Artists*, with an overview of the history of Mustang and a discussion of the difference between so-called 'high' and 'low' culture. Through a careful analysis of Rigsum Gonpo, or Protectors from the Three Buddha-families, pervasive architectural features in both the territory of Mustang and in Powell's depictions of this landscape, Ramble illustrates how anthropologists' preconceptions about meaning and continuity are not always shared by locals. Ramble's chapter brims with context; from the environment in which Powell's art may be viewed, to the dusty and harsh reality of daily life in Mustang which contrasts with many foreigners' perceptions of an enchanted land.

Annegret Nippa's chapter offers an intensive examination of a mosque that Powell documented in the spring of 1980. Nippa, director of the Museum of Ethnography in Dresden, uses her comparative and historical learning to demonstrate that the mosque of Gabral Jaba, located in Swat-Kohistan, is an extraordinary construction with a remarkable heritage. Powell's instinct was spot on when he chose to focus his artistic attention on this mosque which "while not the biggest or most spectacular by any means, did have something very special in its atmosphere, its remote location and its evident non-Islamic details". According to Nippa, Powell's images of the structure preserve a secret that has remained hidden from the missionaries: "Gabral Jaba reminds people of the old days and the old gods".

Michael Oppitz's chapter, the final one in the collection, is one of the most rewarding. Oppitz does here what he does best—blending detailed ethnographic insight with comparative anthropology, and topping it off with his deep understanding of the visual arts. Oppitz and Powell first collaborated in the 1980s when the anthropologist asked the artist to illustrate a book on the northern Magar populations of Nepal. Oppitz singles out one of Powell's drawings to show how the artist's focus on documentation resulted in the artistic aspects of the drawing being understated. The emphasis lay in its "auxiliary service to ethnographic explanation. In a sense, the painting was on its way towards mutation into a descriptive chart".

However, Oppitz points out that Powell's creations are often images beyond the documentary, collapsing space, cutting through solid walls to expose structural features of buildings, or capturing angles impossible with a camera. Oppitz punctuates his analysis with pairs of images, usually a photograph of an object accompanied by Powell's rendition of the same, and the author shows how time after time he prefers the artist's interpretation to the photograph. Discussing a *gagri* beer pot, for example, Oppitz concludes that Powell's ink version "had more material presence than the corresponding photograph", a presence which is actually intensified through its decontextualisation. Oppitz again:

Unlike corresponding photographs which cannot but catch everything upon which they are focussed, Bob's drawings are extremely selective, radically omitting anything secondary. They stand alone on the sheet, undisturbed, undistracted, demanding an exclusive and solitary dialogue with the observer, on the isolated ethnographic subject they capture.

Oppitz coins the catchy term "ethnographic draughtsman" to describe the artist's way of focussing in on images of intrinsic anthropological interest, while, at the same time "humbly following the rules of likeness". Oppitz concludes his stimulating chapter by turning to Powell's Mustang oeuvre, which he notes is considerably larger and more colourful than his earlier drawings. Colour is central, argues Oppitz, in understanding how Powell conceptualises Mustang. The artist collected samples of Mustang soil used by local colourists to extract pigment, examples of which are reproduced in the book. We further learn that Powell does not "*paint* white; rather, he *leaves blank*, so that 'white' is the white of the paper".

Even more than in earlier work, the physical conditions and travel restrictions of Mustang obliged Powell to paint in his studio in Kathmandu. Nevertheless, the photographs that he necessarily took of his objects of study never extend beyond the functional. As Oppitz writes, "for Powell photography will always be a research tool, an auxiliary activity to his vocation as draughtsman". As the reader learns from this wonderful collection, Powell would rather use a careful brush, a precise hand and his fertile imagination to assist him in his imaginary documentation. While some may find Powell's adherence to realism and accurate representation outdated, the artist himself is not unduly concerned: "In Kathmandu many in the modern art scene think my work is totally old-fashioned. They are stuck in this 1960's idea of what modern art should be". *Himalayan Drawings* comes a long way in illustrating both how and why Powell works in the way he does, and in so doing provides the reader with a feast for the eyes and mind.

Painted room, Kuthu Math, Bhaktapur

Robert Powell: Himalayan Drawings. Michael Oppitz, ed. Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich, 2001. 304 pages, 283 colour illustrations, 59 black and white, 1 map. ISBN 3-909105-41-6. Rs 6,000.

(A longer version of this review appears in the October issue of *Himal South Asian*.)