

In the Land its Story

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February 13, 2019



Bantay Srei, Angkor Wat, Cambodia



Floating down the river in Pu Luong, North Vietnam



Market, Mekong Delta, South Vietnam



Temple, Luang Prabang, Laos

As someone with two passports and cultural allegiances only to the magnificent concept known for the moment as Europe, I am not a very political person. But at one time in my life, during the war in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, this wasn't the case. The War was a malign presence throughout my childhood and youth, and our family actively participated in the protest movement. Hospitality was offered to draft dodgers passing through Rome, and we were removed from the American school to protect my younger brother from the infamous lottery. *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?* is a song that my little granddaughter loves today when I sing it to her. I am so glad she doesn't know what inspired my hero Pete Seeger to write it.

So I have always felt a strong need to go and see where it all happened, and

make a kind of personal atonement. It's appropriate to me personally that this week Kim Phuc has received the International Peace prize. The iconic image of this innocent 9-year-old's flight from a napalm attack in 1972 will always be a reminder of vicious cruelty on both sides of the war, and her horrific injuries burned themselves onto the consciousness of the world. I stayed with a family of Vietcong. I also stayed with the family on the other side of the war. My beautiful hostess was around my age. She had lost two children and a husband to Agent Orange. She had no rancour. We talked. Such acceptance. Forgiveness. Maybe being a Buddhist helps....

The trip was revelatory in so many different ways. As a person, I was bowled over by the beauty of the people - their kindness, openness and generosity. As an art historian I was gobsmacked by the complexity of vegetable dyeing and the resultant woven textiles, which are more detailed than I have seen anywhere else, even in Peru. I became a fawning groupie wherever there was a loom in sight, and was ready to give everything up to become a weaver. The gold bling of the temples and monasteries was a delight that was distinctly different from the European sites of worship that I know so well. Once again, I realised how Eurocentric I am, and was forced to confront my own ignorance, an experience that is always chastening, and that will be another blog.

Ultimately it was as an artist where I was most nourished. The countryside has recovered and survived the war, like its citizens who act as its loving custodians today. The land holds its story locked within it, but thankfully it is resilient and has recovered. Perhaps a little more quickly than its human occupants. That's a good thought. There is huge poverty and certainly huge problems with government corruption, and I don't wish to be self-indulgently romantic or sentimental, but where there is so much natural beauty, I think there is hope.

There are certainly paintings. Where to start? In Cambodia at Angkor Wat, gilded by the sun, rising like massive drip castles made of sand out of the jungle in the very early morning? Or down a back street at dawn in Laos giving sticky rice as alms to hundreds of monks shuffling along like a version of holy Halloween trick-or-treaters? Or in Vietnam in the riotous markets piled high with tropical fruit and piles of delicious bats and rats and chickens and fish and frogs? Or watching the sun go down in the glorious Mekong Delta, site of so many infamous battles? Or is it balancing, vertigo temporarily banished, binoculars in one hand and the other on a rickety bamboo platform watching thousands of nesting storks in a watery wilderness? Or is it standing with my watercolours sprayed with mist by a waterfall out of a Hokusai woodblock print? So many images. So little time.

To work.