

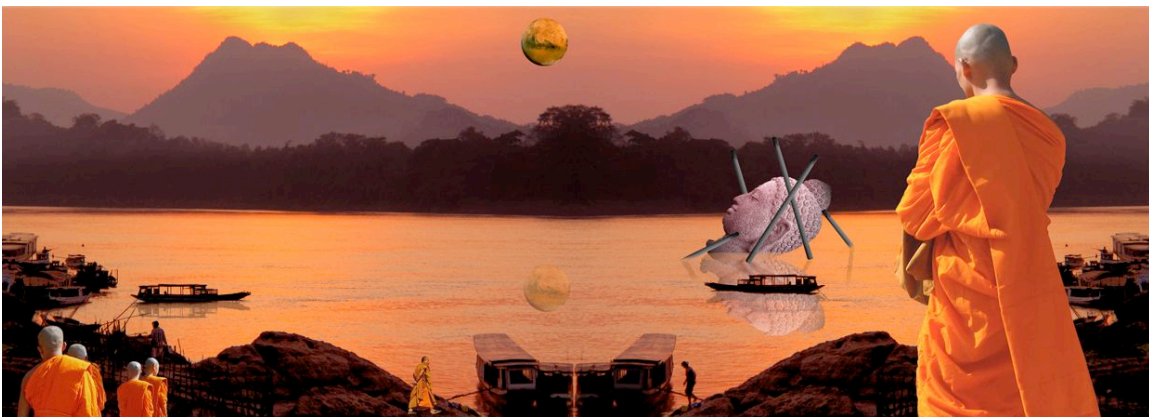
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## THE LENS MAN

Text by Rachel Greaves

“Peace is not defined as the absence of war but as the presence of compassion; and this is what I want to portray.” Javanese artist Bundhowi is a painter and a photographer, known for his striking photomontages, in which he edits and combines individual photographs to create a seamless composite print. It’s a technique that goes back to the mid-nineteenth century, when fantastic photomontaged postcards became popular in Victorian England. The same method is accomplished today using image-editing software. It is sometimes known as ‘Photoshopping’, and Bundhowi is a Master of the technique.



Art, however, stretches infinitely beyond technique, and the self-taught Bundhowi uses his talent as a platform through which to visually articulate his metaphysical reflections and experience, together with his personal mission to convey the concept of universal peace. Visual arts made a huge impact on this artist from an early age, his first exposure being through comics and movies. His passion for photography was fired later, when he fulfilled a five-year teaching and supervisory post with ‘Save the Children Federation’,

'The Experiment in International Living', and the 'World Learning Incorporation' at Galang Island. This Indonesian Island, close to the islands of Bintan and Batam off the coast of Singapore, was the site of a refugee camp that accommodated Indochinese refugees between 1979 and 1996. "When I was at high school", recalls Bundhowi, "I was troubled by the images and news of war in Vietnam and Cambodia, so when there was an opening to be a teacher at this camp, I applied and got accepted out of hundreds of applicants.



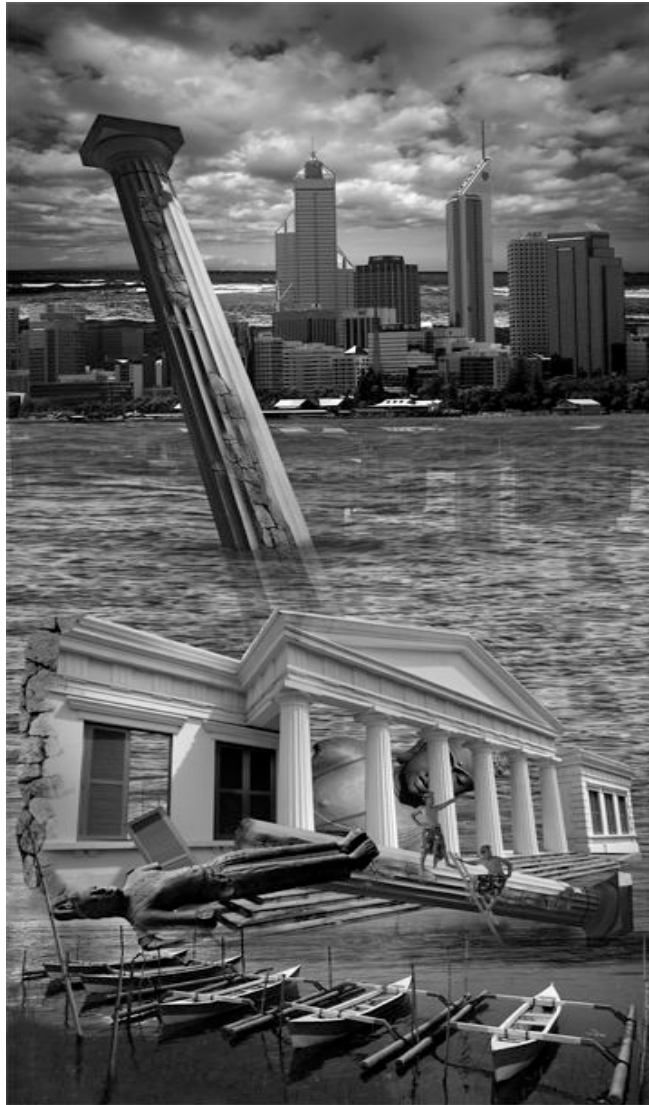
I believe I was destined to be there". Surrounded by children who were the victims of suffering, violence and war, who had been wrenched away from their homes and were also nursing a deep trauma and grief, the teacher took photos. "I carried my camera at all times, documenting the lives of the Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees. They called me the Lens Man of the camp! After a while, however, I asked myself, why am I doing this? Why do I have to take pictures of suffering? Although I knew that my photographs could record history, I believed they could become a venue for vengeance, so instead I attempted to take pictures that would express the spirit of rebuilding combined with a sense of making peace among the people. Rather than depict suffering, I decided to focus on the way in which people determine to get back on their feet and create hope for themselves". Although he admires war photographers such as Robert Capa, James Nachtwey, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, who have candidly exposed the facts of reality, Bundhowi decided to take a different road. "If we have war photographers, why not also have peace photographers?"



After leaving the camp, the Lens Man took time out to explore some foreign countries, including Indochina where the refugees had fled from. The chronicles of these journeys later emerged within his work. When he came to live in Bali, he found that this island was

also a place where he could unleash his creative ability. “A lot of photographers from all over the world come here and take pictures of nature, life, culture and tradition. I wanted to do something different, which is why I chose photomontage.

Wars, and the movements against them, have constantly inspired artists, and within this field the strength of photomontage as a medium stands out. Bundhowi’s artwork is therefore a powerful tool and vehicle for ideas and narratives. The complex imagery of Bundhowi’s work explores the concept of rebuilding, while also reflecting many influences of artistic style, from conceptualism to constructivism to surrealism. His combination of various and diverse elements within one picture, produces interactions, affinity, dialogue and the creation of a new reality.



The Lens Man’s studio is his laptop, “I take a picture and later I give meaning to it”. Using both digital and film cameras, including infrared techniques to produce silvery-white tones; some of his work is comprised of as many as 150 digital layers, taking as long as one month to compose. He explains, “The idea is to use different representations to convey a meaning. Images of peace to denote hope”. Borrowing the traditional icons of peace from world religions and visual prayer, his montages put idealism and humanitarian

values into a single piece of work.

His images of a Balinese Hindu ceremony on Jimbaran beach, for example, were taken early in the morning just after the Jimbaran bomb attacks; the Buddha's head in the sea is symbolic, portraying a hope of peace for the island. In one montage the Buddha's head glows above the sharply contoured inky body of water, in another, one figure stands out in bold colour against a backdrop of black & white, while another blends images of Java and Bali, representing the tension that was felt between the two islands after the bombing. "This montage," Bundhowi explains, "was my effort to restore the peaceful connection across the water between the two islands". His rich and inventive work often features the beautiful image of the full moon as another potent symbol of peace.



Not all of his artwork depicts Bali; many of his photographs were taken in Cambodia and Laos. Lotus flowers and umbrellas are two of his trademarks, while the orange-clad monks, who he befriended during a month-long stay at a monastery in Vientiane, take centre stage in many of his compositions. He also works some surrealist magic by juxtaposing disparate imagery in 'The Quest in the West', which represents the quest to find meaning and peace within our lives in the face of capitalism and consumerism. Finally, an aura of the old world characterises his black & white image of a lone fisherman; the hand poised in prayer and the moonlight on the water suggests a man at peace within the solitude of his simple lifestyle.



Bundhowi's artwork has recently been exhibited at Alila Ubud and Alila Jakarta. Look out for his next exhibition, scheduled for August at Rudana Museum, Mas, Ubud.

M Bundhowi, Art Photography