

Luminosity and Illusion in the Bardo

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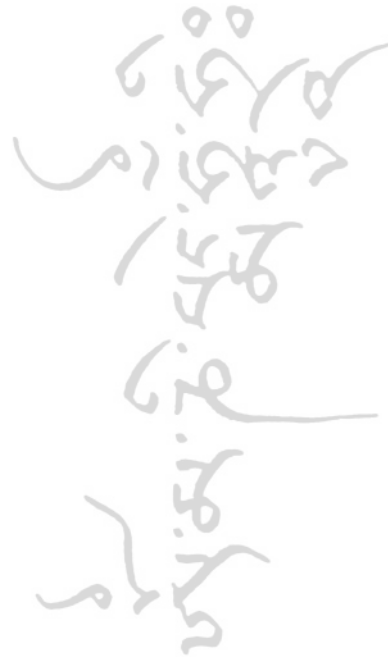
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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements.

Mark Ryan October 2007

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Abstract

Luminosity and Illusion in the Bardo

An exploration of visual experiences within the Bardo state

This is a creative practice-based photographically researched project that is contextualised by a written exegesis. I am attempting to conceptualise the apparent visual experiences that occur during the dying process, death, and rebirth as believed within Tibetan Buddhism. The Bardo of life is also relevant as it pre-ordains the visual context of the experiences within the dying, death and rebirth Bardos.

Through the medium of photography, my methodology and practice are reflective of two fundamental ideas. These are: **Luminosity** and **Illusion**. They are supported by my research into the phenomenon of the 'Near Death Experience' and the Jungian concept of the conscious and subconscious mind. These states of reality are explored in relation to the Tibetan Book of the Dead's concept of the Bardo. My focus is to photograph the four elements of Earth, Fire, Air and Water as mediums familiar to all human beings and relate these in context to the Tibetan Book of the Dead's description of entering the Bardo of death. Illusion and luminosity are discovered by 'seeing' these within the four elements, and are related in context to the Tibetan Buddhists' belief of an after-death reality. This transition from the dying process into the unknown Bardo of death is supported by the familiarity of these four elements in life, and the mind's notion of reality.



Introduction

The thesis is based on a 15th Century set of scrolls known as the **Bardo Thodol** - (*Liberation through Hearing in the In-between State*), otherwise known as The Tibetan Book of the Dead. **Bardo** (*Tib. Bar Do*; *Skt. antarabhava*) is defined as a 'transitional passage or intermediate state'. The accepted translation of the Bardo is "in-between". It is usually associated with the dying process, death and rebirth. However, it also includes the consciousness of life.

Rinpoche (1992) referring to The Tibetan Book of the Dead states that there are four Bardo states:

- the 'Natural' Bardo of life
- the 'Painful' Bardo of dying
- the 'Luminous' Bardo of dharmata (unconditioned truth)
- the 'Karmic' Bardo of becoming (Rebirth) (p. 103)

My focus is to explore the luminous nature of these states and the associated illusions in context within Tibetan Buddhist beliefs, and to reflect and re-consider these within a 'Western' concept of an after-death reality: a tunnel of light, Heaven or Hell, and a state of transformation into unknown realms. I am also exploring the significance of a dissolution (dissolving) and renewal of the natural world through the four elements, in context with the Bardo state of death, which I defined as a luminous state of mind-consciousness in between dying and rebirth. Referring to 'Luminosity' and 'Illusion', these are described as phenomena experienced within a Bardo state; '**Luminosity**' associated with the opportunity to achieve self-enlightenment, and '**Illusion**' referred to as a virtual vision actualising within the Bardo and emanating from one's self and the consequences of one's life experiences.

This is a practical research project using six images displayed in an exhibition gallery. These images represent a nominal eighty percent of the final submission. The exhibition is accompanied by a written exegesis that contextualises and explains the issues of Luminosity and Illusion within the Bardo states.

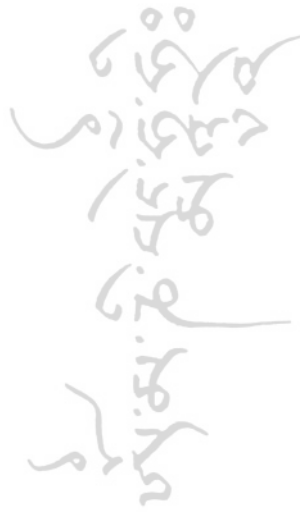
Chapter 1

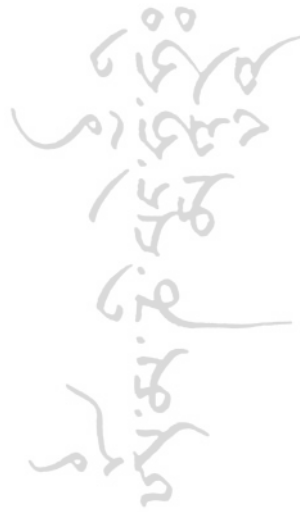
Conceptual Ideas from the Bardo

1.1 Luminosity

Through my photography practice, I am discovering the sublime characteristic of light (luminosity) from the four elements of Earth, Fire, Air and Water. It contains the entire spectrum of colours and is often used to describe a spiritual insight of inner knowing and resonance. The concept of luminosity is related to the awareness of illusion. In accordance with the Tibetan Buddhist belief, luminosity offers an opportunity for transcending the illusionary experiences in the Bardo state and breaking the cycle of rebirth and death. Luminosity is the liberation from illusion and it is the equivalent of Nirvana or Buddha Consciousness as believed within Buddhism, or Heaven in a Judeo-Christian context. The term luminosity is defined within the Tibetan Book of the Dead as: "Clear light or clarity" (Freemantle, 2001, p.199). It is experienced by letting go of the familiar, the attachments of our remembered life and accepting a journey into another realm of light.

In conclusion, the illusionary and luminous outcome from photographing these elements is created by my 'seeing' these in the context of the Buddhist belief of letting go of what is known and familiar. Allowing my preconditioned and pragmatic photographic expectations to dissolve and change, I am creating and discovering a new reality and potential from my interpretation of the photographed subject. This new reality in my final image is somewhat of a paradox, in that I am creating one illusion from another and adapting light from the image to suggest a transformation of the subject.





1.2 Illusion

I propose to establish a visual narrative that suggests visionary perceptions within these Bardo experiences are subjective and emanate from the self; one's own thought projections create a reality based on illusion and the virtual nature of the mind's perception of reality. The accepted definition of illusion from the Collins English dictionary (Anderson, Butterfield, Crozier, Dainith, Davidson, Grandison, 'et al.' 2005, p. 812) is:
"A false appearance or deceptive impression of reality."

In context with the Tibetan Book of the Dead, I also intend to briefly include two other academic studies to support my philosophical approach to this project. They are:

1. A phenomenon known as "A Near Death Experience"
2. Psychology and the nature of the mind as proposed within Carl Jung's (1992) research and psychology, in particular the relationship between the subconscious and conscious mind and what generates the realms of perception

These components within my project will support my rationale of the illusory nature of thought and resulting 'realities', and relate these to the Tibetan Buddhist belief of the dream-like and illusory conditions within the Bardo states (Fig. 1).

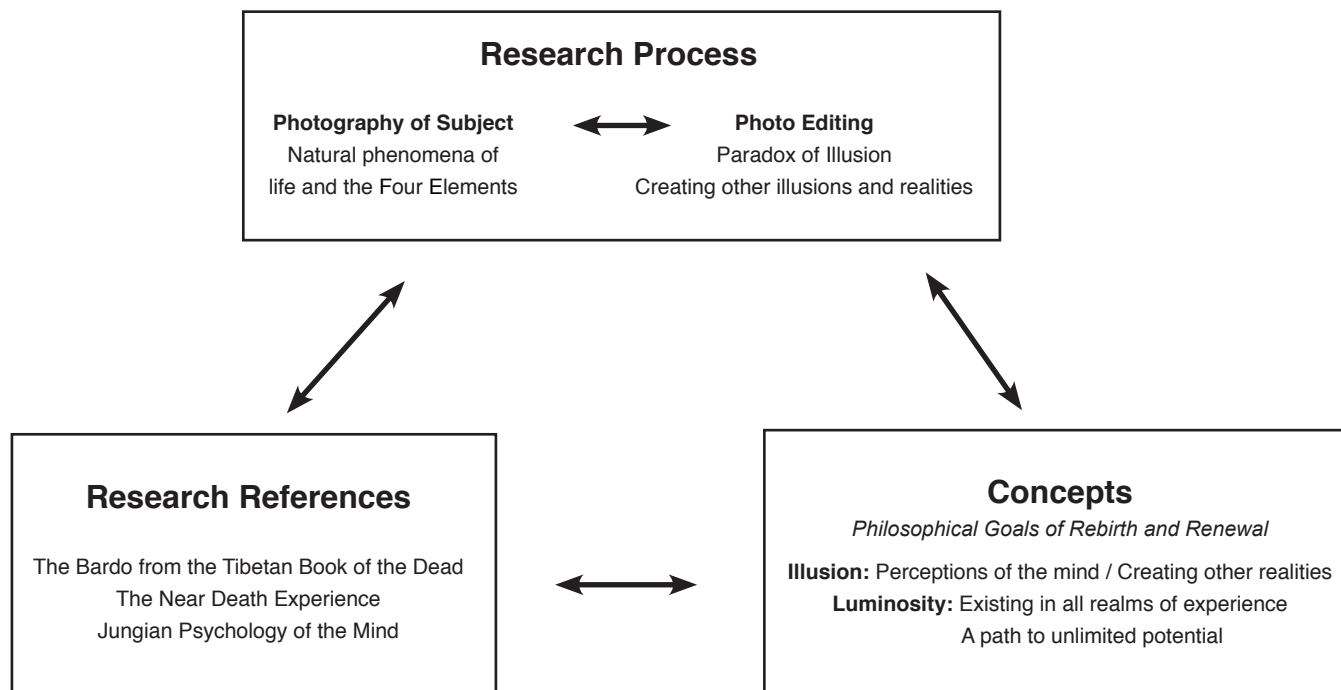


Fig. 1

Chapter 2

Three Perspectives of Consciousness

The research that supports my thesis is based on three independent ideas of what may exist after death. These are:

- the Near Death Experience (NDE)
- Jungian psychology of the conscious and unconscious mind
- dying, death and rebirth as described from The Tibetan Book of the Dead

Each topic is discussed in relation to my conceptual ideas of illusion and luminosity and the philosophical approach to my photographic practice and methodology.

2.1 The Near Death Experience - A Brief Experience of Dying

The Near Death Experience is a phenomenon that supports my exploration of the Bardo of Dying. I will discuss the virtual conditions arising from a number of common descriptive experiences within the Near Death Experience (NDE) and the Tibetan Buddhist's notion of the same experience. This comparative discussion allows my methodology to evolve into the photographic rationale, and to simplify concepts that would otherwise become lost in complex dogma and belief.

An NDE is a survivable experience of an actual death. It is when a person has clinically died and is then resuscitated. There are a number of common similarities between an NDE and the Buddhist's Bardo of Dying. The survivor will relate a series of sensations and experiences that surpass 'time and space' and in some cases retain a vivid recollection of these experiences.

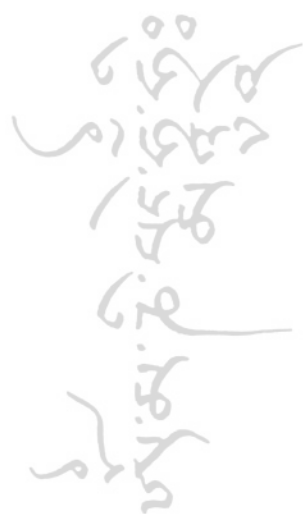


Some of these sensations are:

- a state of peace and well-being, complete and free from pain
- an awareness of sound as a rushing or buzzing background noise
- the sensation of being outside of oneself and floating above one's body, observing the scene from an objective viewpoint
- a brilliant light that is often beckoning and luminous
- perfect clairvoyance, form and mobility in an unreal environment
- meeting others that have died
- heavenly and hellish visions in different realms, often described as observed rather than experienced
- a sense of judgment or life review

Almost all NDE survivors that recall these phenomena describe the event as life changing and are often inspired to re-invent themselves within their lifestyles and attitudes. Recent NDE studies (Van Lommel, 2001), have concluded that only 12% of hospitalised cardiac patients recall a deep experience during an NDE, although this could be explained by the current anesthetic medication used during the operation that has amnesiac effects on the patient when resuscitated and revived. They also suggest that various drugs and the body's own endocrine secretions produced under stress can create the NDE experience.

Tibetan Buddhist practitioners dedicate their lives in preparation for the Bardo of dying and death experiences so as to be aware of the illusory nature of this event and to accept the reality as emanating from one's own mind. The objectives and goals of the Tibetan Buddhist practitioners are to maintain this awareness when experiencing the Bardo of death and to achieve 'Ground Luminosity' or Nivarna by letting go of these illusions from one's mind. The consequence of this enlightenment through luminosity, is ending the cycle of death and rebirth.



There have been many studies that have attempted to understand these phenomena, and the anecdotal evidence from survivors often describes similar experiences that relate to the Tibetan Buddhist Bardo state. Researchers Moody (1975), Morse (1990) and Swiss-born psychiatrist and author Kubler-Ross (1997), have documented stories related by many survivors of a 'Near Death Experience'. Kubler-Ross (1997) stated: *"After your death, when most of you for the first time realize what life here is all about, you will begin to see that your life here is almost nothing but the sum total of every choice you have made during every moment of your life. Your thoughts, which you are responsible for, are as real as your deeds. You will begin to realize that every word and every deed affects your life and has also touched thousands of lives".* (Retrieved June 2007 from web site). From Morse & Perry (1994), another description from a man who wrote a poem about an NDE incident in World War II: *"Would you really call this dying? In the near light, but far away. This light which our hope nurtures. To the star high above, everyone has traveled there in their mind. Before your body, the mind, the spirit belonged to the stars. Let this shine deep in your heart, in your dreams on this earth. Death is an awakening."* (p. 51).

Summary

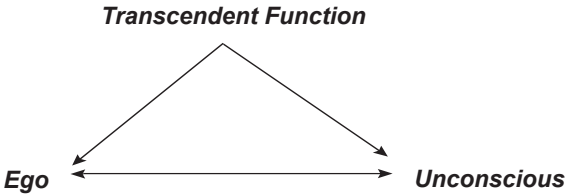
Within the Tibetan Buddhist beliefs there is this same notion: what you are in your thoughts during life will be manifested in death. The reality you 'see' will be of your own making, but there is this beckoning light that can transcend that reality, and move you on into another infinite realm of existence. In relation to my photography, the NDE is a description of a brief moment of a place after death; a transformation into a realm of light, colour and tranquility. My goal is to photographically emphasise this light, luminosity and colour from the four elements we are made from and to convey the feeling of beauty and renewal from these ever-changing substances.

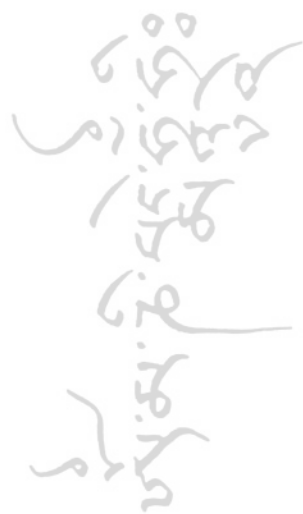


2.2 Consciousness - A Jungian Idea

The mind is a powerful persuading force in our lives. It can create thought patterns that are both positive and negative. Jung (1992) discovered within the many parameters of psychological research, that the mind manifests both conscious and unconscious expression in the way of dreams. My intention is to establish an association with the Bardo state of consciousness and Jung's understanding of dreams, and to suggest that they are both created by the mind and appear as illusions when experienced in both these states. It is my belief that the effects of these experiences are retained by one's conscious mind, whether it be in an awakened state in life, or a Bardo consciousness in death.

This thesis in relation to this Jungian concept is to state that all thought in a conscious mind is always affected by the unconscious mind, which in turn is influenced by everyday life experiences. Unconscious thoughts are often a result of stressful or unresolved emotional experiences. These then become manifested as dreams, which can appear unreal and illogical. They seem to be influenced by external events, not at all coming from one's self. Jung describes the images experienced in a dream as not having an independent existence, but coming from a lifetime of either collective or archetypal experiences. He also separates the unconscious mind from the ego, with the term '*Transcendent Function*' (Singer, 1994. p. 274), which can be described in simple terms as an over-self that gives autonomy to both the ego (the conscious mind) and the unconscious mind, but makes a connection between the two.





Does the soul become Jung's 'Transcendent Function' to make sense of the flood of unconscious thoughts experienced in this death state?


When one experiences death, then if any consciousness exists, it might resemble the dream-like state that one experiences when alive. The sense of what appears to be real, could simply be a continuation of what has already been constructed within one's mind and therefore, one then creates the subjective visions based on karma (cause and effect), as described within the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

Summary

As this area of psychology is vast and complex, it is not my intention to explain or challenge Jung's work. The slice of research I extracted from Jung's theories on dreams and the conscious (ego or self) and unconscious mind, appear to have similarities to the Tibetan Buddhist belief of the state of the mind when experiencing illusions in the Bardo realms. The significant point is that either illusion in dreams, or in the Bardo realms, can be interpreted as some sort of 'reality' experienced. It appears real, and my question remains: is this experience real enough to call it 'reality'? And how do I interpret and reflect meaning to what I see? From Jung's perspective, reality is measured in a collective agreement of archetypal figures, and is a way of making sense of complex interpretations of experiences, dreams and feelings. My interpretation of reality may not be shared by others, and therefore could be considered an illusion.

2.3 Dying, Death and Rebirth

Dying and Death



This is an event everyone will face at some time. It is often emotionally difficult to comprehend one's death and yet it is an everyday occurrence. The frightening part of this phenomenon is that one does not know what is on 'the other side.' As an example, in 'The Bardo of Life and Dying' (Fig. 4), I am exploring the nature of attachment to life and the emotional fear of no longer having the security of life's familiar habits, comforts and people around us. It is also a journey into an unknown realm, a pending judgement and a time to reflect and be totally alone with one's own mind. By going with and accepting the dying process, the Tibetan Buddhists believe that the awakened mind will discover the essence of absolute truth (Luminosity), and liberation from the cycle of dying, death and rebirth can be achieved. Luminosity in the Tibetan Buddhism context, is to abandon the mind's illusions of ignorance, anger, pride, possession, desire, and jealousy and allow these to dissolve into light and emptiness. Tibetan Buddhist terminology describes three realms inside the dying, death, and rebirth processes as: Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Nirmanakaya. (Rinpoche, 1992, p. 343).

Through my research of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, it is my interpretation that within these three realms, the mind will experience :

1. The outer dissolution of, and experiencing the essence of, the four elements, Air, Fire, Earth and Water. These are the foundations from which we are made. It is returning to these elements once again - a luminous emptiness and one's re-absorption back into the earth and stars.
2. The inner dissolution of the senses to be replaced by 'The true nature of the mind' which momentarily experiences 'Luminosity'. This radiance of the mind is displayed in the appearance of sound, colours and light.
3. The consciousness becomes aware of past karma and habits and creates an illusionary attachment to the mind again. If one cannot accept these illusions as coming from one's self and let go of them, then a rebirth will occur, and the cycle of birth, life, and death is repeated once again.

Rebirth

There are many ways of describing rebirth. My way of seeing this in relation to my photography is to evolve the images into a different state of reality and yet retain the essential 'being' or soul of the subject. It is believed by Tibetan Buddhists that a soul looking for rebirth will wander through various realms, '*...eventually arriving at a place where their future parents are making love.*' (Rinpoche, 1992, p. 296). Various interpretations of rebirth or renewal have been described in many religions and by philosophers attempting to give meaning to this notion. Jung (1992) describes five forms of rebirth, each having different definitions and meaning:

- *metempsychosis*¹ (*transmigration of karma*)
- *reincarnation* (*a continuation of the soul in a human body*)
- *resurrection* (*a re-establishment of human existence after death. A Christian concept*)
- *rebirth* (*a renewal or improvement without changing a personality*)
- *participating in the process of transformation* (*indirectly participating in some rite of transformation such as a Mass where there is a transformation of substances*) (p. 47).

The Roman poet, Ovid (A.D.8, as cited by Howard, 1998, p. 79), described metamorphosis:

*"As a young man from the sea
Then as a lion, then a roaring boar,
Or as a snake whom many fear to touch!
Horns change you to a bull, or you might be
A sleeping horse, a tree, or water flowing.
Or fire that quarrels with water everywhere."*

1. The Collins English Dictionary (Anderson, S., Butterfield, J., Crozier, J., Dainith, J., Davidson, G., Grandison, A. 'et al'. 2005, p.1024), describes metempsychosis as:
"*The migration of a soul from one body to another.*" A similar terminology used to describe the process of renewal is the word metamorphosis or "*a complete change of physical form or substance.*"

Rinpoche (1992) on rebirth states:

“As in the Bardo of becoming, the time for rebirth gets closer, you crave more and more for the support of a material body, and you search for anyone that might be available in which to be reborn. Different signs will begin to appear, warning you of the realm in which you are likely to take rebirth. Lights of various colours shine from the six realms of existence and you will feel drawn towards one or another.....Once you have been drawn into one of these lights, it is very difficult to turn back.” (p. 295). The Tibetan Book of the Dead also describes this luminous emptiness as an area where transformation of the mind takes place within all stages of the Bardos.

Summary

Each of the three experiences of dying, death, and rebirth are a transformation process. In Tibetan terms, if one does not achieve the ultimate liberation through luminosity in the Bardo of death, then the Bardo of rebirth still offers a positive renewal and continuation of life. The choice of a suitable realm within these two states is simply decided by one's self and pre-existing karma, with the illusionary nature of one's mind creating a reality and continuing on within a different realm. With some gained awareness through the soul's development, another chance is offered through rebirth and the Bardo of life again. The Bardo of death is a realm wherein a significant transformation occurs, and by using the four elements of Earth, Fire, Air and Water, I am suggesting these elements act as a medium to facilitate the transition to another rebirth. These elements are familiar to every person in life, and are supporting the mind's own reality and understanding during this transitional state. It is my way of using something familiar and tangible to facilitate an unknown journey between the conscious awareness of dying and being born again in the Bardo of life. 'The Bardo of rebirth' (Fig. 10) is the last of the series of Bardo images, and is comprised of an entwined pair of lovers set in a dark monochromatic space. Hovering near them is a soft blue light, or a soul looking for rebirth. Within all of my images, I have allowed space to indicate renewal and rebirth. To support this concept, embedded in each of the images is what I term 'The Feminine Principle,' which I will discuss in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

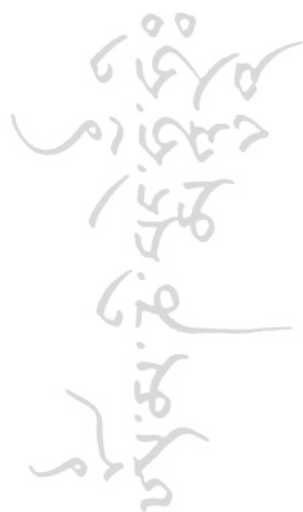
Theoretical Principles

3.1 Colour

In this chapter, I will discuss the importance of colour and my use of colour as a significant component of my Bardo images. In most of my images I have used hues of a single colour as a medium of transformation in each of the Bardo realms. Colours are components of 'white light'. When sunlight is reflected or transmitted through various mediums, it reveals each color according to the frequency created by the medium. A red rose is not reflecting blue, simply because blue and the other missing colors (with the exception of red), are absorbed by the petals of that red rose.

Within my photographic perception of the Bardo realms, I sometimes use single colours within each of the four elements and disperse these colours into a realm of *no* colour; black or grey, or the balance of all colours to represent white light and luminosity. In my use of grey, it signifies the in-between state of black and white. It allows me to use this as a background to exemplify the value 'white' and its association with luminosity and limitless space. I am also exploring the idea that the realms described in the Bardo, the death experience, are often intense and selectively associated with colours. I am using colour (and the absence of it) to describe a progressive sequence in experiencing the metamorphosis of illusions within the elements of Earth, Fire, Air, and Water. I interpret the colours in my images as either an intense white light (containing all colours) characterizing liberation, or black (all colours absorbed) indicating a void; unknown realms of emptiness and a journey of transformation of the mind/soul. In using a single colour within a monochromatic image, I am isolating the potential of a 'reborn' mind/soul from the monochromatic surface and environment of a Bardo realm.

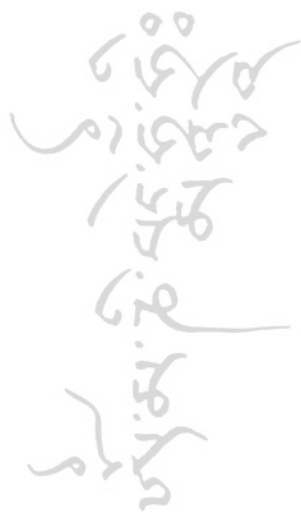




3.2 The Feminine Principle

The Tibetan Book of the Dead describes eight powerful male and female natures within the Bardo visions (referred to as the sons and daughters of the Buddha). They are the parents of enlightenment; together they produce Bodhichitta - the heart of one's enlightened mind. The male identities are empowered with variations of compassion and their purpose is to be helpful and offer guidance. The female identities represent a functional transmutation to awareness, awakened into immortality. Fundamentally, the feminine principle is the creative power that gives birth. She is space, the zero dimension of emptiness from which all phenomena arise.

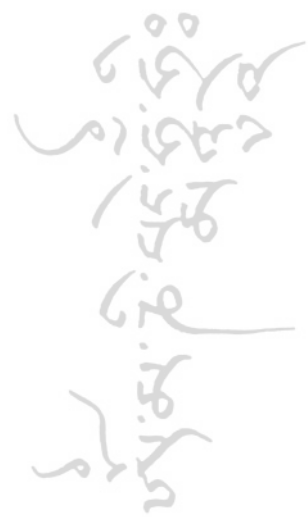
Within my image of 'The Painful Bardo of Dying', I have embedded an image of a female face deep in meditation to represent the infinite potential of awakening again in another realm of existence. (Fig. 4) I have also used this face in the images of 'Water' and 'Fire' in a subtle and translucent way, to connect to the intuitive awareness of the transforming process of the Bardos. Within the 'Earth' image a foetus is seen evolving from the rocks to be re-absorbed back into the stardust of the universe and reborn once again. (Fig. 6). It is the feminine aspect that I search for within this project. I try to achieve a transformation of each of the elements into a feeling of identifying with it's essential nature, and to apply and extract this nature of renewal and change.



3.3 The Illusion of Reality

The illusionary nature of my work has its very foundation in my photographic insights which have come from applying many technical and scientific projects I have experienced over many years. For example, a reality transposed from digital photography is realised through a series of zeros and ones. These are then assembled in a series of pixels to create a mosaic of 'reality'; polarised light projected and viewed in certain prescribed angles can create the illusion of three dimensional imagery; a scanning electron microscope creates an image from a subject that we cannot see because it is smaller than a wavelength of light and therefore it is unable to reflect light. The virtual image is created by electrons bouncing off this gold-coated subject and only then are we able to see it.

Technology can be pragmatic and absolute, and yet create an illusionary reality within its pragmatism. For example, the transformation of images under altered mediums such as ultraviolet light, infrared light and scanning electron microscopes can 'create' the invisible to a visible state. Just as the original perception of invisibility or non-existence is a valid reality, it does not mean that something does not exist. My work in progress takes dimensional reality into a no-boundary or emptiness state. I describe this as a place where the limitations of the subject, such as the element Water (Fig. 9), is unrestrained by its physical surroundings. I am using space within the image to suggest a place of transformation into another reality. The emptiness and neutral grey tones I have used in this image create the notion that something *is* actually there, even though it is not apparent or visible.



As one's mind creates its own reality, the semiotic relationship between what is real and illusionary will always rest with one's own perception. Bateson (1972) states: "*The mind contains only transforms, percepts, images, etc...It is nonsense to say that a man was frightened by a lion, because a lion is not an idea. The man makes an idea of the lion.*" (p. 271). In relation to emptiness and space, when I am working with the subjects of Earth, Fire, Air and Water, I am challenged by the reality and defined nature of each of these elements. For example, fire creates flames from a construction of wood or other combustible material. It is contained and defined within a designated space and dimension. But then the flame disappears into nothing - a transition of reality into something else. Rotman (1993) also refers to the concept of 'nothing' in terms of a semiotic meta-sign: "...*The mystical O of the Kabbalah; the Hollow Crown which served as an icon of ex nihilo creation; the great circle of white light signifying infinity for Traherne; the origin and place of birth...*" (p. 60).

Summary

My understanding of the illusionary nature of a Bardo existence is that we become a virtual body without limitations. My photographic knowledge has been challenged during this project, in that my expectations were always going to be illustrative if I were to accept my 'known reality.' Describing my relationship with illusion when I am photographing, by not defining the obvious appearance of something 'real' I have allowed myself the freedom of expressing something yet to be revealed. I have in my mind the essence and fundamental characteristics of the subject but I can never be fully aware of these characteristics at the time as they are in constant change. It is much later when the images are laid in front of me that I am able to discover and create *my* reality from the subject.

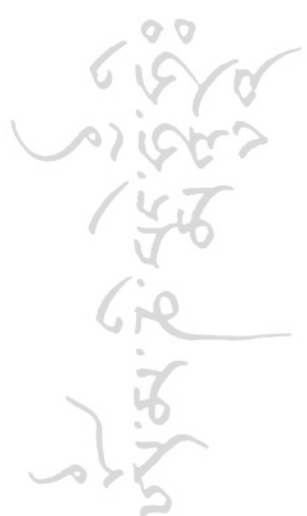
Chapter 4

The Photographic Journey of the Bardo

4.1 Methodology and Practice

As I mentioned in my introduction there is a paradox within my practice, in that each point of view creates a different outcome and reality, both in the reality of photographing the original image and the interpretation of the final image. I am subjected to the illusionary nature of this transformation process and yet attempt to evoke another layer of reality from the original image. My intention in this project is to explore and project my creative perception of the virtual nature of the Bardo state and to visually engage the relationship between the Bardo states, and relate these realms within the context of luminosity and illusion. It is my perception that the absolute nature of images created by photography are light and the absence of light. These two elementary principals are the foundations used to create images. My experiences in exploring the Bardo within a photographic context are inseparable from these fundamental tenets.

Illusionary elements are constructed when I use photography either by 'seeing' something within the subject that has a powerful resonance within my own experiences, or by discovering the illusion later when I extract the evocative essence from the reality of an image. Reality is constantly changing and transforming. The reality of a subject can change within seconds to create another reality. For example, in a simple reflection of the sun in a pool of water, the wind can disturb this reflection and fragment the image into multiple suns (Fig. 2-3). Another example is returning to the same subject from a different perspective. It can convey a completely different message from the earlier image captured. Using the four elements of Earth, Fire, Air and Water, I am extracting a series of metamorphic structures from each of these elements and enabling these to become a vehicle to transport the viewer into the Bardo. Also, my use of space and emptiness within the images is to describe a place of transformation, renewal and rebirth that is the regenerating nature of the feminine principle which embodies potential.



Making critical decisions as to which of the images are to be used within the final work is a process of discovery. Selecting from a vast collection of photographic images became a process of intuitive responsiveness. It is from the quantity of images that I am able to select something that resonates within myself and connects to the essence of the subject I am attempting to express. My post production and post construction of the final images are not preconceived. This process of discovery unfolds as I assemble the work from a pallet of available images. The criteria of discovery and selection must contain subtle qualities from the particular element or Bardo realm I am exploring, and it must also evoke a strong personal response from my own experiences associated with the element or Bardo realm. I would describe these qualities as: the beautiful curved composition from a component of water or flame; the luminous nature of light coming from a reflective surface or from a momentary slice of the sky captured at daybreak; the texture and colors of the sand, rocks and earth around us; or the structure of rose petals that created a sensual illusionary image of a couple embracing as shown in the Bardo of Rebirth (Fig.10).

A colour, shape or texture convey simple emotive responses. This is especially relevant in selecting images relating to the Air (Fig. 8), Water (Fig. 9) and Fire (Fig. 7) elements. These elements are in constant change and transform into etherial realms of supposition and invisible states of existence. A mysterious feeling of wonder is felt when water moves from a stillness to turbulence; fire becomes a series of rapidly changing structures of flame, the shapes disappearing and reappearing in an instant; air is felt but invisible and conveys the immensity of infinity and unlimited potential into another dimensional existence.

The Bardo of Life and Dying (Fig. 4), Earth (Fig. 6) and The Bardo of Rebirth (Fig.10) are personal interpretations based on my own experiences of life's dramas and pleasures, the death of family members and friends, and my inner hopes and fears. They are 'real' images in the sense they occupy everyday experiences and are constructed from my personal knowledge, experience and beliefs. However, they are also share a similarity to the Air, Water and Fire images, in that they each have something yet to be revealed and create a feeling of excitement towards a journey of discovery.

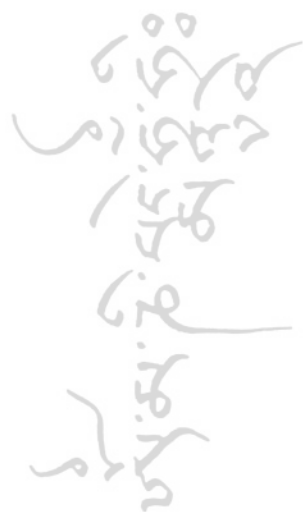
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Fig. 2



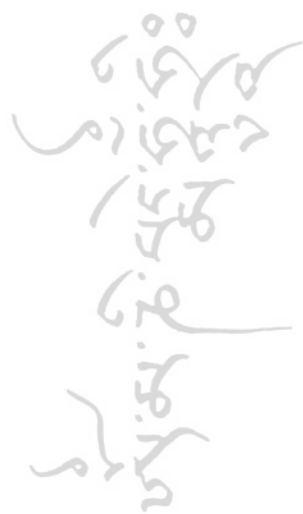
Fig. 3



4.2 The Queen Street Experiment

In the Tibetan Book of the Dead, one of the six realms of consciousness is called the Realm of the Hungry Ghosts. It describes a constant desire for everything. Never satisfied, this realm constantly presents to us a hunger for more. Responding to this philosophical notion, I decided to use photography to explore this realm of desire by walking the length of Queen Street in Auckland at a busy time of the day. My intention was to photograph the experience while encountering overwhelming pressure from the busy environment filled with seductive advertising posters and signage to own and buy these items and goods. The whole of Queen Street seem to be shouting out, "Buy me!" and the notion projected was that if one did acquire them, one would find happiness and contentment. There were also poster images of the 'beautiful' people. The intended promise was, that a good-looking young male or female appearing confident could be associated with clothing or lipstick and then elevate us to a higher level from where we were to become a demi-god in a single purchase. Jewellery also came in sparkling imagery, likewise the luxury cruises to far-off destinations also promised happiness with beautiful people in beautiful surroundings. Heaven on earth.

The many single images I captured were: a Mercedes Benz logo, a Mont Blanc watch, gold chains and a fashion poster. And yet there was confusion and clutter all around during my encounter with each separate photographic experience. I was enveloped by a feeling of delusion and yet the addictive comfort of 'maybe I do need this to fit in'. From a series of these images I then assembled a photo-montage exploring a continuation of the feelings I had experienced in the moment of taking the photographs. I experimented with compositions and modifications that tested visual representations of aspects of the confusion and overwhelming pressure to consume which had been my experience.

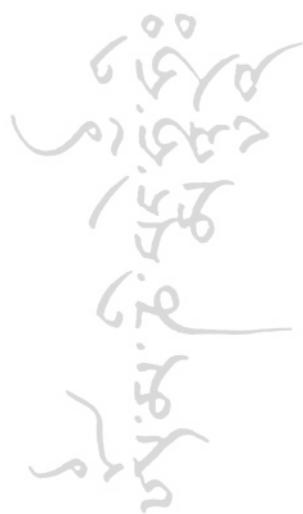


The new composition relates to those crowded busy messages and the scrambled perception of reality. (Fig. 5)¹ On reflection, my experience of the street seemed to create a barrier to quietness, space and peaceful simplicity. I then asked myself, what the difference might be between the Queen Street experience of being a photographer of visual excess and clamour, and immersing myself in a more relaxed location? I decided to use the same approach to being a photographer in the mountains or near the sea; in other words: the great outdoors. The natural world seemed to present me with sublime quietness and yet overwhelming power. I responded to that experience through allowing myself to connect emotionally with elements, and in this environment a resonance awoke something inside of me. For me, the experience and my sensation of space and emptiness when in this natural environment is quite profound. I began to understand that if I am able to let go of my conditioned rational photographic approach, then an intuitive *seeing* occurs to replace this. My response to a subject and the surrounding space captured in the photograph, then begins to harmonise and starts to connect with all of these elements and the ideas of 'letting go' that I have been studying from Buddhist philosophy.

Summary

On this assignment into the field, my professional attitude and practice towards photography was immediately challenged. The necessity to fill up space within the photographic image is well learnt and continually re-enforced within the profession. It was hard to let go of what I believed was expected. The results of my experiments comparing the Queen street photographic approach and the approach I experienced in relation to a non-urban, more natural environment, have produced a sense of freedom from expectation in creating the series of related works. I concluded from this experiment that the loud signals from Queen street reinforced my professional practice of expectation, whereas by listening and 'seeing' the more subtle and quieter signals coming from the natural world, I found *the freedom to discover*.

1. The image I created from Queen street (Fig.5) was experimental and will not be used in the Bardo series exhibition. It represents The 'Realm of the Hungry Ghosts' and could apply to any one of the Bardo states.

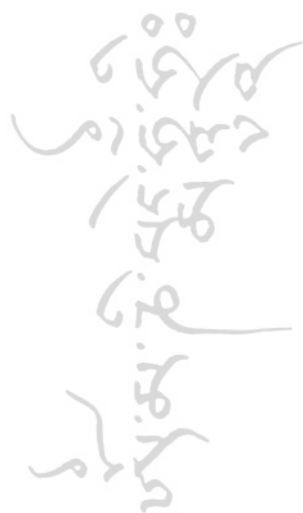


4.3 The Four Elements

Earth (Fig. 6)

Photographing the Earth Element, I became aware of texture, colour, and large powerful form. There seemed to be a sense of ancient physical energy from millions of years of formation, fused with an overwhelming perception of quietness and solid permanence. I see a weathered sandstone surface as layers of entities locked in suspended time; the sparkle of light coming from the sand reflecting the life that was, and the transformation yet to eventuate. I can also see its form created by fire, and carved by the other elements of air and water. The circular rocks on the beach look like planets and moons, no longer free to fly, but embraced and held by the earth.

Earth is the womb in which there will be a slow gestation. It is as if it is patiently awaiting its return to the stardust from which it came. The textures are varied. Smooth and silky mud occupying the same space as rough granular sand. Through my camera's eye I see how the direction of light changes the depth and structure of these textures. I am also attracted to the colours of the earth. Viewed from close up they are warm colours; red orange, yellow and brown in subtle shades, hues and saturation. Seen from a distance, the earth takes on the cooler colours of blue, cyan and green. My spacial distance from the subject when photographing, both physically and emotionally (letting go of preconceptions), allows me the freedom to re-create a new image from a palette of many. It is the idea of renewal and rebirth that connects me to this image of Earth.



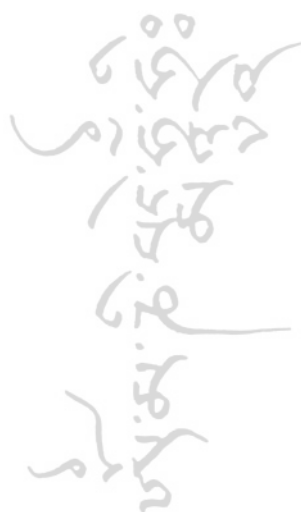
Fire (Fig. 7)

There is a technical foundation that is required to facilitate a correct exposure when photographing flames. Due to the extremely short duration of a flame, the highest shutter speed setting is essential. However once that technicality is in place, I am attempting to understand the nature of fire and what that means in context to the disillusion of this element and the Bardo state. Fire is a manifestation of the sun. It heats and creates light in a nurturing way, but can also consume in a destructive manner.

Within my photography capturing flames, no two images are the same. Again, this process is an insight into abandoning my expectations to produce a defined result. The moment of pressing the shutter is intuitive, and what I perceive at the decisive moment is not what I expect.

There are so many variable combinations of flame structures, it is almost impossible to see the rapid transformation in the moment of capture. Each of the flames are unique. I see them as sensual, benevolent, angry, and evil simply because of their shape and form.

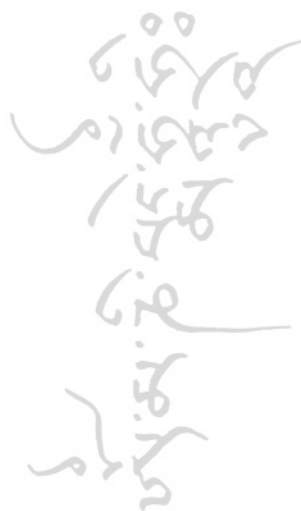
By combining these single images, my resulting dissolution of the fire element becomes a discovery of potential, in that it conveys many emotions and impressions when viewed as a single final image. When I made the selection from these images, it was the combination and blending of each image that created an illuminated structure that embodied the flame's nature of transmutation and immediate dissolution into emptiness. By turning the flames into a horizontal direction, I am suggesting a time transition from left to right, into the journey of the Bardo. There is a natural luminosity within the flame itself and it bears the feminine characteristic of renewal and potential.



Air (Fig. 8)

Photographically this is the most challenging of all of the elements. It is simply invisible. One can feel the pressure of air on one's body when it manifests as wind. The importance of the air temperature is a demographic marker of the world's population to choose a place of residence. Air is an essential life force that supports our natural environment and is vital for us to breathe. In terms of the Bardo, this element is the last element one experiences as one dies. It may be a peaceful transition during one's last breath or it may be a fearful grasping of life. Within Buddhist practice, absolute control of breathing air in and out when meditating is an essential path to a clear mind and illuminated spiritual awareness.

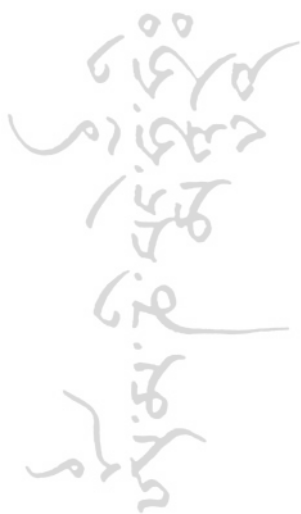
My discovery of where and how to photograph air was to simply look up. Depending if I was looking at the sky at night or during the day, there was an overwhelming sense of space and infinity. I associate air with absolute space and emptiness. The two fundamental experiences of luminosity and illusion became apparent only when I deconstructed the actual image back to its simple components - light and colour. The final image of air represents these values of space, emptiness, light and colour. The result is minimal in construction, much more than in my normal photographic approach. However, it expresses the very nature of the element Air in relation to its dissolution when entering the Bardo state. It is Luminosity.



Water (Fig. 9)

The illusionary nature of water is its transience and translucency, consisting of both visible and invisible structures. Water is a living entity consisting of every mineral and biological form that can exist in suspension, but it appears as an empty body, something we can look through and yet see none of these components. It is in constant change. It soothes and cleanses one's body and it occupies most of the planet. It becomes luminous and reflects light in continuous ways; translucent and subtle it falls from the sky, it rises up to form clouds, it freezes into snowflakes - no two ever identical; it cleanses and quenches thirst and it is the sustenance required for life. In a state of calm its surface is a mirror for light. When disturbed, its volume and content can become vast, powerful, and destructive.

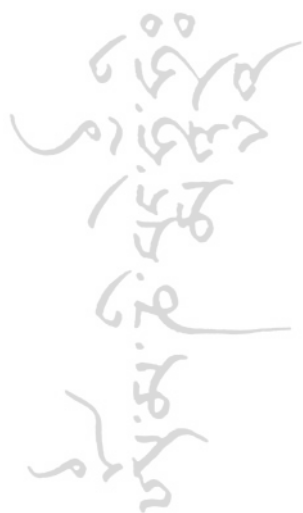
My photography of water was a collection of movement and structure. My use of a grey background is to suggest the idea that another realm of existence exists. It is the evaporation of water into an invisible space and emptiness. A luminosity emanates from the turbulent crest of small waves and contains a meditative face of a female. She is the essence of rebirth and renewal; the transition from water into air and the repetitive cycle of air turning back into water again.



Conclusion

Western research often relies on finding a reason to explain a phenomenon or a feeling resulting from some experience. Science and academic rigour should not be down-played or understated. However, occasionally there is too much emphasis on trying to rationalise the unknown or unseen. The New Zealand Maori and the Australian Aborigine and many other indigenous cultures are quite different in terms of their respective beliefs and history, but share a unifying similarity of thought to explain the unknown or unseen, often expressed in each of these cultures through their art.

Within this thesis and my visual practice of photography, I am reflecting my ideas of what happens during the dying process, after death and the possibility of rebirth through this medium. I have no personal knowledge of these experiences other than observing the dying process; however, I am expressing The Tibetan Book of the Dead's belief in the Bardo, suggesting an idea that all reality is based on a person's own perspective and experience. The premise being that what you perceive in life affects what you perceive in death. You take your own reality with you, illusionary as it may be. Applying this in my photographic practice, my images express how I see the hidden and sublime characteristics of a familiar environment. Being a subjective perception, this environment and the elements of the natural world are experienced by every person, regardless of culture or religious belief.



Religious dogma also is something I have tried to avoid in this thesis. As much as I have been able to draw similarities from The Near Death Experience, Jung's interpretation of psychology and from the Tibetan Buddhist's concept of the mind (especially in the Bardo state), I have some reservations with restrictive, pragmatic, and dogmatic terminology. For example, thousands of rituals practiced within Tibetan Buddhism can be confusing when attempting to understand the essence of the Bardo realms. Equally, Jung's classification of archetypical personas and NDE researchers' investigations are often inconclusive due to many variations within the research and outcomes.

My feelings in context to what actually happens during the dying process and after death are that no one actually knows what constitutes reality in this state. The only clues that persuade me that some sense of benevolence exists after death and a potential of renewal again, are the expressions and sharing of our illusions through art. Throughout this photographic project, I discovered the existence of luminosity within the four elements and in the natural environment. I also believe luminosity is reflected when kindness and compassion are awoken within oneself, offered to, and received from others.



The Exhibition Images

- The Bardo of Life and Dying (One image 1170mm x 470mm)
- The Bardo of Death
Represented by the four natural elements of Earth, Fire, Air and Water (Four images, each 1170mm x 470mm)
- The Bardo of Rebirth (One image 1170mm x 470mm)

Practical Work - The Images

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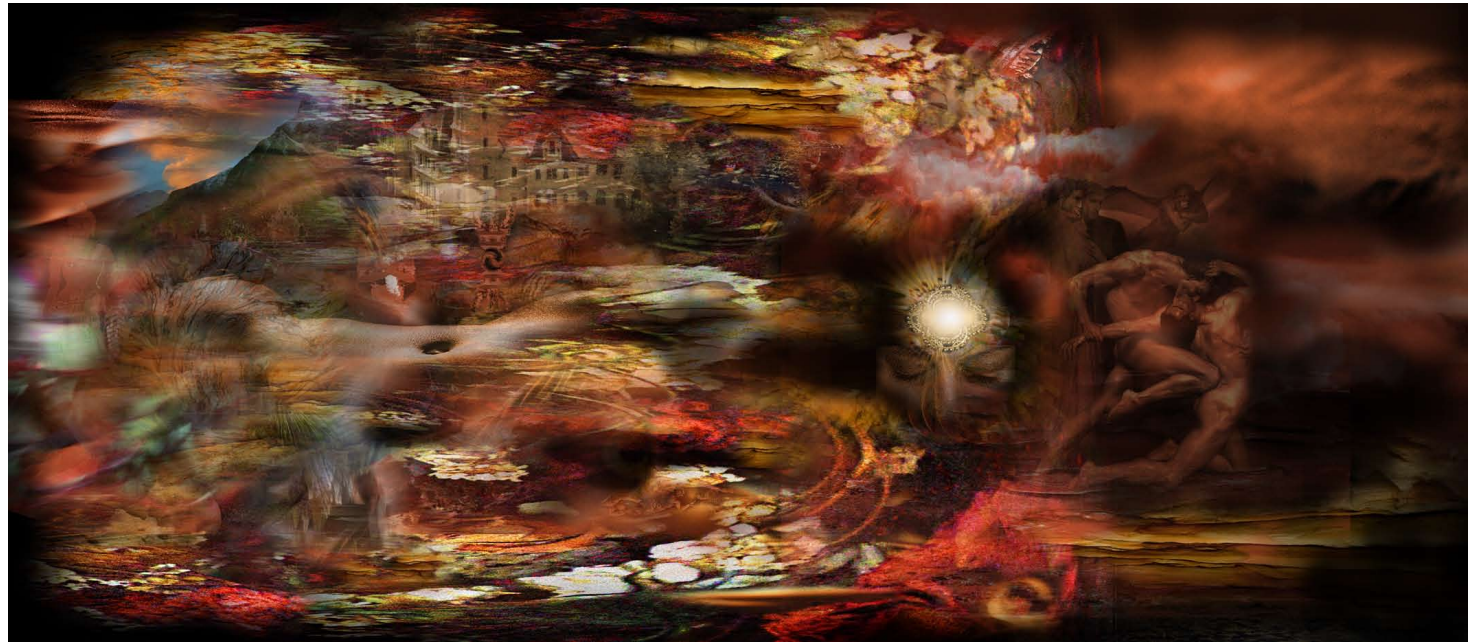


Fig. 4 The Bardo of Life and Dying

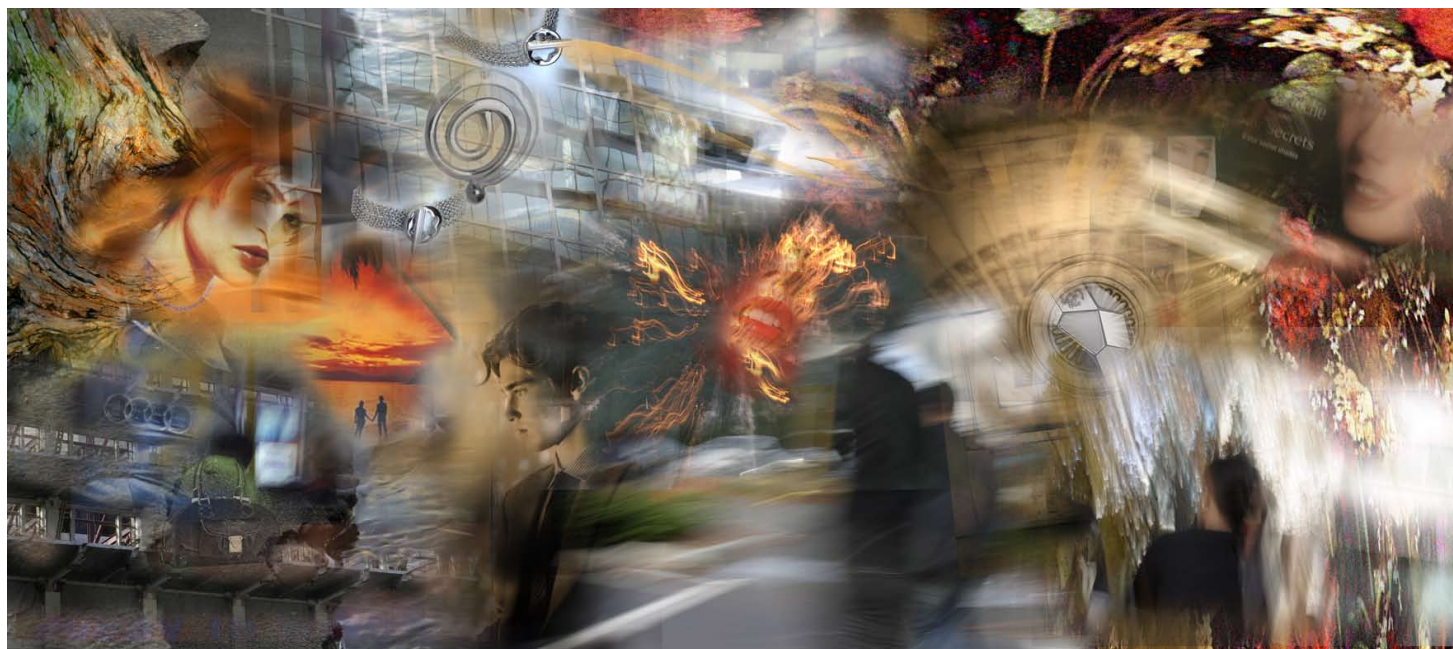
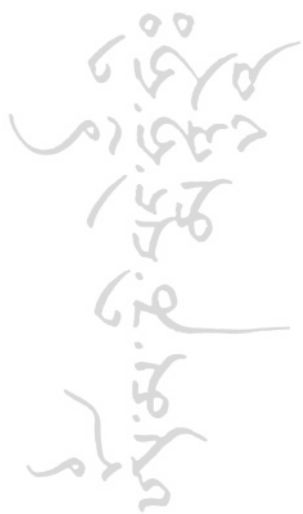


Fig. 5 Realm of the Hungry Ghosts

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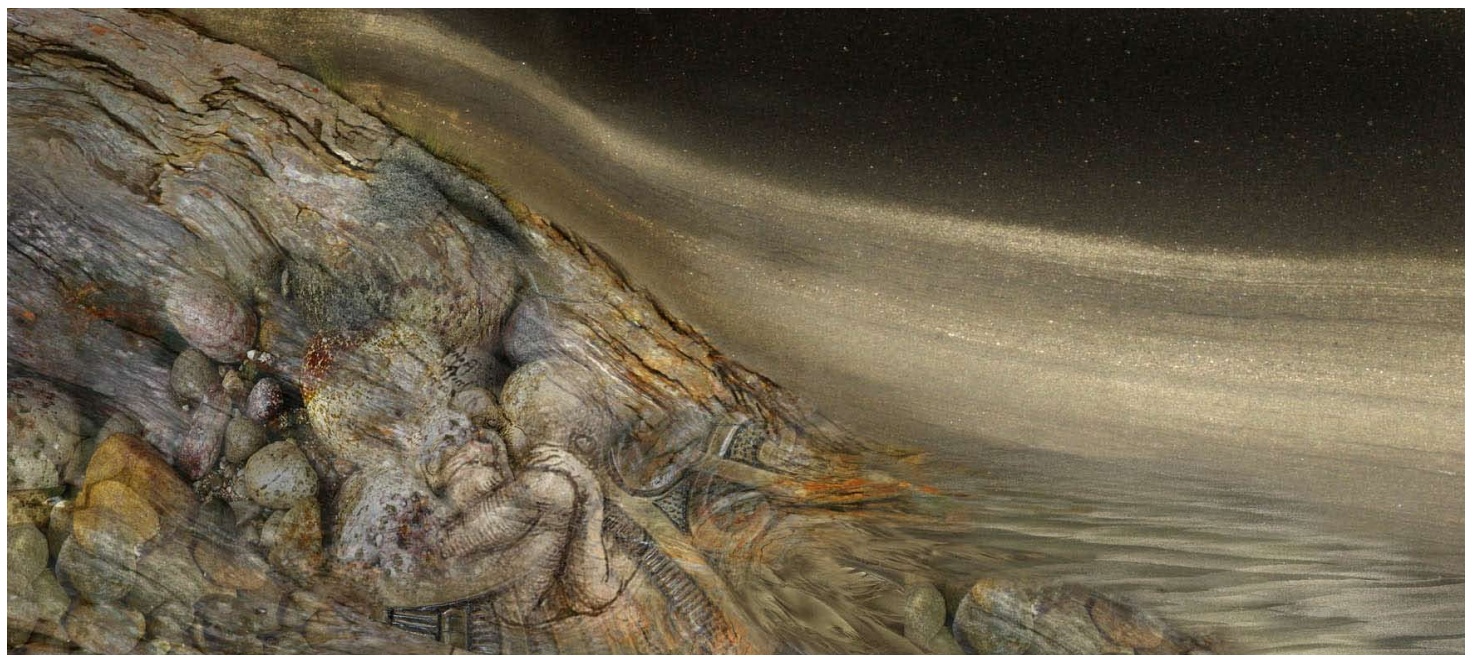


Fig. 6 Earth

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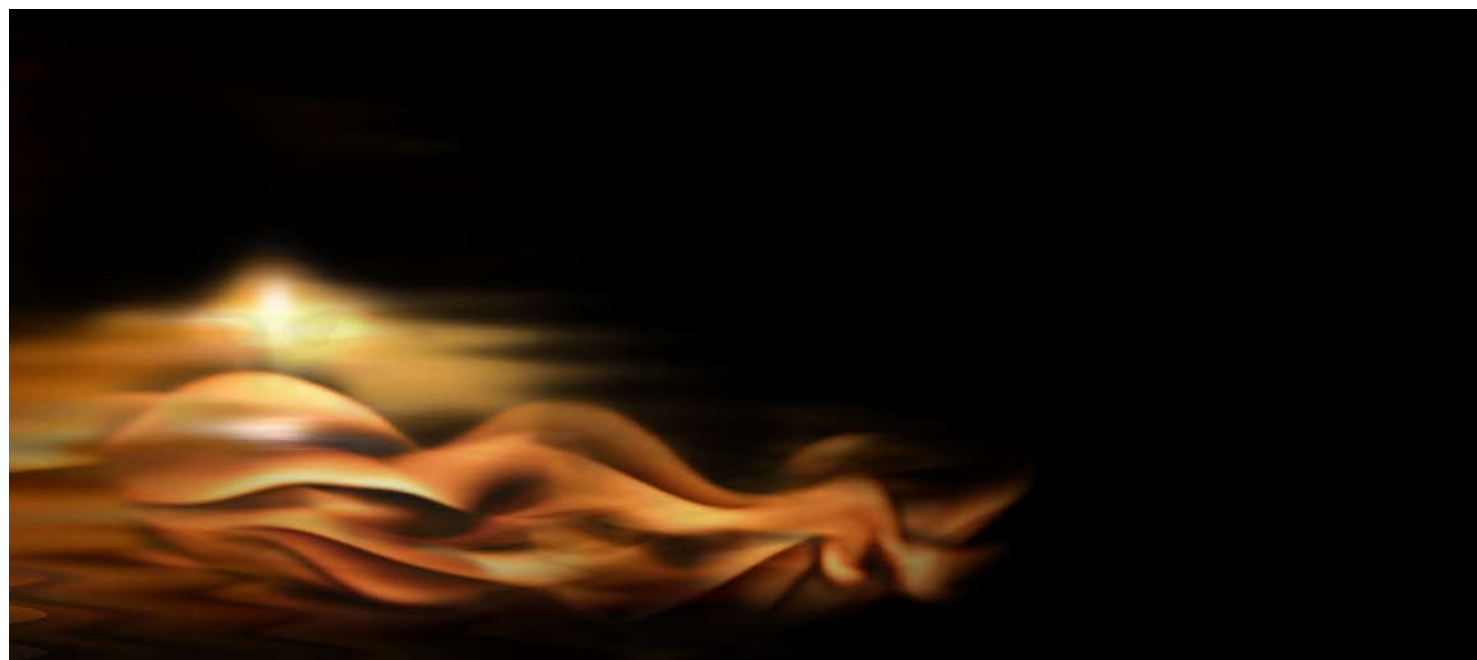


Fig. 7 Fire

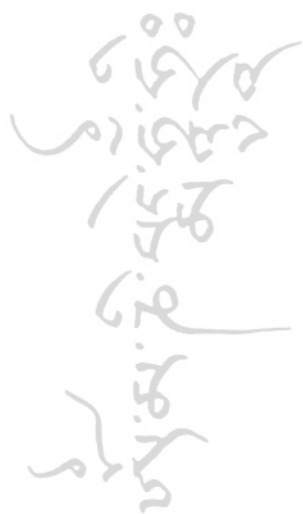


Fig. 8 Air

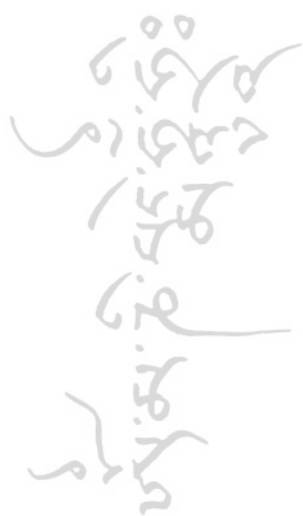


Fig. 9 Water

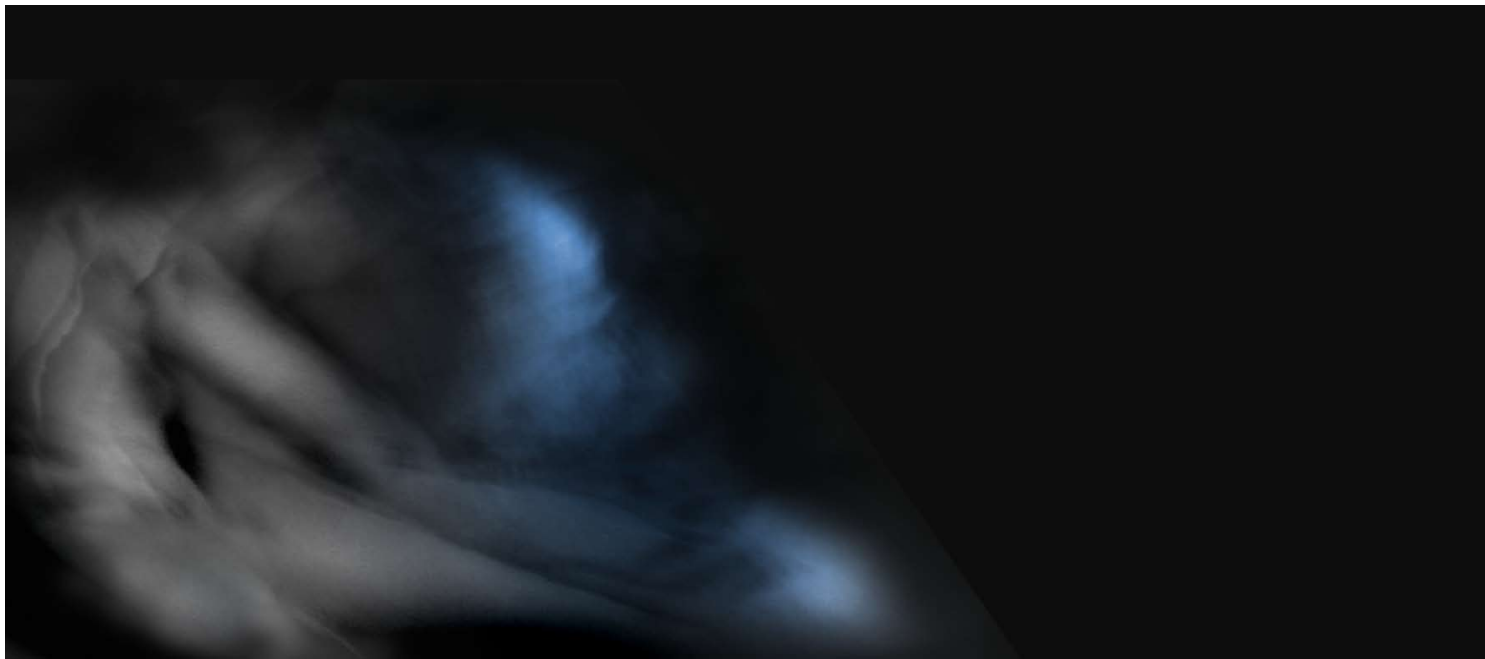


Fig. 10 The Bardo of Rebirth

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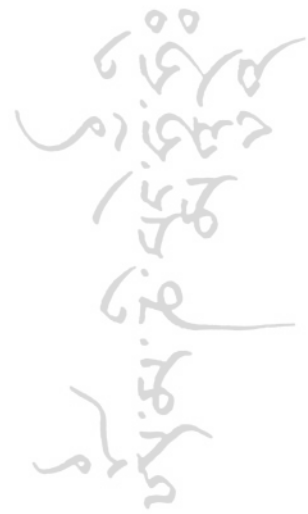


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Research Data - Earth Images

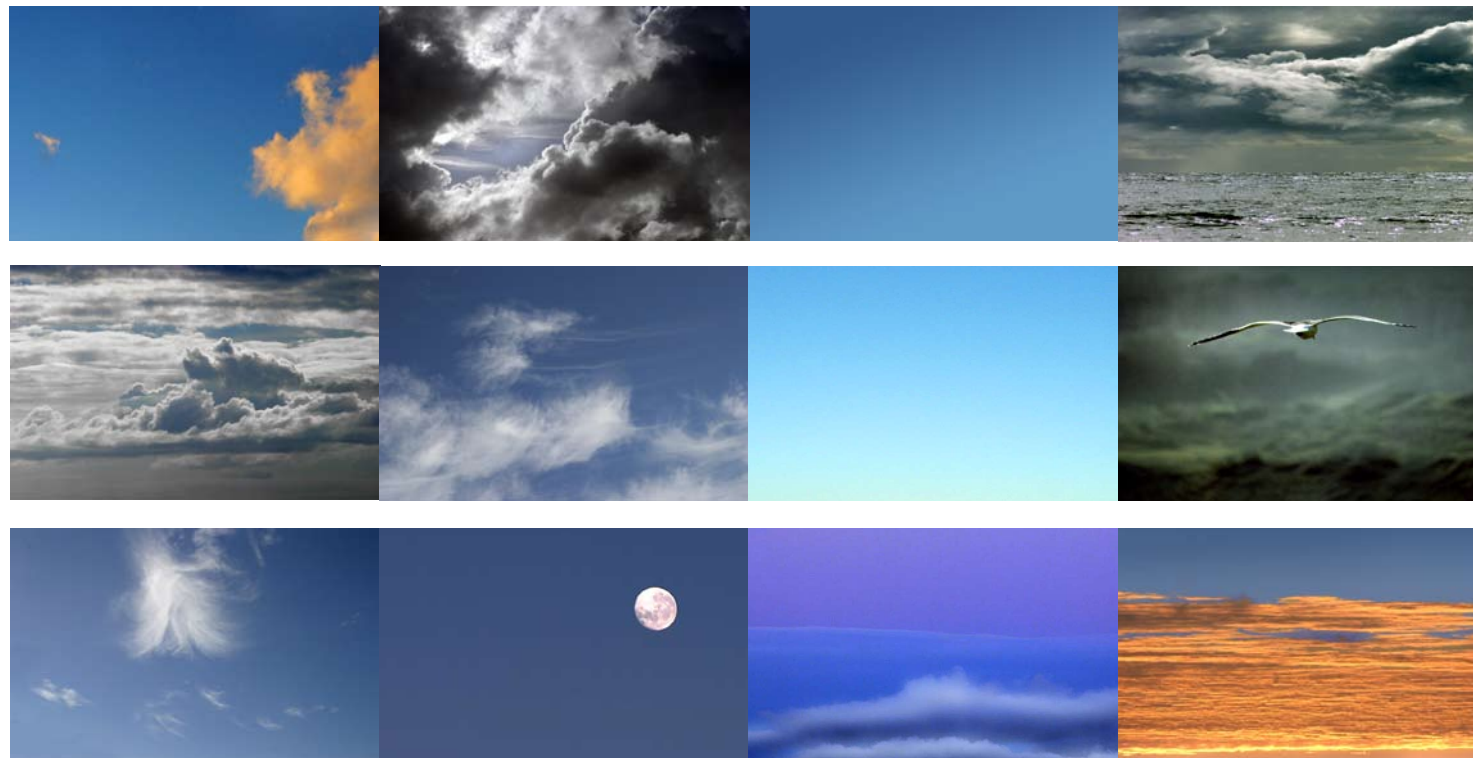


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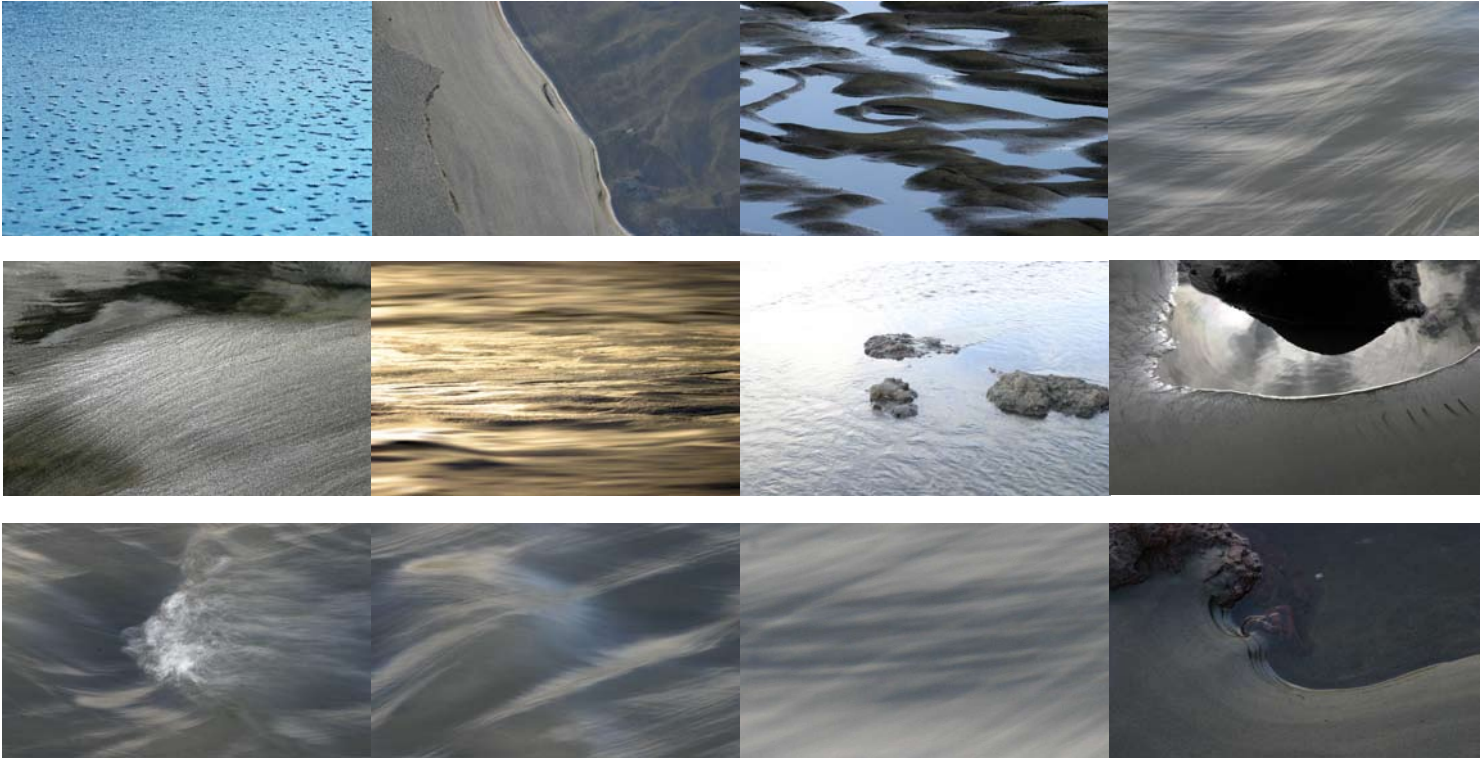
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Research Data - Air Images



Research Data - Water Images

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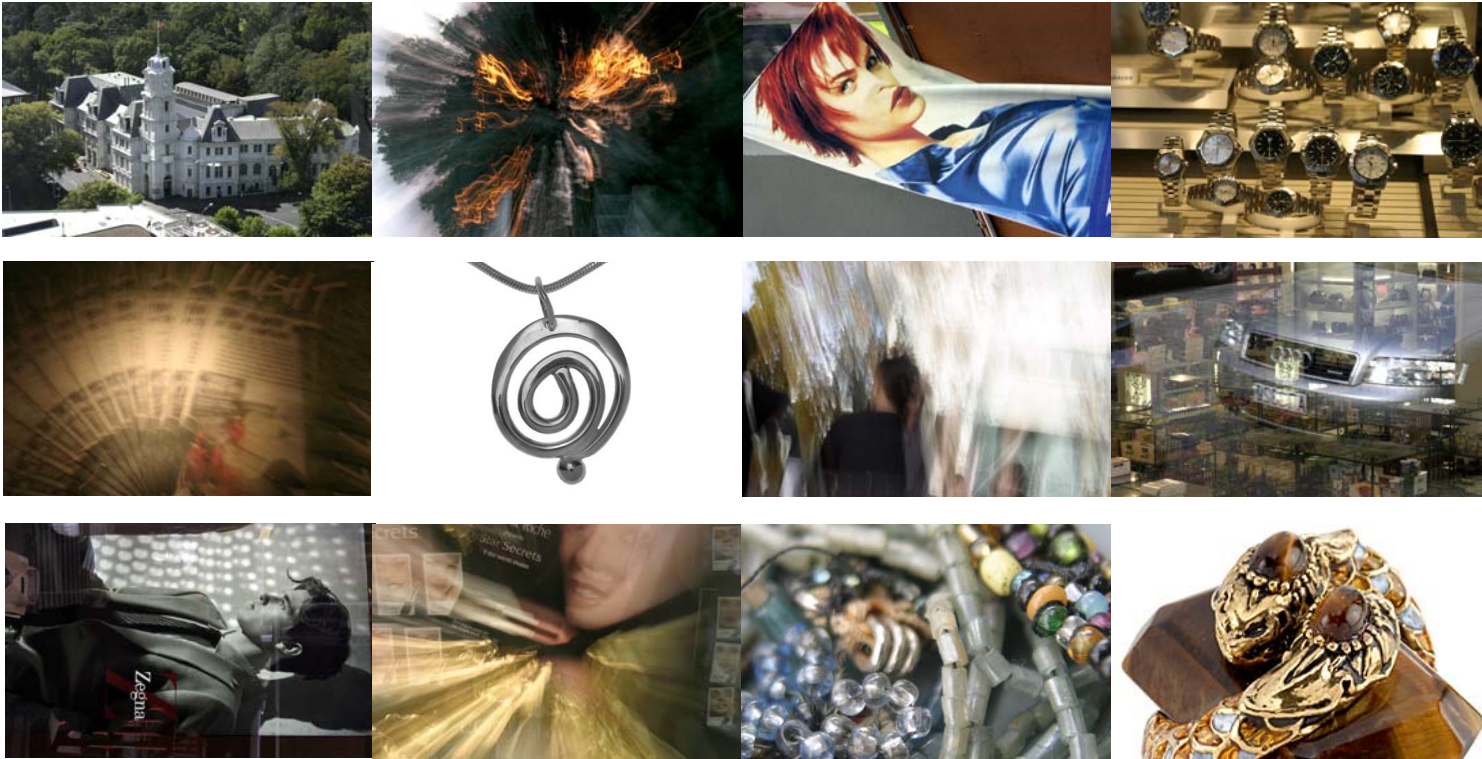


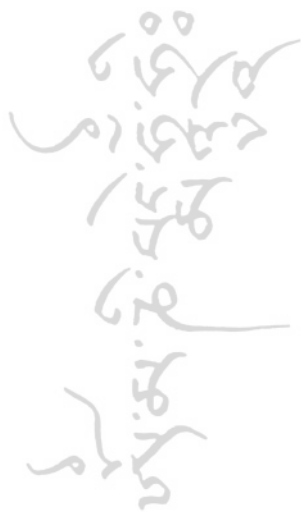
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Research Data - Queen Street Images

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Glossary of Terms

Bardo: (*Tib. Bar Do; Skt. antarabhava*) The intermediate state between death and rebirth. Also defined as the four realities of life, dying and death, after-death and rebirth. (Rinpoche, 1994, p. 103) 'Bar' meaning "In between" and 'Do' meaning "Suspended or thrown." (Rinpoche, 1994, p. 102)

Bodhichitta: (*Skt.*) 'Bodhi' meaning one's enlightened essence, and 'Citta' meaning heart. The heart of one's enlightened mind. (Rinpoche, 2001, p. 201)

Dharmata: (*Tib. Cho nyi*) Often translated as 'Suchness' or the 'True nature of things' or 'Things as they are.' Reality in an enlightened state without distortion or obscuration. (Rinpoche, 2001, p. 56)

Dharmakaya: Unconditional truth.

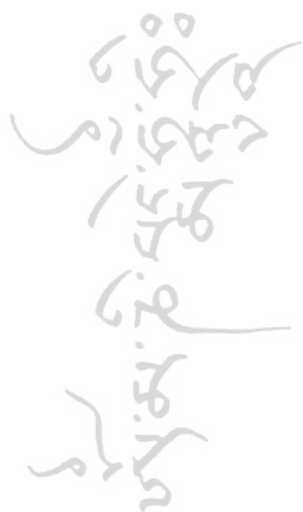
Sambhogakaya: Intrinsic radiance of energy and light.

Niranakaya: The dimension of ceaseless manifestation. (Rinpoche, 1994, p. 343)

Karma: (*Tib. Lay*) Literally 'Action.' The unerring law of cause and effect, eg. positive actions bring happiness and negative actions bring suffering. (Rinpoche, 2001, p. 57)

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