

Art as Dharma

Two of Ven. Lama Zopa Rinpoche's students, Sigrid Müller and Vivienne Williams, who live in Wales, had a joint exhibition of their paintings recently at the Martin Tinney Gallery in Cardiff. Their friend and fellow student Sonja Weigold in Munich corresponded with them about their work.

Sonja: You trained as a graphic designer in Germany, didn't you, Sigrid?

Sigrid: Yes, I specialized in illustration but the job I ended up doing was based on quick ideas and execution – the absolute opposite of the way I like to approach things. My whole time and energy went into making carpet adverts. I gave up this job in 1996, moved to Wales and began painting as a professional artist.

Sonja: When did you first become interested in Dharma?

Sigrid: On a visit to my sister, who was living in Kathmandu, Nepal in 1992, I attended a meditation course at Kopan Monastery. I met Lama Zopa Rinpoche one year later at Aryatara Institut in Germany and that was it!

Sonja: How much has your interest in Buddhism influenced your work, would you say?

Sigrid: It is difficult to answer this. In a way, I dealt with similar themes before I met Buddhism – impermanence for example – but on a more mundane level. Looking at those pictures now I would say they were full of fear and anguish. I used to paint a lot of portraits but my subject matter over the last few years has been flowers and fruit. Like people, flowers have different characteristics. Some are extrovert, some shy, some are tender and some are vaguely menacing!

Sonja: When I look at your flowers, Sigrid, they seem to me to 'talk' about a more subtle level of existence – buds opening, pods bursting, seeds flying away. The transitory nature of life and yet each moment is powerful.

Sigrid: Every phase is beautiful. I can witness the whole process from birth to decay, but the most exciting moment for me in the life of a flower is when the bud opens. It can be a slow unfolding or a more dramatic bursting out. I feel this tension.

Sonja: What medium do you use?

Sigrid: The backgrounds are pooled watercolor washes, while the objects are drawn with layer upon layer of very fine pencil crayon. It is a meticulous process which can take several weeks from the preliminary sketch to the finished painting. The composition has to be planned very carefully because once I have started there is no possibility to change it.

Sonja: An important topic in Buddhism is emptiness, or dependent-arising. Usually in everyday life it doesn't occur to us to look at things in a way that we become aware of their dependent-arising – that they ultimately do not exist in the way we think they exist. Do you think art can teach us something about this?

Sigrid: A painting itself is a very good example of dependent-arising. The piece of paper, the watercolors, the crayons, the marks made by the artist – it is labeled 'art'. Moreover it is given a title and a price! It becomes a valuable object instead of a mere assemblage of bits and pieces: something desirable, treasured by the owner. I myself fret about its welfare – will the framer take care, and so on ...

Sonja: Do you feel a connection with the people who buy your paintings? I suppose you know some of them. I mean, just imagine someone taking your painting home, hanging it up in their house, feeling joy, inspiration, peace?

Maybe this is another indication of the interconnectedness of everyone and everything?

Sigrid: Well, I don't know where most of the paintings end up, but it is always nice to visit homes where the pictures are part of someone else's life. I was reading about the benefits of the Namgyalma mantra some years ago. It is incredibly powerful. Rinpoche blessed the sea with the mantra printed on a board, and all the fish and other living beings were blessed. I often stick this mantra on the back of my paintings. It is quite long, so I made small photocopies. Of course the buyers don't know they have this mantra in their house. It is invisible because it is inside the back of the frame. Sometimes I write Tara mantras in the margins. In this way more people can come into contact with the mantra. The paintings are expensive objects after all – they are hung on people's walls and are looked after.

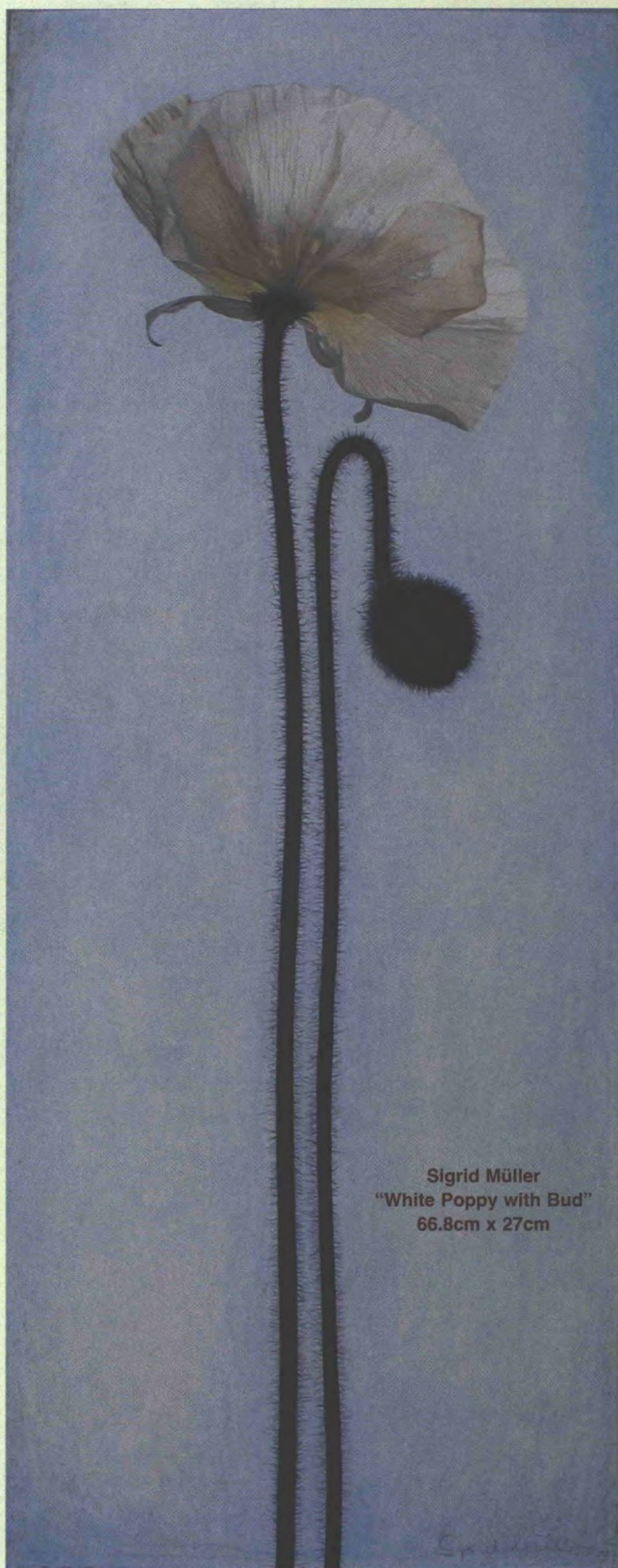
Vivienne: It is always lovely when someone comes up to you at an exhibition, takes your hand warmly and says, "I have one of your pictures." Even though you have not met before, that person feels a connection, a familiarity. They feel like they know you on some level. After all, a painting is an expression of who you are.

Sonja: How much would you say is there a connection between your own life and your art? Does one have an effect on the other?

Vivienne: Most certainly – if the painting is 'true'. You paint your state of mind. In the same way that physical surroundings are a reflection of your inner landscape – tidy or untidy – so a painting records who you are and how you feel. When my father died last year I think the sense of loss was apparent in my work.

Sonja: Would you say that paintings are outer pictures of inner images?

Sigrid: One part of the creative process is having the idea in the first place. I see a dandelion clock or a tightly-furled iris, a dried poppy head or the light coming through a crumpled petal of a poppy and I feel a kind of excitement, an indrawn breath – it's hard to describe. But then something strange happens in the process of putting this image down on paper. It seems to become imbued with something



Sigrid Müller
"White Poppy with Bud"
66.8cm x 27cm



Sigrid Müller



Vivienne Williams

else; something seems to happen during the process of drawing which I can't really explain.

Sonja: I have heard artists talk about being in the 'zone'. Is it something like that?

Sigrid: Certainly I need to be in a certain frame of mind – very balanced and very concentrated.

Sonja: I remember you made a Green Tara for Aryatara Institut in Munich some years ago. Are you still interested in thangka painting?

Sigrid: Yes. I made the Green Tara in 1996, the first picture I did in Wales after leaving Germany. It is still my long term goal to paint thangkas. It has been difficult to find the balance between painting for a living and making thangkas. I hope to devote a few days every month to thangka painting as I would like to finish a Shakyamuni Buddha started some time ago.

Sonja: Would you say painting is a kind of meditation?

Vivienne: I don't know – but it is as if the ego is out of the way for a short time at least. Everything flows, and there is no sense of, "Now I will make this mark here, put this color there." At the end you look at the picture with surprise – it seems to have painted itself! This doesn't happen every day, I should tell you.

Sonja: How long have you been an artist, Vivienne?

Vivienne: I have been painting full time for the last eighteen years. I came back to Wales in 1990 after many years of working abroad in Italy, Australia and across the border in England.

Sonja: How did you become interested in Buddhism?

Vivienne: When I was travelling overland to Australia I spent some time in India – even visiting Dharamsala. So I saw lots of Buddhist holy places – in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and so on – but it wasn't until I went on a lam-rim course in

Chenrezig Institute in Queensland in 1982 that I actually met the Dharma. In retrospect, I could see that everything had been leading up to that. It had a profound effect on me. I met Lama Zopa Rinpoche in 1985. I spent seven years living in a Dharma centre.

Sonja: Did you paint during that time?

Vivienne: No, I was studying, working, doing retreats although it was quite painful *not* to paint. In fact, I could say that my dilemma at that time was whether to paint, or to devote myself to practicing Dharma, as if they were two separate things. When I realized eventually that there wasn't a contradiction, you could practice Dharma and do anything really, I came home and started.

My subject matter over the last few years has been still life – flowers, fruit and vessels of various kinds. I would say that color is the most important thing in my work. The elements within a painting are often rearranged and painted over many times until I am happy with the composition. In this way, layers of paint (I use acrylic paint) are built up until ordinary paper takes on the appearance and weight of old leather. The surface texture is energetically worked and reworked, scratched, sanded and stained. At any moment during this process there is the opportunity for a painting to emerge. Of course, you have to be alert to recognize the moment when it *has* emerged!

I paint everything from my mind. The things in my room which I see every day – the table, the fruit ... of course they end up in the pictures, but I don't set up a still life and make a representational picture of it, with correct perspective and so on. I am not interested in doing that.

Sonja: Looking at your bowls, for example, one can see them sideways and at the same time can look inside them as if from above.

Vivienne: Yes, I prefer this flattened perspective with simplified forms. I have a fairly narrow range of preoccupations – it is like working a seam. It is not difficult to see what is happening in my pictures. There are no cultural footnotes required. Everyone knows what a lemon is, what grapes are. It is not so much the subject matter as the feeling produced by the arrangement of the objects, the colors and texture. The subject is universal, not particular – a pear, not *the* pear. There is no real difference between Cézanne's apples or Mont Sainte-Victoire, the mountain he painted so often, even though the latter is a specific, geographically located place. The artist invests an emotional significance in the object by returning to it

again and again. It is the *essence* of the thing or place that is important.

Sonja: What is your experience of the 'zone'?

Vivienne: When I paint I am divorced from critical analysis. I suspend judgment – listening to the radio, to audio books or Dharma teachings helps keep the conscious mind busy while the hand moves.

It was a bit of a break-through when I learned to say, "It's not finished yet" about a painting instead of saying, "This is a complete failure". Consequently, I have a stack of not very good pictures in my work room and as I find it difficult to start a new, unmarked piece of paper, I simply take one from the pile and think, "This is a thick and interestingly-textured one – ripening up nicely"... I have had some pieces for seven or eight years and it is very satisfying when, after layer upon layer of failed attempts, the surface picture finally works. When people buy a painting they are actually buying ten or maybe twenty pictures – but only accessible by X-ray.

Sonja: What is the significance of the vessel, do you think?

Vivienne: Other than being a pleasing shape? In Buddhism, the teacher and the student have various qualities. The analogy used is that a good student is like a pot which has to be the right way up to receive the information.

It must not have any cracks in it to be able to retain this information and must not be polluted in the first place. For example, a pot which still has traces of garlic in it will contaminate the next substance to be placed in it. The mind of the student must be unprejudiced. But I must say I am not thinking about these things when I am actually painting, and in any case, the person looking at the pictures has their own interpretation.

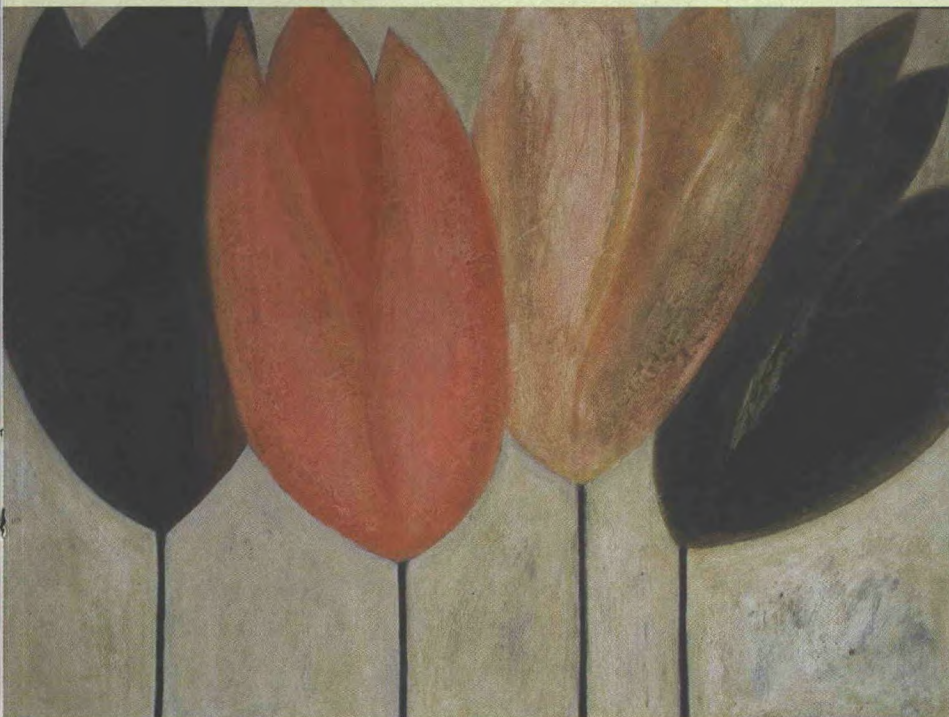
Sonja: In a public talk (World Peace Through Inner Peace) which His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave in Miami, 2004, he talks about individuals like artists who, according to his vision could play a more active role in bringing about world peace. What do you think is the role of an artist in society in the Twenty-First Century?

Vivienne: Now that's a question that really deserves looking into! I think everyone would agree that art is important – a powerful reminder of beauty in the world from earliest times – but also of great suffering. Art can change the world. Even single photographs have had the power to change political decisions. It is a huge topic...

Sigrid: It reminds me of something I heard recently – that more people go to art galleries and museums in Britain than go to church. They are looking for something...

Sonja: Well, lots more to discuss I can see! Thank you both very much and heart-felt good wishes for the future. ☸

Vivienne Williams "Tulips" 56cm x 76cm



Sigrid Müller "Amaryllis" 39.5cm x 36.5cm

