

WILD PLACES WILD HEARTS

NOMADS OF THE HIMALAYA



ALLEN SMUTYLO

TOM THOMSON ART GALLERY

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OVERLEAF

Readiid
watercolour and collage
11 x 14 in
2006

To Mom and Dad

OVERLEAF

Morning Tea
watercolour and etching
14.5 x 21 in
2004

Foreward

IT IS UNUSUAL TO COME across an accomplished visual artist who is also a compelling writer. Allen Smutylo is that rare find – he is as confident in conjuring with words as with a brush or pen. *Wild Places Wild Hearts* is a recording of his travels over the past five years to live alongside the Kharnakpa, a tribe of Tibetan Buddhist nomads or Changpa, who live in the Himalaya of north-east India near the border of Tibet. These people live in one of the most inhospitable places on earth. Cold, dry, oxygen-deprived, devoid of trees and cultivated crops, the land remains snowbound for eight months of the year. The Kharnakpa rely solely on their herds of goats, sheep, and yaks and some wild vegetation for survival. They roam the mountain valleys with their animals, living out of their black yak-hair tents as they have done for the past two thousand years. This book details the artist's experiences with the nomads during several trips to the region. It is filled with vivid descriptions of the spectacular yet harsh settings, quiet tales of strong friendships built across linguistic and cultural divides, and stories of a spiritual peo-

ple who maintain a rugged, ancient way of life, rich in perspective and the quiet rewards of serenity and purpose.

Illustrated with images of Smutylo's beautiful paintings, watercolours, and prints that draw upon his experiences, *Wild Places Wild Hearts* is a marriage of art and narrative by an artist, writer, and traveler. If the author is an unusual hybrid, so too, this book avoids any attempt to categorize it into a particular genre. It is not a run-of-the-mill travel book, nor is it merely an exhibition catalogue. Although sumptuously illustrated, it could not accurately be called a coffee table book to be leafed through for visual pleasure or distraction. It is an adventure story of sorts, but does not set out to thrill the reader with tales of daring. The book could have been biased towards political advocacy, given the plight of displaced Tibetan Buddhists and their spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, but instead, the author reasonably states the situation, sidestepping any stridency.

Wild Places Wild Hearts creates its own category – a heart-felt visual and literary account of an

individual's experience, uniquely faithful to the restless soul. This book subtly inhabits the imagination and connects the reader with another reality, something unexpected, authentic, and potentially transforming.

The stories in the following pages certainly do not encourage us to book a flight to northern India. Smutylo's tales of the taxing physical challenges of his travels and the stark conditions of life on the Tibetan Plateau will not serve to entice many, except the seasoned trekkers. Although launching into a description of apparent poverty and hardship could be a temptation for an author, Smutylo shares a type of pragmatism with his subject and his understatement speaks volumes. He does not exoticize the nomads or their lifestyle, he writes from the standpoint of a trusted friend to the Changpa. An intimate perspective on another way of life, the tastes, smells, sights, and textures are all eloquently described, fleshing out the encounter.

In its telling, this story asks the reader to leave the safety of what is known and what is comfortable to cross a threshold into a place where alternative frameworks are placed on reality. The reader is encouraged to cast off the conditioning of a consumer society and go beyond the impulse to marvel at "others" who live with so

much less. The author builds a bridge across the divide between the reader and the nomads through the most basic of human experiences: the bonds between families and friends; the relationship between humans and the natural environment; and in the concept of identity found in the collective understanding of a people who embrace duty, history, and customs. He does this by recounting stories of conviction, dignity and perseverance that all people will identify with.

In this book, images of Smutylo's works powerfully illustrate the fascinating stories. His artwork addresses our contemporary world in which the ubiquitous camera is attached to everything from an instant teller to a mobile phone. As endless images of vapid nothingness stream by, individuals seek that moment when something unusual, extraordinary, or real might appear. While photography and video seem to be the most accurate and immediate method of recording experience, Smutylo reinforces our appreciation of the labour and time invested in the handmade. The artist works with photography and watercolours on-site while he is travelling, then back in the studio in Canada these documents inspire etchings, collages, and paintings. Smutylo creates images of great atmosphere and reverence, giving the viewer a vivid representation of the intimate

view, the gritty textures of garments and weathered skin of the people, as well as the vast sublime panoramas of the lands they occupy.

In his works on paper, Smutylo has developed a technique of combining imagery from a number of sources – watercolour, printmaking, chine collé, and collage – that converge in an intensely charged surface. The mosaic of rectangles is composed in a veiled space where one image may overlap or colour another. Script from journal entries or Sanskrit characters may be a decorative border or element that links or balances other areas. In each of the works on paper, one can see the time and focused attention invested in the piece. In combining a mark from a printing plate that has been etched, inked, and passed through the press with the delicate hand-rendering of a watercolour, the artist turns the multiple into a one-of-a-kind object. Smutylo is not interested in the printed image as a means of producing an edition, but instead uses the multiple as a different kind of evidence. The etched images are reincarnated again and again, recurring in many of the other pieces, but each time with a different impact depending on the combination of elements he has chosen. The artist composes a stream of images like stanzas in a poem, allowing certain motifs to recur, echo, and reverberate within the greater body of work.

In recent works, the artist has integrated fragments of nomads' cloth into the finished work as a ground or element in the collage. The textures of handmade papers also reinforce the nature of each work as a three-dimensional object first and foremost, rather than a flat, two-dimensional image reliant on illusionistic space. These works present like a carpet or a quilt, each assemblage of important references pieced together lovingly and intentionally to reformulate meaning. The individual pieces are each integral to the whole – a fitting analogy for the ethics of the communal nomadic society that Smutylo describes so eloquently in prose.

In these works by Smutylo, images hover in an ambiguous void. There is a fracturing of the traditional point of focus in each work. Imagery is unhinged from a linear narrative reading and instead appears in a synchronistic fashion leaving the viewer with much more of an open-ended impression than a straight-forward message. It is as if the artist has discovered that to really experience something, one must dispel expectation, disassociate from singular attention, and become open to the multiplicity of sensations around us. From these works on paper, one can take a variety of impressions from the array of visual references. This is in keeping with the way Smutylo writes about his experiences. He does not

try to over-analyze or prescribe meaning onto his various encounters, instead he calls on the reader to proceed with an open heart and mind.

The oil paintings that are included in this book take another approach to the subject matter. When working on canvas, the artist chooses to paint a singular image of his subject in the oils – often a solitary figure, always in dramatic light. Smutylo eloquently discusses his fascination with the light effects throughout the book – the dim light of the nomads’ tents and the stark sun of the high Himalaya give him a variety of lighting choices. The paintings are generally on a different scale than the works on paper – often figures are painted life-size, so they have much more impact. In many instances, the surface of the canvas is heavily textured with a patterned gesso or impasto, evoking the rough interior of a tent or the wall of a cave. This texture serves to differentiate the figure from the ground, allowing the painted subject to emerge as if fully-formed in the foreground of the work. The artist revels in the details of the nomads’ dress, textures, and layers; the deep colours and painstaking rendering are enthralling. It is, however, in the subtleties of facial expression and body language of the sitter that the artist is best able to convey emotion and intent. Many of the nomads are caught in moments of quiet contemplation: sitting, spinning

the prayer wheel, looking off in the distance. In their stance, the people show a different body language, a quality that is difficult to pinpoint. Totally unselfconscious, they seem grounded, settled, even rooted in their belonging to the place. These large paintings open up like portals into an intimate experience of a settled being, at peace in their place in the world.

Wild Places Wild Hearts holds words and images that speak to the wanderer in all of us. It recognizes our restless urge for a greater meaning to deepen our connection with life and each other. The author and artist coaxes us out of the everyday, away from the endless stimulation and pursuit of trivial things, transporting us to a far-away place, seemingly from another time. The surprises in store for the reader are the jolts of clarity in which one realizes how our lives are linked to our contemporaries living in such remote settings. Time may have preserved the nomads’ isolated for millennia, but suddenly the world is a smaller place. Smutylo’s stories of the Changpa document the ripple effects of change emanating from our life in the West that are being felt in that remote location – not just the impact of climate change and pollution, but the infiltration of politics and the seductive distractions of consumer culture that lure many to nearby cities. *Wild Places Wild Hearts* points to the vulnerability

of the nomads' way of life, which is in danger of disappearing altogether, as a portent of the precarious state of humankind's relationship with the natural world. This book calls for mindfulness and a new awareness in contemplating one's priorities in life. Ultimately, Smutylo's art and stories are a call to attention, resonating with wild hearts in wildly different places.

The Tom Thomson Art Gallery is proud to be a co-publisher of this wonderful book and thanks Allen Smutylo for his vision, persistence, and commitment to sharing his extraordinary experiences with an eager audience.

Stuart Reid
Director/Curator
Tom Thomson Art Gallery

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About the Book

THE IDEA FOR WRITING THIS BOOK came from a few different directions. As an artist, shapes, colours, and textures are normally my vocabulary. I translate what I see and feel into imagery – I story-tell in pictures.

Although some pictures may be worth a thousand words, there started to build in me an awareness of the inability to tell certain parts of my story in a visual language. My trips, particularly in the Himalaya, gave me experiences and thoughts that I didn't know how to communicate using tubes of paint or etching ink.

The other impetus for this book came from friends and family. On returning from a trip, these were the people that I told my stories to. It was their urging that helped push me towards the writing that follows.

However the most important reason for the writing that follows was simply the power of the experience I had living among the nomads of eastern Ladakh. They are extraordinary people,

possessing the rare traits of incredible mental and physical toughness with minds that are open, sensitive, and compassionate. Their culture is complex, rich, and two thousand years old, yet it remains almost unknown.

Where they live is very isolated, and yet modern influences are hard to escape even in the thin-aired elevations of the Himalaya. Today, many nomads feel some of these influences have pushed their culture towards a precarious tipping point, putting its sustainability at risk.

The writing and the artwork in this book is a documentation of these fascinatingly isolated and vulnerable people. Appreciating fringe cultures or championing the need for diverse cultures, as we advocate the need for biodiversity, is certainly a timely message and one worth making. But over a five-year period as I made my way from my culture into the nomads' and back again, I began to see their stories had a surprising degree of contemporary relevance. In contrast to the tenets of our

society, I saw compatibility with the environment, inclusiveness in spirituality, and an emphasis on non-material things. On one level their world was rugged and archaic, but wrapped inside that was a disarmingly impressive philosophy.

The title of the book is paraphrased from a line in the Dalai Lama's autobiography. He uses the expression while writing about human beings' core need for some form of spirituality in their lives. Past the basic necessities like shelter and food, he contends that having a spiritual centre is important in nurturing a compassionate heart. This, in turn, is pivotal to a person's or a society's ability to find inner happiness. He uses the Himalayan nomads and their particular practice of Tibetan Buddhism to illustrate this point, saying that this peace of mind pervades "even the wildest places, and most of the wildest hearts."





PART 1

White men like to dig in the ground for their food. My people prefer to hunt buffalo as their fathers did. White men like to stay in one place. My people want to move their tepees here and there to different hunting grounds. The life of white men is slavery. They are prisoners in towns or farms. The life my people want is a life of freedom. I have seen nothing that a white man has, houses or railways or clothing or food, that is as good as the right to move in the open country and live in our own fashion.

Sitting Bull, Chief of the Lakota Sioux

OVERLEAF

Kharnakpa
oil on canvas
21.5 x 51 in
2004