

Peter Maber

When Francesco Clemente first travelled to India in 1973, his art was transformed by the vibrant, regenerative culture of images he discovered proliferating from temples to the streets; and this distinctive sense of a living tradition was something he found carried over into the life of images in print:

Technology of printing might be similar everywhere – technology is technology – but the tones, textures, shades and smells of the printing ink is different ... that is where Indian popular culture in print is very much its own.¹

The popular publications, including calendars, posters, story books and prayer books, with their intense colours and handmade papers, not only fed into Clemente's artwork, but inspired numerous book projects too. Within ten years of his initial visit Clemente would be engaging Indian publishers to produce small-scale editions reproducing his artwork, and books in collaboration with writers: and these individual qualities of print and manufacture which he identifies lend a further collaborative dimension to these projects. Here the focus will be on two of Clemente's most substantial book projects that were printed in India in the 1980s and 1990s: *White Shroud*, an edition of the poem by Allen Ginsberg; and the Hanuman Books, a series of fifty miniature titles published over seven years.

Whilst India offered a fresh start for Clemente's art, it also provided certain attractive continuities with his Italian heritage, and specifically with those aspects of the European past that he regarded as dead or as redundant: « the Gods who left us a thousand years ago in Naples are still in India ».² Moreover, Clemente had felt at an impasse in Italy, where he had been grouped with the *Arte Povera* movement, which he came to regard as a dead end. Nonetheless, one notable influence which carries forward from *Arte Povera* into his mature work is the emphasis on the importance of the materials of art and on the value of collaboration.³ Clemente had closely followed the career of Alighiero Boetti, in particular his travels to Afghanistan and collaboration with folk embroiderers; and processes of collaboration and cultural exchange carry through a large part of Clemente's exceptionally diverse mature work.

After the initial visit of 1973, India became the creative stimulus to which Clemente would keep returning, and for many years now he has divided his time between homes in New York and India. Images derived from his Indian experiences remain a distinctive feature of his work; part of the fascination derives from the way the popular, secular use of ancient iconography on the streets of India has reproduced, adapted and reinvented images over time. Clemente extends this kind of process, never reproducing images faithfully, or with direct reference to their original contexts; rather, they enter his work in a state of flux, as they are personally experienced and often reinterpreted as his work progresses. He says he thinks of the images in his paintings as being in motion; and refers to the paintings as « crossing points for images ».⁴

¹ Francesco Clemente, 'Personal Interview with Jyotindra Jain', New Delhi, October 2009, quoted in Jyotindra Jain, *Clemente: Made in India* (New York: Charta Books, 2011), 110.

² Quoted in Jain, *Clemente: Made in India*, 42.

³ See Jain, *Clemente: Made in India*, 41.

⁴ Jain, *Clemente: Made in India*, 63.

The image of an egg, for example, may be initially a humble hardboiled egg in eggcup; yet through intense colour and isolation in space such an image can gain an almost mystical, luminous presence, suggesting the egg as Hindu symbol of creation.⁵ The transition from the everyday to the spiritual results in a kind of epiphany; conversely, religious symbols are brought into the human world to bathetic effect. The *ouroboros*, ancient symbol of self-reflexivity and endless renewal, is brought into the human world in *Hunger*, a gouache of 1980: the shift couldn't be any more abrupt as a man gorges on the once-symbolic snake; but of course such a scene as a whole has its own powerful symbolic value.⁶ These shifts in meaning have an ambiguous implication in terms of narrative: being caught between states they resist straightforward meaning or singular interpretation. Clemente works most commonly in series, which may have ideas, forms, and media in common, but never a transparent narrative design.

Clemente's collaboration with local artists has played a vital role in these transitions and multiple viewpoints: he has worked with painters of Indian miniatures, and panel and signboard painters, at times encouraging them to work on elements of the paintings on their own, which lends on the one hand a form of authenticity to a work's origins, while on the other it adds a degree of unpredictability, allowing the evolution of images to take place as the work is being created.

It was in the New York of the 1980s that Clemente's work began to receive great acclaim, after he took a studio there in 1981; he associated and worked with other artists, most notably with Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol; and it was in New York that he encountered many of the authors with whom he would collaborate. The particular kind of literature to which Clemente has said he is drawn is that in which « seemingly meaningless imagistic elements rub against one another to spark a flame of indeterminate meaning », in which distinctions fall away « between private and public, important and unimportant, trivial and overwhelming, the big scheme and the little detail »; and he describes a process of defamiliarization, of « familiar qualities that have an unfamiliar meaning, which makes us happy and which is the task of art to do. »⁷ Such transformation of the everyday into something with ambiguous symbolic value is clearly something that plays out in his own art. The writers in whom Clemente found such qualities were often those who reacted against the mainstream, and who, like Clemente, looked to the East for an escape from Western materialism; the Beat generation were of particular interest, as well as the subsequent generation of young countercultural poets, including Robert Creeley, René Ricard, John Wieners and Vincent Katz.

Clemente met Allen Ginsberg in New York in 1981, and the two shared not only this interest in the transformative power of the everyday, but also the love of India, its culture and its spirituality. Together they worked on a number of projects: a book entitled 'Images'; *White Shroud*, an edition of Ginsberg's dream poem; and 'Black Shroud', its brief sequel.

It was *White Shroud* alone that Ginsberg and Clemente published; and this was Clemente's first large-scale collaboration with a living poet, and his first book involving text to be produced in India: it was printed by the Kalakshetra Press in Madras, where Clemente had a house. Clemente painted the illustrations for *White Shroud* around Ginsberg's specially-prepared, hand-written copy of the poem, in 1983, with the edition coming out in 1984.⁸

Yet « illustration » may not be the ideal term if by illustration we understand the visual to follow on from verbal, a secondary contribution that refers back to the original in another

⁵ Such a pastel is included in Francesco Clemente, *The Pondicherry Pastels* (London: Anthony D'Offay Gallery, 1986), n.p.

⁶ *Hunger* (1980), Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania.

⁷ Donald Kuspit, 'Clemente Explores Clemente', *Contemporanea* (II.7, October 1989), 36-43.

⁸ Allen Ginsberg and Francesco Clemente, *White Shroud* (Madras: Kalakshetra Press, 1984).

medium; its sense of elucidation is not proper to the aim here either. Just as Clemente's stand-alone images move away from the tangible world, so his visual response to the verbal is never directly imitative; it may respond to certain words or elements of the scenes and characters described, but moves from these in unpredictable, sometimes inscrutable ways, into the realm of the abstract, and of the painter's own imagination.

Ginsberg calls the watercolours « illuminations », which captures the spiritual dimension, as well as of course suggesting the tradition of illuminated manuscripts; Ginsburg furthermore suggests that both writer and artist were inspired by William Blake, which certainly fits with the format – a dynamic use of the whole page around the poem – and with the highly personal, idiosyncratic nature of the spirituality. The watercolours recognisably correspond with Clemente's previous work in India: so the colophon is looped by a version of the *ouroboros* form; they also mark the start of his sophisticated use of watercolour as a stand-alone medium. It could be said that Ginsberg's poem likewise grows out of India and his previous work there; despite its setting (which is mainly the Bronx), its form, a dream poem; its meditative qualities; and its stream of consciousness style are all elements Ginsberg developed from his study of Eastern religions, and the style in particular recalls passages in Ginsberg's *Indian Journals* from the 1960s. So what we have in the book is the intersection of related thought processes, of parallel usages of the same traditions.

The poem 'White Shroud', Ginsberg tells us, was composed immediately following the dream which is its subject; we follow the poet's thoughts as he is free to « roam » through « the Great City of the Dead », that is the New York – specifically the Bronx – of his youth. The poem's exordium is flanked by two bodies, whose faces suggest the masks of comedy and tragedy above a theatre; propping up a prostrate, faceless body form, they also form a pyre, of the kind both Clemente and Ginsberg were mesmerised by during their separate stays in Varanasi, the sacred city on the Ganges. The double page following switches to a black palette, and to abstract forms that perhaps take their cue from the line « Television's frenzied dance of dots & shadows calmed »; this page also coincides with the description of descending « to this same street from blackened subways Sundays long ago », which memory might again prompt the colour, as well as the sense of downward sideways movement in these forms, whose haziness might evoke both the static of TV and the fuzziness of memory or dream.

The next pages then burst into a riot of colour, as the poem breaks into what it calls a « picture cavalcade », a free association of memories apparently within the dream, marked by a breakdown in conventional syntax; Clemente's visions here offer no direct parallel, but form their own kind of phantasmagoric rupturing. There are many references here to body parts: the overarching image suggests two heads facing each other, whilst merging and breaking up, in the midst of other body parts, above all phallic forms; and in fact almost all of Clemente's images in this book can be seen to spring from the form of the human body, and explore its fragmentation, multiplication, and disintegration, beginning with the screenprinted frontispiece, much more starkly two-dimensional, which shows the displacement of a head with a multitude of symbolic possibilities.

The body in parts is not a striking feature of the poem, though one recurrent image is of teeth: we hear of the poet's « dentist cousin », later his « teeth braces », and finally meet his mother with teeth problems, that seem to symbolise fragmentation, decay, and mortality; and so Clemente's images of a string of teeth, with the page capped with an incisor form, are the most direct chiming of word and image. It is wholly typical of Clemente's work that this image has both been used before – in a self-portrait of 1981 – and recurs in later paintings: images are frequently shared, reconfigured, developed, throughout his work, moving ever further away from their origins; so in the case of the later paintings the mystification is greater, without any narrative context. But of course in all its forms this is a highly stylised

image, and it would be entirely in keeping with Clemente's practice if in fact it was borrowed from another source to begin with (a tribal tooth necklace, for example). All of his images are thus in a sense in a state of limbo: their pasts often uncertain, and always with the potential to resurface in the future.

If the teeth, the most tangible of the images, are unstable, then Clemente's other bodies and their parts are constantly on the move, slipping in and out of form, and away from the text; yet these fragmentary, elusive bodies, become emblematic of the different disintegrations that occur within Ginsberg's dreamworld. Ginsberg's poem at the point of the two faces is marked by a collapse of both geography and of the story time as the poet recalls glimpses from other cities: « How like Paris or Budapest suburbs, far from Centrum/ Left Bank junky doorstep tragedy intellectual fights/ in restaurant bars ». The blurring of time and space is heightened as unstable memories create fragmentary worlds within the initial dreamworld, in a kind of psychogeographic *mise en abyme*.

It is in the liquid, translucent layers possible with watercolour that Clemente extends these blurred levels into the visual domain, creating the sense of movement through time and space, inner and outer worlds, and worlds within worlds. The immediacy of watercolour, a medium Clemente associates with chance, furthermore echoes the spontaneity with which Ginsberg writes: he times the composition of the poem precisely as « 5:30–6:35am October 5, 1983 », the morning of the dream; there is a comparable precariousness in painting directly on to the manuscript, and occasionally the edges of words become blurred with the overlap.

The layering of the watercolour is put to powerful use in the recurring configuration of the body as a kind of palimpsest, a form and idea with which Clemente has often worked since.⁹ In one of the stand-alone images we have the sleeping head, that of the poet perhaps but also an emblematic head, filled and surrounded by, perhaps regressing into, multiple miniature heads. Furthermore, there are bodies within this representation of the mind: it functions as a kind of Russian doll of womb-like caverns, and egg-shapes suggesting birth or rebirth. These images, while related to Clemente's previous work in India, here relate to two of the poem's most powerful concerns: of the self conceived as being multiple, and of the mother figure. The climax of the poem comes in the poet's metamorphosing perspective, as he realises that a « shopping-bag lady » in a « buildingside hovel » is in fact his mother, named as « Naomi ». As in other Ginsberg poems, this is a version of his real mother, who was called Naomi, and who suffered from an acute psychological disorder, dying in a psychiatric institution in 1956; here the vision gives her the old age she never had.

There is frequent play in the book, then, with doubling and reflections: of light and shade, life and death, writer and artist. These are precisely not rigid dualities; the book negotiates contrarities to inhabit an in-between space, caught between past and present, inner and outer, personal and impersonal, specific and abstract, stasis and movement, reality and dream, temporal and eternal, East and West, word and image.

These concerns play out not merely in the contents of the pages, but in the pages, and the binding of the book itself. Under Clemente's supervision the Kalakshetra Press printed 1,111 numbered copies (Clemente has often used numerological symbolism in his work). The copies are hand bound in hand woven, hand-dyed Indian cloth, with handmade, unevenly-textured endpapers from a local ashram; different colours were used for the papers and the binding cloth, so the unpredictability extends to the books' appearance; the vegetable dyes used in the cloth add an additional variability. The artistic collaboration, in other words, extends to the makers of the final physical books.

White Shroud opens up a vast array of possibilities for the space of the book, within a relatively conventional format. It transforms the rich past it draws on, using collaboration as a

⁹ See Max Hollein (ed.), *Francesco Clemente: Palimpsest* (Nürnberg: Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2012).

vehicle for unpredictability and openness, not a static reinforcement of ideas, and not a hierarchy of word then image, or of creativity then publication. Its multidimensionality, we could say, is archetypally postmodern, and postcolonial in its democratic engagement with the East; except that such labels risk detracting from the anti-schematic originality and independence of the project.

It was an expensive book, published to coincide with Clemente's show at the Kunsthalle Basel, so with the moneyed art collector as an intended purchaser, which is perhaps the only part of the project that goes against the anti-materialistic, independent spirit of the creativity of the work; yet the book was expensive to produce, and it is important to note that the press in India was being used primarily for the meaning the craft and the materials brought to the work, not at all for cheap labour.

It was to the Kalakshetra Press that Clemente again turned for a book project two years later, that, whilst also produced in small numbers, reached a far wider audience. These are the Hanuman Books, fifty titles published between 1986 and 1993, that came about through Clemente's meeting with Raymond Foye, also in New York in the 80s. Foye had been an editor at the famous centre of Beat-publication, City Lights Books in San Francisco, where he had also worked on books with Ginsberg, and was now editing for several New York-based publishers. Foye approached Clemente to collaborate on a book for the Petersburg Press, *The Departure of the Argonauts* by Alberto Sabino, printed in 1986. Here Clemente extended the parameters for word and image collaboration by having some images printed entirely over the type, so that the text moves between being semantic intelligible, and surrendering to become part of a visual design.

Foye shared a great love of beautifully produced books and countercultural literature: he once described how when growing up in Massachusetts a City Lights book would seem to him like a « message from another world ». ¹⁰ Inspired by the Hindu devotional texts that were the staple of the Kalakshetra's business, the pair conceived the idea of publishing a collection of Western texts in a similar miniature size, that could be held in the palm of the hand, the series named after Hanuman, the Hindu god that is part-monkey, and whose qualities include great bravery, and possessing great knowledge, mastery of the senses, and faultless speech: all of which is appropriate since the content of some of the books could be daring in subject matter, while an emphasis was placed on language that was powerful in its brevity. The size of the books meant that the works chosen had to be short: no more than 12,000 words could be accommodated in a binding. The editions were also small, around 1,500 copies per title.

As with *White Shroud* local Indian materials were given prominence, including cotton paper and vegetable dyes, and the copies were all hand-sewn by local fishermen. In speaking of those particular qualities of Indian printing, Clemente describes a particular interest in « how technologically produced images were contextualized in India »; and here that process of cultural contextualization is disrupted, and comes full circle, as the adapted techniques (of photolithography on the covers, for example) are now produced for a predominantly Western readership and marketplace.

Kalakshetra's owner, C.T. Nachiappan, should be given prominence here for his major input in the design of the books, far more than he had in the making of *White Shroud*. He hand-set the texts on a letterpress, and added gold foil lettering for the covers. Each book has a photographic portrait of the author on the cover, and black and white photos were ordered so that each could be colour-tinted in situ, allowing further creative input from the printers.

¹⁰ See 'Hanuman Book Records', University of Michigan, <quod.lib.umich.edu/s/slead/umich-scl-hanuman> accessed 15 August 2013.

The typesetting speaks intimately in its careful spacing and handset irregularity, at times suggesting a hand-typed missive from author to reader.

The books' appearance correlates with the independent spirit and sometimes mystical subject matter. Titles include artists' writings, contemporary poetry, philosophy (including a translation of René Guénon's particularly pertinent *Oriental Metaphysics*), as well as many of the countercultural literary authors for whom the East represented such a refreshing source of creativity in the post-War period, including Jack Kerouac, whose *Manhattan Sketches* was in fact pirated here. Ginsberg was asked to contribute, and offered his study of William Blake, an apt extension of their previous collaboration. As a whole the series is diverse, spanning many different subjects and genres, and while the majority are American authors there are also some British represented, and quite a few translations of little-known works. But they are all beautiful miniatures, charged with presence by their appearance, little talismans that we can carry in our pockets. They give us an insight into the minds of the editors: Foye was responsible for most of the contemporary poetry and fiction, being well connected in his job as an editor to well-established presses, and he already had manuscripts he was looking to place by younger, upcoming writers, including Eileen Myles and David Trinidad; Clemente proposed many of the works in translation, the philosophy, and texts by other artists, including Francis Picabia, David Hockney, and several by Willem de Kooning, that he specifically commissioned from the artist. Clemente also put up the funding needed to get the project going: this was at the height of his fame in the 1980s, when it is reported he at one point had shows at three different New York galleries simultaneously.¹¹

The books were shipped from Madras to Foye's office in the Chelsea Hotel in New York, and from there to subscribers and distributors, who sold them on to bookshops and museum shops (where they were often placed at counters due to their small size, and affordability – priced at between four and five dollars each.) The books were also tied in with bohemian events around New York, including poetry readings and gallery shows.

The meeting of different cultures was not without problems, however, and an unwelcome intervention came in the form of Indian customs officials, who held up a shipment of 20,000 copies of different books in 1988 because of a Roman illustration of the fertility god Priapus that featured in the underground actress Cookie Mueller's book *Fan Mail, Frank Letters, and Crank Calls*.¹² Clemente and Foye brought a lawsuit against the Indian government on the grounds of unfair censorship, and won, though many copies had already been destroyed. Nachiappan himself then got cold feet, and destroyed the first edition of a volume he had just printed by the performance artist Bob Flanagan entitled *Fuck Journal*: he was understandably concerned that anti-obscenity legislation could extend to printers as well as publishers of controversial material. They eventually reached a compromise whereby 500 additional copies were printed, and then smuggled out of the country.

Like Clemente's art these books cross many borders and take risks along the way. They take as their premise existing models, but radically adapt them, putting them to very different uses, and ending up with something wholly new. All of these books extend the concept of the visual artist so that it can include writers, publishers, printers, and the craftspeople who do the final making: hierarchies, that is to say, begin to be collapsed. The resultant democratic territory is wide open for multivalent collaborations that, both in their internal relations, and in relation to the wide world, can converge, reflect, and reinforce; and, as vitally, diverge, adapt, and subvert.

¹¹ Robin Pogrebin, and Kevin Flynn, 'Does Money Grow on Art Market Trees? Not for Everyone', *The New York Times*, 30 May 2011, <www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/arts/design/not-all-art-market-prices-are-soaring.html> accessed 15 August 2013.

¹² See 'Hanuman Book Records', <quod.lib.umich.edu/s/sclead/umich-scl-hanuman> accessed 15 August 2013.

Bibliography

Clemente, Francesco, *The Pondicherry Pastels* (London: Anthony D'Offay Gallery, 1986), n.p.

Ginsberg, Allen, and Francesco Clemente, *White Shroud* (Madras: Kalakshetra Press, 1984).

'Hanuman Book Records', University of Michigan, <quod.lib.umich.edu/s/sclead/umich-scl-hanuman> accessed 15 August 2013.

Hollein, Max (ed.), *Francesco Clemente: Palimpsest* (Nürnberg: Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2012).

Jain, Jyotindra, *Clemente: Made in India* (New York: Charta Books, 2011).

Kuspit, Donald, 'Clemente Explores Clemente', *Contemporanea* (II.7, October 1989), 36-43.

Pogrebin, Robin, and Kevin Flynn, 'Does Money Grow on Art Market Trees? Not for Everyone', *The New York Times*, 30 May 2011, <www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/arts/design/not-all-art-market-prices-are-soaring.html> accessed 15 August 2013.

Contributor Note

Peter Maber teaches English and American literature at the University of Cambridge and at the New College of the Humanities in London. Much of his research examines continuities and disjunctions between the verbal and visual arts. He writes regularly as an art critic for *The Times Literary Supplement*, and is the author of a book on the Leach potter William Marshall, *William Marshall: Organic Vision* (2010).