

TIM JOHNSON

*Parallel Universe*

10 September to 3 October 2020

If a painting is a portal to another dimension, then the canvases of Tim Johnson are magic carpets, each one an invitation to embark on a voyage through the acclaimed Sydney-based artist's personal cosmology. Revealing his sustained interest in Buddhism and other Eastern traditions, these serenely composed constellations of figures, objects and symbols inhabit an exalted space free from everyday concerns.

Johnson's first show in five years with Tolarno Galleries, which has represented him since 1987, *Parallel Universe* brings together 12 new paintings, five of them made in collaboration with Daniel Bogunovic, a self-taught artist who lives in LA. "Daniel has an immaculate technique," says Johnson, who has worked with him periodically for more than a decade. "He became interested in the Tibetan Buddhist aspects of my work when I was collaborating with a Tibetan artist, Karma Phuntsok. Daniel wanted to challenge that, to try depicting Buddhist imagery himself, and he's become very good at it."

Their collab canvases are the product of a 'paint-and-post' method that privileges contingency over autonomy. Johnson sends Bogunovic a semi-abstract background, onto which the American artist paints a central motif of his own choosing – mostly Buddhist deities for this show – in clear, bright colours before posting it back to Australia. After researching the deity and consulting his own archive of materials and images collected over a 50-year career, Johnson sets about responding.

Sometimes, however, Bogunovic places a motif on an otherwise blank canvas before shipping it over to Johnson. "He gets impatient and can't wait for me to send him backgrounds," laughs Johnson. As such, each of these canvases has crossed the Pacific at least once, which is just the kind of thing magic carpets are supposed to do.

In *Citipati 2020*, the eponymous deity, which manifests as a pair of gyrating skeletons, draws the eye in to a dazzling dreamscape of yellows, oranges, reds and blues, softened by a diaphanous veil of white dots. Radiating out from *Citipati* in concentric circles are an eclectic array of smaller motifs, among them a rainbow, acrobats, UFOs, guitars, mythical winged creatures, Tibetan decorative elements, pseudo hieroglyphics and more deities, all rendered in mostly pastel tones.

Look closer and you'll spot a tiny monochrome tondo of American blues legend Blind Lemon Jefferson. "I follow my own interests and one of them is blues music," explains Johnson. "Blind Lemon's an important guy if you know about Mississippi blues. There's a link there with the skeletons, as he sang about death quite a lot. One of his most famous songs is 'See That My Grave Is Kept Clean', which Bob Dylan, Lou Reed and Nick Cave all covered."

## TOLARNO GALLERIES

Sure enough, there's a stenciled silhouette of Bob Dylan in the lower right-hand corner of the canvas. And providing counterbalance to *Blind Lemon* is another tondo depicting Karmapa, the supreme lama of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, which Johnson follows. "I'm sincere but I'm not good at it," he says. "I turned to Buddhism 30 years ago as a way of dealing with a traumatic issue and found it incredibly helpful – it saved my life. And then it became an interesting contribution to my art."

Another significant aspect of Johnson's practice is his precise dotting technique, which he learned from Indigenous artists involved in the Papunya Tula art movement during the 1980s. An early collector and advocate of Western Desert painting, Johnson collaborated with brothers Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, among others, and was given permission to use the technique in his own work.

In some paintings (*Pehar* 2020, *Yogini* 2020), Johnson applies a layer of white dots to diffuse the intensity of the hues beneath, while in others (*Dorje Drakten* 2020, *Thredbo River* 2020) he uses coloured dots to define forms in three-dimensional space and provide atmospheric perspective. "I realised the technique could evolve into something closer to Lichtenstein's use of the Ben Day process in pop art or even pointillism," he says.

Having come of age in the conceptual ferment of the late 1960s and early '70s, Johnson has long maintained a syncretic approach to his work, where unlikely, even disparate, elements drift and coalesce into new forms, patterns, narrative and, ultimately, meanings. Yet he's careful not to overthink this process of intercultural fusion. "I like to free up whatever I'm doing in the picture from my own need to structure and compose it," he says. "If I try and control things, it becomes too self-conscious. But if I let it happen, the picture takes care of itself."

Tony Magnusson  
July 2020