



REDREAMING THE EARTH

A catalogue essay to accompany *Square Earth*,
an exhibition of the work of **Le Van Tai**
reflecting on differences between Vietnamese
and Australian ways of seeing our planet

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Square Earth 1, Le Van Tai 2004

Le Van Tai's retrospective exhibition at the Fairfield Regional Gallery in Sydney (28 February – 29 March 2004) takes us beyond the binaries that divide 'us' from 'them', East from West, North from South, mind from matter and we humans from our environments to present a romantic re-dreaming of the earth as a fecund habitat in which the 'transplanted seeds' and 'uprooted plants'^[1], as the artist calls first-generation migrants like himself -- as well as those of us who have never been displaced -- can metaphorically flower, fruit and flourish in hybrid profusion, as part of 'nature', not separate from her.

Eurocentric and East Asian readings

I come to this work as an Australian of Anglo-Celtic descent so I've struggled to translate some of Le's imagery, including the beautifully executed squares from which the title of this exhibition is drawn. My initial thoughts ranged from clichés about being boxed in, cooped up, subdivided and fenced in or out, to exclusionary notions of inside/outside, centre and periphery and all those 1990s innovation-mantras like 'think outside the frame' and 'push the envelope'. These preliminary very-Eurocentric readings will seem naïve, even simplistic, to people whose cultural roots are in East Asia where, despite the processes of modernization and economic globalization, social and political life is still deeply imbued with Taoist and Confucian values. People immersed in these traditions will immediately recognize that *Square Earth* is a very explicit reference to a cosmology in which Heaven, Earth and we

Humans are conceived as a single, integrated whole. In this sacred triad Earth is represented as a square with five cardinal points (north, south, east, west and centre); Heaven as a circle, the base of the all-encompassing dome of the sky; and, in between are we humans whose highest moral calling is to intervene in our ever-changing world to create harmony, equilibrium, or what today we might call 'sustainability'. As the Confucian philosopher, Tung Ch'ung-shu (c.179-c.104 BCE), wrote during China's Han dynasty (202BCE-220CE):



Heaven, earth, and humans are the basis of all creatures. Heaven gives them birth, earth nourishes them, and humans bring them to completion. Heaven provides them at birth with a sense of filial and brotherly love, earth nourishes them with clothing and food, and humans complete them with rites and music. The three act together as hands and feet join to complete the body and none can be dispensed with.^[2]

Square Earth 2, Le Van Tai, 2004.

Those of us who don't recognize the cosmological references in the title of Le Van Tai's exhibition might at least be familiar with the replicas of ancient Chinese coins used as Feng Shui charms, those ubiquitous bronze circles with little square holes in the centre now sold in 'New Age' shops throughout the industrialized world. Certain Vietnamese coins, such as the Annamese *Canh Thinh Thong Bao* from the Tay Son dynasty (1793-1800), also embody the Confucian cosmology.

Beyond 'Western' dualisms

Read in this broader context Le Van Tai's squares signify a profoundly interconnected set of relationships and values in which the damaging dualisms or binary opposites afflicting Judeo-Christian thought are completely absent. His squares suggest ways of thinking which transcend both the mind/matter split of 'Western' philosophy and the them/us modes of identity formation through which communities, including nation-states, continue to legitimize the marginalization, exclusion, vilification, dispossession, even genocide of those who are not 'Us'. This exhibition may present what British scholar Stuart Hall has called 'a new kind of difference – the difference which is not binary (either-or) but whose 'differances' (as Jacques Derrida has put it) will not be erased, or traded'^[3]. To me this 'new kind of difference' is something to celebrate.

Realms of memory

There are other more localized ways of interpreting the work in this exhibition, as Le Van Tai himself pointed out to me when he sent me a children's story^[4] about the

'invention' of the glutinous rice puddings Vietnamese families offer their ancestors and share with friends at Tet. I've enjoyed these puddings, even watched them being made without ever realizing that they are mini-memorials to the first independent Viet state, Van Lang, founded by the legendary kings of the Hung-Vuong dynasty four thousand years ago. And nor did I realize that, embodied within them, are indigenous stories from what is now Vietnam which predate the Taoist and Confucian cosmologies inherited from imperial China.

The rice pudding legend is about the sixth Hung-Vuong king who devised a very modern competition to decide which of his twenty-two sons should be his successor: he asked them to cook a banquet for Tet and the son who prepared the tastiest dish would be crowned the next king. The princes journeyed to the four corners of the earth to find the most exotic ingredients -- all except the sixteenth son, Tiet-Lieu, a shy young man who loved his father too much to leave him and was too poor to travel abroad or buy extravagant ingredients. But one night a spirit appeared to Tiet-Lieu in a dream: you are the most faithful son and it is you who should sit upon the throne, the spirit said. He told the prince that the tastiest, most valuable food was growing right outside the palace gates, yet was so cheap that even the humblest peasants could afford it. The spirit was, of course, talking about rice. He taught Tiet-Lieu how to select the best grain, mill it, mix the flour into dough, mould the dough into puddings, stuff them with mung bean paste and minced pork, then wrap them in banana leaves and cook them overnight. One pudding should be shaped like a square to symbolize the earth, the spirit said, while the other should be round like the sky.



Tiet-Lieu followed the spirit's instructions and nervously placed the puddings on the banquet table. The king unwrapped the banana leaves, tasted the rice inside ... then smiled. And so it was that the sixteenth son of King Hung-Vuong VI, the tender-hearted Tiet-Lieu, became the seventh king of the quasi-mythical state of Van Lang.

Square Earth 3, Le Van Tai, 2004.

New meanings for new times?

Today glutinous rice puddings prepared to this allegedly four-thousand-year-old recipe retain a cultural significance far greater than the sum of their ingredients. Offering the puddings to ancestors, eating them, even speaking their names -- *Banh Day* and *Banh Chung* -- are identity-affirming acts. Glutinous rice puddings have become part of what it means to be Vietnamese, and an implicit acknowledgement of an all-encompassing and very ancient way of seeing the world. French historian Pierre Nora would call them *lieux de memoire*, or realms of memory,

a concept he developed to explain how nations and communities are constructed and held together by stories^[5].

As architectural historian Zeynep Celik explains, a *lieu de memoire* is anything 'which by dint of human will or the work of time, has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community.'^[6] But the meanings of such memorials can change over time -- so is Le Van Tai consciously adding new layers of meaning to these traditional puddings? Is he suggesting that Prince Tiet-Lieu's story has something to say to first-generation migrants who still 'feel their soul to be far away in their homeland'?^[7] And might there also be a message for those of us whose families have been in Australia for many generations?



Square Earth 5, Le Van Tai, 2004.

The *Banh Day* and *Banh Chung* story reminds me, for example, how important it is to cherish the local in these globalized times, the everyday 'paddy fields' in which we live our daily lives; to be engaged in the here and now rather than nostalgically longing for some other place, some other time. It also reminds me to value the endemic species we share our 'paddy fields' with, including the rice-like grasses once harvested in what is now Western Sydney by the Dharug people, for whom the earth was mother, the source of all spiritual and physical sustenance. Many of these native grasses are now locally extinct, however, and we all know what

happened to Australia's indigenous peoples after the first boats arrived from Great Britain just over two hundred years ago. Perhaps these are some of the 'shadows' alluded to in Le's work

Multicultural complexity

But Le Van Tai's imagery is too rich, too complex to fit into any single narrative, as is his own Vietnamese heritage. Milton Osborne calls Vietnam East Asia's 'shatter belt'^[8], because it's here that the Taoist and Confucian cultures of China encountered the Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim cultures from South Asia. Le Van Tai grew up in the frontier territory of central Vietnam which, from the second century of this era, was the heartland of the Champa trading empire established by 'Indianized' Malay migrants from what is now the Indonesian archipelago. Cham rulers built great temples to the Hindu deity Shiva in this part of Vietnam, and peasants piously rubbed sacred stone lingams to ensure good harvests. Centuries later they lit incense before distinctively Cham Buddha's and bodhisattvas. Le Van Tai draws extensively on all these pasts: you can see them in his recurring moon motif; in his composite

humanoid figures, including birds with human heads; in his use of mandalas, lotus blossoms and fish; and in his references to male and female ways of being, to Yin and Yang.

Alternative ways of seeing

In the Hindu and Buddhist belief systems introduced into what is now Vietnam during the Champa era all sentient beings, both human and non-human, are intimately connected through the cycle of death and re-birth, or *samsara*. One of the ancient Buddhist texts, the *Lankavatara Sutra*, expresses this interdependence in a very immediate way:

In the long course of rebirth there is not one among living beings with form who has not been mother, father, brother, sister, son, or daughter, or some other relative. Being connected with the process of taking birth, one is kin to all wild and domestic animals, birds, and beings born from the womb.^[9]

The relationship between people and other species expressed here is very different from that defined in Genesis, the first chapter of the Bible introduced to Australia by Christians in the late eighteenth century:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them and said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; and to you it shall be meat.^[10]

The biblical injunction to 'have dominion over' the earth and 'subdue it' has been taken all-too-literally in the last fifty years of 'Western'-style economic development and consumption and, as a consequence, biologists are now claiming that Earth is entering a period of mass extinction equivalent to that which occurred 65 million years ago when the dinosaurs disappeared. By the end of this century up to half of all species we now share the planet with may have been annihilated -- and we are all perpetrators in this ecological holocaust, whether or not our ancestors conceived the earth as square, round, flat or as their mother; or whether or not we now see ourselves as 'kin' to other beings, as part of the Confucian triad, or as separated from 'nature' in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

For me the only comfort possible in this time of crisis is the knowledge that, in every part of the world, in Vietnam as in Australia, millions of people retain a deep emotional bond with the earth and are collaborating to restore and rehabilitate damaged habitats, and to transform policies and practices responsible for species loss. By encouraging us to think about the ethical dimensions of our relationships with other species in these ways Le Van Tai is contributing to the processes of social change which may yet halt the human-induced 'extinction event' biologists are warning us about.



Australian syncretism

Art critics use the terms 'hybridity' or 'cultural transliteration'^[11] to describe the work in *Square Earth*, but Le Van Tai, I think, prefers the term 'syncretism'. His art is syncretic in exactly the same way the stone friezes on the centuries-old Cham temples he grew up with are: a subtle, sophisticated fusion of many different histories and values mixed with the blood and tears, the unspoken shades and shadows, of millennia of mind-numbingly destructive war.

Rhythm Earth, Le Van Tai, 2004

Le Van Tai's paintings bear the traces of all these pasts: Confucian, Hindu, Buddhist; Cham, Khmer, Viet; Chinese, Indian, Malay; French, Russian, American; folkloric, Surrealist, Cubist; iconic, mythic, representational; erotic, spiritual, humanist; traditional, modern, postmodern; local, glocal and global. All this, and yet his art is absolutely Australian, whether or not the Art Establishment recognizes it yet! I thank him for his re-dreaming of what this country is ... and what it might yet become.

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^[1]Le Van Tai, "Uprooted plant, made in Vietnam", *Redreaming the plain*, Imagine The Future Inc. 2002, <http://www.redreaming.info/DisplayStory.asp?id=32>, (accessed 20 Feb. 2004).

^[2]Mary E. Tucker, "Confucianism and Ecology: Potential and Limits", *Earth Ethics* 10, no.1 (Fall 1998), republished in Forum on Religion and Ecology, Harvard University Center for the Environment (HUCE), MA, USA. See <http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion/confucianism/index.html> (accessed 20 February 2004).

[3] Stuart Hall, "Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re-imagining the Post-nation", keynote speech to the conference *Whose Heritage? The Impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain's Living Heritage*, Manchester, UK, November 1999, published in *Third Text 49*, Winter 1999-2000, pp 3-13.

[4] Tran Van Dien and Le Tinh Thong, *Once upon a time in my country*, Tu Sach Song Ngu Huong Viet, Vol. 2.

[5] Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Rethinking the French past*, cited in Zeynep Celik, "Colonial/Postcolonial Intersections: Lieux de memoire in Algiers", *Third Text 49*, Winter, 1999-2000, p. 63.

[6] Zeynep Celik, "Colonial/Postcolonial Intersections: Lieux de memoire in Algiers", *Third Text 49*, Winter, 1999-2000, p. 66.

[7] Le Van Tai, *A Short Mid-Day Sleeping in Footscray*, cited in Chapter 9 of an unpublished PhD dissertation by Peter McKenzie, Victoria University.

[8] Milton Osborne, 1996, *Southeast Asia: an introductory history*, seventh edition, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards.

[9] Donald K. Swearer, 1998, *Buddhism and Ecology: Challenge and Promise*, *Earth Ethics 10*, no.1 (Fall 1998) republished in *Forum on Religion and Ecology*, Harvard University Center for the Environment (HUCE), MA, USA. See <http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion/buddhism/index.html> (accessed 20 February 2004).

[10] Genesis, Chapter 1: 26-29, *The Bible*, King James version, Oxford University Press, pp 7-8.

[11] Canadian poet, Jam Ismail's term, referred to in Janet Duckworth, *Art on the rim, Pacific Rim*, 1997, <http://www.langara.bc.ca/prm/1997/page12.htm> (accessed 30 October 2003).