



'Spirit of the Present', one of triptych, watercolour, gold, 51 x 41 cm



'Spirit of the Future', one of triptych, watercolour, gold, 51 x 41 cm

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FORD ROBBINS

INTUITIVE RENDITIONS

Automatism and ancient geometry are key elements in Cynthia Smith Stibolt's exploration of spiritual iconography through the translucency of watercolour. Profile by Marie Geissler.

CYNTHIA Smith Stibolt is a mystic, seeking inspiration and assurance from the transcendent for her ethereal imagery. Her approach embraces automatism, a creative process explored by such well-known visual artists as William Blake, Miro and Masson. In literature there have been the notable examples of Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who, like Stibolt, have taken exception to the dominant rationalist traditions of the day. Commenting on her working method, she says, 'It happens spontaneously, as it did in the work of Giotto, Fran Angelico, Mozart and Beethoven.'

Stibolt's work also joins forces with the mysticism found universally in the world's major religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam (Sufism). Spiritually inspired, her visual language looks back to the floating calligraphic figures of ancient cave paintings, such as Australia's Bradshaw figures or the Lascaux images in France.

She also embraces the inspiration of contemporary paintings by tribal societies, such as the North American Indians and the Australian Aborigines. Importantly, Stibolt's work shares in a sense of the unity of humankind and Nature and 'the oneness that characterises the ultimate reality'.

Light Beings or Ancestral Spirits are her subjects, visionary images of exquisite harmony which transcend the sensory intellectual consciousness. Symbolically, they are the universal spirits of land, sky and sea, other-worldly-beings, accessible to all, that as 'forces for good, reveal themselves in paintings to help and guide planetary harmony'.

She explains: 'They inhabit invisible realms. They

'Light Beings', watercolour and ink, 46 x 35 cm

are carriers of wisdom that is needed in the world today. They seek communion with us. They are there in the beauty of Nature – the starry sky, the surface of the waters, the countryside. They are shimmering in the sky at dusk as the stillness creeps over the surface of the land. They are guardians of sacred sites. They are there to assist humankind, to restore fullness and balance to life on Earth – to bring Heaven and Earth together at last.'

Her paintings are inspired by these Beings of Light.





'The Ancient Ones Series – The Elders', watercolour, gold, 36 x 48 cm



'The Ancient Ones Series – Lost Tribes', watercolour, gold, 36 x 48 cm



Stibolt's purpose-built, adobe-style studio erected on sacred ground in New Mexico. Designed by Ken MacKenzie, based on the principles of sacred geometry used in the architecture of cathedrals, temples, mosques and shrines. The studio's compass alignment was similarly determined and the artist works in the centre of the building directly beneath a large circular skylight



Their images speak differently to each of us, so it is important to be open and receive what one can from them. They are signals to get our attention, to make us respectful – a wake-up call to acknowledge our interdependence on each other.

Stibolt lives on a property in Santa Fe, New Mexico, some eight miles west of the town. She moved there from Connecticut in 1982. It is an idyllic location nestling on rolling land at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. At an elevation of more than 2,000 metres, it's inhabited by pinon trees, juniper and some large cholla cacti and Yucca. The centre of Stibolt's world for many years, an adobe-styled studio stands apart from her house.

Before breaking the ground to build her studio, Stibolt, along with an Indian elder, the contractor and her architect Ken MacKenzie, visited the site and petitioned the land to accept the building. She says, 'We asked the spirit world to accept this project, to recognise it, so they would come to help.' Using the principles of sacred geometry that have been used in the architecture of mosques, temples, shrines and cathedrals, for centuries, the plans as well as the compass alignment of the building were determined accordingly.

The preferred shape and alignment ensured the energy of the studio was ideally tuned to facilitate connection to another dimension. According to MacKenzie, the intent was to create an harmonious environment, a vessel that reflects the order that exists in the universe. It was to be a serene space that fostered a channel with unseen realities. 'When you enter the building there is a sense of being insulated from worldly distractions,' he says.

The design allows Stibolt, whose principal medium is watercolour, to work at a u-shaped bench situated directly beneath an octagonal-styled drum, surmounted by a circular skylight that allows a stream of natural light to pour into the softly lit interiors. Stibolt's career began in 1973, establishing a style as a contemporary landscape watercolourist. The emergence of the images of *Light Beings* came just before her move from Connecticut. Their appearance was a surprise, initially as abstracted elongated figurative works resembling the sculptures of Giacometti. Commenting on the evolution of the imagery, Stibolt says she felt that the figures emerged slowly, veiled at first, then more strongly and clearly defined as time progressed.

At first there were depictions of three "beings" in counsel or conversation. These forms were portrayed in rippling colour harmonies of luminous beauty



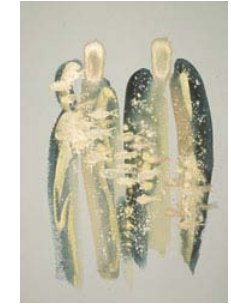
'Untitled', watercolour



'The Elders', watercolour



'The Ancient Ones – Lost Tribe'



'Blue Guardians – Sea'

and radiance, at once resplendent in softly hued, flowing star-studded costumes. Later came single figures. She remembers wondering, 'Why don't you have faces?' And the answer was 'Because we don't have egos – we are Beings of Light'. Faces connote personalities and Stibolt was expressing the essence of *Light Beings*. Conveying a physical presence rather than the details of the subject, as much symbolic as real, they hover elusively between the worlds of fantasy and reality, linking non-tangible experiences of mind to those of the everyday.

The Ancient Ones: The Elders series, consisting of ethereal groups of robed figures, came in 1995, with a change in focus following an injury sustained by the artist. Stibolt had been exploring the Fremont culture in south-eastern Utah. She was curious to know more about the mysterious figures in their cave paintings, the oldest known inhabitants of North America – the Anasazi. She started to draw these images with a gold pen (she chose the sacred symbols used by this culture as the starting point for stick forms). Next was to fill in the backgrounds. This was accomplished using pale bronze, terracotta and blue washes, and additional embellishments inspired by drawings from the cave walls.

The next series of *The Ancient Ones – The Lost Tribes*, commenced in 1996, was inspired by the ancient civilisations of Mesopotamia, Euphrates, Tigris and the Mediterranean Sea. Some are black skinned, others white, with varying shaped headdress, costumes and auras. Some of the figures appear to be clad in Chinese or Tibetan costume, others African, wearing long-flowing bejewelled robes which lend them a stately or regal presence.

Ethereal and vaporous, the figures appear alluring and strangely beautiful. Depicted in a setting of boundless space, they are portrayed as benevolent, dream-like, spiritual presences, and quickened by a spontaneous brush stroke and the unique power of rainbow-coloured abstraction. Her pictorial language has a vital rhythm, almost mantra-like quality that is highly evocative of shamanistic ritual.

Ancient Ones – Blue Guardians: Sea declare their allegiance to the ocean in haunting imagery. In front of the deep blues and greens of their robes, gleaming shoals of golden fish sweep magically by. Others are showered by tiny lights of phosphorescence, the microscopic presences of the underwater domain.

Blue Guardians: Heavens take the indigo blues of the night sky for their attire, which is studded with gold and silver starbursts. In these works there is a hint of some facial definition.



Green/Gold Guardians: Earth are fluid forms that enjoy the predominance of olive greens and indigo blues with highlights from sprays of white and pink alluding to the natural world, carpeted by flowers and foliage.

'Blue Guardians – Sea', watercolour, gold, 35 x 48 cm

In *The Garden* the figures are in festive mood, with clouds of bouquets made from tiny flowers sprayed across a foreground that is imaginatively supported by the bright reds, blues, greens and yellows of the robed clothing and halos.

'Blue Guardians Series – Heavens', watercolour, gold, 32 x 52 cm





'Blue Guardians Series - Heavens', watercolour, gold, 32 x 46 cm



'Light Beings Series', 1997, enamel and 22 ct gold on glass panel, 32 x 45 cm



Cynthia Smith Stibolt



'In the Garden Series', watercolour, gold, 43 x 32 cm

work includes a series of her *Light Beings* painted on glass at the studio of glass artist Peter Crisp in Bowring, NSW, a short distance from the national capital, Canberra. Translating to glass as a medium for painting her imagery was very demanding. Similar in some ways to watercolour, it opened up new possibilities of expression for Stibolt. 'With the light coming through the glass from behind the figures, it gives them a new dimension that is very exciting.' Some are very lively, others serene. The beings of the *Garden* series are recalled in freely floating figures painted in a palette of greens and browns. A dynamic feel is there in a series that pick up on imagery of Stibolt's early angelic forms. This angelic series has a striking vibrancy that comes from the application of gold embellishment onto painted halos, the calligraphically lined edges of garments and star-studded surfaces. Other works, like the figures in her *Guardians* series, have a serene meditative stillness. The glass works have been made on rectangular as well as circular glass panels. Negotiations are presently taking place for several pieces to be commissioned for a Chapel of Unity in NSW. Cynthia Smith Stibolt claims that in a civilised "artificial" society, like our own, we must awaken the golden glimmer within by responding to Nature's beneficent embrace. She sees her work as offering an opportunity for us to intuitively connect with this possibility.

Marie Geissler

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'Light Beings Series', 1997, painted glass panel, 47 x 35 cm



'Light Beings Series', 1997, enamel on glass panel, 32 x 45 cm