

Imagining the Visual Himachal

Payson R. Stevens

For the last 11 years it has been my great good fortune to pass time annually in the remote Upper Seraj Valley of Kullu. It's hard to know what kismet has drawn me from California, USA: Kamla, my wife, who wanted to return to India after retiring from a professional life in the US; working as an advisor on sustainable livelihood and conservation issues in the



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Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP); sewa projects with the NGO, My Himachal; or, the constant magnetism of the Himalayan environment that stimulates and pulls with its immense, visual beauty. Perhaps each has fed the other providing many daily experiences surrounding me with the higher energies of the mountains, forests, and streams of Himachal Pradesh.



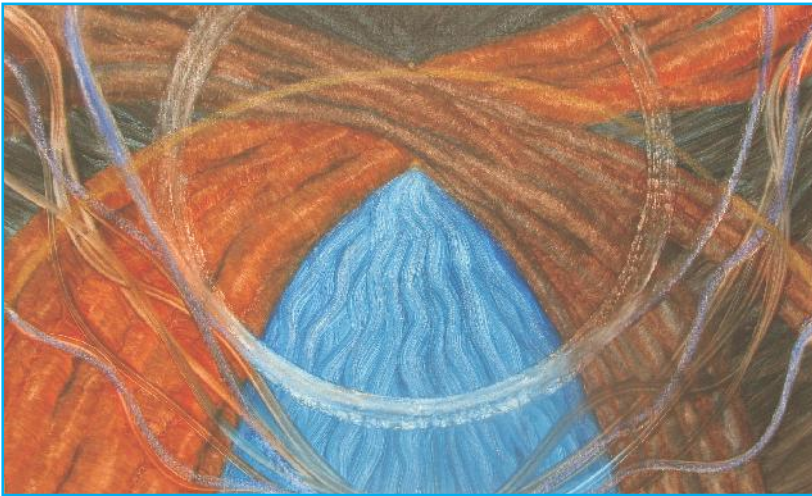
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As a trained scientist, I was taught to observe the natural world to better understand the patterns of the living and non-living worlds and to elucidate what principles, interactions, and forces underlay them. As a practicing artist, the patterns in Nature have also been supremely important—but they have been driven by

visual and emotional responses rather than intellectual ones. In effect, they are the interplay of the imagination with the conscious and unconscious forces that frame the way one sees the world. Science is an intellectual construct; art is an imaginative one. Both are gifts given to the individual



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who chooses to fully enter and dedicate a life to understanding and/or feeling the world that embraces him. In turn, this gift can be returned to others, through one's inventive labors, whether through scientific/technical output or artistic creations.

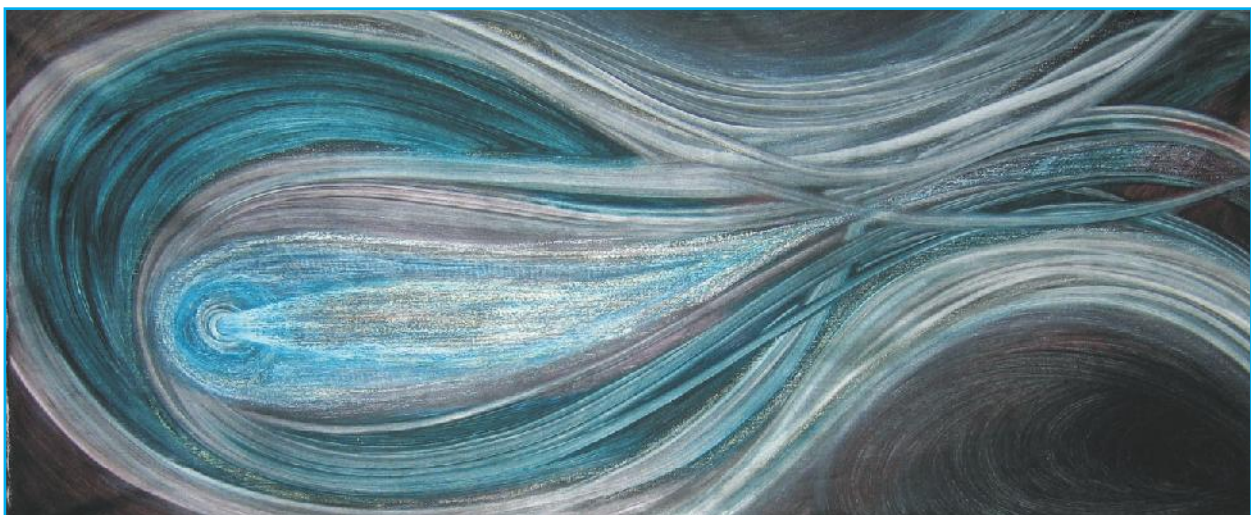
The immense beauty of Himachal Pradesh, especially in the more remote regions of Kullu, Kinnaur, Chamba, and Lahaul-Spiti, has been an important catalyst for my paintings, drawings, and sculpture. From the dense,

old growth Himalayan climax forests of ancient deodars, firs, oaks, horse chestnuts, and spruces of GHNP, to the austere high deserts and high altitude lakes of Lahaul-Spiti, one is constantly overwhelmed by the power of these landscapes. Everywhere there are alternating and contrasting scales: expansive macrocosmic views with dramatic, ragged peaks catching orange-violet-pink, alpine dawn or dusk; raging, creamy rivers flowing out of melting glacial sources; shafts of golden light streaming through variegated green,

leafy branches. And at the other scale, the intimate, microcosmic views: trickling springs with rainbow bubbles popping; jeweled emerald mosses and jade lichens; the iridescent wings of a Krishna butterfly darting before you.

Over the past 40 years I have painted abstract land and waterscapes, preoccupied by their energy and power. The artwork has resulted from extensive time spent in Nature, including California mountain ranges and deserts, Baja Mexico, the American Southwest (Utah, Arizona, New Mexico), Alaska, and Antarctica. Since 2000, the Indian Himalayas have been my main focus. My work tends to be abstract/semi-abstract and also reflects visualizing aspects of a daily, meditative practice. Some subject matter has also been figurative and representational.

I usually work on visual themes catalyzed by specific



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ideas and images from the surrounding natural environment. These have included themes of water, forests, trees, mountains, rocks, etc. For example, the *Dark Forest Series* of paintings and drawings (2008-2010) focused on energy flow in the forest. The viewer is in the undergrowth, the ground level where trunks, thick limbs, branches and vines—all powerful symbols of our unconscious, our DNA, our neural net, and our sinewy bodies—swirl in their interpenetrating dance

as they strive for higher levels of illumination. And this quest is the journey into the symbolic dark forest we each carry within...and then beyond into the clearings ahead, where the light vibrates ...drawing us on.

The recent sculptures, *Himalayan Totems* (2008-present) are mixed media, found-object constructions. They combine carvings with natural (wood, bone, feathers, stone, quills, etc.) and man-made (metal, plastic, cloth, rope, barbed-wire) objects. Some pieces have individual

Between

Somewhere between the
Mountains and meadows
Angular boulders
Lie scattered
A mirror of a life:
Soaring peaks,
Tumbled ridges,
Grasses swaying,
Shafts bent;
Wild fragrance
Here...
...gone.

Tremble Monal pheasant
Flicker Viper tongue
Flutter Oak leaf
Dance golden Goral*, dance.

In darkening forest
Bear and leopard roam.

The Tirthan River** trickles,
From glacial melt source.
Then,

Gaining,
Twisting,
Roaring,
Scouring

Polishes clean
The sharp edges,
In the journey down.

All around and between:

The Mighty Himalayas
Swallowed by the fog.

* rare Himalayan antelope

** major river with source
in the Great Himalayan
National Park, India

elements that are cast in bronze. They are a modern expression of the early tribal concept of the totem in which signs and symbols were created (carved, painted, etc.) to represent spiritual elements of the natural and supernatural world. The man-made components are a harsh contrast to the flowing natural forms and express concerns about destructive human environmental impacts that are occurring worldwide.

The India work represents an attempt to honor our Home Planet and engender a sense of beauty and contemplative respect in the viewer. The energy dimension envisioned, on one level, is an attempt to touch different levels of visual awareness. On another, it is about the play of energy all around us with its inherent movement and beauty. Many of the paintings have iridescent, reflective surfaces. These layers shift depending on the angle of light and/or the viewer's perspective. The energy of Nature is constantly transforming: a



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reminder that nothing is permanent and that a greater mystery envelops us all. It is only through self-awareness and our good works that we create something beyond our

small ego presence and merge into the eternal moment, which Nature constantly offers us if we become part of its flow.



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Payson R. Stevens is an American trained in the earth sciences and art. For over 25 years he worked with NASA, NOAA, and the USGS on global change issues. He lives half the year with his wife, the writer Kamla K. Kapur (www.kamlakkapur.com), in a remote area of the Kullu Valley where he paints, writes, and does sewa. He is a founding and advisory board member of My Himachal (www.myhimachal.com), a US and Indian NGO working on rural poverty issues and nature conservation. Solo art exhibitions in India include: US Embassy/American Center (New Delhi/2009), Chandigarh State Museum (2007), Nicholas Roerich Art Gallery (Nagar/2006). His artwork can be seen at www.energylandscapes.com