

# Natural Feeling

By WILLIAM MEYERS

In 2005, the photographer Rena Bass Forman traveled to Sri Lanka with the intention of helping with the relief efforts in the aftermath of the tsunami that had struck the island in 2004. Ms. Forman had previously spent time in remote parts of the Arctic, Africa, Indonesia, Iceland, Greenland, the Middle East, Europe, and South America, where she lived in villages with indigenous people to better understand their cultures and especially to absorb their feelings for the landscapes in which they found themselves. The relationship between what are held to be sacred sites and the social customs they inspire is a main focus of her work; environmental concerns are another. Both of these subjects are now on display in "Sri Lanka: Rena Bass Forman" at the Bonni Benrubi Gallery.

## SRI LANKA: Rena Bass Forman

Bonni Benrubi Gallery

Fifty years ago I took a course in the history of Japanese Buddhism with E. Dale Saunders (1919–1995), the world's leading scholar on the subject. It was a very rigorous course that extended far beyond Japan and included more than Buddhism. One of Saunders's most enduring contributions was his book "Mudrā: A Study of Symbolic Gestures in Japanese Buddhist Sculpture," which was published in the distinguished Bollingen Series in 1960. "Mudrā" is the Sanskrit term for the gestures or hand postures used in Buddhist rituals and iconography; it plays a central role in communicating a statue's metaphysical meaning. I consulted a copy of Saunders's book to help me understand Ms. Forman's photographs.

Like all 10 of the pictures in the exhibition, "Untitled, Buddha, Mihintale, Sri Lanka," was taken in 2005 and is a 38-by-38-inch gelatin silver print toned with a deep sepia. The toning immediately associates the image with 19th-century landscape photography, which Ms. Forman acknowledges, along with the painting of the Hudson River School, as a major influence on her work. The picture was taken from an elevation, so we see above the trees that make up its bottom half and register the picture's darkest shades. In the distance is a hazy horizon in a middle shade, and above it a cloudless sky that is lighter yet. Way to the right, projecting above the trees, is the top of a statue of Buddha; where the sun strikes it, the white of the statue is the lightest tone in the picture, and it makes the stature very prominent, although it takes up only a small part of the whole.

The statue of Buddha is visible from about his breast up, and we can see his right hand, which is



BONNI BENRUBI GALLERY

Rena Bass Forman, 'Untitled, Buddha, Mihintale, Sri Lanka' (2005).

*The toning immediately associates the image with 19th-century landscape photography.*

raised to shoulder level; the thumb and forefinger are pressed together, and the other three fingers stand naturally open. According to Saunders's book, this is the mudrā that "tranquillizes and collects." "The circle formed by the thumb and the index, a complete form, having neither beginning nor end, is that of perfection; it resembles the Law of Buddha, which is perfect and eternal," he writes. Mihintale, where the picture was taken, is in north-central Sri Lanka, which is the birthplace of Buddhism on the island; since this is "the mudrā of the Buddha who explains the Law to the faithful," it is particularly apposite at this place. Ms. Forman's image integrates the manmade statue into its natural setting in a way that makes its presence there seem totally appropriate.

"Untitled, Seated Buddha, 10th century, Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka"

shows only the statue and its immediate location, but since the figure is carved from live stone, it retains its place in nature. The Buddha sits in a classic position with his legs crossed and his hands palms up in his lap, the left hand resting on the right. This, according to Saunders, is the *jō-in* mudrā. "The symbolism of the *jō-in* is closely associated with the Indian concept of *samādhi*: the complete absorption of thought by intense contemplation of a single object of meditation, in such a way that the bonds relating the mental faculties to so-called 'real phenomena' are broken, and the worshiper is thus enabled to identify himself with the Supreme Unity through a sort of super-intellectual raptus," he writes. This is close to the heart of Buddhism, and, by emphasizing the striations that mark the human figure, Ms. Forman's image exposes the statue as simultaneously a part of the natural world.

There are three pictures that are without any human references: a seascape, "Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka"; a landscape, "Kothmale Reservoir, Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka," and "Tree, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka." The last recalls the wonderful tree studies in the current exhibition of mid-19th-century British photographs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the

dramatic portraits Eugène Atget took of trees in the parks around Paris. Ms. Forman shot upward into the branches against a blank sky in such a way that the viewer can find patterns — or thinks he or she can find patterns — in the otherwise random arrangements of trunks, limbs, branches, and twigs.

"Lotus Offerings, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, Full Moon Festival" is simply a mass of the flowers that are swept up every six hours during the festival, but we can dimly make out a single piece of paper with Sanskrit or Pali writing on it. "Untitled, Sea Temple, Southwest Coast Near Galle, Sri Lanka" shows a lot of ocean, and on the horizon a very small island, just big enough to support a few palm trees and a tiny temple. There was a much larger temple on the shore, but it was completely washed away during the tsunami. The larger temple disappeared, the smaller one miraculously survived. The breaking waves in the foreground of Ms. Forman's picture remind us of the endless beating of time, and the doughty little temple of how tenuous is our hold on earth.

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