

# **CARNIVAL OF DREAMS**

PHOTOMONTAGES BY BASIL PAO







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## AN EXQUISITE CRIME SCENE

WHEN Basil Pao asked me to write an introduction for this beautiful book I felt honoured to be included as a long-time supporter of his exquisite art.

For many years I have marvelled at his incredible and various talents: a sublimely talented graphic artist and brilliant photographer who, as a result of his visual acuity and deep personal empathy, is able to capture the unique lives of ordinary people wherever in the world they call home.

However, when I saw the art in this book I recognised Basil had become an evolved master, one who had made a quantum leap into an exceptional, new world . . . a world steeped in mystery, sublimely spiritual and symbolically surreal.

Carefully reusing elements from the enormous collection of his original photos, Basil assembles the chosen parts into fascinating and elegantly fresh combinations, releasing new and more profoundly grounded meanings. I found his new work utterly mesmerising.

However, last night at dinner he completely blindsided me. Goaded by a mischievous but full-bodied vintage Barolo, Basil confessed that his new style was a complete rip-off of my work for *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. I was so shocked I was *complètement sans mots*.

We had been close friends for over 40 years, or so I thought. But, I had been fooled. For behind Basil's wry and slyly inscrutable Oriental smile lurked BETRAYAL!

My work with cut-out collage animation had been groundbreaking. The techniques I had developed were completely original as were the skills I constantly honed so I could manipulate the unruly pieces of paper that, for economic reasons, I was forced to work with. I worked alone, keeping my arcane secrets and discoveries hidden from the voracious eyes of competitors. I trusted no one, except for my "friend" Basil. Little did I know I had befriended the Fu Manchu of the art world.

(LEFT & OVERLEAF) BOOK COVERS FOR MONTY PYTHON'S LIFE OF BRIAN



# MONTYPYTHONSCRAPBOOK



They say that mediocre artists copy, and that great artists steal. I knew Basil Pao was a great artist, but had no idea that he would actually rob a dear friend. Yet, there he was last night . . . laughing as he left the restaurant. I raced after him, shouting desperately STOP, THIEF!, but he merely smiled inscrutably, leapt into a passing palanquin and was gone. It was too late! The artwork had already reached the printer and the presses were rolling.

The book you are now holding in your hand is, in a sense, an exquisitely crafted crime scene. The money you have spent buying it is by now buried deep within Pao's giant gold-filled coffers and will only encourage him to continue his artistic and criminal careers.

My belief in humanity is shattered.

But Art endures.

And I am strangely happy knowing that, in some small way, my tawdry, clownish attempts at collage and popular animation provided the spark for the gleaming blaze that is Basil Pao's newest addition to the world of fine art.

As for you, dear sophisticated and tasteful purchaser, I hope you will have endless years of joy while continuing to be constantly awestruck and swept away by the wondrous artwork that blesses these pages.

However, it is only fair I should warn you that, potentially, as the possessor of this book, you may be liable for prosecution and being found guilty as an accessory to the crime.

Enjoy it while you can.

TERRY GILLIAM · LONDON · JANUARY 2023







## THE MAN FROM EVERYWHERE

FOR DECADES now, Basil Pao has been the global eye through which I've taken in almost every country, as clearly as the world within. I never know where he's going to go next. He sends me a book with gorgeous, warm, and often funny portraits of faces he's seen on his constant journeys; then he offers me a work with the haunting suggestive stillness of a Tang dynasty brush painting. He produces a cheery collection of images of landscapes on every continent made strange by a blown-up version of Edvard Munch's "The Scream"—and then a set of images of the walls of China, seen so close they become textured works of Abstract Expressionism.

So why am I not surprised that now he's giving us dreamscapes that could emerge only from someone who knows the real world inside out? Works that blend his elegant, classical artist's eye with the zany inventiveness of his friend Terry Gilliam? Stairways to heaven, straight out of my teenage dreams, mixed with evocations of Siddhartha's mother that suggest, in piercing, mysterious ways, that all the world around us is smoke and dust.

Put differently, I never know where to place Basil; I can't get my head around him. Which makes him a constant purveyor of freshness and surprise. I first bumped into the man in a dusty square in Nepal where he was working as the stills photographer for Bernardo Bertolucci's film about the Buddha. But in an earlier Bertolucci film, Basil had acted as Zaifeng, Prince Chun, while also serving as assistant director. On his free days in Bhaktapur he traveled up to remote sanctuaries to look at the Himalayas in first light. The minute we spoke, I recognized a high antic spirit that made him a natural friend to members of Monty Python. Here, in short, is the rare soul who can give us the irreverent black joke of "Pilgrim's Progress" right next to the genuine mysticism of "The Infinite Recognition."

◀ THE VITRUVIAN MAN IN OMDURMAN





His wit has never, for me, begun to efface his wisdom. And as I came to know him a little better, I realized I couldn't tell how much he was English boarding-school boy, how much West Coast hip graphic artist and how much Chinese sage. He seems to inhabit many centuries at once, which perhaps means simply that he's the perfect voice of the city that gave him birth, Hong Kong, in which the collision of cultures and ages is making, every hour, for startling new combinations.

Some of the images here are gaudy as a teenager's fantasies. Some – "The Return" – shine with the clear humanity that only a photographer of rare compassion could bring forth. I've always known that my old friend is blessed with a stunning sense of design, able to see the form and art in everything; but here, in these compact short stories, he gives us wild imagination, too. As he points out in his typically wide-ranging introduction, a dream can seem like an embarrassing burst of the subconscious, just what your parents worry about. Yet for serious Buddhists, a dream is an image of the life that otherwise we take too seriously.

I have in my little apartment here a framed collage that Basil once gave me that suggests a hundred glassy airports. I also have a beautiful book of his that shares the innocent beauty of the many remote places he knows intimately. Here they come together in "Mirrors of Dust." Album-designer, loving father, covert Chan master – 21st century Renaissance man – Basil is always bringing the many worlds inside him together to create something far more than the sum of their parts. Is he a Taoist Fellini? Or just a state-of-the art contemplative? It doesn't really matter. For so many years, he's been giving us the world-wide angle, close-up, crazy, moving, and ravishing. It only makes sense that now he's showing us whole other worlds, which may be inside us, outside us or both at once. Art's dream, I believe, is to do just this: stand us on our heads, speak directly to our heart – and never cease to surprise.

PICO IYER · NARA, JAPAN · DECEMBER 2022

◀ THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE HOMAGE TO *LE PRINCIPE DU PLAISIR* (1937)



## A CUT AND PASTE STORY

EVER SINCE my very first album cover design for *Crosswinds* by jazz-fusion drummer Billy Cobham almost 50 years ago, collages and photomontages have remained an integral part of both my personal and commercial creative endeavours. What follows is a brief account of their evolution.

### PHOTO TRANSFER DRAWINGS

My earliest photomontages emerged from a series of experiments with different materials and techniques while I was a student at the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles. “Photo-transfer” simply means putting the chosen magazine images face down on an absorbent surface, usually watercolour paper, and then rubbing turpentine on the back of the page to loosen the binder from the printing-ink pigment. The chosen areas are then scratched energetically with a pencil or a hard pointy object until the required images are transferred on to the drawings, which often already have a background of watercolour washes. Oil or water-based colour pencils are used to complete the compositions. It was one of my favourite techniques in school as the images have a strangely immediate feel, and it was also the quickest way to create them for assignments due the next day. After I moved to New York I continued using this technique commercially for some magazine illustration commissions.

### ALBUM COVERS

In 1974 I was a 20-year-old art director/designer at Atlantic Records in New York City when I designed my first album cover, *Crosswinds* by jazz-fusion drummer Billy Cobham, and it was a photomontage. Apart from being a great drummer, Billy saw himself as a “photographer” and wanted one of his own creations on the cover. Well, let’s just say again that he’s certainly a great drummer ...

A potentially embarrassing situation was saved by the album’s title, while a holiday snap of a storm brewing over a beach in the Caribbean gave me the idea





of flipping the sky. But it was the little old man (whose name I sadly cannot recall, but might have been Jerry or Gary) in a darkened room at Rainbow Graphics on Madison Avenue in NYC, working meticulously with a tiny sable brush, bleach and dyes on a composited dye-transfer print, who turned the potential nightmare into a dream image.

In the years that followed Jerry or Gary was responsible for retouching almost all of my photomontage album covers. These included “Progressive-Rock” band Nektar’s *Magic Is a Child* on Polygram Records in 1977 – featuring actress Brooke Shields at age 12 on the cover – followed by Brazilian composer Deodato’s *Knights of Fantasy* for Warner Bros Records in 1979, and then many others. By contrast, the cover for George Harrison’s *Somewhere in England* had almost no retouching as it was composited in the darkroom with multiple exposures and four hands “dodging and burning” together at once. The cover remained unpublished during George’s lifetime as Dark Horse Records’ distributor, Warner Bros Records, decided against releasing the album with a black and white cover after the assassination of John Lennon on 8 December 1980.

#### **X-ACTO CUT-AND-PASTE COLLAGES**

While as art director of Album Graphics Inc. in NYC around 1977, I did a series of cut and paste collages of images from magazines and books with an X-Acto knife, rubber cement and spray adhesive. They were essentially exercises in composition and an experiment in the juxtaposition of images with conflicting content.

#### **OIL AND PASTEL PHOTO PAINTINGS**

Soon after returning to Hong Kong in 1980 I was introduced to Mural Paper, a black and white photo paper that came in six-foot rolls, had the texture and absorbency of a fine-grain watercolour paper and that took well to most colour mediums. Later on I discovered that sets of tiny tubes of old fashioned Photo-Oil

paints – popular since the 1840s for hand-colouring photographs – were still available in the China Products store’s camera department. This led to a series where cut and paste collages were copied on to large format negatives and printed on mural paper, with colours applied on top in photo-oils, pastels and Prisma colour pencils afterwards.

#### **SURGICAL BLADE COLLAGES**

Quite by accident – the elevator doors opened on the wrong floor – I discovered a shop that sold medical equipment in the same building as the restaurant where my family liked to go for dim sum. With the discovery of surgical blades attached to different articulated handles, I was able to make more fluid and precise cuts on a far greater range of printed images that allowed me to create more complex, or some might say over-complicated, compositions.

#### **4R PRINTS AND SX70 COLLAGES**

It was impossible to escape the influence of David Hockney’s adventures into photography, and so I quite shamelessly imitated his techniques in a couple of series of works in 1987.

#### **COMPUTER GRAPHIC IMAGING**

George Lam’s 1984 album *Fever in Love* for WEA Records in Hong Kong marked my return to album cover design. It was the early days of computer-graphic imaging, and in order to achieve what I needed for the poster of his concert series of the same name I had to travel to Japan, where one of only two machines dedicated to that level of high-resolution photo compositing in the Asia-Pacific region was located – the other was in Sydney, Australia. The same computing power that then resided within a machine occupying a rather large room in an industrial building on the outskirts of Tokyo is now routinely available in most professional laptops.

BASIL PAO · CHEUNG CHAU · MARCH 2023





▲ INSPIRE · CHARTERHOUSE ASIA · HONG KONG (2020)  
► ORIGINAL PRESENTATION SKETCH FOR "STUDY" · CHARTERHOUSE ASIA · HONG KONG







## CARNIVAL OF DREAMS

FOR Aboriginal Australians “the Dreaming” is the essence of their existence. It opens the gateway to “Dreamtime,” when “Spirit Ancestors” created their universe and the life within it while they mapped “Songlines” (dreaming tracks) to connect the sacred sites that guided travellers across their country. It explains through legends the workings of nature and humanity’s obligations to the organisms and spirits of the land, and the people’s responsibilities toward each other. This belief system that structured and shaped the lives of the Aboriginal people has been passed down through stories, art, songs, and ceremonies for an estimated 50,000 years, a conjecture that gives a whole new resonance to the old cliché “life is but a dream.”

Since the third millennium BCE most of the ancient Eurasian civilizations, from the Babylonians, Sumerians and Egyptians to the Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, Christians and Muslims, shared a similar belief that dreams were like “tweets” and “emails” from their respective gods and demons as they guided or judged mortals, offering “thumbs up” and “thumbs down” messages of revelations and threats in the eternal struggle between hope and fear. Some bold souls, however, struggled with the good and evil angels on their shoulders by venturing that “dreams are havens where we sin without consequences.”

In Asia, the Hindu and Chinese cultures leaned toward the concepts of the “Soul” and a “Land of Dreams” populated with fairies and monsters, undoubtedly originating from the minds of early humans who interpreted their sleeping experiences as out-of-body experiences when a secret part of them escaped into a separate reality. The Tibetans and Mayans, for example, believe our spirits travel when we dream and that our souls “face-time” other distant dreamers in the eternal realm.

Besides using dreams as tools for the expansion of consciousness and to gain self-control over body and mind as a part of the path toward enlightenment,



Buddhists have a novel notion that dreams are like “Zoom” conferences. Prince Siddhartha’s family, for example, were all said to have had the same dream the night he escaped from the palace to begin his search for Enlightenment. In the Taoist tradition Zhuangzi famously dreamed he was a butterfly, but when he awoke began to wonder if he was a butterfly dreaming of being a man.

Differences of expression and imagery aside, most cultures agree dreams serve as bridges to the supernatural that carry us to the hidden, intangible part of ourselves where we can be made whole as our Yin unites with the Yang. Or in Shakespeare’s words, “we are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.”

Shamans and priests across multiple cultures have throughout the ages used dream interpretation to understand the past and predict the future. Norse sorceresses tried to shape the outcome of often perilous voyages with rituals based upon Viking dreams, while Native American Dream-walkers ensured the survival of the tribe in the depths of winter by pinpointing locations for game through their collective dreams. In classical Greece’s temples of Asclepius at Epidaurus priests prescribed specific therapies for patients based on their dreams from their night spent in the *adyton*, the most sacred part of the temple, helping lay the foundations of modern medicine.

But it wasn’t until 1899, when Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams* with his theories of the twin process of “wish fulfillment” and the suppression of those desires, that dream interpretation entered the “scientific” mainstream and generations became inspired to explore the unconscious through their analysis. Carl Jung, Freud’s friend and acolyte, believed “the dream is a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the soul, opening into that cosmic night which was psyche long before there was any ego-consciousness . . . Dreams are the facts from which we must proceed.”

The Surrealist André Breton went a step further. In his 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto* he highlighted the importance of the dream as a reservoir of Surrealist inspiration and declared that dreams are “beyond good and evil . . . Omnipotent in a world in which neither morality nor reason obtain. Where anything is possible.”

Perhaps David Mitchell said it best in *Number9Dream*: “Dreams are shores where the ocean of spirit meets the land of matter. Dreams are beaches where the yet-to-be, the once-were, the will-never-be may walk awhile with the still-are.”

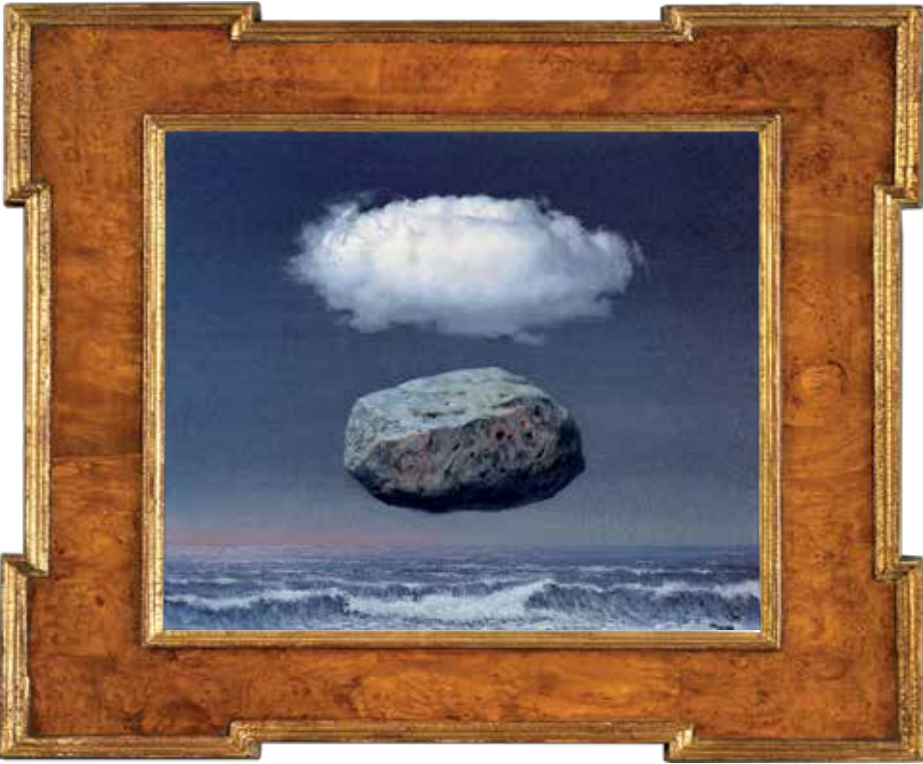
This series of photomontages, which began as my homage to the Surrealist painter René Magritte, have evolved over the years from what started out as photographic reinterpretations of his paintings, into fantasy dreamscapes that had flitted across my inner eye and somehow branded themselves into my memory.

Looking back, it has been a mind-twisting rollercoaster ride from the Age of Aquarius’s consciousness-expanding substances to the Digital Age of zeros and ones when one can receive images in the comfort of home from a distant galaxy 220 million light years away via man-made machines.\* And as we drift headlong into the *Matrix* world where “Androids Dream of Electric Sheep,” our children face the danger of becoming prisoners inside their 3D goggles in a metaverse where AI constantly monitors our thoughts and QR codes dictate and track our basic daily activities.

Yet we must try to survive within this biosphere, despite the remorseless efforts of technology-induced deceptions and absurdities to usurp common sense and decency. And while we watch in confusion as our lives turn into one continuous lucid dream and “reality” becomes more surreal with each passing day, it is perhaps high time for us to celebrate the secret wishes and desires of our collective unconscious with a Carnival of Dreams.

\*The Hubble and James Webb telescopes.





CLEAR IDEAS  
HOMAGE TO *LES IDEES CLAIRES* (1958)





## ON THE STEPPES OF DREAMS

### A TRIBUTE TO "GILLIAMESQUE"

FROM the first time I saw *Monty Python's Flying Circus* as a 15-year-old schoolboy in the ancient English city of Bath, the *Meaning of my Life* was changed forever, although I didn't really understand why the show was making me laugh at the time. It was many years later when I realised that a cultural Rubicon had been crossed, and the Great Wall of centuries-old presumed wisdom had been breached. And within the rubble of an untutored mind, the will to question traditions, rules and authority had been implanted. Most significantly, it had introduced a Hong Kong Chinese boy to "a sense of humour"\* and showed me the importance to laugh every day and to *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*.

But it was Terry Gilliam's animation sequences that struck me like Thor's hammer. His surrealistic collages, combining classical and mundane imagery in a magical juxtaposition of conflicting elements, always moving in unexpected directions, were so exciting and full of surprises that they profoundly changed the way I perceived the world around me. If the sketches in the show had lifted the veil covering my brain, it was Terry's "cartoons" and subsequent films like *Brazil* that opened my eyes to the fantastic world hidden behind the blindfold.

The "Gilliamesque" had unlocked the power of my imagination, and the desire to dream.

\*The Chinese language had no word for "humour" until 1933, when writer Lin Yu-tang coined the word "you-mo" in a transliteration.





◀ GUAN YIN IN DELHI

▲ DO MONKS DREAM OF INVISIBLE SHEEP?



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C R E D I T S

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COMPUTER-GRAPHIC IMAGING BY ESTHER JACOBS  
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STUDIO 8 EDITIONS CHAIRMAN: TIM HUXLEY  
COLOUR REPRODUCTIONS: BASIL PAO PHOTOGRAPHY  
  
THIS PUBLICATION HAS BEEN GENEROUSLY SUPPORTED BY  
THE Y. K. PAO PUBLICATIONS FUND  
AND  
EDKO COMMUNICATIONS LTD.

C O P Y R I G H T S

A STUDIO 8 EDITIONS PRODUCTION  
© 2023 STUDIO 8 EDITIONS  
PUBLISHED BY HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS  
© 2023 HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS  
THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG, POK FU LAM ROAD, HONG KONG  
<https://hkupress.hku.hk>

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ISBN 978-988-8805-74-7 (HARDBACK)

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BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA  
A CATALOGUE RECORD FOR THIS BOOK IS AVAILABLE FROM THE BRITISH LIBRARY  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PRINTED AND BOUND BY ASIA ONE PRINTING LIMITED, HONG KONG, CHINA





## BIOGRAPHY

BASIL PAO began his photographic career in 1980 upon his return to Hong Kong after ten years in the United States, where he was art director for Atlantic Records and Album Graphics Inc. in New York, and Warner Brothers Records in Los Angeles. He first worked with Michael Palin when he designed the book, album and poster for the Monty Python film *Life of Brian*. They have since collaborated on 11 illustrated books based on the BBC travel series *Pole to Pole*, *Full Circle*, *Hemingway Adventure*, *Sahara*, *Himalaya*, *New Europe* and *Brazil*. He is the author of *Hands*, *China Revealed*, *Yi'Jing-Book of Changes*, *Shan Shui-Mountain-Water*, *The Universal Scream* and *OM<sup>2</sup>-Ordinary Moments+*. His exhibition catalogues include *Travels with Michael Palin* for his exhibitions at the Fox Talbot Museum and the Royal Geographical Society in London and *Around the World in 8000 Days* at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum. His corporate limited editions include *A Tale of Two Ventures* for Wah Kwong Maritime Transport; *AMAN*, *Bhutan* and *AMAN<sup>2</sup>* for Amanresorts; *OM-Ordinary Moments*, *CMYK-China* and *Blazing Shadows-A World of Black & Light* for Printer Trento. Basil's travel essays and other assignments, including his Special Stills photography for Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* and *Little Buddha*, Terry Jones' *Erik the Viking*, Terry Gilliam's *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* and other feature films, have appeared in publications and exhibitions all around the world.

► ROAD TO CHOMOLUNGMA

