

TOM KREISLER - A report from the trip to South America
and Mexico

The journey started when we left Auckland at 8.00 pm on January 6 1988 (arriving in Buenos Aires twelve hours later but at 4.00 pm of the same day!), and finished on our arrival back in New Plymouth on 20th of May.

We travelled more than 14000 miles in South America. As I said, our first port of call was Buenos Aires. I had been born there, had left to come to New Zealand when I was thirteen, and had not been back for 37 years! During that time I had been to Mexico on two occasions. The first time, but only briefly, when I was twenty-one. The second visit took place almost twenty years later when I was there for two years as an art teacher at an international school. These two trips and brief contacts with spanish speakers had kept my spanish in reasonably good nick. My spanish, my mexican experiences, memories of my early childhood, were some of the factors that attracted me back to the South American environment in order to reassess it in terms of my art, myself as a teacher, and possibly myself as a person.

The attraction of Mexico for me even all those years ago had been in part from experiencing the incredible richness represented in the cultural intermixture and diversity of indigenous cultures there. Growth in literacy, and an ever broadening outlook of the world, had in many cases, and contrary to a great deal of popular belief, not necessarily been detrimental to the cultures, but had in many respects strengthened them. Contrary to many examples in the past of colonial and religious exploitation there were now many agencies at work to preserve ideologies to make them fiercely conscious of the importance of remaining identifiable by their differences and traditions. Mexico was uniquely mexican and it owed this not just to its landscapes and climates and resources but its people and how they had used this in relation to themselves and their own and other social groups and had become identifiable cultures as a result.

Mexico had about 17 million people at the time of Cortes' arrival with 500 men in 1512. But by comparison with Pizarro, his South American counterpart, Cortes was a man of much more penetrating intelligence in cultural matters. The centre of Aztec power was Tenochtitlan, a remarkable futuristic city in many ways more advanced than the best in Europe. The destruction of it (Mexico city being built over the top) was caused by one of his generals going on a rampage because of a failure of nerve during one of Cortes' absences. But even now after all this time the same basic forces and energy still exist.

In South America the picture however it quite different. One can never blame Pizarro enough for what he did to the Inca Empire. The legacy of his destruction is felt there even now. The destruction of it had a lasting reverberating effect on the self-worth of the indian nations.

To be an indian in South America, in contrast to Mexico, represents as being of little value as a person. There is of course a worldwide movement afoot nowadays, to change this attitude. Education as mentioned before reverses the process, but generally the pace of change in this is too painfully slow, and also often prone to many variations caused by unscrupulous vagaries from political, commercial and even religious sources.

In this atmosphere Art as such is as unstable as anything else and of a political nature and often therefore of little lasting value. Those who practise it are either the privileged or the desperate. But I do ask myself 'is this not the case everywhere else in the western world.' Well I suppose it is and it isn't. As the world itself is becoming destabilised more of this work is being done and gaining currency and being shown in the leading galleries of the world.

In closed or remote communities in South America village markets or sidewalks are the mainstay from where craftsfolk sell their work. Stylistically the products are traditional, and generally they have a utilitarian content. In larger more cosmopolitan centres the work displayed is more varied and fanciful; the footpath stall gives way to craft centres and complexes and galleries run by the generally well educated members of the affluent class. When not serving, the shopkeepers are quite often to be seen drinking coffee in a corner or reading a book sometimes with music playing from a tape. The artists and craftspeople who produce the work for such places, work in studio workshops and not infrequently employ other people on a cottage basis. Its also not uncommon for these artists to hold classes and workshops and even tutor at summer schools and in-residence programmes. Another place where arts etc are shown is in pleasant park settings etc, generally located in expensive residential areas and open on weekends.

From World War 1 Argentina with its agricultural exports had become a leading world economy. With its increasing wealth, opening up of new industries, discovery of extensive mineral reserves (petroleum self-sufficiency), resettlement programmes for displaced foreigners mostly from Europe, all this resulted in a climate of great national productivity. The arts were caught up in this wave. With all the money being generated and the proportionally high level of cultural interest and enthusiasm around, all types of sponsorship flourished. As a growing world exporter the country had to export not only a product but an image as well, and this also applied to its art. If it could import Opera from overseas then it could similarly export the best of its art to the rest of the world. This marked not a renaissance but the birth of a cultural tradition.

Since the 1950s things however have changed. The money which at one point was being channelled towards common and reasonably idealistic goals, started to find its way into personal wardrobes and foreign bank accounts. As corruption grew at all levels so did the forces of indignation particularly in the form of ideologically motivated guerrilla movements. The main breeding ground for these were the universities.

This conflict, which is well documented, took place in one form or another in most Latin American countries in the 60s and 70s, led to localised wars. Hostages were taken and in some cases destroyed. Some simply escaped. But the long term effects of this were devastating. The result of the personal, cultural, and philosophical insecurity was largely to destroy the self confidence of many of the people. The art styles that represent this period are ashen, labyrinthian, and shadowy. But in spite of this a knowledge of a greater hope still lies at the core of individual creation.

In these societies the value of art has never been in question.

Throughout South America the Artist has been honoured and allowed to exist with dignity sometimes against a background of incredible human abuse and spiritual and intellectual repression. Maybe this is so because the arts have been symbolically linked with the struggle for freedom and independence which historically marked the shaking off of the colonial yoke. Yet it is acknowledged that some forms of expression are more subversive through some mediums than others. In some South American countries some of the most ill-fated artists have been the singers of songs. Music has a more direct way of reaching people than does a painting, and in these countries where there is still a high level of illiteracy the printed word has often to be interpreted through somebody else.

But painting does provide a strong visual counterpart to ideology. There is a powerful current of art that runs along the walls of streets in the form of social and political graffiti... and some of the best visual art in these countries is found on these walls. Its powerful, colourful and often highly sophisticated. The sophistication of the treatment of the imagery is an indication that painting in a sense is alive and well in these communities even if existing at a guerrilla warfare level. But as Picasso and most Modernists have pointed out : Art is subversive, and this is the double dilemma for the State. It is aware that to repress it will only give it a greater stamp of respectability. This art of the street serves a double function - it carries an ideological message; educationally it represents an art learning experience. The workshops I visited showed me that they are places where one learns techniques but the best expressed ideas in art are derived from life-learned experiences.

Main Museums, Institutes etc visited

ARGENTINA

Buenos Aires

Centro Cultural Ciudad de Buenos Aires

Diverse arts workshops etc. Attended discussion on Sculpture workshops. An exhibition of my work at present under discussion, possibly for 1990.

Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes; Museo de la Boca; Escuela Bellas Artes Manuel Belgrano; Tango halls; dealer galleries; artists' workshops.

Cordoba Museo Camin Cosquin; Universidad; Cathedral etc.

BOLIVIA

La Paz

Visit to Tihuanaco (famous pre-Inca site); involvement at La Diablada festival at Oruro. Visit to husband and wife studio: foremost Bolivian artists, both of them. He the first living South American painter to hold a one man show in Russia at the Hermitage Museum. She is an internationally known potter and weaver.

PERU

Overland trip from La Paz to Cuzoo, good part of the journey along Lake Titicaca with various stops and transport changes along the way. Overnight stay at Copacabana and a journey across the lake to the sacred Inca Island of the Sun and Moon.

Cuzoo Capital of Inca Empire. Visits to the many remarkable churches and the main cathedral. Also the various museums but most importantly the Archaeological sites of Ollantaitambo, Urubamba, Chincheros, Pisac and Machu-Picchu.

Lima Museum of Gold, Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, the various churches etc. Invitation to opening of exhibition of contemporary Brazilian artist.

BRASIL

Salvador

Afro-Brasilian Museum most disappointing. Clearly the african influence a poor substitute for the original. The lack of vitality in the african element probably due to the relocation of the cultures at the time and in a state of slavery: CANDOMBLE, the african derived magico-religious ceremonies, pretty dull affairs and often poorly represented in rather hackneyed form and cheap tourist imitations. Brasil is so poor, so self-abused nowadays the once exotic icing has all but disappeared.

Manaos

Interesting, celebrated Opera House which has to be repainted every seven years because of the climate. Great street graffiti (as in Salvador, also Buenos Aires). Catastrophic evidence of the effect of the opening of the Amazon rain forest. Scarred live wild animals for sale.

Cuiaba

Five days spent with Gloria and Alfredo Martins. Shes an internationally acclaimed film maker best known for socio-documentary dramas and generally recording traditional life styles and the effects of change on different groups of people, small tribal subgroups etc in that area which is known as the Pantanal region.

Rio

Unbelievable natural beauty, even 2 weeks after devastation of floods - the totally abused poor totally impervious or cynical of the scenery which attracts the wealthy. The traditional 'alegria' (happiness joyfulness of spirit) of Brasil is the reserve of the rich!

MEXICO

Probably a highlight. Totally amazed by the feeling of energy that seems to come out from out of the ground, like an uncontainable inspiring force even in the presence of the ruins of the devastating earthquake of three years ago. This flowering particularly inspiring through the discovery and excavation of the most magnificent archaeological area right inside the heart of the city. A museum to rival the famous museum of Anthropology has been built to house the treasures. Re-established many contacts and friendships including with Helen Escobedo well known sculptor and former director of the Museum of Modern Art.

QANTAS AIRWAYS
REF JP601D

** ITINERARY **
FOR
KREISLER TMR
KREISLER LMRS

24 DECEMBER 1987
2.56 PM

DEPART AUCKLAND WED 6 JAN 88 8.50 AM
ARRIVE BUENOS AIRES/EZE WED 6 JAN 88 4.45 PM
A L ARGENTINAS AR 881 Y CLASS CONFIRMED

DEPART BUENOS AIRES/AEP SAT 23 JAN 88 12.15 PM
ARRIVE CORDOBA SAT 23 JAN 88 1.05 PM
A L ARGENTINAS AR 502 Y CLASS CONFIRMED

; >

DEPART CORDOBA THU 28 JAN 88 4.55 PM
ARRIVE MENDOZA THU 28 JAN 88 5.55 PM
A L ARGENTINAS AR 816 Y CLASS CONFIRMED

DEPART MENDOZA SAT 30 JAN 88 6.15 PM
ARRIVE SAN CARLOS DE BAR SAT 30 JAN 88 7.40 PM
A L ARGENTINAS AR 810 Y CLASS CONFIRMED

DEPART SAN CARLOS DE BAR SUN 7 FEB 88 1.20 PM
ARRIVE MAR DEL PLATA SUN 7 FEB 88 3.50 PM
A L ARGENTINAS AR 665 Y CLASS CONFIRMED

DEPART MAR DEL PLATA TUE 9 FEB 88 12.15 PM
; >

ARRIVE BUENOS AIRES/AEP TUE 9 FEB 88 1.05 PM
A L ARGENTINAS AR 621 Y CLASS CONFIRMED

DEPART BUENOS AIRES/AEP SAT 13 FEB 88 6.05 AM
ARRIVE LA PAZ SAT 13 FEB 88 9.10 AM
A L ARGENTINAS AR 282 Y CLASS CONFIRMED

DEPART LA PAZ WED 17 FEB 88 9.00 AM
ARRIVE CUSCO WED 17 FEB 88 8.50 AM
LLOYD AERO BOLIVI LB 930 Y CLASS CONFIRMED

DEPART CUSCO MON 22 FEB 88 10.00 AM
ARRIVE LIMA MON 22 FEB 88 11.00 AM
; >

FAUCETT CF 218 Y CLASS CONFIRMED

DEPART LIMA FRI 26 FEB 88 2.00 AM
ARRIVE BUENOS AIRES/EZE FRI 26 FEB 88 8.05 AM
A L ARGENTINAS AR 385 Y CLASS CONFIRMED

DEPART BUENOS AIRES/AEP SUN 28 FEB 88 8.55 AM
ARRIVE IGUAZU SUN 28 FEB 88 10.40 AM
A L ARGENTINAS AR 754 Y CLASS CONFIRMED

OWN ARRANGEMENTS

DEPART IGUASSU FALLS TUE 1 MAR 88 6.15 AM
; >

ARRIVE SAO PAULO/GUARULHOS	TUE 1 MAR 88	8.40 AM
VARIG	RG 165 S CLASS	CONFIRMED
DEPART SAO PAULO/GUARULHOS	TUE 1 MAR 88	9.10 AM
ARRIVE SALVADOR	TUE 1 MAR 88	1.15 PM
VARIG	RG 370 S CLASS	CONFIRMED
DEPART SALVADOR	MON 7 MAR 88	5.05 PM
ARRIVE MANAUS	T	
CRUZEIRO DO SUL	SC 485 S CLASS	CONFIRMED
DEPART RIO DE JANEIRO/GIG	SUN 13 MAR 88	7.50 PM
DEPART NEW YORK/NEWARK	MON 25 APR 88	7.25 AM
ARRIVE HOUSTON/IAH	MON 25 APR 88	9.55 AM
CONTINENTAL A L	CO 647 Y CLASS	CONFIRMED
DEPART HOUSTON/IAH	MON 25 APR 88	10.35 AM
ARRIVE CANCUN	MON 25 APR 88	12.44 PM
CONTINENTAL A L	CO 440 Y CLASS	CONFIRMED
DEPART CANCUN	MON 25 APR 88	4.10 PM
ARRIVE MERIDA	MON 25 APR 88	4.55 PM

; >

AERO MEXICO	AM 495 Y CLASS	CONFIRMED
DEPART MERIDA	FRI 6 MAY 88	1.40 PM
ARRIVE MEXICO CITY	FRI 6 MAY 88	3.20 PM
AERO MEXICO	AM 427 Y CLASS	CONFIRMED
DEPART MEXICO CITY	FRI 6 MAY 88	4.30 PM
ARRIVE LOS ANGELES	FRI 6 MAY 88	6.18 PM
DELTA AIRLINES	DL 1743 Y CLASS	CONFIRMED
DEPART LOS ANGELES	MON 9 MAY 88	8.00 PM
ARRIVE AUCKLAND	MON 9 MAY 88	6.50 AM
CONTINENTAL A L	CO 1 Y CLASS	CONFIRMED

; >