Locale

Raymond Foye

The local is not a place but a place in a given man—what part of it he has been compelled or else brought by love to give witness to in his own mind. And that is THE *form, that is, the whole thing, as whole as it can get.*

I think we will be fools to be embarrassed by it. We know the other neatness possible, the way of the neat pattern, and the dodging which it must call for. Grace has no part in that. At some point reached by us, sooner or later, there is no longer much else but ourselves, in the place given us. To make that present, and actual for other men, is not an embarrassment, but love.

*Robert Creeley**

In the early 1970s Francesco Clemente began a series of migrations between Italy, India, and New York that continues to this day. Indeed, the itinerant nature of his career is one of its chief characteristics. He has traced a path between three cities—Rome, Madras, New York—each a fulcrum for interrelated yet distinct activities shaped by the individual character, history, and geography of the locale. Subjects, materials, and working methods are, for Clemente, inextricably bound to a simple fact: geography. These specifics of place have always been a determining factor for Clemente's art, which, for all of its introspection and mystical intimations, remains triumphantly and essentially of this world.

Ezra Pound noted that all verse consists of a constant and a variable. In Clemente's work the constant is the human body—the corporeal envelope that we must of necessity inhabit. The variable, then, is all that is extrinsic to this fragile human form. The boundary where these two factors meet—the arena where Clemente's work takes place—determines what one might call *identity*. In a larger sense Clemente's search for identity represents a search for unity, that hoped-for ideal of every philosopher from ancient times to the present. And yet the paradox of this search is that every aspect of our identity is composed of such innumerable elements that the very asking of the question is a plunge into a myriad of forms and meanings as complex as life itself. This is a challenge that Clemente has chosen to meet head on. To find a unity amongst diversity has been his insistent impulse. The lovely evidence of this search has comprised a cosmogony of forms and images so complex and lastingly resonant as to place Clemente alone amongst his contemporaries.

* Robert Creeley, "A Note on the Local," *First Person*, no. 1 (1961); reprinted in Robert Creeley, *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley, 1989), p. 479.

Madras

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"What unifies is what you don't know," Clemente once said. "I am always more interested in what I don't know than what I know."[1] Clemente's comment bears an uncanny echoing of the opening lines of the *Kena Upanishads:* "It is not understood by those who understand it; it is understood by those who do not understand it."[2] It is an instinctive anathema to anyone trained in the ways of Western logic to consider wisdom as the domain of the incognizant. But it is precisely in the state of unknowing, outside of intellect and the five senses, that we apprehend the ultimate reality that is the aim of enlightenment. This is a fundamental truth of the mystical tradition, a tradition of which Clemente's work partakes and from which it in part derives. It is dangerous if not impossible to demark the differences between the "East" and the "West," and Clemente has often stated that such artificially contrived terms have no meaning for him. But if such a line can be drawn, surely it lies in the distinction between vision (West) and insight (East), with vision defined as the purely rational, outward gaze of the objective mind, seeking to know that which is perceived; and insight defined as the mind turned in upon itself, seeking to know that which is perceiving. If the physical fact of Clemente's work is determined by the common boundaries of the intrinsic and extrinsic worlds, the visual content of his work is suspended between the poles of vision and insight.

For an artist who spent the first twenty years of his life in the grip of Roman Catholicism, India became a link with the pagan past of southern Italy, a past that had been nearly obliterated by the church but that lingered on in myriad symbols and myths. "The gods who left us thousands of years ago in Naples are still in India, so it's like going home for me. In India, I can feel what it was like [in Italy] many years ago."[3] Clemente's observation is a striking one in that it conveys an entirely unexpected jolt of recognition, a firsthand discovery that ours is an Indo-European tradition. For Clemente the result was a living restoration of ideas and values that had previously existed only as historical notion.

Clemente's first trip to India was in 1973. India loomed large over the cultural landscape of the 1960s, when its music, art, and religions were simplistically popularized and often vulgarized. Nevertheless the culture and mystical traditions of India found fertile soil in the counterculture movement in the West, and Clemente's first visit was essentially in response to these circumstances. He had been influenced by a friend in Rome who had traveled in India and returned with stories that sparked his imagination. This same friend lent Clemente a book of discussions with a holy man in Delhi, R. P. Kaushik, a homeopathic doctor and former political militant. Like many Indians of his generation, Kaushik had been greatly influenced by the influx of young people from the West, and his teachings fused radical Western notions of politics and personal liberation with traditional aspects of Indian thought. His ideas presented Clemente with the hope of finding a way out of the closure of purely political thinking, into a more basic sense of personal integrity and responsibility deriving from one's own experience. The attraction of these dialogues, combined with the artist's restlessness and boredom with the status quo in Rome (where he had moved from Naples in 1970), cemented his decision to leave Italy. "I wanted to be somewhere else," Clemente said flatly, years later, "and I thought that was as far as I could go and I had the surprise of my life. I mean, I just couldn't believe my eyes."[4]

Overwhelmed by the poverty and the bewildering array of people, customs, and religions in India, Clemente's romantic or sentimental ideas about that country quickly fell away. Roused from the spiritual lethargy of his life in Rome, he now found unfathomable India a challenge to everything he knew. Having lost all sense of time, place, or identity, and faced with this seemingly limitless diversity, Clemente eventually chose to embrace his disorientation: "I was really attracted to [India] . . . by the fact that I didn't understand it. It was my own incomprehension that was alluring."[5]

If what initially attracted Clemente to India was its dissimilarity to the West, what kept him intrigued was the correspondence between the two. The three months Clemente lived in

Figure 16. Plate from Francesco Clemente, *Undae clemente flamina pulsae* (Amsterdam: Art & Project, 1978)

India, in 1973, were largely spent in an ashram in Delhi, listening to dialogues between Kaushik and his four students, two Indians and two Europeans. It was during this first visit that Clemente discovered that the venerable tradition of oral transmission, valued in the days of the pre-Socratic philosophers but now lost to the West, remained very much alive in India. It was, in Clemente's words, "an oral tradition concerned with correct behavior, with the fact that knowledge is a proportion between what you are and what you know."[6] Clemente's role as a student was a passive one, as he later recalled: "At the time, I was very surprised by the whole situation that was going on there between this man and his four students. I didn't really know what to think of it, but I was extremely impressed, watching these things."[7]

During this first visit Clemente kept a notebook and made numerous small India ink drawings (p. 61). These sketches mark the beginning of a vast body of ideogrammatic images, symbols, and emblems that Clemente would accumulate throughout the 1970s, and that would serve as a repositorium of imagery for his work throughout the 1980s. The drawings represent a pure play of ideas, and were created and assembled without any concern for order or arrangement. They were, quite simply, an aggregation of visual elements persistent enough to force themselves onto paper. As a condensed, informal record of his visual thinking during these crucial years, these drawings underscore the notational (as opposed to representational) aspect of Clemente's art.

When Clemente returned to Rome after his first trip to India, the letdown he felt was enormous. "To come back and look at the dullness . . . the eyes were so lifeless,"[8] he recalled wistfully. Clemente resumed life in Rome, working now to integrate into his life and work the radically altered view that India had offered. The sheer diversity of life in India proved to be the most lasting impression that Clemente carried away following this visit. While the experience opened up an enormous range of expressive possibilities he had not known in Rome, it also introduced a set of perplexities that would consume him for the next decade. The cultural multiformity of India led Clemente to accept fragmentation and stylistic diversity in art, in contradistinction to the prevailing cultural hegemony of the West. By abandoning the traditional hierarchical ordering of experience, Clemente was seeking a more open form that was able to accommodate the influx of new factors brought to the fore in India: eros, the psychic imagination, the mutability of meaning, and the discontinuity of experience: "My overall strategy or view as an artist is to accept fragmentation, and to see what comes of it—if anything. . . . Technically, this means I do not arrange the mediums and images I work with in any hierarchy of value. One is as good as another for me. All the images have the same expressive weight, and I have no preferred medium. . . . I believe in the dignity of each of the different levels and parts of the self. I don't want to lose any of them. To me they each exist simultaneously, not hierarchically. . . . One is not better than another. I do not prefer one over another. So that to lose one is in a sense to lose all."[9] To attempt to reduce a work, idea, or emotion to its constituent parts and assign each a value is an impossibility, all the more so with respect to art. There is no correct order because there is no correct interpretation. The elements that constitute a work of art are wedded to their form, which is in turn wedded to the physical fact of its making. It is a complex, a whole made up of interrelated parts, each of which is a fundamental determinant in the meaning of the work.

In 1974 Clemente again headed East. For nearly a year he traveled throughout Afghanistan with his friend and fellow artist Alighiero Boetti, with an extended stay in Kabul, where Boetti operated a hostel and café. Boetti, who is twelve years Clemente's senior, was well established as a leading figure in the Arte Povera movement. At the time, the wide range of ideas and influences that Boetti utilized in his art had great appeal for Clemente: "The iconography of his work was very eclectic," he later recalled. "It really took from a lot of different things. The ideas behind it derived in large part from the French—Lacanian ideas of eccentricity, autonomy, criticism of politics. But the focus, the soul of this whole system,

was that you had to build your own territory. You have to build your own territory just for the fact that it has to have a reality of its own, that it exists apart from everything else."[10] Like Clemente, Boetti had left Rome in disgust with the narrowness of the art world and the strangle hold on aesthetic discourse held by critics and intellectuals. While in Afghanistan, Boetti employed local embroiderers to create a series of canvases using ambiguous and poetical word plays (see Figure 1). The trip was, in a sense, an unofficial apprenticeship for Clemente. Upon his return in 1975, Rome seemed even more confining, and the following year he left for India for a second time, with his future wife Alba.

The three months Clemente spent in India in 1976 were divided among Delhi, Benares, and Madras. For a month in Delhi he and Alba slept along the banks of the Ganges in an encampment of Tibetan monks. There he kept a notebook that he later used as a collaged element in the portfolio *Early Morning Exercises,* to accompany poems by the Boston writer John Wieners (p. 182). From Delhi they traveled to Benares, the seat of classical learning in India. Again, they lived along the banks of the Ganges, visiting temples and participating in the religious life of the holy city. After several weeks in Benares, the Clementes traveled to Madras, lured by the many temples and sacred cities of the Dravidian south.

Throughout the 1970s the tendency toward inclusiveness in Clemente's work is everywhere evident. If the overriding minimalist concern of the time was how much of the outside world could be *excluded* from art, Clemente's concern soon became how much of the outside world could be *included.* In his Italian years we see Clemente involved in the fundamental struggle to create a structure or form able to accommodate the tremendous variety of ideas and styles that possessed him. Ultimately, however, the borrowings would not do. But it was not until his third India visit, in 1977, that Clemente discovered this form, which turned out to be a kind of formlessness.

The adaptation of outside systems to art was a shared preoccupation among many artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As part of their art-making activities, artists were pursuing systems of thought and ways of organizing information as diverse as archaeology, mathematics, semiotics, and philosophical discourse. It would be a mistake to situate Clemente in opposition to such artists, since he clearly absorbed so much of their work. Yet inevitably he rejected such approaches, most frequently citing what he felt to be the poverty of the appearance of the works of art themselves, and especially their failure to embody the richness of the process behind their creation. Among such artists only Joseph Beuys remained an exemplary figure for him, in large part, as Clemente explained, through his ritualistic approach to art and his shamanistic willingness to regard himself as the instrument upon which the forces of inspiration played (see Figure 7).

Conceptualism, earthworks, video and performance art—so much of the art of the late 1960s and early 1970s was about expanding the formal vocabulary of art by utilizing other media and methods. The task Clemente was engaged in was not to expand the formal vocabulary; he was in fact seeking a return to traditional media and working methods. He was instead searching for a means to reanimate art with the philosophical, religious, and hermetic import that had existed in centuries past. He was looking forward with one eye and backward with the other. His contemporaries' loss of faith in painting as a viable expression was undeniable; the tremendous weight of the tradition alone seemed reason enough to abandon it. But for Clemente, who was schooled in the classics, this was precisely the allure: to engage the tradition, and to treat its historical canon of images and styles as one more element with which to work.

During this period, Clemente's travels in India confirmed his need to reinvest art with a sense of pleasure and fantasy, and to search out its roots in the psychic imagination. India brought about in him a reawakening of interest in the ritualistic origins of art, not the least

of which was the reaffirmation of sexuality (regarded by Tantrists as an intrinsically divine quality). Eros, once a prime motivator in Western art, has never lost its power in Indian art. It is rare in our day that a work of art can still shock, but Clemente's blatant expositions of sexuality regularly elicit strong reactions from viewing audiences. By aiming directly at society's taboos and exposing them, Clemente calls attention to our collective sexual anxieties. Yet the artist's intention is not to shock but to explore the erotic impulse impassively—to deny the possibility that one might be intimidated by one's own desires. From the Hindu standpoint, the correct attitude would be one of acceptance, followed by detachment.

During Clemente's return to India in 1977, he felt an even greater sense of despair toward his homeland than he did in 1973. Enormous disillusion and considerable persecution followed the rebellions of 1968, polarizing Italian society along political lines and splintering radical groups previously united. On a personal level, Clemente had reached a period of transition in his work, having fully rejected the narrow academicism of the Italian art scene, while still not knowing how to deal with the rush of ideas and images that flowed ceaselessly out of his life and experience. "In 1977 the degree of fermentation and bankruptcy of all the ideas and all the people I knew was so high . . . that I didn't really feel bound to anything anymore."[11] To this dilemma, India was to prove the way out.

The overwhelming variety of subjects and styles, visions and emotions, and techniques and materials that coexisted in Indian life and art helped Clemente to free himself from the narrow world of the Italian avant-garde. Yet ultimately his response to the energy and vitality of Indian art had not so much to do with a reaction against the austerity of Western minimalism and conceptualism as it did with the simple fact that Indian notions of aesthetics were more closely allied with his own. The cultural multiformity of India appealed to his natural eclecticism and freed him to pursue the stylistic diversity he had been seeking. The many years of dissolution Clemente experienced in Italy proved a direct pathway to his realization of the Hindu tenet that the breaking up or destruction of a thing is a necessary part of its renewal. For him, after having torn down all previous ideas and conventions he had been working with, India became the place of regeneration. "My work really came together in 1977 on this trip," he later recalled.[12]

Between February and May of 1977 the Clementes returned to Madras, dividing their time between the Connemara Hotel and the Theosophical Society. The profusion of drawings, watercolors, and pastels continued unabated, and many of these were included in a handmade catalogue, *Undae clemente flamina pulsae*, printed in Madras and issued the following year for an exhibition at Art & Project in Amsterdam (see Figure 16). The hesitant, tenuous quality that characterized many of Clemente's Indian drawings of the previous year was here replaced by a more forceful and openly playful quality; we see him now engaging the actuality of India. Also evident is a growing fascination with Indian popular culture, which would prove a constant source of inspiration in future years.

Clemente's love for the popular arts of India is part of a larger attraction to the notion of degenerated forms of the classical deistic tradition, both East and West. For any artist born and raised in Italy, the burden of a classical tradition stretching from antiquity to the Renaissance to the present is something one can seemingly neither afford to ignore nor risk to engage. If the tradition assumes museum status, then the artist is relegated to the position of curator and must be content with footnoting the past. Yet to engage such an immense cultural catalogue directly can prove equally oppressive. Thus for the artist it is a matter of constantly finding new use for outdated currency, and here the key is adaptability, of which Indians are masters. One must negotiate a thin line between the living and the dead, as Aldous Huxley once noted: "It isn't a matter of forgetting. What one has to learn is how to remember and yet be free of the past. How to be there with the dead and yet still be here, on the spot, with the living."[13] While this dilemma resulted in a kind of historical schizo-

phrenia or alienation in much of the West, Clemente found that the artisans he encountered in India shared a far more integrated relationship with their past, due in large part to the custom of handing down ideas and skills from one generation to the next. In this respect the Indian tradition of oral transmission of knowledge exists in contradistinction to the Western impulse to objectify knowledge, reducing it to the level of technique or materiality, and divorcing it from the function from which it derives.

Figure 17. Page from a Hindu comic book
India, c. 1980
Collection of Francesco and Alba Clemente, New York

While the rich historical traditions of classical Indian art provided a deep well of inspiration to Clemente, it was the popular arts of India that captured his painter's sense of fancy. These innumerable, common manifestations of Indian culture exist everywhere—advertising, movie placards, painted plaster statuettes of Hindu deities, postcards and souvenir books sold at temples and shrines, greeting cards depicting stars of soap operas or B-movies, comic books that retell the great epics or the lives of holy men—the list is endless (see Figures 17–19). Excessively vivid, cheap, and gaudy in appearance and quality, these contemporary artifacts have always held an extraordinary allure for Clemente. Inevitably, within a few days of his arrival in Madras, his studio is filled with such objects, which often function as a kind of mental backdrop for his work, in much the same way that the drone exists as a background constant in Indian music. These pop relics possess the same rhythmic design and purity of color as the fine arts from which they derive, but their creators are unconcerned with aesthetic considerations or theory. Rather these manifestations comprise a genuine urban folk art in a modernistic context: they are made by nonprofessionals and directed at the emotions. Full of luster and ornament, they are in many ways closer to what the classical arts of the frieze, fresco, or miniature would have looked like when first created. If art, as has been often said, is a way of imbuing the commonplace with a feeling of the sublime, then these popular creations might be said to be a way of treating the sublime with a sense of the commonplace. They represent not so much a deflation of the masterpiece, but a popular aspiration toward such an ideal. Responding to their honesty, energy, and veracity, Clemente is unwilling to accept the idea that the impulses behind classical Indian art—joy, sensuality, extravagance—are limited to past creations.

Figure 18. Cover of a Hindu comic book
India, c. 1980
Collection of Francesco and Alba Clemente, New York

The Clementes returned to Italy in 1977 for the birth of their first daughter, Chiara, but eight months later, in the spring of 1978, they were again in India, visiting Kashmir and Pelgam in the Himalayas, and passing the summer in Delhi. In September they again journeyed to Madras, staying on for ten months, first at the Theosophical Society and later in a rented house in a garden compound on the grounds adjoining the Krishnamurti Foundation.

Figure 19. Campaign poster for the former film star M. G. Ramachandran and the Two Leaf political party, Tamil Nadu, India, c. 1985

Madras is a city of three million people, sprawled across nine miles of gentle, winding seacoast on the Bay of Bengal. An ample harbor makes it a port of call for sea freighters, and the two major railway lines of southern India share a vast, cavernous terminal there. It is a relatively recent city, founded in 1639 as an English trading post, and later briefly held by the Portuguese and French. Madras is the capital of India's southernmost state, Tamil Nadu, and is a chief commercial city known for its glass, cement, and iron works, its cotton mills, and acres of flower plantations for the thriving trade in perfumes and essential oils. The major spoken language is Tamil, an ancient classical tongue that has survived virtually unchanged for twenty-five hundred years. Its native inhabitants are Dravidians, a purely linguistic term that describes the many peoples who once extended their domain across the entire subcontinent.

If the physical charms of Madras are gentle, the climatic extremes are not. Temperatures regularly range between 100 and 120 degrees Fahrenheit from early spring to late summer, and violent monsoons lasting six to eight weeks inundate the city twice yearly. It is during the palpable boredom of these stretches of heat and rain that Clemente works best, on the floors or verandas of rented houses or hotel rooms, or in a tiny backroom studio he keeps at

Figure 20. C. T. Nachiappan and Francesco Clemente, Ramana Maharshi ashram, Tiruvannamalai, India, 1984

Figure 21. Postcard of Hanuman, the Hindu monkey god, Madras, 1985

Figure 22. Francesco Clemente
Hanuman Books logo, 1986
Ink on paper, 4 x 3" (10.2 x 7.6 cm)
Collection of Francesco and Alba Clemente, New York

the Kalakshetra Press, a letterpress printing house presided over by his close friend C. T. Nachiappan (see Figures 20–24).[14] Both the quality and quantity of his art often seem to be inextricably equated with the degree of physical discomfort that must be endured during its creation.

Clemente's reasons for settling in Madras were largely due to the fact that it was a city where space, supplies, labor, and shipping could all be secured with a reasonable amount of perseverance. His reasons for staying were its proximity to several dozen temples and holy sites scattered across the state of Tamil Nadu; its wealth of classical musicians and dancers and the yearly Carnatic music festival; and its long tradition of philosophical learning centered around the Theosophical Society and the neighboring Krishnamurti Foundation.

Founded in New York City in 1875 by Helena P. Blavatsky and Henry S. Olcott, Theosophists organize themselves under the motto "All Religions Are One."[15] Theosophy was an eclectic movement, drawing influence from prevailing schools of occultism of the time—mesmerism, Swedenborgianism, Freemasonry, and Rosicrucianism—with heavy borrowings from the newly rediscovered religions of Egypt and India. From its inception Theosophy was also a pioneering social force, with its members advocating fair treatment for the American Indians, equal rights for women, prison reform, higher wages for workers, the right of labor to organize, and a host of other liberal causes. Under the leadership of the Englishwoman Annie Besant, the Theosophical Society in Madras became a focal point of the Indian National Congress and the movement for independence from Britain, earning it a position of great affection in the hearts of the citizens of Madras.

The religious eclecticism of the Theosophists and their antipathy to the Catholic Church held great appeal for William Butler Yeats, George William Russell (Æ), MacGregor Mathers, and many other members of the Irish literary renaissance in the early 1900s. The professed desire of the Theosophists to merge science, art, and religion, and their hostility to the rampant materialism of the industrial age attracted such international artist-members as Piet Mondrian, Max Beckmann, Arnold Schoenberg, Marsden Hartley, and Wassily Kandinsky, with the latter attributing his theories of abstract painting in part to Theosophical notions. With a sizable endowment, an ample library, and the genteel inhabitants of its residence hall, the Theosophical Society in Madras maintains itself as a center for the pursuit of occult and esoteric knowledge. It provides an anachronistic setting, a retreat from the world into simpler times, when the hopes for a world religion were still an ideal to be striven for. As Clemente later recounted:

> *The Theosophical Society is like a modern painting in a modern museum, you know. Being there is like being in the waters in which people like Mondrian were fishing. There is again this hope of finding a universal language of human experience which everyone could use all over the earth. The result of the Theosophical Society has been the thought of Krishnamurti, who resembles the American Expressionist painters in the sense that he said one must give up all these symbols, that they all belong to talk, and talk is bound by time, and freedom and unity are not within the boundaries of time. The Society is a place where you can still breathe the spirit of the 20's and the hopes of the 20's—and at the same time you can understand that spirit gave rise to something like American Expressionism, people like Clyfford Still or Franz Kline.*[16]

Clemente's remarks regarding the pleasantly anachronistic ideals of the Theosophical Society are of interest for the connection he draws between the philosophy of Krishnamurti and the notions of the sublime as expressed by many of the American Abstract Expressionist painters.[17] A statement summarizing the credo of his contemporaries, chosen from the writings of Barnett Newman, could have easily been spoken by Krishnamurti himself: "We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or

Figure 23. Cover of *Sayings of the Holy Mother* (Madras: Weldun Press, 1983). Books such as these were the prototypes for the Hanuman Books, published by Francesco Clemente and Raymond Foye, and printed by C. T. Nachiappan

Figure 24. Cover of Eileen Myles, *Bread and Water* (Madras and New York: Hanuman Books, 1987)

Figure 25. Jiddu Krishnamurti, Theosophical Society, Madras, c. 1915

what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, or 'life,' we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history."[18]

Jiddu Krishnamurti (his first name was later dropped) was discovered swimming off the beach in Madras in 1909 by C. W. Leadbeater, second in command at the Theosophical Society at Adayar, a district of Madras (Figure 25). Recognizing an extraordinary aura surrounding the fourteen-year-old boy, Leadbeater came to believe that this was the World Teacher, or Bodhisattva, whose coming both Blavatsky and Besant had predicted. Krishnamurti was soon placed under the guardianship of the Theosophical Society for a ten-year period of education and spiritual training in India and England. Eventually failing his entrance examinations at Oxford, he stayed on in London and developed a fondness for the theater, Saville Row tailors, and British motor cars. He returned to Madras in 1921 to head a special order of the Society that had been created for him. In 1929, with his followers numbering well over ten thousand, Krishnamurti renounced his title of World Teacher. Speaking in the presence of Mrs. Besant and three thousand believers, he denounced his disciples as "false, hypocritical people following me," and the Theosophical Society as an "absurd . . . structure."[19] He condemned all religions, sects, and authority, and insisted upon the solitary path of the individual seeking enlightenment. Turning from the religious to the secular, Krishnamurti began a fifty-five-year journey as teacher and philosopher. While his thought embodied the essence of Buddhist, Hindu, and Western religious teachings, he insisted upon dispensing with the ritual trappings that these beliefs promote. (He once told Aldous Huxley that meditating on objects such as lotuses, lights, gods, and goddesses might lead to insanity.) Instead, Krishnamurti's meditations focused unrelentingly on the nature of time, perception, and awareness *in the present moment,* while his notion of beauty closely paralleled the Western concept of the sublime.

Although Clemente has noted that he "never got around" to attending a single meeting at the Theosophical Society in Madras (eventually prompting looks of gentle consternation from some members), he often made use of their vast library, and always enjoyed the company of other residents and visiting guests.[20] The Clementes occupied a large, single room on the third floor of the Leadbeater Chambers, a stately English colonial-style residence hall (Figure 26). Their austere room contained a bed with white mosquito netting, writing desk, chair, and ceiling fan, opening onto a huge veranda overlooking the Bay of Bengal. Clemente would spend hours on this veranda, practicing yoga, reading the teachings of Krishnamurti and Ramana Maharshi, and creating the eighty-five drawings that came to be known as "The Pondicherry Pastels" (pp. 65–68).

"The Pondicherry Pastels" take their name from the former French colonial port, just south of Madras, along the east coast of India. Although some of the works were created there, the majority were made in Madras. (The title was attached because some of the pastels were drawn on handmade paper from the Sri Aurobindo ashram in Auroville, just outside of Pondicherry [see Figure 27].) They are among Clemente's most unique and memorable works, due in part to their intimate scale and the innocent, artless clarity with which they are drawn. With obvious delight and in a typically involute manner, in this series Clemente delves into the many conventions governing depiction. The pastels are influenced by both classical Indian miniatures and contemporary popular imagery. Clemente explores the iconographic import of common objects (Figure 28), portraits, animals, and fauna in rich colors evocative of the subcontinent. The notion of the commonplace in both subject and materials is a central theme in the series, and one that the artist would return to throughout the next decade. In discussing a group of pastels created a decade later (and with striking thematic similarities), Clemente recalled his concerns of that time: "For me this series was a return to a certain language that I was fascinated with fantasizing about in my early work: about

clichés and commonplaces, assuming that a commonplace is taken literally as "a place in common" among people in a time when there is nothing in common among anybody. A place where many different meanings of people connect."[21]

Figure 26. Clemente on the veranda of the Leadbeater Chambers, Theosophical Society, Madras, 1979

This notion of the common is a persistent desire, a *longing,* that runs like a subtext through Clemente's work. While he is often thought of as an artist devoted to the arcane or occult aspects of culture, there is an equally persistent strain to his work that insists upon the elemental: that which is integral or essential to mankind and shared by all regardless of place, privilege, or social status. Indeed, it is the subtle play between the opposing impulses of familiarity and concealment that lends his work its special tension.

"The Pondicherry Pastels" represent an intermediate zone between the austerity of Clemente's Roman works and the extravagance of his so-called Neo-Expressionist period. It is significant that it was these works that Clemente chose to show at his first solo exhibition in New York City in 1980. It is difficult today to recapture that odd admixture of feelings one had as a viewer, confronted for the first time by these seemingly modest works, and being genuinely displaced by their *otherness,* both geographical and aesthetic. They did not refer to any other art, nor were they a reaction to such: they simply represented one of those rare achievements in art—a new place in which to exist.

Figure 27. Clemente dyeing handmade paper with local craftsmen, Madras, 1983

"The Pondicherry Pastels" are also significant in that they firmly establish a method that Clemente would settle into throughout his mature career—that of working in series. Clemente has always been interested in what one might call organizing principles: how and why objects or ideas are grouped according to subject, size, shape, number, or that most arbitrary of all methods, alphabetization, and in what ways these structures impart meaning to their individual elements. While much of his work is about fragmentation, there exists a larger theme of interdependence. The organization of disparate elements, whether governed by natural or imaginary laws, is a constant source of fascination for Clemente: the plant kingdom as ordered by Linnaeus, the heavens as charted by John Dee, or the human body as schematized by the Tantrists (see Figure 29). Such arrangements aspire to the divine pattern that recurs in the fragmentary images of the fallen world, fulfilled in the symbolic realm where ultimately everything symbolizes everything else. Working in series also opens up a sort of analogical chain reaction where image begets image and meaning generates meaning. The "theme and variation" aspect of serial work likewise allows the artist to explore the same idea in different contexts until the circuit is closed or the idea exhausted.

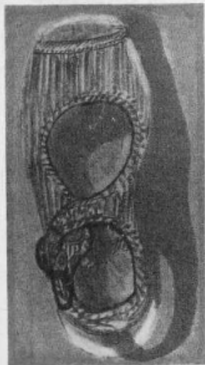

Figure 28. Francesco Clemente
Plate from *Happier Than Piero,* 1979
Pastel on paper, 6⅜ x 3⁹⁄₁₆" (16.2 x 9 cm)
Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London

In the 1980s Clemente established a pattern of making extended biyearly visits to India. Paradoxically, the country was by now becoming both increasingly familiar *and* exotic. For Clemente, India came to serve as a much-needed clearing, both physical and psychic, as well as a traveling back through time to an Ur culture, where the gods of Hinduism echo the chthonic origins of Greek religion. It was this quality of resonance, of one culture resounding within another, that took on increasing importance in his art.

The opportunity to work with craftspeople of all sorts has always been an important part of Clemente's working methodology. This is particularly so in India, where he regularly employs the skills of the young miniature painters of Jaipur and Orissa, the papermakers of Pondicherry, and the Tamil billboard painters who are responsible for the remarkable movie placards that adorn the major thoroughfares of Madras. In each case, Clemente is seeking to participate in the sensibility of another, in a kind of literal realization of Arthur Rimbaud's remark that "I is an Other."[22] By allowing his creativity to flow through another person, Clemente likewise gains a desired conceptual distance from himself and his work. It is a method of circumventing the habit of one's own impulses, and a way of introducing an element of chance or misunderstanding into the work, which has always appealed to Clemente's highly developed sense of ambivalence.

Figure 29. Francesco Clemente
Untitled, 1985
Oil on aluminum, mounted on honeycomb fiberglass; 67 x 41" (170.2 x 104.1 cm)
Private Collection, Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

Figure 30. Francesco Clemente
Untitled, 1985
Pastel on paper, 12³⁄₁₆ x 12³⁄₁₆" (31 x 31 cm)
Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

The subject of collaboration has often been problematical for viewers and critics of Clemente's work, for nothing is so antithetical or unsettling to our Western notion of the artist-as-hero than this willful relinquishing of control. But what is gained are the resources, knowledge, and skill that the craftspeople bring to bear upon the work, based upon their understanding of a centuries-old tradition. Clemente's pleasure in engaging such a tradition—and in casting it in contemporary terms with a total absence of sentimentality—has proven a continual source of delight in his work. When an artist effectively engages a tradition, as Ezra Pound noted, he not only partakes in the spirit of past knowledge, but also updates that tradition and lends it momentum. Thus time and again in Clemente's work we see this fascination with tradition and with new uses for archaic currency. Indians are masters of adaptability, and in India it often seems there is virtually no custom or idea from earlier times that does not have its present-day usage. For Clemente, it is the shape of the idea that matters—the form itself. The specific contents, whether words or images, are, throughout the ages, interchangeable. It is the forms alone that endure.

It was during his 1985 stay in Madras that Clemente created some of the most ambitious works on paper of his career, in a series that plays upon the theme of unity and duality. *The Four Corners* (p. 79) is a vast gouache on sheets of handmade Pondicherry paper, joined together with strips of cotton muslin. The image was executed with the assistance of Tamil sign painters, whose flat, bold style, complemented by gentle shadings, greatly appealed to Clemente. A vast hand rises from the sea against a starry sky, while man's fate, the "map" of the hand, is superimposed with a map of the world. In selecting the hand as subject for this and related gouaches (see Figure 34 and p. 63), Clemente has chosen the universal archetypal image that has served man from prehistoric times to the present. It is the image of man's destiny: the palm as a signpost to personal fate—or simply to the inevitable future. That the artist has enlarged the hand to such gigantic proportions induces a sense of awe, a sense of the dreadful power that is among the first intimations of religions both Eastern and Western: the need to stay on the right side of the Prime Mover.

The image of the hand occurs throughout Clemente's work (see Figure 30 and pp. 176–77); along with the face it is the most versatile and visible part of the body, and a source of near limitless expression. Anthropologists have often speculated that visual communication preceded verbal communication in the history of mankind. An elaborate system of hand gestures was developed, and it is from these that our written alphabet derives. In many ancient religions these gestures survive as ritual invocations. The traditional rabbinical blessing in Orthodox Judaism is performed by a member of the hereditary priestly caste with the fingers of one hand, and with the congregation's eyes scrupulously averted. Many gods of the Buddhist and Hindu pantheon are endowed with numerous hands, and in Hinduism each part of a devotee's hand is sacred, belonging to a god or goddess. A vast array of delicate, static hand poses are used in the Bharata Natyam, the classical dance of southern India, which Clemente so deeply admires. These poses are in turn derived from mudras, the ritual hand poses of the Buddhist and Hindu priests. Mudras are sacred gestures, symbolic of mantras, that are used in evoking deities or channeling cosmic powers. In this light, Clemente's Madras gouaches can be seen as contemporary mudras—visual formulas meant to evoke the elemental themes common to all religions, the wonder and awe of creation.

The companion works to the "hand" gouaches from 1985 include *Day and Night* (Figure 31), *Hermaphrodite, Boy, Girl,* and *Untitled* (Figure 32). If the "hand" gouaches can be said to depict unity, their counterparts can be said to represent binary divisions—day and night, male and female, silence and speech, physics and metaphysics, body and mind, north and south, east and west—each revolving around the other in mutual dependency. The figures are surrounded by the Theosophist's "etheric" envelope, where thoughts and impulses

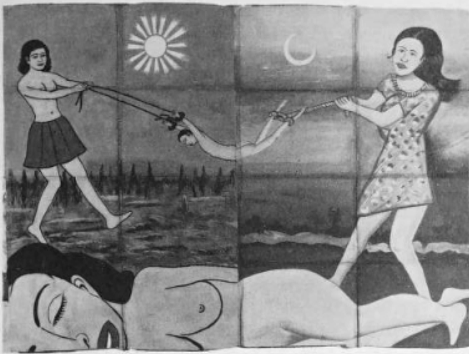

Figure 31. Francesco Clemente
Day and Night, 1985
Gouache on handmade paper, 94 x 130" (238.8 x 330.2 cm)
Private Collection

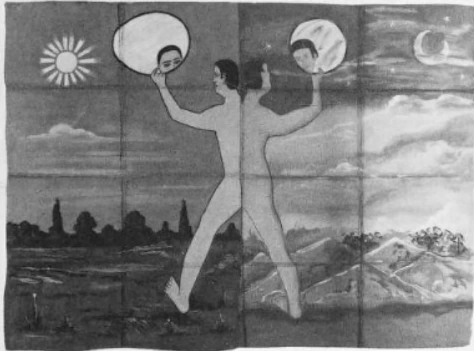

Figure 32. Francesco Clemente
Untitled, 1985
Gouache on handmade paper, 94 x 130" (238.8 x 330.2 cm)
Private Collection, Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

become, for a time, living creatures. If unity belongs to the gods, disunity is man's lot. "Oneself is like half a fragment," said the sage Yajnavalkya.[23] In each of these gouaches a figure is torn between the two aspects of his nature in a world of tugging opposites. By giving in to these illusions, seeking the gratification of his desires, man further descends into the torpor of his existence. To experience the unity of the divine realm is the ultimate goal in the practice of yoga, but as in Antonin Artaud's observation, which Clemente is fond of quoting, the four-thousand-year-old system of yoga is easily dissolved by the reality of a simple toothache.[24]

In time, India became the ideal working environment for Clemente, and the works he has created there are possessed with an animated glow quite unlike those made in Rome or New York. Looking back over the decade and a half that Clemente has worked and dwelled in India, one is struck by not merely the diversity of subjects, styles, and techniques that he has engaged, but also by the equally various states of mind that he has explored in his work. The true subject of Clemente's art is consciousness itself, and in this respect his works on paper comprise a graph of the mind in many forms—history, myth, imaginings, musings, poetry, symbols, meditations, notations, inscriptions, ideographs, hieroglyphs—each forming a fragment of a greater whole, which might be termed a belief. For Clemente drawing is not an afterthought or embellishment or appendage to painting but rather the seed of it. The drawings are actual road maps of the ideas contained within the paintings. The primacy of drawing in Clemente's work lies in the fact that it is not only the technical foundation of his art but the conceptual basis as well. The extraordinary body of drawings that Clemente produced between 1970 and 1980 (some of which precede the paintings by ten years) are the record of a personal struggle to fix an image, to give permanent form to a set of vastly shifting emotional states. In this attempt to find some equivalence, the coherence of the work is not reliant upon any external logic or system, but rather upon the nature and process of the artist's intuition, intellect, and temperament. The viewer is not in a position to explain or even to "understand," but simply to behold.

1. Donald Kuspit, "Clemente Explores Clemente," *Contemporanea*, vol. 2, no. 7 (October 1989), p. 40.
2. *Kena Upanishads*, II, 3; quoted in *Francesco Clemente: India* (Pasadena, 1986), n.p.
3. Interview with Rainer Crone and Georgia Marsh, May 1986; this quote is taken from the unedited transcripts that were later published in Crone and Marsh, *Francesco Clemente: An Interview with Francesco Clemente* (New York, 1987).
4. Crone and Marsh, *Clemente*, p. 18. A book-length series of interviews conducted at the artist's studio in New York in May of 1986, this is by far the best introduction to the artist's work in his own words.
5. Kuspit, "Clemente," p. 39.
6. Crone and Marsh, *Clemente*, p. 19.
7. Ibid., p. 22.
8. Ibid., p. 24.
9. Kuspit, "Clemente," p. 40.
10. Crone and Marsh, unpublished transcripts.
11. Crone and Marsh, *Clemente*, p. 26.
12. Crone and Marsh, unpublished transcripts.
13. Aldous Huxley, *The Devils of Loudun*, quoted in B. S. Gupta, *The Glassy Essence: A Study of E. M. Forster, L. H. Myers, and Aldous Huxley in Relation to Indian Thought* (Kurukshetra, India, 1976), p. 239.
14. Nachiappan, printer, book designer, scholar, and devout Hindu, is the owner and publisher of the press. His jovial nature and vast knowledge of Indian art, religion, philosophy, and literature has made him a close friend and traveling companion to the Clemente family when residing in South India. Nachiappan is the printer of Hanuman Books, a series of miniature volumes of poetry and prose published and edited by Clemente and Raymond Foye. Based in format on Hindu prayer books widely available in India, Hanuman Books measure 3 x 4 inches. Named after the Hindu monkey god Hanuman, the press is devoted to publishing the works of poets, writers, artists, and philosophers whose works are valued by Clemente and Foye (see Figures 21–24). The series at present contains 42 titles. The complete list of authors includes John Wieners, David Trinidad, Eileen Myles, Taylor Mead, Francis Picabia, Henri Michaux, Amy Gerstler, John Ashbery, Herbert Huncke, Manuel Rosenthal, René Daumal, Bob Flanagan, Willem de Kooning, Cookie Mueller, Sandro Penna, Vincent Katz, Alain Daniélou, Edwin Denby, Max Beckmann, Gary Indiana, Jean Genet, Allen Ginsberg, René Guénon, Gregory Corso, Elaine Equi, Ronald Firbank, Rene Ricard, David Hockney, St. Teresa, Simone Weil, Jack Smith, Beauregard Houston-Montgomery, Bob Dylan, Richard Hell, Henry Geldzahler, Robert Creeley, Dodie Bellamy, and Jack Kerouac.
15. For an excellent history of Theosophy, see Bruce F. Campbell's *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley, 1980).
16. Crone and Marsh, unpublished transcripts.
17. The connection between Krishnamurti and the Abstract Expressionists can in fact be documented in the case of Jackson Pollock. Already conversant with the ideas of the Theosophists, Pollock spent the summer of 1929 at Krishnamurti's Star Camp in Ojai, California. Through his friend Frederick Schwankovsky, an intimate of Krishnamurti, Pollock entered the close circle of followers. In later life Pollock's widow, Lee Krasner, recalled him frequently mentioning the work of Krishnamurti. See Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York, 1989), pp. 129–31, 137–45, 151, 157, 821–22.
18. Barnett Newman, "The Sublime Is Now," *The Tiger's Eye* (December 1948), p. 53.
19. Pupul Jayakar, *Krishnamurti: A Biography* (San Francisco, 1986), pp. 77, 78.
20. Clemente in conversation with the author, 1985. Clemente was not a member of the Theosophical Society.
21. Francesco Clemente, interview with Lisa Phillips, March 27, 1989. The interview was conducted in English and all quotes are taken from this transcript. An edited version of the interview appeared in *Beaux Arts Magazine*, no. 69 (June 1989), pp. 91–95, 159–60, under the title "Exposition Clemente: Les Chemins de la sagesse," and included a summary in English.
22. Rimbaud to George Izambard, May 13, 1871; in Arthur Rimbaud, *Oeuvres completes* (Paris, 1972), p. 249.
23. Quoted in Philip Rawson, *Erotic Art of the East: The Sexual Theme in Oriental Painting and Sculpture* (New York, 1968), p. 31.
24. "Et le clou d'une douleur dentaire, le coup de marteau d'une chute accidentelle sur un os en disent plus sur les ténèbres de l'inconscient que toutes les recherches de la yoga." Antonin Artaud, "L'Homme et sa douleur," in Antonin Artaud, *Oeuvres completes*, vol. 14 (Paris, 1978), p. 205.