

Rock Paper

By Suzanne Smith

With the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, I'd say that Surmang is at once so exotic and so foreign, that when you first get there, you don't see the "there" there. There are no tourists, no days of the week, no watches, little access to the outside world at all.

Lots of wildflowers.

It takes a while to see it. And when you do, things and people start to pop out of the periphery: the lush greenery, the sense of human and natural recovery, the sense of being in China and not in China at the same time, the bravery and confidence of Phuntsok and Drogha, our two resident physicians. The confidence in the left side of your brain.

One of the things that just popped out of the background was the ancient art.

Beautifully stone carvings adorn stupas at Surmang. They are probably as old as the monastery itself, about 400 years old. Like a lot of the monastery, the art, these antiques are art and at the same time, not art. They are expressions of sacredness. They are worshipped as sacred objects, creating a gentle, weathered and funky echo of the monastery's sacred space. So monks and villagers regularly circumambulate these stupas, connecting their own aspirations to that sacredness and paying their respects. It's a natural part of life there.



We had the idea to do rubbings of these carvings. I never did anything like that before, and so I had the no idea how to do it. I found a beautiful Buddha carved into one stone. I placed my paper on it and chose a black crayon, and began. A Monk came by and was curious as to what I was doing. I don't speak Tibetan or Chinese, but I gestured to him to come closer and see what I was doing. He was interested as he saw the image emerge on the paper, so I ripped a piece of paper from the pad I was using, and handed him a crayon, and he began his own rubbing on another stone nearby, that also had a Buddha carved on it. It was clear that he'd never seen anyone do this before or even thought of it.



After he finished, he showed me his Buddha rubbing. He had a big smile on his face. The paper had ragged edges where I had torn it. He gently and precisely folded each side of the paper evenly around his picture, which hid the torn edges. We said goodbye and he walked up the hill towards the Monastery. It was a good encounter. It was a good day. There were many good days. Actually all of them were good days at Surmang.

Suzanne Smith is the Managing Director of Surmang Foundation. She is a very senior development director, having lived and worked in Mozambique and Afghanistan for many years. Suzanne gives her heart and her mind to our work.