Notes on the Making of UNFORGOTTEN
by Tohby Riddle

The Idea and Text of *Unforgotten*

THE IDEA OF ANGELS

Having no formal religious background, my idea of the angels (or angelic beings) in *Unforgotten* is largely an intuitive one. To me they are a compelling concept – one that inspires good wonder about the nature of reality and about ourselves. It seems they can be metaphors for many things.

The idea of us passing things such as angels unawares intrigues me. How much of our world don't we notice? What lies at the edges of our perception? Or at the edges of our memory? What have we forgotten?

And while writing *Unforgotten* another thought arose. As the angel grows weaker and more immobilised, who will help it? Who will help the helper?

A self-portrait? (created 2008)

HOW THE IDEA CAME ABOUT

I've been scribbling things in my notebooks to do with angels for years. And they'd popped up in cartoons I'd done for *Good Weekend* magazine. Then in more recent years, tantalising images accompanied by strong feelings would come to me: angels (flying or earthbound) in fantastic urban realms. These imaginings really interested and excited me but they were hard to really grasp, and for a long time I couldn't give them form or narrative.

A random sketch from my 2009 notebook. The bird and the pantomime horse would end up in *Unforgotten* too.

Thus preoccupied, I was out driving one day in spring 2010 when I noticed a large white cockatoo on a bin outside shops in Leura, in the Blue Mountains. Tourists were crowding around it and taking photos. Here was a white, winged creature that for some reason had come down from the sky to be among them. I wondered what would happen if an angel appeared in such a public place, like on a park bench or something. How would passersby respond? Why would the angel be there? What would it all mean?!

The book's first line came to me that day: "Nobody knows where they come from. But they come." And with those words in place, *Unforgotten* was underway.

THE TEXT

Leading up to writing the text for *Unforgotten* I'd been reading poetry by Emily Dickinson (*see example right*). Her stark, economical writing beautifully demonstrated to me the power of omission – the power of what is left unsaid. And as I began wording the story, it seemed a few carefully chosen words, poetically expressed, was going to be the way to capture big and elusive ideas – such as those for *Unforgotten* – and allow space for wide-ranging imagery.

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise.

  – from poem "1129"
  by Emily Dickinson c.1868

The Artwork of *Unforgotten*

The artwork is best described as a combination of photomontage and collage. It was assembled in Photoshop largely from scans of my drawings, details from photos that I took and details from archival photos dating back to the 19th century. A set of effects were more or less applied globally to each illustration for mood and meaning but also to help the elements that made up each image cohere into a singular whole. It sometimes felt as if each illustration was an intricately arranged piece of music and my computer a multi-track mixing desk.

Illustration from Unforgotten

TIME & SPACE
The reality depicted in the book is intended to seem timeless and locationless where people and buildings from different times and places simultaneously exist in one vast, twilit realm – a fusion of past, present and possibly future realities. The world seems strange yet also familiar. Perhaps this is because its phantasmagorical quality is actually created from an assemblage of mostly ordinary and familiar things – and it is just how these ordinary or familiar things are combined with one another that creates effect.

EARLY POSTCARDS
There are parallels between the way images were constructed in *Unforgotten* and early 20th century postcards. This is no accident as I have a small but growing collection of these postcards, which I really enjoy studying (*example, right*). Postcards made between about 1900 and 1940 (when colour photos became more widespread) were often ingeniously constructed images – using deceptive montages of b/w photography, hand-drawn details and innovative colour tinting, to come up with fantastic representations of instantly recognisable places that never really were. An amazing kind of proto-Photoshop!

*Postcard from the author's collection*

CLOUDS, FOG AND SMOKE
It somehow felt right for the world in this book to be strewn with obscuring fogs, clouds and smoke. This idea may well have been prompted from living in Katoomba – a Blue Mountains town often nestled in mists and low-flying clouds, Echo Point (*pictured left in 1910*) is down the end of my street.

Echo Point, Katoomba Photograph by Harry Phillips

USE OF PHOTOS

Besides the use of archival photos from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I took over 2000 photos for the book– in places as various as Edinburgh, London, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and rural NSW. Earlier photos I'd taken in New York and Tokyo were also used. By using photography I was able to archive many backgrounds and skies and all kinds of details and objects for use in the illustrations. Many of the photos were of common and ordinary things and places.
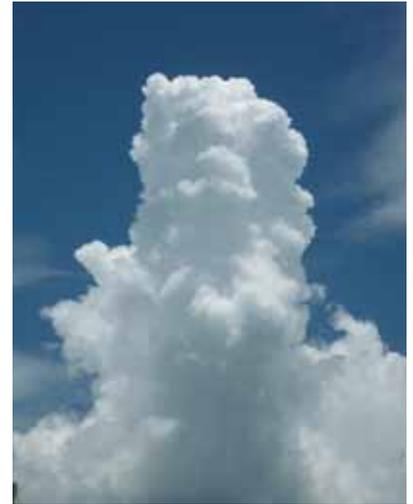
A cloud outside my front gate

And some of these things, such as shipping containers, old luggage and rusted machinery made up the debris of lost or forgotten things that were scattered throughout the book's world.

I didn't always know what I was looking for while wandering a town or city, but if something took my fancy, I'd stop and take a photo – like this photo (*below left*) – and it might work its way into the book (*below*).

Subway in Central Station, Sydney

Scene from *Unforgotten*

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE MOTION SEQUENCE

Studying early photos such as daguerrotypes led me to pay much more attention to photography and its history. I learnt that the chronological sequence (showing change or motion) that photography could capture so well was a new concept in the history of visual art. Photography offered a way of seeing how something alters through time – and a way seeing how things move.

These ideas about sequences of movement or change (or both) underpinned the image sequences in the book: the dissolving cloud (*pictured*), the angel flying, the leaves falling and so on.
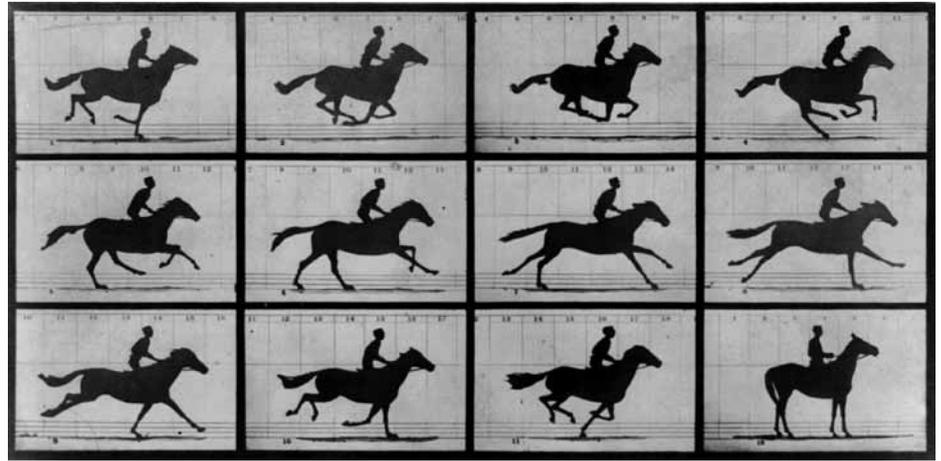

Photo sequence of galloping horse by Eadweard Muybridge, 1878

Photo sequence I took of a dissolving cloud for *Unforgotten*, 2011
(The photos were taken from my attic-studio window.)

SKETCHES AS FINAL ART

In the drawn art, I was also keen to use the spontaneity of my sketches – qualities which are often lost in the more conscious labourings of final art. The sketches were done with pencils in a pad of bond paper then scanned and added to the illustration being assembled in Photoshop.

Sketch used in final artwork for *Unforgotten*

THE ROLE OF MUSIC

Music played an invaluable role in this project. It always does in my work, but for *Unforgotten* I actually used it strategically in the creative process. For instance, when starting out on the cityscapes – some of the first artwork I did for the book – I listened to pieces by composer Steve Reich, e.g. *Six Marimbas, Electric Counterpoint* (from the album pictured right), and Philip Glass's album *Solo Piano* to get me going. These busy, pulsing, seemingly repetitive pieces – that I found analogous to a cityscape's busy visual repetitions and rhythms – gave me another way of accessing the subject and gave me extra creative momentum.

STATUE HEADS

On a visit to the British Museum in 2010 I found myself taking portraits of statues there, fascinated with the range of ways people have depicted the human face over the millennia (*right*). There seemed to be endless variation and yet all faces conveyed a palpable humanity.

Neolithic face
c. 7200 BC,
Jordan

When I put these heads on photos of real people they came to life in truly compelling ways and seemed to express an even deeper humanity. They became new people - and people who could populate the world I was creating. It was like they emphasised the physical density which keeps us bound to the earth – as opposed to the metaphysical, free-from-gravity angels.

Surprisingly, even the weathered and broken faces (e.g. *right*) of some statues worked as living faces – as if poignantly revealing the accumulated knocks of life.

Extending these thoughts, the angel who sinks to ground undergoes a kind of *descent into density* which continues all the way to it becoming a near-lifeless stony statue. To me, the angel's predicament describes human states of being, such as the way a kind of ossification of our being can occur through lack of mindfulness and an incremental forgetting – to the extent that we have forgotten who or what we really are and have become stuck or lost in life!
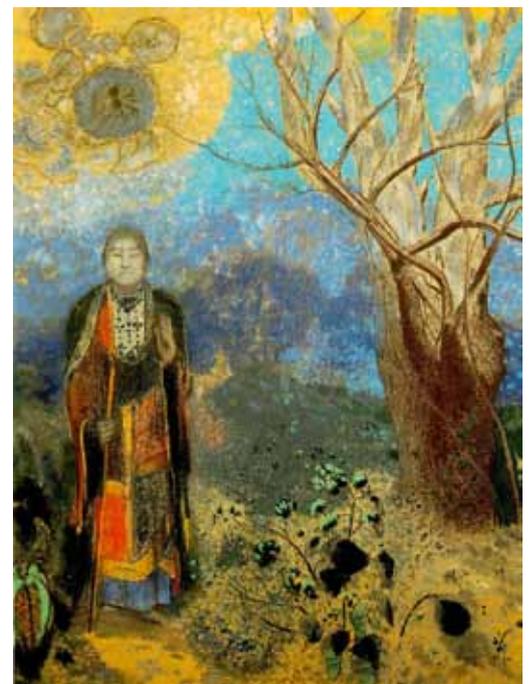
DAGUERROTYPE EFFECTS

With somewhat metaphysical ideas at play here, the way in which daguerrotypes (*below left*) scratch and corrode showed me a way to represent metaphysical qualities and ideas in an image. Strange blooms and glows; impossible lighting; and scratches and spots took on rich and curious meanings which could capture elusive ideas.

The art of Odilon Redon (*right*) interested me for the same reason. All these kinds of daguerrotype-like effects were applied to illustrations throughout *Unforgotten*. I hoped these effects might also give an impression that *Unforgotten* is somehow an *old story.*

Le Bouddha by Odilon Redon, 1905