

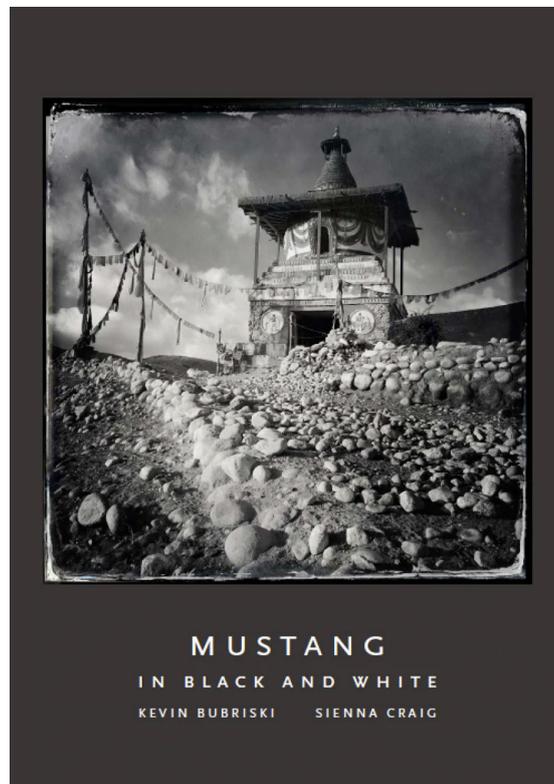
Book Review

Review of *Mustang in Black and White* by Kevin Bubriski and Sienna Craig

Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2018. 152 pages. ISBN: 9789937623872

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2022.7225>



Recommended Citation

Heimsath, K. M. (2022). Review of *Mustang in Black and White* by Kevin Bubriski and Sienna Craig.. *HIMALAYA* 41(1): 146-148.



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The cover catches my eye while chatting with Bidur Dangol, the proprietor of Vajra Books, one of the few remaining brick and mortar bookshops tucked away on the Jyatha lane, with shelves overflowing and floorspace stacked high with volumes of anything and everything ever written about Nepal and the Himalaya. The dramatic black and white image of a highland *chorten* and minimalist layout suggests a volume from the early 20th century, perhaps compiled from the large format slides of the first generation of Himalayan explorers. But the names Kevin Bubriski and Sienna Craig, prominent contemporary photographer and anthropologist respectively, indicate a new publication. Bidur himself is central to this collaboration. Vajra has been publishing cutting edge Himalayan scholarship for years, and now they are producing high-quality interdisciplinary art volumes (printed in New Delhi) at a price much lower than would be possible out of Europe or North America. Bidur and Vajra Publications have brought together top-notch scholars and photographers in a production that would not have been viable otherwise.

“I found the pace of short narrative writing interspersed with a dozen or so images to be exceptionally effective in conveying the phenomenological power of the highlands, something almost impossible to express in either word or image alone”.

- Kabir Mansingh Heimsath on *Mustang in Black and White*

The Introductions by Charles Ramble and Neils Gutschow are immediately notable not only for the renowned scholars contributing, but also for the expansive ideas that each lays out here. Ramble, a doyen of Himalayan anthropology, takes this opportunity to extol the peculiar virtues of Mustang as a borderland on the edge of kingdoms, nations, and consciousness. Quoting from 19th century Tibetan (Karu Druwang) and 20th century English (Dylan Thomas) with equal proficiency, Ramble points out the strangely compelling power of Mustang light conveyed through these photographs. Gutschow, the most eminent scholar of Nepali architecture, meanders through black and white photography, Buddhism symbolism, and village passageways to emphasize the structural impermanence so graphically visible in the pictures collected here. The essays are brief but intellectually provocative, and add scholarly cachet to this publication.

Kevin Bubriski’s earlier books on Nepal, *Portraits of Nepal* (1994) and *Power Places of Kathmandu* (1995), remain two of the most interesting photo documentary collections on Nepal. His black and white portraits simultaneously convey a sense of timeless humanity and unmediated individuality. The partnership with Keith Dowman on sacred sites serves as a precursor to this volume in its combination of text and image to help convey the continuing vitality of sacred space in the Kathmandu Valley. The photographs in the current volume mimic Bubriski’s older black and white images with nuanced monochromatic shading and granulated texture. The square format and mottled framing further convey the sense of a large-format tripod mounted camera and old-time film. Finally, the composition of the images, most without humans or evident action, present the sense of time suspended in long duration exposures. It is as if the camera has removed its subject from the mundane reality of bustling life and left it hanging in a moment in-between, liminal, on the border between here and elsewhere. The cover image that caught my eye includes a *chorten*, prayer flags, and also a

roughly-paved stone road that drifts around the stupa, over a rise, to who knows where? The shadows are solid black below the roof, under the gate, within the niche, beside each rock. The harsh sunlight, burning out negative spaces, plays the critical component to any clarity here. But Bubriski adds a

layer of paradox to all this abstract timelessness with his short introduction, “Seeing in Black and White.” He lets us know that all the images were taken on a smart phone, the ultimate device of instantaneous gratification, and filtered through a digital app to lend an antiquated feel to otherwise utterly contemporary images.

This is where the accompanying text plays a crucial role in the value of this book. If anyone knows where the road around the *chorten* leads, it is Sienna Craig, noted anthropologist, author, and Mustang expert. The variety of her publications, from illustrated children’s book, through memoir and poetry, to scholarly monographs, are imbued with the concrete experience of life on the ground, in the present. Her tone in this publication is personal, familiar and precise. “A woman, disheveled and some say crazy, washes her feet in the river. She scrubs incessantly, until her leathery heels look puckered and pale. The

woman tells you the water is cold but good, and that she is running low on soap. She entreats you to wash as well” (p. 42). Scenes like these pull the reader/viewer through the distance of timeless image and into direct engagement with specific places and particular people. I found the pace of short narrative writing interspersed with a dozen or so images to be exceptionally effective in conveying the phenomenological power of the highlands, something almost impossible to express in either word or image alone.

I will offer one critique of this outstanding collaboration and production: it tries a bit *too* hard to bring together narrative and image. While the main text works wonderfully in poetic juxtaposition to the photographic essays, the series of page references (in text) and captions (below image) seem unnecessarily pedantic. Perhaps someone totally unfamiliar with the landscape or lifestyle would appreciate cross-referencing and descriptive notes, but I found captions such as “Hay feeds the cows and horses” redundant. This small weakness in an otherwise beautiful volume may well be an attribute of its innovative approach to publication. I hope that future collaborations between scholars and photographers, artists and publishers, will build on the formative example presented here.

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