

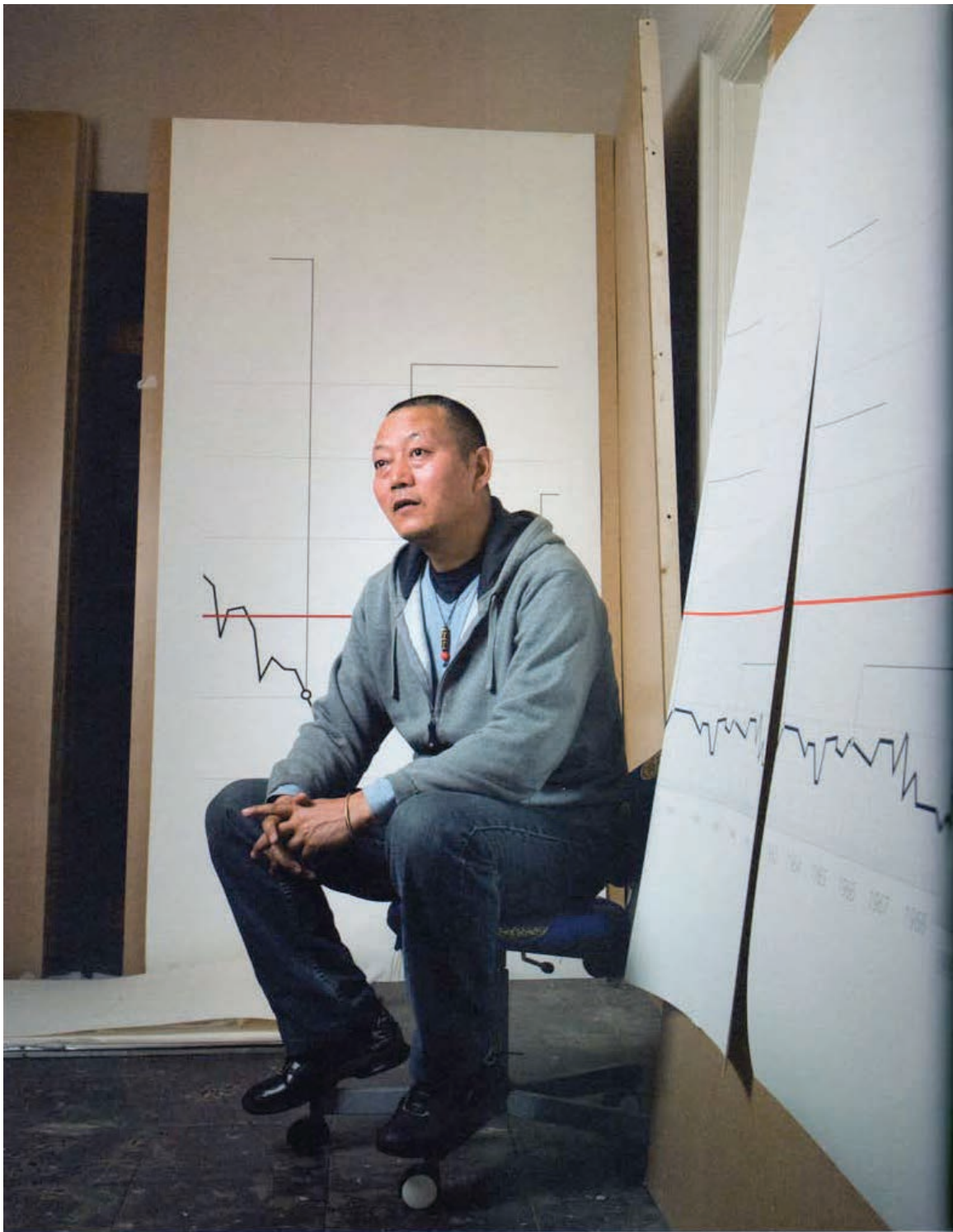
[www.anthonymeierfinearts.com](http://www.anthonymeierfinearts.com)

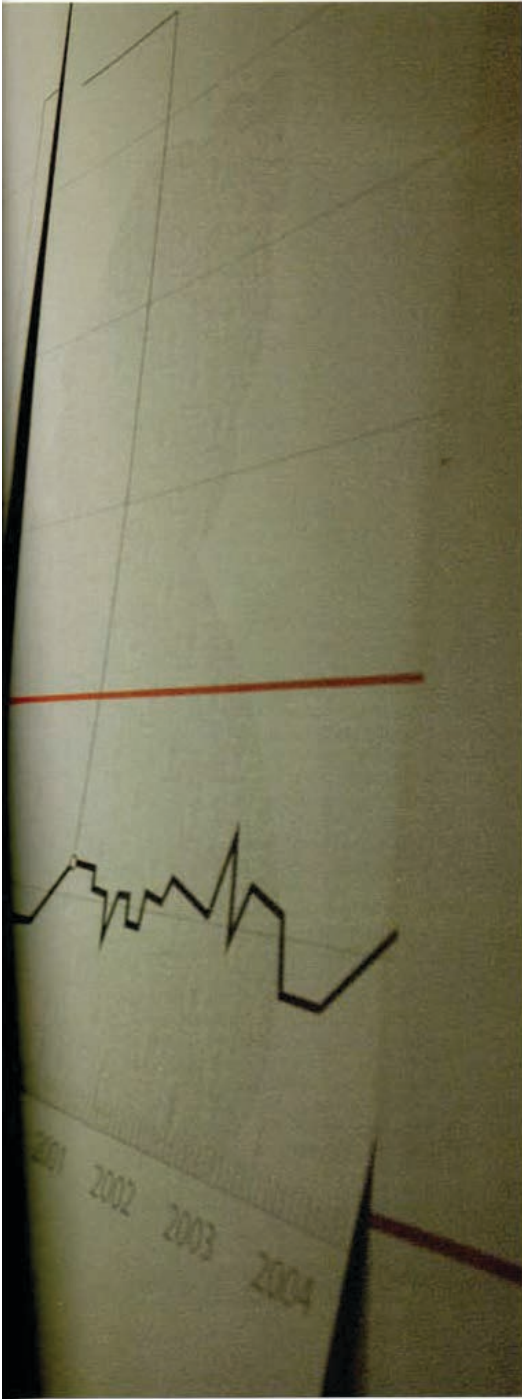
## Contemporary Visual Culture

ISSUE 63 MAY/JUN 2009









53rd Venice Biennale Participating Artist

GONKAR GYATSO

# Contours of Identity

*A painter of both serene  
and troubled Buddhist icons refines  
his art on a journey that takes him  
from Lhasa to London.*

*By Donald Dinwiddie*

On a freezing Sunday evening in January, I journeyed out to Bethnal Green in London's East End to see Gonkar Gyatso's work-in-progress at his small studio above a working-men's club. He was busy building a model for one half of his submission to the main, curated group exhibition in this year's Venice Biennale. *Reclining Buddha-Shanghai to Lhasa Express* will be an outsized Tibetan book whose pages, unfolding in the traditional accordion style, will reveal the gigantic contour of a reclining Buddha. The irregular, triangular shape of this contour will serve as an elevation route plan, complete with labeled stops, of the new railway running from Shanghai to Lhasa. Its partner piece, *Reclining Buddha-Beijing Tibet Relationship Index* will also feature a reclining Buddha spread across the unfolded pages of an enormous Tibetan book. However, in this instance superimposed on the Buddha's shape is a mock graph like a stock market index charting the highs and lows of Sino-Tibetan relations since 1951. As often the case with Gyatso's work of the last decade, both images combine traditional and modern elements into engaging and amusingly clever images that tackle contemporary (and often Tibetan) issues in a sidelong manner. Gyatso is less interested in broadcasting his judgment on the issue than in creating visual juxtapositions that encourage the viewer to think about it for themselves.

For Gyatso, the new railway connecting Lhasa to China proper is weighted with very personal significance. Born in 1961 in Lhasa, he grew up in the new secular and socialist society created by the People's





1.

***In Beijing, Gyatso was able to see unprecedented exhibitions of Western art collections.***

Republic of China after it invaded and occupied Tibet in 1950. At school, Gyatso's artistic talent was fostered by decorating the school's chalkboards with murals in the social-realist style proclaiming the glories of the state. He was, he has said, educated to have a Chinese socialist intellect within a Tibetan body. He knew nothing of Tibetan culture. Revered sites in Lhasa such as the Jokhang Temple and the former residence of the Dalai Lama, the Potala Palace, were closed, as were all temples and monasteries throughout Tibet. The Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976 was for him and his generation simply part of the milieu in which he had been raised. However in 1980, when he won a place to study traditional Chinese ink-and-brush painting at the Central University for Nationalities in Beijing, everything began to change.

First, he had the opportunity to study ink-and-brush painting, an art form that had been despised and even outlawed during the Cultural Revolution for its associations with pre-socialist society. Soviet-derived social realism had been the only approved style for the revolution. But by 1980, the father of the revolution, Mao Zedong, had been dead for four years and his regime overturned. The new great helmsman was Deng Xiaoping, and in the early 1980s his government began to open up China to the West after more than three decades of self-imposed isolation from Western influence. In Beijing, Gyatso was able to see unprecedented exhibitions of Western art collections as well as gain access to books and magazines that discussed and illustrated the history of Western art. Like most artists in Beijing at that period, what really fascinated Gyatso was

the evolution of 20th-century Western art—the influence of which he and other artists of his generation (whether Chinese or Tibetan) were keen to bring to bear on art in the People's Republic. For the first time, Gyatso was faced with artworks from the myriad art movements that developed during the 500 years from the early Renaissance to Abstract Expressionism. "In the early 1980s, we in Beijing were really very innocent; we didn't know what to pick up [from the West] and what not to. It was a time of excitement and panic. We were very lucky to be there."

After he finished his studies in Beijing, Gyatso returned to Lhasa in 1984, where he took up a post teaching art at the Tibet Teacher's College (renamed Tibet University in 1985). In many respects, he was a success. He had been to the capital and had studied there. And throughout the 1980s he would be invited back to Beijing in his capacity as an artist—either for painting projects or for academic residencies. He had also returned to Lhasa with a passionate commitment to create a new Tibetan art, and found his old friends there fired with the same enthusiasm.

Tibet had changed considerably in the four years he had been away. The liberalizing policies that had brought Western culture back to Beijing had also allowed Tibet's temples and monasteries to re-open, and they were once again populated with monks. Traditions of over a thousand years were reasserting themselves with vigor. For the first time Gyatso could see the great Tibetan paintings and sculptures that had been shut away all of his life. "The whole culture began looking back on what it had been missing. This was happening all over China, but it was also happening in Tibet."

There was also the first influx of foreign visitors keen to see a place that, even before the Chinese invasion, had been accessible only to the intrepid. So, in addition to rediscovering their cultural heritage, Tibetans—like people all over the People's Republic—were gaining firsthand access to the West. Gyatso and several friends established the Sweet Tea House Artists' Association in 1985. Teahouses were Lhasa's meeting places and, in one, they exhibited their works and met to discuss their awakening to a Tibetan identity and art. In the work of the Sweet Tea House collective, each artist rejected utterly the social realism of their childhood, but the richness and diversity of what they could turn to was also overwhelming. It was both exciting and frustrating.

The second half of the 1980s was difficult for Gyatso. The Chinese ink-and-brush style he had learned in Beijing proved inappropriate to the stark wild landscapes of the high plateau. "I realized that this technique wouldn't work in Tibet. For it you need a cloudy, misty landscape. Tibet's landscape is dry and hard." And then the crackdowns—curfews, jailings and re-closures of temples—began as the government panicked over the effects of liberalization. Having just become used to seeing monks again, Gyatso and his friends then witnessed them taking to the streets to demand more rights. "We wondered what these monks were doing in the street. Our generation never had a concept of protesting." As the government reaction to these protests came into play, Gyatso and the people of Tibet also witnessed the monks being beaten by the police, jailed and even killed. Groups like the Sweet Tea House

1. The artist with his family, in front of the Potala Palace, Lhasa, 1973. Courtesy the artist.

2. RED BUDDHA, 1989, painting on cloth, 120 x 85 cm.

3. WHITE ROOF, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 65 cm.

4. DOORS, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 70 cm.

5. THE MOUNTAIN ON OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 65 x 180 cm.

6. BUDDHA AND FONTANA'S CUTS, 1997, oil on canvas, 75 x 130 cm.

7. SOHO BUDDHA, 1997, oil on canvas, 120 x 75 cm.

8. SHIRT NO. 15, 2002, cotton, brocade, 50 x 70 cm.



2.



3.



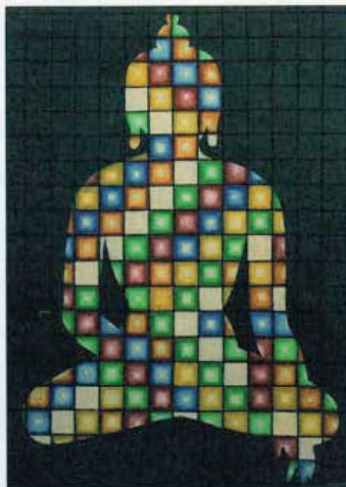
4.



5.



6.



7.



8.





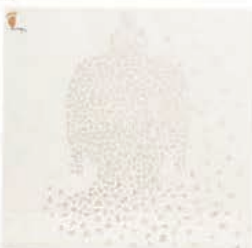
9.



10.



11.



12.



13.



14.



15a.



15b.

also came under suspicion from the authorities, and they ultimately disbanded in 1992 due to pressure to bring Han Chinese artists into the association. From joy and excitement, the mood in Lhasa changed to one of anger and frustration. And it was during this period that Gyatso turned his back on landscapes and started to paint the Buddha figure—a symbol of his Tibetan heritage. However, these hauntingly beautiful images were of a broken, bloody Buddha, imperfectly formed. A classic example is *Red Buddha* (1989) which depicts a distorted silhouette of a seated Buddha seemingly manifested out of a bloodstain.

In the autumn of 1989, Gyatso was offered a year-long artist's residency at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, but it was not a great success; the city was deeply traumatized by the military crackdown on student pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square in June of that year, and the sort of fear and suspicion that had been endemic during the Cultural Revolution had reasserted itself. Gyatso returned to Lhasa even angrier and more despairing. He feels now that if he had stayed in Lhasa, he would have turned to violent resistance himself. However, in a "forbidden" book about the Tibetan community in exile in Dharamsala, Gyatso read of young Tibetans who talked about a Tibetan future—something he felt no longer possible in Lhasa. He decided to leave and find these people. After two years he finally managed to obtain an exit visa to Nepal, and from there he worked his way to Dharamsala.

When he arrived in Dharamsala, however, it became clear to him that he would not find the community he had been looking for. The book was about Dharamsala in the 1960s and 1970s, but by 1992 when Gyatso arrived there its young visionaries had largely moved on, mostly to Europe and the United States. Political activity in the city was dominated by power struggles among the lamas and their coteries. The situation reflected the problems of Tibet's past, not the promise of its future. Nevertheless, Gyatso enjoyed the novelty of living in a Tibetan community that could regulate itself, and there was a great deal he could learn about Tibet's history and culture. He began to study both traditional *thangka* painting and the Dharma. "Before I went to Dharamsala, I was very ignorant about Tibet."

During his four years in Dharamsala, his anger against the situation in Tibet dissipated. He began to see that he was not just a Tibetan or a child of China's socialist revolution—he was both. He brought to his painting his studies in Buddhist doctrine and his new knowledge of iconometry, the proportional golden mean for Buddhist imagery. He still painted Buddhas, but they were no longer broken and bleeding. They were perfectly proportioned, and imbued with a tangible and calm spirituality. For his anger, at least, he had found a kind of peace.

However, the question still remained of his and Tibet's future. While in Dharamsala he met Peter Towse, a lecturer in art at London's St Martin's College of Art & Design. Towse was very impressed with Gyatso's portfolio and invited him to continue his studies at St Martin's. As the people Gyatso had thought he would meet in Dharamsala had disappeared into the West, it seemed that this was also where his future lay. But his first encounter with



16.



17.

### During his four years in Dharamsala, his anger against the situation in Tibet dissipated.

London came as a profound shock. Nothing he had seen in Beijing, Lhasa or India prepared him for the sheer mass and alienness of the city's art scene. Bewildered and confused, he could not even pick up a brush for the first seven months. When he saw in late 1997 the anarchic new wave of British art in the *Sensation* show at the Royal Academy he had a kind of epiphany. He realized that art could be anything and that art was in everything. Having gone through much of his life believing that art must serve an ideological purpose—either for the state or towards a Tibetan identity, this encounter was both devastating, and ultimately, liberating.

For a few more years, Gyatso tried to paint in the spiritual, Buddhist style he had developed in Dharamsala, but he "was really struggling to complete work." Then one day he asked himself, "What am I doing here if I want to continue this spiritual work? Can I try to do something that doesn't really exist in London? So, I decided to get into the street and get involved with real life." Joining a collective called Artists in Exile—a Glasgow-based association of artists from all over the world—he began to create installations and exhibit in their shows, most notably one at Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art: "Sanctuary: Contemporary Art & Human Rights" in 2003. In particular he played around with the Union Jack—symbol of his new British home. Perhaps the most poignant piece from this series was simply titled *Union Jack* and was made while he was in residency at the Pitt Rivers museum in Oxford in 2003. This work was just a Union Jack flag, but made up of the kind of rich silk

9. **TRINITY - IN TIBETAN, CHINESE AND ENGLISH.** 2004, black ink on paper, 40 x 29 cm.

12. **THE RELIGION QUESTION - 2.** 2005, pencil on paper, 26 x 26 cm.

15. **MY IDENTITY 3 & 2.** 2003, series of four digital prints, 48 x 65 cm.

10. **ANGEL.** 2007, stickers and pencil on treated paper, 152.5 x 122 cm.

13. **THE MINORITY NATIONALITY QUESTION - 1.** 2004, black ink on paper, 34 x 30 cm.

16. The artist, with fellow artists, in front of his first solo exhibition in Lhasa, 1987.

11. **DISNEY PLUS - 3.** 2004, pencil and stickers on paper, 40 x 33 cm.

14. **SHANGRI-LA.** 2005, stickers and pencil on paper, 40 x 29 cm.

17. The artist working on a mural for the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, 1985.





18.

### Gyatso's latest phase is playful but no less serious in its content.

brocades used traditionally in Tibet for the patchwork mantels of high-ranking monks. Here, Gyatso adapted the emblem of his new home into a familiar Tibetan context.

Another seminal work from this period was a series of four photographic self-portraits entitled *My Identity* (2003). In each image Gyatso looks directly at the camera while seated on the floor in front of an easel in the act of painting. In the first he is dressed as a pre-1949 Tibetan with his hair tied back, painting an icon of the Buddha. In the next he is a Red Guard seated before an icon of Mao. In the third, he is dressed as a young Tibetan in Dharamsala, his hair long and falling over his shoulders, with a painting of the Dalai Lama on his easel. Finally there is Gyatso as a punk-haired London artist, sitting on a wood veneer floor and painting a mandala that dissolves into a psychedelic background. What Gyatso represents in this series of images is not a masquerade; each of these visions is part of him. It is a powerful and truthful self-portrait.

In 2004, Gyatso returned to the Buddha image, but this time looking at how the Buddha has become a pop icon. He began work on a series of pop Buddhas composed of dozens of stickers—the kind children place in albums or on their school books. His *Pokémon Buddha* of 2004 was one of the first examples in this body of work. Here, he outlined the seated Buddha using an iconometric grid, filling the squares with stickers of the characters from the Pokémon cartoon franchise. In a similar way, he has also used Chinese and Tibetan script to create Buddhist images. In *Religion Question* (2005), a mass of Chinese characters form the dissolving (or coalescing) head of a Buddha. Reordered so as to be illegible,

the characters are an excerpt from Mao's 1957 essay on religion, "The accurate way to sort out a clash between people of the same political persuasion."

Over the last several years Gyatso has begun to use the stickers, Chinese and Tibetan script, and Buddhist imagery as key elements in a visual language through which he can address any subject—not just those centered on Tibet. In *Angel* (2007), the sticker-filled outline suggests both a traditional manifestation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, but also—unmistakably—the famous, hooded image of an Iraqi prisoner at Abu Ghraib. The figure holds what is simultaneously a Buddhist rosary and also the electrified wire used to torture inmates at the notorious prison. Around the image the iconographically dictated multiple hands and heads and mandorla of the bodhisattva are sketched in. But beyond this traditional halo is another of cuttings from newspaper headlines and advertisements—most poignantly "Always look on the bright side of life!"

In Gyatso's studio the creation of the work for the Biennale goes on. The images he plays with are as evocative, and therefore intriguing, as ever. First there is the format. While *Reclining Buddha-Shanghai to Lhasa Express* references the commercial pamphlet of the route created by the railway company, Gyatso has transformed it into a giant Tibetan book—or Buddhist sutra, and he has chosen the same format for *Reclining Buddha-Beijing Tibet Relationship Index*. The reclining Buddha serves to replace the simple diagram of stops for one part of the work and stands in for a normal chart field of a stock market index in the other. Furthermore, the *Shanghai to Lhasa Express Buddha* is an iconometric grid filled with characters that are half simplified Chinese and half Tibetan script. The source for this hybrid text is the railway's commercial pamphlets, detailing information such as ticket prices and the oxygen supplied to the different classes of travelers on the train once the rarefied atmosphere of the high plateau is reached. These composite characters are Gyatso's own creation. They seem to be a kind of nonsense, but in fact the two bits come together for those familiar with both writing systems to form words and ideas in a new written language. In terms of shape, of course, a reclining Buddha befits both parts of the work—a kind of right triangle with a long slope perfect for communicating the distance and rise in altitude of the journey from China proper to the Himalayas, or for serving as a field to show the highs and lows of a market graph. But, most importantly, the reclining Buddha is also the Buddha of the Parinirvana—the moment when the Buddha relinquished his mortal body and dispersed into nirvana. It is the Buddha of an ending and a beginning.

In Gyatso's work of the last decade, it is possible to see a progression beyond the simply technical or stylistic to a deeply personal process of maturation. Gyatso has left behind the grimness of his late 1980s Buddhas as well as the reverent holiness of his Buddhas from the 1990s. This latest phase is playful, but no less serious in its content. He has mastered his anger against and frustration with the situation in Tibet, and he has mastered his reverence of the Buddha image in order to create works that engage and comment on his own situation and that of Tibet and the rest of the world with clarity and vision.

18. Fifteenth-century statue of the Akshobhya Buddha.

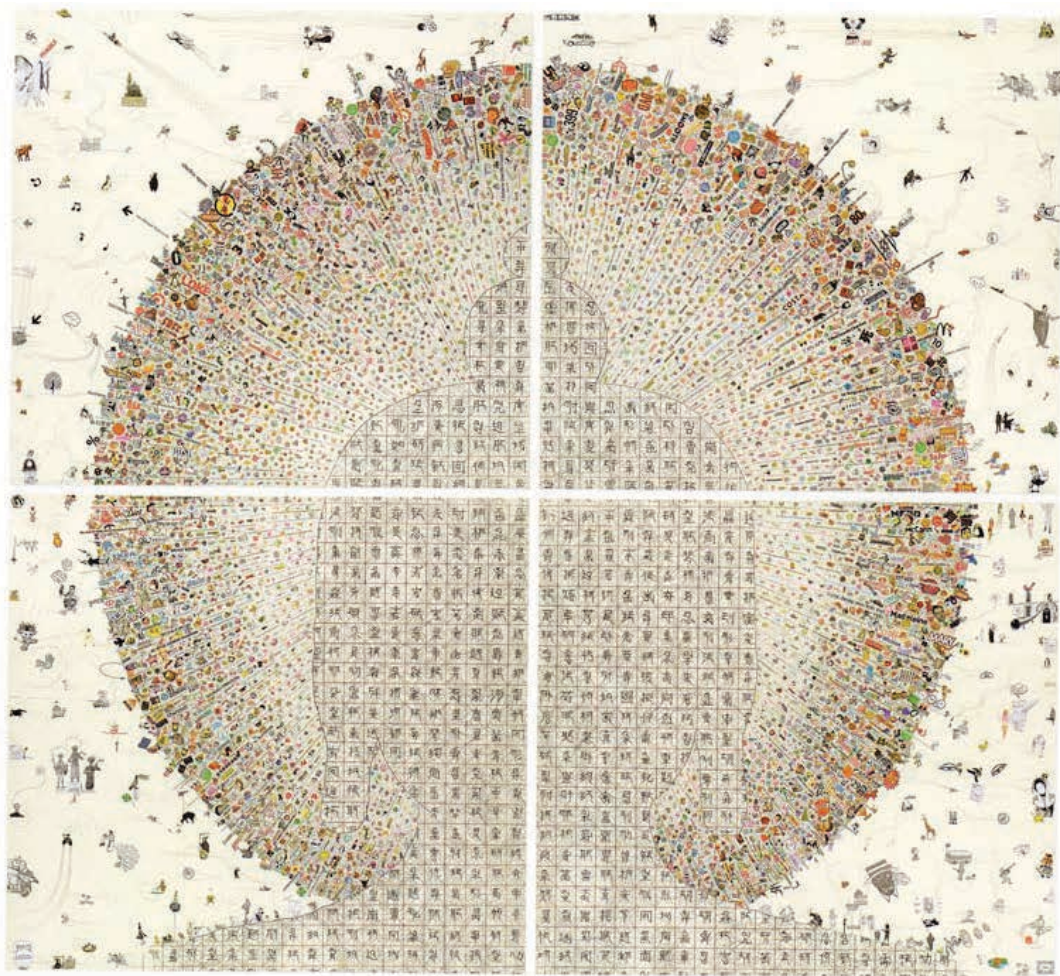
20. **POKÉMON BUDDHA.** 2004, pencil, Pokémon stickers on paper, 24 x 18 cm.

22. **L'INTERNATIONALE.** 2007, pencil, stickers, mixed media on treated paper, 154 x 124 cm.

19. **THE SHAMBALA OF THE MODERN TIMES.** 2008, sticker, papercuts and pencil on treated paper, 200 x 219 cm.

21. **PANDA POLITICS.** 2006, stickers, Indian ink on treated paper, 70 x 50 cm.





19.



20.



21.



22.