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Artists

GONKAR GYATSO

Born 1961 in Lhasa, Tibet. Lives and works in New York, USA.



Gonkar Gyatso, *Wheel of Modern Life*, 2010, pencil, Indian ink, collage and stickers on treated paper, 154 x 154 cm. Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi, London

Gonkar Gyatso is a Tibetan-born artist who studied traditional Chinese ink-and-brush painting in Beijing and went on to take further studies in Fine Art in London. He is the co-founder of the Sweet Tea House, a contemporary Tibetan art gallery based in London. His work combines traditional Tibetan iconography and Buddhist motifs with contemporary branding logos, typography and popular cartoon characters in a way that both reflects and criticises the cultural hybridity of globalisation.

There is a lavish, sacred quality to the detail and execution of Gyatso's art. He applies a range of media such as Indian ink, or gold and silver leaf, on to silk-screen prints, such as in *The Shambala of the Modern Times* (2009). His finely detailed and large-scale works also employ ordinary materials, such as the assemblage of stickers, pencil drawing, pieces of cut paper, and plastic toys on treated paper in *One World Many Dreams* (2008); in this visual overload, Gyatso reflects the chaotic dreams of the individual and the beauty of possessing a vast vision – in contention with the technological 'traffic' of ideas in the modern world.

China and Tibet share a cultural history through the Buddhist religion. Gyatso's Buddha appears in a variety of guises in his work, adorned with modern materials such as plastic tubing, or filled with repeated imagery such as the face of a panda bear (*Panda Politics*, 2006) – a seemingly innocent reference to Sino-Tibetan relations. In *Reclining Buddha – Beijing Tibet Relationship Index* (2009), Gyatso casts a stock market index against a reclining Buddha, appearing to chart the relations between China and Tibet since 1951 as one would chart the economy. The phony index is linked to a symbolic, rather than historical chronology – cut-outs and drawings of images such as Disney characters, President Obama, Hollywood celebrities and religious leaders populate the scene, accompanied by speech bubbles commentating on broad issues such as the global financial crisis, fast food chains, religious doctrines and consumerism. The viewer is left to interpret their own meanings from this index in relation to the current situation in Tibet, the artist's birth country, or perhaps to view it metaphorically in the broader context of globalisation.

Having lived in Tibet, China, India and the West, Gyatso's *My Identity* (2003), a four-part photographic series, goes further in personalising his investigations into the hybridity of cultural experiences by charting his own diverse movements. In the first, the artist wears Tibetan robes before a traditional Buddhist-style painting; in the second, he sits before a portrait of Chairman Mao and himself wears the olive-green Mao uniform; in the third, he sits in more contemporary garb painting the Potala Palace and the Dalai Lama; the final photograph is set in a sparse room containing a vase of flowers, before an abstract painting devoid of obvious cultural linkages.

Gyatso's work also possesses a broader political edge. In the work *Angel* (2007), a figure adorned with a cloak constructed of detailed imagery stands upon a box, reminiscent of one of the photographs of Abu Ghraib prisoners, covered by a pointed hood and hooked up to electric wires from his fingers. The reference of this image is a powerful visual trigger and, encircled by Buddhist iconography, the work presents a stinging contrast to spiritual teachings. The title anoints the figure as an angel, spiritualising the forlorn and tortured victim, and recasting history by adorning him with religious symbols and beautiful colours in death.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2008 'Gonkar Gyatso Retrospective', Rossi & Rossi at Art Dubai, Dubai
2004 'Tibetan Word: The Art of Communication', The Sweet Tea House Contemporary Tibetan Art Gallery, London, UK
2003 'Leverhulme fellowships and Artist residence show', Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
1996 'The Footprints of Buddha', International Cultural Centre, New Delhi, India
1987 'Modern Tibet Art of Gyatso', The Revolution Exhibition Hall of Tibet, Lhasa, Tibet

Selected Group Exhibitions

2009 'Making Worlds', 53rd Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
2009 'Unbound: New Art for a New Century', Newark Museum, Newark, USA
2008 'Return to Lhasa', Red Gate Gallery, Beijing, China
2007 'Consciousness and Form: Contemporary Tibetan Art', Rossi & Rossi, London, UK
2007 'Thermocline of Art: New Asian Waves', ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe, Germany

Selected Bibliography

Don Dinwiddie, 'Contours of Identity', *ArtAsiaPacific*, issue 63, New York, 2009, pp. 132–39
Clare Harris, 'Encounters in Inter-Cultural Space(s): Gonkar Gyatso and Peter Towse', *Oh! What a beautiful day*, Anna Maria Rossi and Fabio Rossi Publications, London, 2006, pp. 10–13
Clare Harris, 'From Lhasa to London: Gonkar Gyatso', *ArtAsiaPacific*, issue 50, New York, 2006, pp. 110–13
Nathalie Gyatso, *Gonkar Gyatso*, Harmattan, Paris, September 2005
Nathalie Gyatso, 'Tibetan Art Today', *Art Press*, issue 347, July–August 2008, pp. 52–59

