

2 ASIAN ART PROFILE

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Gonkar Gyatso

Born in Lhasa in 1961, during the decade after the Chinese first entered Tibet, Gonkar Gyatso has had a fascinating artistic journey. From Lhasa to Beijing to Dharamsala to London, and finally to New York, Gonkar Gyatso has been one of the revelations of this year's Venice Biennale. After experimenting with various media and getting reacquainted with his past, he has developed an artistic form that would allow him to remain close to his heritage, but without being enfolded in the traditions of Tibetan painting. Creating drawings with different layers of understanding, he combines the traditional shape of the Buddha with the appealing and glossy imagery of popular stickers, and includes Chinese and Tibetan characters taken from press articles or writings from Mao Zedong.

In the interview below, Gonkar Gyatso shares the milestones in his journey that led him from Lhasa to New York.

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER: Growing up in Tibet in the 1960s and 1970s, where the exposure to contemporary art was minimal, what led you to become a contemporary artist?

GONKAR GYATSO: When they are little, all children like to draw, and I was no exception. As I finishing middle school in Tibet, I never thought I was going to be an artist. What I do remember is that I wanted to become a farmer, not the traditional kind, but the modern farmer who would drive trucks, and use modern technology. That was my dream. Somehow, by chance in 1977, I got a job at the museum in Lhasa when I was seventeen. At the time, the museum was reasonably well known for its exhibitions, and they were looking for a young graduate who could speak good Chinese and Tibetan to work as a guide to these exhibitions. Through that job, I met a few artists as the museum had two or three professionally trained artists working for them. Naturally, they influenced me and encouraged me. I went out with them to do sketches, and my relationship with them nurtured my desire to become an artist.

AAN: Where did you acquire your artistic skills?

GG: Interestingly, I never had any training in Lhasa. I began to consider art seriously when I got the job at the museum although I was simply a tour guide. The museum job left me with a fair amount of spare time that I spent with other artists – two Chinese and one Tibetan. They became my mentors, and I would spend a lot of time with them. Back then, there were no art schools or art colleges in Lhasa. Consequently, I learned by myself and together with these artists. In 1980, I applied for art school in Beijing, passed the exam, and got admitted to the school. The training I chose in Beijing was Chinese brush painting, meaning I was only going to be taught my major in conjunction with the history of Chinese art. Surprisingly, in the early 1980s, Chinese history did not include anything about Tibet, Tibetan art, or art from any other minority in the

Mainland. It was all about traditional Chinese art. After four years, and having acquired a good knowledge of Chinese art, I began to learn about Western contemporary art. That made me suddenly realise that I did not know anything about my own culture. One of the reasons I subsequently went to India was to learn more about my own heritage and about Tibetan art.

AAN: What did you find in India that you did not find in Beijing or in Lhasa?

GG: In India, I decided to study traditional *thangka* painting. Actually, I see a lot of similarities between traditional *thangka* painting and traditional Chinese brush painting: both use lines, both require a solid composition, etc. There are some similarities, however, there are also many differences.

When I arrived in India, I knew nothing about my heritage. While living in Tibet, I had never been taught in middle or in primary school or even at university anything about Tibetan culture. Consequently, there was a lot of frustration that had built up over the years. In those days, Lhasa simply did not provide an environment to learn anything about Tibetan history. Dharamsala in India provided the environment I was looking for. I started focusing on *thangka* painting and then expanded into other aspects of Tibetan culture. As you know, Tibetan traditional culture always relates to religion, and by following a training on *thangka* painting, one has to know other aspects of Tibetan history.

AAN: As you pointed out, religion is a very important aspect in Tibetan traditional art. Is religion an important component of your work?

GG: I am still telling people that I am not yet a Buddhist. Nevertheless, I would tend to say that I am a rather spiritual person. My interest goes beyond Buddhism and I am also interested in Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.

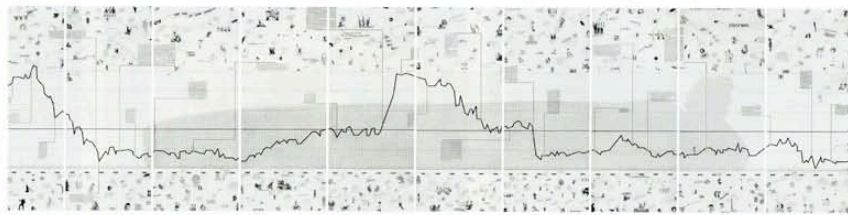
After my stay in Dharamsala, I knew much more about Buddhism, especially about the Buddha figure that I had been working with even before going to India. Before, my understanding of Tibetan Buddhism was very negative. My view was shared by many Tibetans because there was a serious debate going on about how the Tibetans had lost their country. Lots of students and scholars came to the conclusion that it was because of our religion – with Buddhism encouraging people not to kill, to restrict themselves – this was why we had lost our country. Everybody knows that before Buddhism came to Tibet, Tibet was militarily a powerful country in the region. After Buddhism became the official religion in Tibet in the 8th century, the country gradually concentrated on practising Buddhism, with people becoming less aggressive. Before I went to India, my Buddha figure was slightly different. I tried to discuss the figure, and also tried to reconstruct it. The training I received in India deeply affected me, and subsequently I completely gave up the idea of reconstructing the Buddha. I thought that it was a perfect form and I was just to follow the traditional form, keeping the traditional measurements. Actually, the Buddha is based on exact measurements that could be compared to a golden rule in classical art. First, I do the measurements, and then I draw the Buddha according to the grid. Usually, traditional *thangka* painters erase the grid afterwards, but I keep it since I find it represents a modern equivalent of the traditional golden rule measurements.

AAN: Today, what does the Buddha figure mean to you?

GG: The Buddha figure is a representation of my own identity and of 'Tibetanness' in general. At the moment, the Buddha figure in my work does not stand for any religious elements. It is representing cultural elements, my identity, and it is also simply a beautiful form. By filling in the Buddha with stickers of brands and labels, the figure becomes one of the most successful and recognisable forms all over the world.

AAN: How did you start including stickers in your work?

GG: I started around 2004, and it actually happened through my daughter. When she was little, I often came across textbooks or



RECLINING BUDDHA BEIJING-TIBET RELATIONSHIP INDEX

homework that was full of stickers. They really caught my eye because of their visual impact being very glossy and shiny. Then, I started to collect them, and I realised that stickers themselves had become a kind of cultural thing, especially in the West. They relate to youth culture, to popular culture, as well as to street culture, which I was always interested in. I thought it would be quite provocative to put these images into a Buddha.

AAN: You moved to London in the 1990s. How did you cope with the transition from India to London?

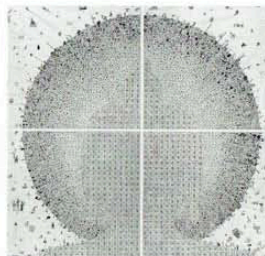
GG: Arriving in London was a culture shock. There was a period when artistically, I simply could not go on. While in Dharamsala, my work became heavily influenced by Buddhism. Since I completed a lot of work in India, I became quite spiritual, and I completed very religious work. After I came to London, I tried to keep doing the same thing that I was doing in India, but after two or three years, I found it very difficult. At first, I did not understand why this strategy did not get me anywhere. And one day, it just clicked. I realised that if I was going to do the same work I was doing in India, I should simply go back to India or Tibet since my work was so much influenced by religion and based on various traditions. Now I was in London there was no Tibetan monk who could inspire me or monastery I could go to. London is a completely different place, very vibrant, diverse, and instead of embracing the city, I tried to ignore it, locking myself in the studio doing things that did not really exist in London. That day, I decided that if I was to stay in London, I had to change the way I was working. This was a major decision. I decided to let myself go with the environment that surrounded me, to get involved with the life in London and with its art. It meant that I was going to be more focused on the present with what was happening around me instead of being focused on the past. Also, I was a refugee who was seeking asylum. I joined the refugee artist's group that included many artists in a similar situation: aliens in a foreign place with a new environment, and a new culture. There was a period when I did not do any Buddha figures giving it up for a few years. Instead, I did some three-dimensional soft sculptures with fabric, and later, I also did a photograph series exploring my identity. I did experiment with other media before coming back to drawings and using stickers.

AAN: You just mentioned your situation as a refugee. Were you forced to leave Tibet?

GG: I left Tibet voluntarily – there was no pressure whatsoever. I wanted to go to India and see what was happening there. At first, I had not planned on staying, but once I reached Dharamsala, I decided that I would prolong my stay. After a while, my passport expired, and I automatically became a refugee. My refugee status also influenced the sculpture clothes pieces I completed once I arrived in London. At the time, there was a huge debate in England about asylum seekers, and how society should react to them. I wanted to complete some pieces that were addressing this issue.

AAN: Over the past few years, we have witnessed a huge enthusiasm from Western institutions and collectors towards Chinese contemporary art. Did you also benefit from that wave, or was being from Tibet something that set you apart from the Chinese contemporary artists?

GG: I think that there was definitely a benefit through the huge popularity of the Chinese contemporary artists. Seven, eight or nine years



THE SHAMBALA OF THE MODERN TIMES

ago, you hardly saw any Chinese contemporary art being exhibited in London. If something was on view from Asia, it always dealt with traditional and ancient art from China, Korea or from Japan. Chinese contemporary art really changed the scene, especially in London, and gradually, there was more and more Asian Art to be seen not just from China, but also from Korea, and from South Asia in general. That somehow geared people's attention towards Asian contemporary art, including Tibet.

However, one thing that upset me was that every time I mentioned that I was Tibetan, people immediately thought of me as a traditional artist, as a *thangka* painter. They did know that contemporary Tibetan art existed – it was a similar situation to Chinese contemporary art 10 or 20 years ago. That is why I set up the Sweet Tea House in London in 2003, a small gallery that shows some of my work, but also introduces other Tibetan contemporary artists. Chinese contemporary art really changed people's perception towards Asian culture, especially towards contemporary culture.

AAN: Lately, you have completed works that are quite critical of the Chinese government. Presently, what relations do you have with the Chinese government?

GG: From 1992 to 2004, there was a period when there were no relations at all. Since I got my British passport in 2004, I am able to go back to China and to Tibet. I re-established contact with Tibetan artists in Tibet and with the few artists I knew in Beijing. Because of this gap between 1992 and 2004, I have the feeling that not many people know me in China although it is the place where I come from. Since 2006, the Red Gate Gallery in Beijing has started to organise every year a contemporary Tibetan art exhibition. The gallery liked my work even though certain pieces were challenging as they included elements that were more critical towards the Chinese. Consequently, they were more hesitant, but we found a middle way to include my work in the show. For example, in the first show they had in Beijing, they wanted to include the photographs from the series *My Identity*. The curator liked the series, but there was one photograph featuring a picture of the Dalai Lama and a Tibetan flag, which proved to be sensitive. We had a discussion, and we agreed upon showing the series without the critical sensitive piece. I just want to make sure my work will be seen in China, but at the same time, I do not want to jeopardise the gallery in any way.

AAN: You have lived in Tibet, in China as well as abroad. How do you view the difficult issues that are causing tensions between China and Tibet?

GG: The situation regarding the relations

between China and Tibet is not just black and white. Having been in China, in Tibet, and having been abroad, I see the complexity of this issue. Politicians from all sides tend to generalise: one cannot resume it to the good Tibetans and the mean Chinese. Not all Tibetans oppose the Chinese. Even today, there are some Tibetans that think the Chinese communist party has changed their life for the better. It salvaged them from their feudal condition and provided them with a different life. We need to see that there are many views to the relations with China. As for the Dalai Lama, he has repeatedly offered to dialogue with the Chinese government that has so far never shown any interest. Emotionally, most Tibetans clearly remain very attached to the Dalai Lama, and consider that what he does is the right thing to do. However, there are also some voices within Tibet and abroad wondering whether the Dalai Lama's approach is going to get Tibet anywhere. This is a good sign as it shows how society is changing, how people are asking questions, which leads us to believe that a democratic way of planning the future is being shaped.

AAN: Since you have insight into both worlds: Western and Tibetan. How do you view the present contemporary art scene in Tibet?

GG: I think the access to art is rather good with the availability of the internet, the possibility for artists to travel to any part of China, to travel abroad or to engage in some exchanges with some mainstream artists within China. Compared to ten or fifteen years ago, the environment has changed dramatically.

AAN: In comparison to what is happening in the art world, how would you view the art being produced in Tibet today? Can it compete with the art on view in Europe or in America?

GG: Not yet. Although the Tibetan artists are quite active in Lhasa, there is a lack of freedom for creativity. In Beijing, artists have a certain freedom to experiment, to express themselves or to express their views about what is happening in China. That is not the case in Lhasa. Artists have to be careful with what they say in their work. In addition, there is no proper environment, with no regional official gallery where people can see contemporary art. It is quite different from Beijing, Shanghai or any other major city in China where they have facilities for people to view contemporary art.

AAN: Is your work known in Tibet?

GG: I think so, I know most artists, and some of them used to be my students. I should say yes.

AAN: You mentioned your former students. Did you teach?

GG: When I finished my studies in Beijing, I went back to Lhasa, and I became a teacher. By 1985, when I went back to Tibet, they had finally set up an art department within the university in Lhasa, and I ended up teaching there for six or seven years before going to India. In addition, I did some teaching when I was in London, very basic things, trying to introduce the Eastern way of making drawings and watercolours into the school.

AAN: Has your being part of the Venice Biennale triggered new projects?

GG: The reaction has been amazing. That is why I ultimately needed an assistant. I was contacted by other biennales, and as a result, I will be exhibiting at the Brisbane Biennale in Australia and at the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea.

OLIVIA SAND

