



What you own... *Three Realms: Gonkar Gyatso,* Brisbane

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Religions are (intermittently) too interesting to be left simply to those who actually believe in them.
(Alain de Botton, via Twitter)



Galleries, historically, have been reverential spaces and, from time to time, an exhibition reclaims some of that aura. The installation, *Do What You Love: The Third Realm* by Tibetan/Chinese artist Gonkar Gyatso (recently exhibited at Griffith University Art Gallery) highlighted art's traditional relationship with the spiritual. The light was low, with a series of headless Buddhas tumbled on the floor, gently spot-lit, covered with ash or powder. The gallery walls were dark on two long sides. Gold feature walls at the front and





back of the space were painted, in white, with thumb-print characters, outlines of Tibetan offering symbols. A headless Buddha is buried into each – their burial is symbolic of what is surrendered within a political process, but it is also a classic rendition of ignorance. With his back to the entry – a gesture of trust – bathed in rosy red light, was a seated Buddha as tall as I am. Every part of the surface of the Buddha is covered with stickers. The cheap consumable nature of these is at odds with the care with which they are applied to the statue. Noloose ends – even on the difficult-to-apply area over Buddha's knobbly hair, these suckers are firm.

There was a solemnity and dignity in this display, bathed in pathos and sadness. It draws on, even as it subverts, Buddhism's meditative traditions, ultimately directing our attention to worldliness rather than inner awareness, and the complexity of relationships – spiritual, emotional, cerebral, political. The headless Buddhas were carefully scattered under their spotlights, the ash that covered them speaking to decay of centuries-old traditions, in contrast with Gyatso's 'nonsense' (thumb) printed/painted encryption on the gold walls. It all evoked the disturbance that Gyatso expresses with quiet determination, the

more powerful for its restraint. The trappings of meditative spaces that we have associated with spirituality and religion have their original meanings and methodologies replaced with global political and polemic possibilities.

Gyatso is a rising star in the Asia-Pacific. With the region's dynamic contemporary art market paralleling its developing economic base, rapid political change and social flux, Gyatso's work and its references to pertinent issues from his Tibetan and Chinese background, has become increasingly sought-after. The exhibition curator, Griffith University Art Gallery director Simon Wright, met Gyatso in New Zealand in 2010, having seen his work in major international exhibitions such as Hong Kong and Venice in 2009 and later in the same year at the Sydney Biennale. It was at that meeting in 2010 when they agreed to undertake a project together in Brisbane, and to produce the major monograph also launched with *Three Realms*. Gyatso has been included in important group exhibitions including the *Asia-Pacific Triennial 6* (2009) but this represents his first significant survey exhibition. Wright observed that to have begun the process even eighteen months later would



have increased the difficulty in both securing work (given recent availability issues) and covering its rapidly increasing value.

Wright's interests in presenting a significant body of Gyatso's work for Australia lie in its political, cultural and aesthetic objectives, its developing international status, and in the issues of racial and cultural origin paralleled in the work of many Indigenous Australian artists. Such artists as Gordon Bennett, Vernon Ah Kee, Tony Albert, Judy Watson and Fiona Foley respond similarly to their cultural heritage without being limited by it. Their commentary extends debate about indigenous political and social issues into Complementing the immersive installation of *Realm Three, Realm Two* at the University of Queensland Art Museum provides useful context in the development of Gyatso's practice since his mature style emerged in 2003. It incorporates works, largely pencil and stickers on paper, from 2003 to 2011, that demonstrate his embrace of contemporary art and its freedoms. Using the technique he developed from his study of the traditional Tibetan *thangka* and his



contemporary arenas of art and developing culture. Gyatso, born in 1961, is of Tibetan descent and spent his childhood there, albeit under Chinese rule during the Cultural Revolution. He lived in Beijing during 1980-84 and learnt Chinese brush painting before travelling to India to research Tibetan scroll painting (*thangka*). He returned to Tibet under independent rule establishing the first avant-garde artists association in Tibet with the Sweet Tea House in 1985. In 1996 he began to study art in London, radicalising his artistic ideas and beliefs. He retains his residency there while preparing for his first solo exhibition for a New York gallery.

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24 February 2012, Wright made the point that the work is Gyatso's offering of himself, his beliefs and images for consideration by an audience, with the implication that the work must also bereceived to make the cycle complete.

Realm Two at UQ Art Museum opened with Gyatso's exploration of his multiple identities: a series of four selfportraits, all made in 2003. *My Identity 1, 2, 3 and 4* describe his cultural, but not actual, journey, from 1 (*Tibetan Robe*) to 2 (*Painter in Communist China*), to 3 (*Refugee Artist*) and 4 (*London Studio*). His pose, sitting in front of his easel with his artist toolbox at his side, is a constant but the trappings of his journey change dramatically. In the first, he is a Tibetan *thangka* painter before the arrival of the Chinese in Tibet (pre-1950) with luxurious and traditional trappings. The second shows him in uniform, obediently painting an image of Mao, studio lined with newspaper, furnishings rudimentary. The

his application of stickers to the Buddha image, he adds witty commentary, often in speech bubbles. The works acknowledge the lingering cultural traditions, the highly crafted order of his training, and found/re-cast objects – the stuff of daily contemporary life: newspaper headlines, kitsch Cupie doll imagery, irreverent remarks ('Dearest Dalai Lama, what's your vision?').

At the panel discussion at the University of Queensland Art Museum on third sees him painting in a corrugated iron shack in a refugee camp in Dharamsala, and the work on the canvas describes his hopes for an independent Tibet. The Dalai Lama's framed photograph watches over him. The final image shows him in a modernist studio, his hair cropped fashionably short, his upper arm sporting a tattoo that translates as 'Tibet', and his painting abstract, a mandala that has been digitally updated. The constant in the image is his belief in his vocation as an artist and the stripping away of tradition and servitude to reach individualistic freedom. It is a pithy summation of his journey.

Images since 2003 utilise two innovations described by Maura Reilly in the project's accompanying book/catalogue: language-as-form (seen in *The Religion Question*, 2004-05); and playful essays in collage (such as *Pokemon Buddha*, 2004).² These have allowed Gyatso to disguise his political intent, and also led to his unique approach in depicting forms of the Buddha. He stated in 2005: 'I figured I would take what I knew of Buddhism, and compare it with what I knew of Western culture – the many interpretations Buddhism has gone through depending on fashion and trends.'

These works become a significant reflection of the contemporary state of the globe. Gyatso's Pop-ish application of stickers ('Pop Candy' as Wright coins them in his catalogue essay), themselves a mish-mash of Asian and Western consumer interests and markers of specific national



identity, add to the accessibility of the work but are used in a highly structured way. His 2009 work *Reclining Buddha: Beijing Tibet Relationship Index* is some six metres long, with notations including, 'The Age of New Anxiety', between 1963-68. A speech bubble for 1997 notes, 'What you own will finally own you', and seems prescient given the current financial and environmental crises. Traffic, anime and planes revolve around the ancient image of peace and tranquility. Gyatso notes that drawing on humour satisfies his need for commentary without causing significant offence, particularly in China where his work is still shown.

One world and many dreams (2008) narrates a view of the Beijing Olympics. The projection of unity and openness by the Chinese is undermined in this work in which the Buddha figure's speech bubbles are censored, with 'xxxx's replacing legible words. In *Yo You! Protect your airway* (2008) the Olympic rings are stickers incorporating sporting, military and cultural markers, with cars lining the circle and dominating the drawing, air

pollution subverting the healthy image of sport.

Wright's analysis of Gyatso's Pop interests describes his methodology as akin to a musician, using 'sampling, jamming and improvisation, lifting from here and there, and yet doing it in such a way as to make a singular contribution with a signature style'. The cultural power of politics, consumerism and humanity, akin to religion, dominates Gyatso's images, which are as beautiful as they are powerful. He has crystallised a 'way of seeing that deals as much in difference as it does in resemblance'. Within it is a sensitively expressed humanity for all people and issues, opening our eyes to another realm altogether.

1. *Realm 3* was part of Brisbane's city-wide collaborative project *Three Realms*, curated by Simon Wright and shown at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane (*Realm One*, an installation, 20 August to 15 October 2011), the University of Queensland Art Museum (*Realm Two*, a survey of Gyatso's mature work, 25 February to 29 April 2012), with *Realm 3* at Griffith University Art Gallery, 25

February to 14 April 2012. The Queensland Art Gallery was also involved through its staff; Suhanya Raffel opening *Realm2*, and Russell Storer in a panel discussion with the artist. See *Art Monthly Australia* # 248 April 2012 for cover and editorial images/text relating to *Realm 3*. 2. Maura Reilly, 'Gonkar Gyatso: '[A] product of occupied Tibet', in Simon Wright, *Three Realms – Gonkar Gyatso*, Griffith University Art Gallery, University of Queensland Art Museum and Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2012, pp. 10-25. *Three Realms: Gonkar Gyatso* was a Griffith University Art Gallery exhibition partnership with the University of Queensland Art Museum and Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; exhibition details below (footnote 1). The project's accompanying catalogue is available via www.griffith.edu.au

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