



# Review

**Contemporary Tibetan Art:  
From the Collection of Shelley  
& Donald Rubin at Oglethorpe  
University Museum of Art.**  
February 2009

*Review by Jonathan Ciliberto for  
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Jan. 10, 2009 - Feb. 22, 2009 at  
Oglethorpe University Museum  
of Art (Atlanta, Georgia)

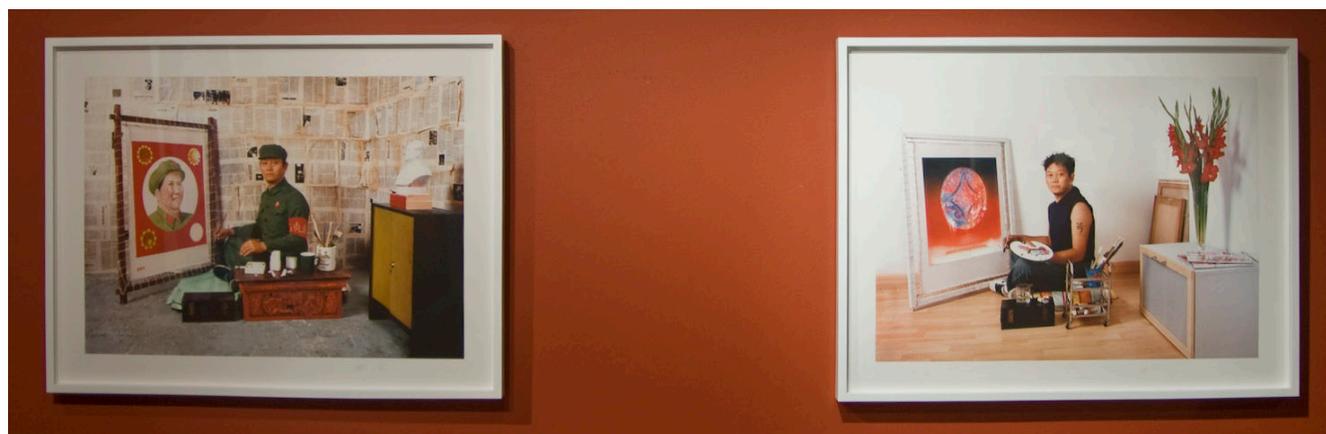
Despite Tibet's remote and  
inaccessible location, Tibetan  
art has historically developed  
under a strong amount of foreign  
influence. Buddhism, itself an  
import to Tibet, has incorporated  
influences in visual styles, artistic  
techniques, and traditions from  
neighboring areas from the  
religion's introduction in the 7th  
century. These influences have  
come from many neighboring  
cultures: present-day India, Pakistan, Nepal, Central Asia, and China.[1]



REVIEW: Contemporary Tibetan Art: From the Collection of Shelley & Donald Rubin at Oglethorpe University Museum of Art. Photo by J. Ciliberto.

The Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959 has had wide repercussions for Tibetan artists, and these continue to reverberate to the present day. Many contemporary Tibetan artists have grown up and trained entirely outside of Tibet proper, while others have remained in the region and received education in the Tibetan Autonomous Region or other parts of China.

Prominent collectors of Tibetan religious art (and founders of the Rubin Museum of Art), Shelley and Donald Rubin (Oglethorpe Alumnus, 1956) have also collected contemporary Tibetan art, which is the basis for an exhibition at Atlanta's Oglethorpe University Museum of Art Skylight Gallery. Amongst the artists included are many of the most prominent names in contemporary Tibetan art: Drugu Choegyal Rinpoche, Gade, Tsering Dorjee, Gonkar Gyatso, Losang Gyatso, Norbu, Pema Donyo Nyingje (the 12th Tai Situ Rinpoche), Mukti Singh Thapa.



Gonkar Gyatso (1961-). My Identity series. Photo by J. Ciliberto.



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The Oglethorpe Skylight gallery displays more than 35 works by 18 individuals through 22 February 2009. One large monochrome photograph, (by Lois Conner), shows a number of Tibetan artists standing in front of the Potala, the previous home of the Dalai Lamas and the emotional heart of Tibet.

Standing between the artists and the Potala is some scaffolding; leftover from the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the creation of the Tibetan Autonomous Region in 1965. One wonders if the juxtaposition of 14 contemporary artists with the 'statement' of 40 years of Chinese over-lordship is meant to convey some unified artistic stance. However, the voices of these artists, as evidenced by Oglethorpe's exhibition, are multiple, rather than singular. This ambiguity of voice confronts the viewer throughout the exhibition. In the West, one is accustomed to view Tibetan art through the lens of politics. But, according to Museum curator and director, Lloyd Nick this monomaniac focus is something a viewer brings to the work of art, and not necessarily the sole or primary motive of the artists. While it is undoubted that works by Tibetan artists refer to recent (and ongoing) tragic events in their homeland, it is not the case that this is the only note they sound. While monks whose culture has now largely vanished in Tibet will surely express this loss in artwork, it is also the case that monks bring more to their work than comment on the events of the last century. Thus, viewers of contemporary Tibetan works by Buddhist



Losang Gyatso Green Zone of Amogasiddhi, 2007 Lightjet print, edition of 5. Image courtesy Oglethorpe Museum of Art.

monks should not develop tunnel-vision regarding the message of such works; general comments on materialism and the Western hegemony on international culture are as evident in the works as more particular comments on the state of Tibet.

While the purpose of Buddhist Art is clear, the intentions of contemporary artists are more often ambiguous. Ambiguity is, of course, a theme, as well as an explanation for the meaning of contemporary art. A lack of clearly-defined purpose, message, motivation, or execution is explained as a kind of intentional and/or valued ambiguity, based as much on the 20th century's erosion of the individual through industrialization as on the ideas of dislocation in Freud and quantum physics.

The exhibition is titled "Tibetan Contemporary Art", as opposed to "Contemporary Tibetan Art," and one sees the distinction in the many artists represented who partake of the styles of modern Western art: impressionism (Tsering Dorje), conceptual art (Gonkar Gyatso), pop art (Tenzing Rigdol, Losang Gyatso), naturalist portraiture (Shelka), and surrealism/DADA (Nortse [Norbu Tsering]). For these artists, the world of contemporary art seems takes precedence in their work over the particularly traditions of Tibetan art. Given their dislocated status, this is not surprising.



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Meanwhile, others (Pemba Wangdu, Jhamsang, Dru-Gu Choegyul Rinpoche, Pema Donyo Nyinje [Tai Situ], Mukti Singh Thapa) work with traditional materials and forms, from thangka painting to familiar narrative elements (e.g., Dru-Gu Choegyul Rinpoche’s paintings of episodes from the life of Milarepa).

This is not to say that there is clear demarcation, a point made by the “New Scripture” series by Gade “based on traditional Tibetan woodblock printed pages of religious texts” [from exhibition label], but incorporating imagery from both traditional and Western sources. Also exhibiting this blending of traditional and non-traditional are two exquisite paintings by Tenzin Norbu Lama (Norbu) employing traditional thangka painting technique with non-standard symbolic and



Nortse (Norbu Tsering) (1963-) *The State I Am In- 2*, 2007 Mixed media on canvas. Image courtesy Oglethorpe Museum of Art.

compositional devices.

Pemba Wangdu’s trio of paintings — *Lust*, *Envy*, *Jealousy* — employ graphic styles traditional to Himalayan Buddhist art in the figures and clouds, as well as traditional materials (stone-ground pigments on cloth). However, the compositional device of removing these traditionally peripheral, supporting figures in full frame, presents a modern vision. Such figures serve a similarly didactic purpose in Buddhist art, enforcing the artist’s metaphoric

physical positioning of the figures, bent and twisted by their titular ills. “Each individual painting in this series depicts a specific “mental poison” that, when indulged, pushes one further away from nirvana.” [Museum label]

The arrangement of the exhibition in both of the Museum’s two large rooms, lit by both natural



Pemba Wangdu (1969-) *Lust, Envy, Jealousy*, 2005 Stone ground pigments on cloth. Photo by J. Ciliberto.

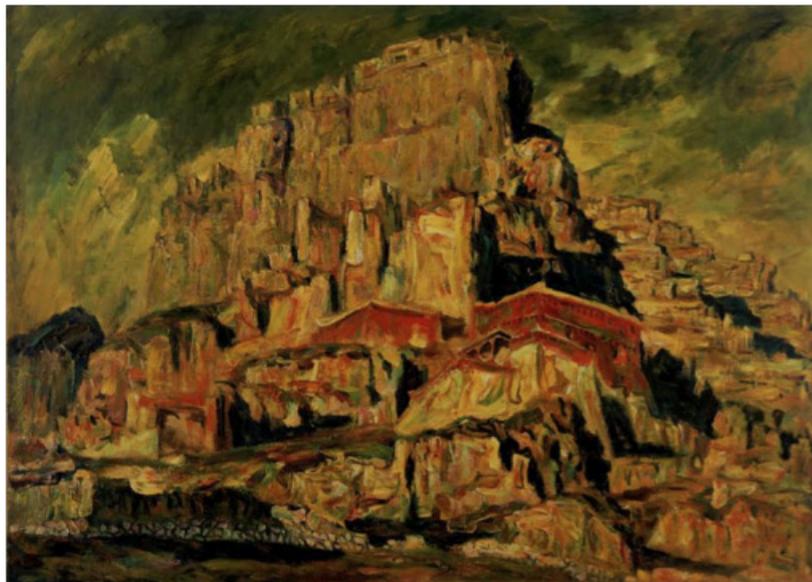


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and artificial light, is spacious and welcoming. On my many visits to the Skylight Gallery, set atop Oglethorpe's library and amid its scenic campus, I have rarely encountered crowds; indeed, I am often the sole visitor, which truly encourages a peaceful, considered experience.

Although the exhibition lacks supporting material (in the form of artist bios, essays, etc.) the label quality is superb, providing cogent and concise information on artists and their approaches.

Amongst the works obviously rooted in Tibetan Buddhist art is a painting of Buddha Vairocana by Mukti Singh Thapa, a Tibetan artist who works in the Newar tradition — a strong aesthetic current throughout the history of Tibetan art. Upon casual viewing, one sees a painting executed in a traditional manner of Vairocana. “But the iconography in this painting is not technically correct, and this would exclude the painting from a strict religious use. The religious iconography in a traditional thangka derives its meaning from a very specific logic, and is meant to be actively used by practicing Buddhists. But by filling the space around the Vairocana figure here with small heads that have no iconographic value, and by associating Vairocana with dragons instead of the traditional lions, Thapa has created a painting that serves a more decorative function. It is beautifully executed, but has no specific ritual use.” [Museum label] What is the purpose of this painting, one wonders. Is it intended as a purely decorative work, albeit one which refers to the lineage of painters of which Mukti is a part? Are the slight deviations from canonical standards meant to illustrate the consistent, unavoidable strain that exists between a tradition devoted to religious art (clearly purposed) and one whose purpose is less well-defined (contemporary art)?



Tsering Dorjee (1958-) Guge, Oil on canvas. Image courtesy Oglethorpe Museum of Art.

Further, the international artworld is a world unto itself, and many Tibetan artists work in it, accepting the influences and rules of that world and incorporating these into their practice. This position is presented especially clearly in Gonkar Gyatso's Cindy Sherman-esque *My Identity* series of photographs, which picture the artist in a variety of personae, including Mao propaganda painter and cosmopolitan art world artist. The photographs underscore the precarious nature of Tibetan artists' identity, counterpoised with the multiple identities of the artist in contemporary society: social commentator, hagiographer, creator of goods, slave to fashion and a global industry.

Speaking more speculatively, one omission from the exhibition is work by non-Tibetan artists from the Tibetan region. Tibet has existed under Chinese suzerainty for four decades and one wonders about the broader aesthetic activity of the region during this period, beyond the well-documented erosion of Tibetan Buddhist art? Another way to put this is: the “canon” of contemporary Tibetan art is determined according to a particular historical/ethical perspective, rather than to any truly objective scholarly position.



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It is true that the changed demography of Tibet is due to aggressive actions undertaken by the government in Beijing, but art history, if it claims to any objective standard, is beholden to view history, however brutal or destructive, as instances of something that stands beyond personal or ethical preference. For example, Mongolian Buddhist art partakes of the traditions of Tibetan due to the previously militaristic-expansionist activity of both Tibetans and Mongolians. One wonders if the re-settling of ethnic Chinese into the Tibetan region will produce responses wholly unexpected, both in terms of Tibetan traditions and the victims of the takeover of Tibet. Similarly, and not to give validity to the actions of the government in Beijing, one wonders if any evidence exists behind the rhetoric of the latter: have any artistic traditions previously in the minority in the region not shown signs of resurgence?

Given that this collection is derived largely from those involved in the international art market, with collectors sympathetic to Tibetan culture, this sort of monoculture is not surprising. Further, while Tibetan contemporary art is hot, contemporary art from individuals living in the Tibetan Autonomous Region who consider themselves Chinese is decidedly not.

Oglethorpe's dedication to Buddhist art is rare amongst Atlanta institutions. Beginning in 1986 with its exhibition "The Many Faces of Buddha" ("the first American exhibit in 50 years devoted exclusively to the Buddha" [link]), through its recent alliance with the Rubin Museum of Art



Tenzin Norbu Lama (Norbu) (1971-) *Liberation*, 2008. Stone ground pigments on cloth. Courtesy Oglethorpe Museum of Art.

which brings six exhibitions of Tibetan art to the Museum, Oglethorpe continues a steady tradition of exhibiting works of Buddhist art in Atlanta. While the works in the present exhibition are not pieces of religious art, that they proceed in many instances from an artistic culture which is deeply tied to a religious activity is evident in both the techniques and styles of the works, but also through many of the themes considered: identity, the individual in society, personal freedom, and cultural history.

[1] [http://www.himalayanart.org/pages/peter\\_della\\_santina/development\\_pdsantina.html](http://www.himalayanart.org/pages/peter_della_santina/development_pdsantina.html)