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***Tradition Transformed: Tibetan Artists Respond***

**First exhibition of contemporary Tibetan art in a New York City museum**

New York – There is no Tibetan equivalent for the word “art” as it is known in the West. The closest approximation is *lha dri pa*, literally, “to draw a deity.” Traditionally, neither the Tibetan language nor the Tibetan cultural framework has recognized art for art’s sake, and an artist’s efficacy rests in his ability to precisely replicate an established visual language and portray the essence of a particular deity.

This puts contemporary Tibetan artists in a precarious position. While their work is informed by Tibetan artistic traditions, the majority of these artists do not live in Tibet, and some never have. The contemporary Tibetan artist’s challenge, then, is two-fold: as he forges a name for himself in the competitive art world, he must also try to find his own place within Tibet’s rich and formalized artistic legacy. What does it mean to be a Tibetan artist who does not follow Tibetan artistic prescriptions?

*Tradition Transformed: Tibetan Artists Respond*—the first exhibition of contemporary Tibetan art presented in a New York City museum—features nine artists who grapple with these very issues of cultural and artistic negotiation and who work with traditional forms in innovative ways.

Technology, travel, displacement, and personal artistic freedom have informed their individual responses to the complex interaction between tradition and modernity in both art and culture. The artists—Dedron, Gonkar Gyatso, Losang Gyatso, Kesang Lamdark, Tenzin Norbu, Tenzing Rigdol, Pema Rinzin, Tsherin Sherpa, and Penba Wangdu— were invited to submit new and recent works. Specific works by the same artists were then selected from private collections to complement these new pieces and highlight each artist’s range.

Of the nine artists, five were born in Tibet, three come from Nepal and one was born in India. Dedron, Tenzin Norbu and Penba Wangdu continue to live in their Himalayan homelands, while the others have emigrated to Europe and the United States at different stages in their lives. The majority of these artists are trained in traditional painting and the strict interpretations prescribed by Buddhist religion—spiritual formulas and artistic norms from which they break by experimenting with alternative media and by extracting sacred symbols from their religious context, repurposing them for self-expression.

Many of their works consistently juxtapose and merge the sacred with the profane. The large Buddha in Gonkar Gyatso’s *L.A. Confidential* (2007), is filled with tiny, disarmingly colorful stickers. Tibetologist Michael R. Sheehy, PhD notes that the conscious re-appropriation of the sacred visual form of the Buddha is a recurring theme in Gyatso’s work. Though born in Lhasa, Gyatso describes his life as “imbued with Chinese tradition,” a source of great frustration and disconnect from the cultural observations of previous generations of Tibetans. It is this cultural rift, Sheehy explains, that Gyatso explores in his art.

On the other hand, Dedron—the only woman featured in the exhibition and one of a handful of Tibetan women artists—says that her work is not a response to politics, but rather a means for raising awareness on behalf of women and animals. Using deep brown and gold pigments found in Tibet’s mineral-rich soil, Dedron’s work reflects her home and concerns—mountains, yaks, birds, nuns, clouds, women’s spheres, and a diminishing respect for the natural world.

“Fusionism” is the term artist Tenzing Rigdol uses to describe his work, and indeed it could well be applied to any of the works of art in the exhibition. Though this blending of styles and traditions is so often a result of oppression and displacement in the case of Tibet, many of the featured artworks seek to strike a balance between traditional Tibetan culture and those of the artists’ adopted homelands. The Buddha in Rigdol’s *Excuse me Sir, Which Way is to My Home?*

(2008), for example, is cut from a roadmap of the United States. In place of temptations of the ego that traditionally appear in *thangkas*, Rigdol's Buddha is surrounded by temptations of the modern variety: cologne bottles, cars, and iPhones.

Tsherin Sherpa, for one, makes a case for the value of transforming traditions. His *Preservation Project #1* (2009) warns against the pitfalls of forced cultural preservation. It features the Buddha's head and many hands in the shape of various *mudras*, all pressed against the inside of a glass jar. Sherpa describes this piece as an emotional one for him. Many in his generation, he says, have "not received a formal education on Buddhist philosophy." They feel disconnected from "the true essence of Buddhist practice," and Sherpa fears that these traditions may become "just a ritualistic tradition for some of us." His painting is "an attempt to question and provoke all of us to check and see how we are actually preserving" traditions. For Sherpa and for many of these artists, Tibet's traditions may be kept alive and relevant through their very transformations.

*Tradition Transformed: Tibetan Artists Respond* is on view from June 11 – October 18, 2010.

### **Catalogue**

A 200-page full-color hard cover catalogue featuring these nine, as well as several additional contemporary Tibetan artists, is available for purchase at the Rubin Museum gift shop. The catalogue includes essays by H.G. Masters, Michael R. Sheehy, and Anna Bremm and an interview with Michael R. Sheehy and Paolo Vanzo. Co-published by ArtsAsiaPacific and the Rubin Museum of Art. \$38.

### **The Artists**

#### **Dedron**

Dedron, the only woman artist in *Tradition Transformed*, was born in Lhasa in 1976. Her richly-hued paintings of land and cityscapes—many of which are created on pieces of recycled leather from traditional Tibetan shoes—invoke common Tibetan motifs such as buddhas, yaks, and nomads without referencing traditional Tibetan religious art. Her distinct style incorporates Modernist, Cubist, and Surrealist influences.

#### **Gonkar Gyatso**

Gonkar Gyatso was born in Lhasa in 1961. Gyatso's frustrations with being disconnected from the cultural observances of previous generations of Tibetans is a recurring theme in his work, which often features his trademark Buddhas constructed out of collaged colorful stickers and cutouts from pop culture magazines. He is the founder of the Sweet Tea House (London), the first gallery in Europe devoted to showcasing contemporary Tibetan art.

#### **Losang Gyatso**

Losang Gyatso was born in pre-Communist Tibet in 1953, but was raised and educated in Britain

and the United States. Gyatso began creating works of art in 1992, simply wishing to privately explore his own aesthetics. This evolved into an interest in Tibetan pictographs, folk imagery, textiles, and utilitarian objects. Most recently Gyatso has used photographs and videos by and of Tibetans to create exaggerated, pixilated works that are nearly unrecognizable up close but take shape at a distance. He played the role of Lord Chamberlain Phala in Martin Scorsese's film, *Kundun*.

### **Kesang Lamdark**

Kesang Lamdark, the son of a reincarnated lama, was born in Dharamsala in 1963 and raised in Switzerland. Lamdark's work typically combines unusual materials with light. He is best known for his pierced beer can art, created by pin-prick engravings on mirrors that are then illuminated from within. Lamdark's experiences in India, Switzerland, and the United States have resulted in a complex fusion of ideas and influences.

### **Tenzin Norbu**

Tenzin Norbu was born in 1971 in Dolpo, Nepal to a family that has produced painters for over 400 years. He is well-known in Nepal for his fusion of traditional art and contemporary illustration set in his pastoral, innovative rendering of landscapes, many of which feature scenes of traditional life in the high Himalaya. Norbu has illustrated four children's books and founded the Kula Ri Mountain School in his native Panzang Valley, creating educational opportunities for children in this remote region.

### **Tenzing Rigdol**

Tenzing Rigdol was born in 1982 in Kathmandu, Nepal. He grew up under the influence of a carpet factory in Nepal, acquiring production skills that are reflected in the precise graphic structures of his paintings. He has trained in traditional Tibetan art forms, classical painting, traditional Tibetan carpet design, Tibetan sand painting, and butter sculpture. Rigdol refers to his work as "fusionism," a term that aptly describes what often looks like cubist deconstructions of traditional Tibetan *thangkas*.

### **Pema Rinzin**

Pema Rinzin was born in 1966 in Tibet while his family was en route to India. He is a master Tibetan *thangka* painter and his traditional training takes interesting shape in his contemporary works. Rinzin's paintings in *Tradition Transformed* are based on clouds, a ubiquitous Tibetan *thangka* motif. After his three-year tenure as artist-in-residence at the Rubin Museum of Art, Rinzin founded the New York Tibetan Art Studio in Brooklyn.

### **Tsherin Sherpa**

Tsherin Sherpa was born in 1968 in Kathmandu, Nepal. He started studying *thangka* painting at the age of twelve under the guidance of his father, a renowned *thangka* artist from Nyalam, Tibet. His art questions contemporary methods and rhetoric of preserving tradition in the modern world. Sherpa's disarmingly colorful paintings are often filled with images of the trappings of consumerism and merge such disparate forms as Buddhist deities with gas masks, mudras under fire, and pop art-style bombs and money signs hovering above traditional Buddhist forms.

### **Penba Wangdu**

Penba Wangdu was born in Shigatse, Tibet in 1969 and has spent the majority of his life in Central Tibet. Of the *Tradition Transformed* artists, his works remain truest to traditional Tibetan aesthetics, narratives and materials—he is one of the few living artists who continue to use traditional stone ground minerals. Wangdu's works offer a spin on the visual representation of Tibetan Buddhist anxieties such as envy and lust.

### **About the Rubin Museum of Art**

RMA holds one of the world's most important collections of Himalayan art. Paintings, pictorial textiles, and sculpture are drawn from cultures that touch upon the arc of mountains that extends from Afghanistan in the northwest to Myanmar (Burma) in the southeast and includes Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, and Bhutan. The larger Himalayan cultural sphere, determined by significant cultural exchange over millennia, includes Iran, India, China, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. This rich cultural legacy, largely unfamiliar to Western viewers, offers an uncommon opportunity for visual adventure and aesthetic discovery.

Admission to RMA is \$10 for adults; \$7 for seniors, neighbors (zip codes 10011 & 10001 with ID), and artists (with ID); \$2 for students (with ID); free for seniors the first Monday of every month; and free for children under 12 and for museum members. Gallery admission is free to all on Fridays between 6pm and 10pm.

Open Monday 11 am to 5 pm, Wednesday 11 am to 7 pm, Thursday 11 am to 5 pm, Friday 11 am to 10 pm, Saturday and Sunday from 11 am to 6 pm; closed on Tuesday. To reach the museum by subway, visitors may take the A, C or E to 14th Street; the 1 to 18th Street; 1, 2, 3 to 14th Street; F and M to 14th Street; N, R, Q, 4, 5 and 6 to 14th or the L to 6th Avenue. By bus, visitors may take the B20 to the corner of 7th Avenue and 17th Street.