

For Immediate Release

Bhutanese visual artist Pem Lham receives the 2026 Rubin Museum Himalayan Art Prize

The annual \$30,000 prize is the largest of its kind in support of contemporary Himalayan artists



Pem Lham in her art studio in Thimphu, Bhutan; photo by Yeshi Zangpo, courtesy of the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art

Thimphu, Bhutan, September 11, 2026 – The Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art announced Bhutanese visual artist **Pem Lham** as the winner of the **2026 Rubin Museum Himalayan Art Prize**, a \$30,000 unrestricted cash prize and the largest international award in support of contemporary art related to Himalayan regions. Pem Lham accepted the award today at a celebration hosted by the Rubin in collaboration with the artist collective VAST Bhutan in Thimphu, Bhutan, where Pem Lham is based.

“I have followed the Rubin Museum’s work in celebrating Himalayan art for many years, and receiving this recognition feels truly meaningful and beyond what I ever imagined,” says **Pem Lham**. “As artists, there are moments when we wonder if our stories are reaching anyone, but this prize is a reminder that our voices matter and that there are always people connecting

with the work we create. I hope this recognition inspires my fellow artists to continue creating, while supporting my own research, experimentation, and future projects.”

As a painter and mixed-media artist, Pem Lham explores themes of folklore, gender, identity, memory, and the evolving relationship between inherited narratives and contemporary experiences. Her work balances tenderness, humor, satire, and introspection, and often deconstructs familiar cultural symbols, inviting a dialogue between past and present. At the heart of her practice is the long-term exploration of “Molay,” a spirit girl from Bhutanese mask dance traditions, whom she reimagines as a contemporary figure. Through her reinterpretation, she examines ideas of womanhood, power, and belonging.

“This recognition is an important step in flattening the landscape of a global contemporary art world that has historically underrecognized South Asian women artists,” says **Michelle Bennett Simorella, Rubin Museum director of global projects and collections**. “The Rubin Museum Himalayan Art Prize widens the lens from which we view contemporary art, and it creates the opportunity for an artist to expand upon their work or take new risks. Pem Lham’s career is just beginning, and I look forward to seeing what she does next.”

For more than 16 years, Pem Lham has been actively engaged with VAST (Voluntary Artists Studio) Bhutan, a nonprofit organization with the primary aim of providing opportunities for Bhutanese youth to develop their artistic talents. She holds a bachelor of fine arts in visual arts from Beaconhouse National University, Lahore, Pakistan, and her work has been exhibited across Bhutan, Nepal, India, Belgium, France, Switzerland, and Taiwan.

Recent exhibitions include her debut solo exhibition *Molay Moley* (2025) presented by VAST Bhutan, as well as the group exhibitions *She* (2026) at Pristine Contemporary Gallery, Delhi, India; *Bhutan Festival* (2025) at Leuk Castle, Valais, Switzerland; and *Healing with Happiness* (2022–2023), which travelled from Brussels to Paris before being exhibited at Bhutan’s Paro International Airport. In 2021 she won the White Canvas Art Competition, an international contest to support emerging Asian artists, and in 2024 she won the Best Production Designer Award at the Bhutan National Film Awards for *I, The Song*.

“Pem Lham is quite versatile in her work, demonstrating skill, whimsy, emotional depth, and a willingness to experiment and explore new forms of expression,” says **Elena Pakoutova, Rubin Museum senior curator**. “Her work is extremely relatable and emotionally resonant within Bhutan as well as the global contemporary world. Pem Lham’s clear talent has great potential to fully blossom. The grant might really propel her to explore and create more, and gain exposure beyond Bhutan.”

In addition to the annual Rubin Art Prize, the Rubin provides direct support to artists and scholars through an annual grant program and art commissions. These initiatives demonstrate the Rubin’s commitment to nurturing the next generation of artists and scholars dedicated to expanding awareness and understanding of Himalayan art. The Rubin’s global model also includes traveling exhibitions such as *Gateway to Himalayan Art*, which is touring across the United States and opening at the USC Pacific Asia Museum in October; long-term loans and collaborations that expand access to Himalayan art, such as the Rubin Museum Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room at the Brooklyn Museum; online educational initiatives for undergraduate faculty and students such as Project Himalayan Art; Mandala Lab curriculum lessons taught in New York City classrooms; and multimedia projects such as videos,

podcasts, and a magazine that expand people's understanding of Himalayan art and its insights.

About the Rubin Museum Himalayan Art Prize

The Rubin Museum Himalayan Art Prize is a \$30,000 unrestricted cash award established in 2024 to support living artists and collectives who have made a mark in creative and critically relevant dialogues between Himalayan art and contemporary life. The winner is selected by a jury of experts in the field and Rubin staff members. In 2024 the inaugural winner was Tenzin Gyurmey Dorjee, and in 2025 the winner was Khadhok – Tibetan Artists' Collective. In addition to the cash prize, recipients receive a statuette designed by artist Tsherin Sherpa.

Support

Support for the Rubin Museum Himalayan Art Prize is generously provided by the Rubin Board of Trustees, individual donors, institutional funders, and the 2026 Rubin Art Prize sponsors.

About the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art

The Rubin is a global museum dedicated to presenting Himalayan art and its insights. Founded in 2004, the Rubin serves people internationally through exhibitions, participatory experiences, a dynamic digital platform, and partnerships. Inspired and informed by Himalayan art, the Rubin invites people to contemplate the human experience and deepen connections with the world around them in order to expand awareness, enhance well-being, and cultivate compassion. The Rubin advances scholarship through a series of educational initiatives, grants, collection sharing, and the stewardship of a collection of nearly 4,000 Himalayan art objects spanning 1,500 years of history—providing unprecedented access and resources to scholars, artists, and students across the globe. rubinmuseum.org

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