

Wandering Among Icons

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The road to acceptance for modern and contemporary Tibetan art and artists within the wider international art world has been a long and difficult one, constrained as they have been by the tumultuous social and political changes of the past half century. Yet, Tibetan artists clung tenaciously to the periphery of the Chinese art world steeped in their centuries-old traditions while major artistic changes took shape in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, and Chongqing from the 1980s onwards. But even in the 1980s, a number of Tibetan artists, inspired by Tibet's early 20th-century oil-painting pioneer, the lama Gendun Jampay, were intent on changing the traditional iconography of their art to create within it a modern image, but without discarding traditional values completely. Indeed, the retention of many aspects of traditional iconography is central to the success and the power of the best of contemporary Tibetan art.

While the past decade has seen many Chinese artists achieve extraordinary acclaim and financial rewards internationally, it is only recently that the best Tibetan artists have begun to receive the broader recognition that they so richly deserve. Now that a significant number of established and emerging Tibetan artists are showing their work around the world, this has gone a long way to helping Western and Asian audiences understand that Tibet's isolation is a thing of the past. These exhibitions have also helped to dispel many of the myths and inconsistencies about contemporary Tibetan culture and society that have been perpetrated by foreigners ignorant of the Tibetan reality of today. A recent exhibition at Plum Blossoms, entitled *Fragile Mandala*, of work by two contemporary Tibetan artists, Nortse and Tsering Nyandak, was important in this respect and in showing just how different -- and powerful -- their imagery is from that made by many of their contemporaries around China.

The current exhibition, *Mushroom Cloud*, brings together a group of dynamic and enigmatic works by Gade, 37, who,

even at the beginning of the 1990s, was seen by his peers to be one of the finest young artists working in Tibet. Even then, as isolated as he was from wider cultural and artistic influences in person, he was consistently seeking new ways to express the cultural and social realities around him.

As a young painter in Lhasa at the turn of the 1990s, Gade was set apart from his peers not only for his “more abstract shapes and forms redolent of Picasso, but [also]...the use of Chinese mineral colors on cloth as opposed to popular oil paints.” (1) Yet, even with his interest in Western art at that time, one saw in Gade’s painting a clear and subtle marriage of styles. “In Gadeh’s there is a distinct juxtaposition of styles: while his paintings are essentially modern in character, he continues to work in a mostly classical Tibetan style. Not only does he copy the monastic paintings of the Ngari-Guge area in Western Tibet, but he colors his abstract pictures in the shades of the past.” (2)

Gade’s paintings from the early 1990s were almost exclusively mineral colors on cloth. This fitted well with his need to preserve his painterly links to tradition. His imagery, too, was clearly linked with Tibetan social and religious traditions, as well as embracing a highly stylized figuration that included brooding, erotic nudes that appeared to float within ethereal spaces, both aerial and aquatic. Many of his Tibetan and Buddhist figures were set within formally constructed interiors, which could be interpreted as temples or niches carved out of rock. In his towering landscapes at that time there was a surreal quality too, with a wide variety of symbolism that harked back to religious tangka painting and Tibetan mythology. Where there was any link at that time with Western art it was derived through books and not on personal experience. The desire to meld traditions, however, is not something that arrived recently in Gade’s mind or something that was particularly easy for him.

“When I went to Beijing to study at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1992, I wanted to show how the traditional and the contemporary could be brought together in my work. But I wasn’t very satisfied with this. I was young then and I didn’t

have very much life experience,” says Gade. “When I look back at that time, I see that I was looking at the Tibetan tradition and the contemporary like I was looking at mathematics, as some kind of formula. But since Buddhism and the culture were strongest for me, they dominated the look of my work, which was to represent Tibetan culture. Slowly I learned to see that bringing things together was not like a formula.

“I really like traditional Tibetan culture but I found it difficult to understand at times because there was a gap due to the Cultural Revolution. When you want to repeat the tradition I couldn’t because of the changes and my life at that time didn’t allow for it. I thought that depicting tradition wasn’t real for me because when I was young, Chinese and foreign influences had a big impact on me and on my memories of childhood. But in painting I saw that a lot of artists were trying to make their tradition mysterious. But I knew that I didn’t want my work to become mere decoration for people’s houses. I felt that I had a responsibility as an artist to my society, its culture, and its traditions.”(3)

The change in the artistic iconography among Mainland Chinese artists became particularly pronounced during the 1990s. As the economic boom led to ever more rapid urbanization, the old taboo of depicting Mao Zedong in anything but a flattering manner fell away. As Western capitalist icons proliferated, they, too, became the new icons of Political Pop art. The propagandized ideals of sanitized communist culture have long been swallowed up by visions of the harsh reality of change where the doctrine of “every man for himself” is now seemingly the norm.

For Gade, however, 2000 was the year of significant change. “I adopted my present art style. I used to elaborate more on tradition, but I began to use more contemporary ideas to talk about the realities of life as it is in Tibet. The visual language I use is very important to me so I still use traditional media like Tibetan cotton, Tibetan handmade paper and colors. I still use traditional imagery, but tradition doesn’t dominate now.”

Forms such as the tangka, the scroll, the sutra, and the mandala are vital to Gade's expression of traditional culture in his art practice. Now, however, they also serve to emphasize a new vision that incorporates traditional symbolism alongside the contemporary capitalist iconography that has come to permeate Chinese and Tibetan society -- McDonald's, Mickey Mouse, and Spiderman, for example. These have become commonplace symbols in the art of many young Chinese artists over the past decade or so. But in many ways the use of capitalist logos among many of China's Political pop artists were realized in a smooth, sophisticated manner that suggests the graphic art of slick advertising campaigns rather than any meaningful act of protest or cultural criticism. In Gade's new work his juxtapositions of traditional Tibetan symbolism and contemporary iconography are far from glossy. They are set within his rough, highly textured surfaces and forms such as the tangka, the sutra, and the mandala. His careful use of dark mineral colors, particularly his brooding reddish browns and ochers, lend his art robustness so different from his earlier paintings of a decade ago. Combining this with his placement of his new iconography within the careful geometry of his forms also lends his art a subtle power that is lacking in a great deal of work that makes up the Political pop genre.

Chinese society over the past three decades has embraced the images of capitalist enterprise at an extraordinary pace. Where such icons as Mao Zedong and the communist zealot and ideal man Lei Feng were foisted upon generations of Chinese as role models, Mickey, Spiderman, and Uncle McDonald are offered up as cute friends drawing in both child and adult alike. Today fun is the thing but it only works when you consume and are part of a homogenous mass, not unlike communism. But politics are long gone from the masses. The Party no longer tells people how to view the world and how to behave. Today global corporations are the motivators.

Three of Gade's most important new series, realized in the forms of tangka, sutra, and scrolls, appear, at first glance as traditional Tibetan works. But this is but an instant: for the

moment one sees the figures of Mickey Buddha, Uncle McDonald Buddha, Spiderman Buddha, and Communist Buddha, one realizes Gade's intention is to provoke the viewer. The provocation in the three series *Modern Tangka*, *New Sutra*, and *New Ideal* is to make us realize just how much traditional religious iconography has been replaced by secular images, which we praise directly and indirectly the moment we purchase or see anything with these logos. Unlike the deference we pay to religious figures, we embrace and befriend secular images and they are fun. They do not challenge our intellect and because this is the case we are made even more accepting of corporate philosophy. They are not fun here. Gade reminds us just how gullible we are.

Repetition of his secular icons adds a curious tension and lyricism to Gade's work in these series. One single work that encapsulates the two important aspects of his art is the beautifully realized and dramatic 11-panel piece entitled *The Demoness* (2006), in holy manuscript format. This work demands to be looked at carefully for it is narrative of subtle drama, containing as it does an extraordinary range of people, things, and icons, both religious and secular, that speak to the past and the present and our confusion with life. Such a work is reminiscent of some of ribald paintings made by Liu Dahong in the late 1980s, as well as work by the 16th-century Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525 – 1569)

The sheer vitality of *The Demoness* is also such works as *Mushroom Cloud No. 1 and No. 2*, *Father's Nightmare*, and the extraordinary 41-piece installation *The Apocalypse*. These are exceptionally thoughtful narratives, the content of which do not preach to us but allows to reflect on the reality and the manner of daily existence. Gade's vision here is not one that is exclusively meant to show us a contemporary Tibet in the throes of change, but one that is universal in nature, one in which illusion and reality are bedfellows from which it is not possible to escape. The Western viewers may not see this immediately, but once they contemplate the manner in which Gade has presented his materials and the astute juxtapositions of his

images, both traditional and modern, then they will relate fully to his art.

Any discussion today about Tibet and its relationship with China is tainted by the opaqueness of emotional argument. For many Tibetan artists there are many different realities tugging at their consciousness. In their art there is often tension but there is also a clear resolve to hold fast to many of the traditions that are under threat. But there is also a clear dissatisfaction with the outside world that looks in.

“Sometimes I really don’t get the ideas expressed by tourists that Tibetans should stick to their own culture and way of living,” says Gade. “The earth is like a village. I don’t want it to be just Western. It should be represented by all cultures and be equal. The culture is changing and it has been changing very quickly. Now, I am wondering what I really feel about Tibet and Tibetan culture. How do you classify it? Tibetan culture has many other elements to it so it is not just the traditional. The traditional way of living is just a part of this and it is vanishing. I feel that this is not within anyone’s control. Tibetans feel that they want the right of choice to live the way that they want.” (4)

Notes:

1. Andre Alexander, Interview with Gadeh, Asian Art News May/June 1992, pages 22-23. The spelling of the artist name was given as Gadeh in the original interview, but this has been standardized as Gade.
2. Ibid
3. Interview with the author in Lhasa, 15 July, 2007
4. Interview with author in Lhasa, 15 July, 2007

Ian Findlay-Brown is the founding publisher/editor of the magazines Asian Art News and World Sculpture News.

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