

become memorials to stubborn not-learning?

Another 'reading' of this exhibition could be this darker viewpoint. Tony Lane's paintings have *fata morgana* undertones. James Ross's constructed paintings are overt hard-edged reflections on the concrete barbarity of much urban space where pure administrative efficiency is the only importance. Pip Culbert's stripped back details of objects are just the bare bones on a rotting body. Bill Culbert's use of fluorescent is the favored torture-light of the long corridor, cell, and shopping mall. In such an apocalyptic setting, Gretchen Albrecht's hemisphere paintings offer us secular salvation.

John Batten



Nortse and Tsering Nyandak at Plum Blossoms Gallery

For many years, contemporary Tibetan artists lived and worked quite isolated from the mainstream Chinese art world, even though a good number were educated at China's thriving art schools. In recent years, however, Tibet has been opened up more and more to foreigners. The influx of foreigners has meant that Tibetan artists have found a growing market for their art from tourist and specialist art dealers. Over the past five years or so, Tibetan artists have participated in a good number of regional and international exhibitions. Hong Kong has been late in coming to show Tibetan artists, but, with the recent exhibition entitled *Fragile Mandala* Plum Blossoms Gallery has made up for this lack with its introduction of two of the most dynamic artists working in Lhasa today: Nortse (Domin, Norbu Tsering, b.1961) and Tsering Nyandak (b.1963).

Although painting in quite different styles Nortse and Nyandak have as their central theme human beings who represent various aspects of contemporary Tibetan life and its problems. The work is didactic, realized with a subtlety and careful consideration that sets the art



Nortse, *Childhood Memory*, 2008, mixed media on canvas, 150 x 135 cm.

by both artists apart from most of their contemporaries. While ready comparisons may be made with the art of a number of mainland Chinese artists of the post-1989 period, Nortse and Nyandak are very much their own persons.

The portrait has become an icon, both commercial and artistic, among many mainland Chinese artists of the past two decades, so much so that the power of the most shocking images of Mao Zedong, workers, peasants, soldiers, and the

female nude have been visually and intellectually debased.

Nortse's paintings have a vibrancy that is fresh. Standing alone in the center of his canvases his anonymous protagonists appear to be trapped, their swaddled heads suggest censorship. *Childhood Memory* (2008) is one of Nortse's most direct paintings and the easiest to read. The figure—dressed, one believes, as an iconic Red Guard, face bandaged in a red scarf, and hand clasping a copy of Mao Zedong's little Red

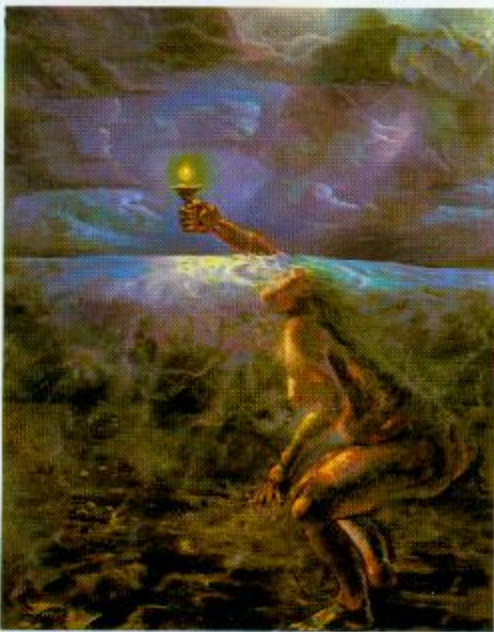
Book—certainly speaks to a time of enormous political and social upheaval where the individual was embraced by the anonymity of the masses. But at the same time as reading the picture as a memory of the past, it can also be read as something that represents the global sameness of much of contemporary society's fixation with trends. The Red Guard has become an icon in the same way as Mao Zedong.

Nyandak's large heads and figures are tinged with a sense of terror. The tone of the staring heads reminds one of the wonderful work made by the Russian artist Oleg Tselkov in the late-1970s and early-1980s. The tone of the figures, however, is very different. The strangely fleshy figures are submerged in water where tradition is buried alongside them, which is perhaps an astute comment on the inexorable disappearance of much of Tibetan culture over the past 50 years. One might easily draw such an inference from *Bound Underwater* (2007). In *Prayer Lamp* (2007) the submerged figure is looking upwards, its hand, clasping a small prayer lamp, reaches above the surface as if attempting to shine some light on a dark and foreboding world where culture and history are overwhelmed by the clouds of a shoddy world.

For viewers who remember the dark days of the Cultural Revolution, Nortse's and Nyandak's art will call to mind the surreal happenings that afflicted society then. In the new consumer-oriented China there is something similar afoot as the alienated youth of the big cities are aware of. But because today's youth has little historical perspective or knowledge of the past, they cannot make the connections to their own alienation and what consumerism does to a society's culture.

Nortse and Nyandak are clearly very thoughtful artists. The mood that they wish to create is one of unabashed dialogue with the viewer. The edgy quality to their work is striking and is wide open to a variety of cultural, social, and political interpretations.

Ian Findlay



Tsering Nyandak, *Prayer Lamp*, 2007, oil and acrylic on canvas, 163.5 x 128.5 cm. Images: Courtesy of Plum Blossoms Gallery.