

the missing peace

Artists Consider the Dalai Lama

A new exhibition traveling the country presents works of contemporary artists inspired by the person and message of the Dalai Lama. For Kay Larson, the show raises interesting questions about how artists, like meditators, work with essence and construct.

IT'S A RARE ART EXHIBITION that begins with a text by Shantideva. On a visit to the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala in the winter of 2005, the artist Bill Viola digitally taped His Holiness at prayers, his head bobbing over his text, which includes one of his favorite passages from *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*. Viola's DVD loop of a segment of these prayers plays continuously in the entrance of *The Missing Peace: Artists Consider the Dalai Lama*, an exhibition of work by eighty-eight contemporary artists, some Buddhist, some not. Mounted on the wall nearby is a translation by Tashi Chodron:

*The Precious Bodhichitta
If unborn, may it arise
If generated, may it never diminish
And may it remain ever-increasing.*

*As long as space endures
And for as long as living beings remain
Until then may I too abide
To dispel the misery of the world.*

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His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Monks by Richard Avedon, 1998. Silver gelatin print.

Avedon 3/2 A.P.

*May all Motherly sentient beings be blissful and happy
May all the lower realms be permanently empty
And may all the bodhisattvas on whatever stage they remain
Fully accomplish all of their aspirations.*

With that prayer ringing, you enter an exhibition that would not look out of place in any secular arena (museum, alternative space, or international biennial) but that holds a question quivering with stored kinetic urgency, like a tightly pitched string: Have artists—quietly and almost invisibly—become a conduit for Buddhism’s entry into the West? This exhibition—and several others focused on art and Buddhism, including those recently associated with the Buddhism Project (on the East Coast), and *Awake: Art, Buddhism, and the Dimensions of Consciousness* (on the West Coast)—are early ventures toward an answer.

It’s hard to tell how many artists represented here are Buddhist practitioners, but their sympathy or empathy with the Dalai Lama and what he evokes is evidently not restrained by their degree of exposure to the nuances of Buddhism. This exhibition is self-selecting, in the sense that the organizers—the Committee of 100 for Tibet, the Dalai Lama Foundation, and curator Randy Rosenberg, helped by a set of international advisers—sent letters to artists whose aesthetic histories they felt were compatible with the show’s intentions.

Artists were asked to donate a work for a traveling exhibition—which opened at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History in Los Angeles in June, is at the Loyola University Museum of Art in Chicago from October 28 through January 5, and comes to the Rubin Museum of Art in New York in March 2007—and for eventual sale at a fundraiser after the tour ends. Those who responded became part of the show, so it’s interesting to see who contributed.

Traditional iconography is quite rare in *The Missing Peace*. There is a “touch-the-earth” thangka lent by the Dalai Lama and an Avalokiteshvara limned in brilliant mineral pigments by Yumyo Miyasaka, a Shingon monk who grew up in his father’s temple and studied oil painting in Tokyo and thangka painting in Dharamsala, facts that speak to the cross-cultural influences at work here.

The “not-a-Buddhist” category includes Richard Avedon, whose brilliance as a photographer was to know the media stars and shoot them in telling circumstances. Avedon’s image of the Dalai Lama surrounded by his monks is an astute study of their candor and clarity, as well as a testament to the star power of His Holiness and, increasingly, of his message.

Viola, Marina Abramovic, and Laurie Anderson have long been known for their complicity with the spirit and heart of Buddhism, although the art press has been persistently befuddled in interpreting what that might mean for their work. Abramovic met the Dalai Lama in the 1980s while she was filming in India,



Right: *At the Waterfall* by Marina Abramovic, 2000-2003. Continuous video loop.

Opposite, above: *Reincarnation* by Salustiano, 2005. Pigments and acrylic resins on canvas.



and she told me that his compassion and generosity have informed her performances and videos ever since. Abramovic's installation in *The Missing Peace* is a wall-sized video projection of 108 head-shots of monks and nuns saying prayers, their voices merging into one flowing interconnectedness.

Besides the Shantideva segment, Viola and his wife, Kira Perov, have a video installation of a male and female figure, each bisected by a brilliant white light that cycles up and down through the chakras. "The luminosity of the central channel is the essence of the whole thing," Viola told me recently. He regards digital media as akin to prayer wheels, and in "spinning" them—as with the Dalai Lama DVD—he feels he is making contact with powerful ideas that came through extraordinary individuals such as saints and religious philosophers. He continued: "When you say the prayers and read the sutras, you are bringing the knowledge from the storehouse and into the living moment, and embodying it with being."

Anderson's video projection is an uncanny simulacrum of an elf-sized arhat (Anderson) and her dog, Lolabelle, both in chairs. If you turned off the projector, you would see two carvings about the size of your hand, shaped like chairs holding a person and a dog. Flip the switch, and a diminutive Anderson begins talking about taking Lolabelle on a walk in the woods, where the dog is dive-bombed by vultures. The story—about impermanence, the sky falling, the Trade Centers falling, and a renewed nervousness about samsara—accelerates quietly.

Literally, these are projections of the self and its fears. Anderson began making them in 1975, around the time she sat her first "life-changing" meditation retreat at the Barre Center in Massachusetts. After ten days of silence she discovered that her peripheral vision was activated and she could see nearly 180 degrees. "It was really eerie to realize how much I was using my eyes," she told me. As we spoke, she was getting ready for a visit from





Left: *From the Air* by Laurie Anderson, 2006. Video projection and installation.

Below: *Serpent Frightened by Color, Abstraction and Time* by William Wiley, 2004. Tapestry.

Opposite page: *Harbinger with Rainbow* by Jane Alexander, 2004. Photomontage, pigment prints on cotton paper.





Mingyur Rinpoche. “To the extent I have a teacher, he is my teacher,” she said. “I see him when he’s here, and he’s like many Tibetans, he’s very relaxed about that. He says you’re practicing all the time in your music. I’d like to think that, it would be an easy out for me. But in many ways my work is about trying to pay attention. It doesn’t feel like there’s that much difference.”

The exhibition lineup includes artists with clearly stated affinities for Buddhism and renown in the closeted realms of contemporary art: Pat Steir, Arlene Shechet, Sanford Biggers, Dove Bradshaw, Kimsooja. Two Tibetan-American painters are Losang Gyatso, with a “portrait” of the Dalai Lama’s foot in a flip-flop, standing on a mandala, and Tenzin

Left: *Terminus* by Katarina Wong, 2005–2006. Mixed media installation.

Below: *Brief History of Tibet* by Tenzing Rigdol, 2003. Acrylic on canvas.

Opposite page: *Bodies of Light* by Bill Viola, 2006. Video diptych.



Rigdol, who has two paintings, one a dramatic takeoff of Picasso's *Guernica*, in which the mangled Cubist horse and its fierce-faced rider (representing Mao) wreak brilliantly colored havoc on the Tibetan nation.

By far the biggest category, however, consists of artists it's surprising to find here. One is Salustiano Garcia, a Seville-based painter who exhibits in the international circuits and who says he's inclined toward the spiritual but knows little about Buddhism. To prepare, he sought out Tibetan teachers and did a lot of reading, he said to me at the Fowler on opening day. He pointed to ten different reds—all hand-ground and applied with a precision evocative of the Renaissance—that envelop the head of a girl. Her piercing lapis lazuli eyes seem to miss nothing and contain everything. Behind her are red Sanskrit letters that translate as "reincarnation." Salustiano explained what I could not have guessed: that the painting is a "portrait" of His Holiness in his next incarnation—presumably a challenging gender change, even for a Tibetan master.

"She is a girl moving through her future," Salustiano said. Artists tend to hide their intentions in their work, so determining exactly where the Buddhism is in *The Missing Peace* can be challenging. The "opacity factor" could lead you to believe that nobody in the exhibition has any Buddhist sympathies. Yet Salustiano said that he spent a year on his portrait, trying and discarding three versions before he got the one he wanted, because he is so drawn to what the Dalai Lama represents. "This moment is so material," he said. "The Dalai Lama offers a profoundly different way of thinking."

Katarina Wong's installation in *The Missing Peace* is a classic case of the opacity factor. Wong, who studied Buddhism at Harvard Divinity School, marveled at the way Buddhism changed as it moved out of India to other countries. That thought led her to recall friends who had moved and the ways they were still interconnected with her in codependent origination. "They remind me that we do hold each other's lives as vessels and we share them," she said. So she began collecting fingerprints, asking people to let her take impressions of the last joint of the index finger. Six years of impressions, cast in tinted beeswax, are pinned to a wall of the museum in spirals resembling the arms of galaxies. The piece, she said,

is "literally dependent" on the people who let her take their prints. She wondered, "How do you talk about a not-language-based experience in art? It's a question of translation."

To achieve that translation, artists at ease in the international art world typically rely on a grammar of form drawn from a century of modernist and postmodernist conversations. Deconstructing the work in *The Missing Peace* involves knowing at least some of that grammar, but the "not-language-based" experiences that created the originating intention are embedded in the work nonetheless, and they can be "unpacked" just as any experience can be. The unpacking process is its own reward.

The cliché that the teacher appears when the student is ready has a corollary: when the student meets the teacher, the baggage that has always been there becomes very interesting to look at. The baggage, for artists, consists of experiences inseparable from qualities of mind that are otherwise indescribable. My sense is that Buddhism intersects seamlessly with the artist's project in two ways. First, the baggage is not only interesting, it is the expression of our humanity, and artists turn to it in the same way practitioners do—to see themselves in the world and to create from that vision. Second, the work itself, when it appears, is newborn and becomes a conundrum containing both the artist's humanity and the viewer's. The process of unpacking it is not unlike what happens in practice, when you see (and start dismantling) the construct you have created.

The mind of art-making and the mind of living are not two minds. I think that many artists understand this subliminally, if not explicitly, and are deeply drawn to what Buddhism offers. To be at play in the fields of mind is a fine thing—a source of joy—and offers a glimpse of vast and fascinating complexity. ♦

