

# FEAR AND LOATHING IN LHASA VEGAS

## New art from the Roof of the World

**Damian Smith** took the train to Lhasa to report on the art scene there. What he found was a mix of personal and political discourses, informed by both international trends and entrenched local traditions.

Photo by Damian Smith  
Pemba Wangdu, Lhasa 2010





Buddhist dharma, a healthy diaspora and recently inspired art dealers are but three factors influencing the development of Tibetan contemporary art, both within and outside of the region. Added to these co-ordinates, and with no less urgency for the cultural practitioners of the moment, is the ongoing legacy of both the Cultural Revolution and, more recently, the invidious traumas arising from the 2008 Lhasa riots: head-to-head conflicts which erupted in both streets and monasteries in the lead up to the Beijing Olympics. Though briefly highlighted in the world media then, visitors to Lhasa today may be surprised by the ongoing presence of roof-top sentinels and SWAT police, teams of which patrol the Bahkor streets. Making great show of their presence, especially around the ancient Jokhang temple, a focal point to which pilgrims flock in regular and fervid procession, they are it would seem as conspicuous in the surrounding bazaar as Praetorian guards once were in the streets of ancient Rome. So it stands, on the roof of the world, in the momentous context of China, the country and marketplace from which none can claim neutrality that Tibet, an ancient and religious culture is poised on the cusp of a new becoming.

For the artists whose emergence occurred in the post-Revolutionary period, exclusive reliance on the canon of traditional art practices has proven both restrictive and inadequate. Evidence of a cultural schizophrenia, the likes of which may be ascribed to many contemporary societies, can certainly be seen in the Tibet of post-modernity. As with other transforming communities, the artists of Lhasa have tackled this problem with varying degrees of success, some nervously fleeing abroad, others remaining firmly entrenched.

Sensing that something of note was afoot, gallerists and curators had early on been attracted. Notable amongst them, Rossi & Rossi of London led the charge, publicizing with great success many of Tibet's leading painters. Of significance in the Chinese capital curators Tony Scott and Leigh Sangster Miller organized the first commercial exhibition, which, when installed at the Red Gate Gallery's 798 premises, generated strong institutional attention. Not long after, works by Gonkar Gyatso were shown at Venice's 2009 Biennale, followed by the Queensland Art Gallery's 5th Asia Pacific Triennial and the 2010 Sydney Biennale. More recently still the CU Art Museum in Colorado held a comprehensive show, the likes of which included works from both in-country Tibetan artists and those of its scattered global diaspora. Perusing works by these artists, I found many of them difficult to resist. Past fascination with the region's religion and history had drawn me into its orbit, but difficulty in travelling there kept me on either the Indian or Qinghai side. Luckily a few events conspired and when the time was right I bought myself a ticket.

Emblematic of the changes taking place in Tibet, the studio of **Penba Wangdu** is divided into two streams of practice. As art teacher at Tibet University, Penba guides his students in the art of Tangka painting, of which he is a recognized and well sought master. This is an arena in which technical skill and academic acumen is prized, the artist assiduously checking to ensure that all details in the representation of deities are correctly and accurately applied. His canvases, created with the aid of senior students, are vivid and colorful creations, distinct in their linearity and detailed to a dazzling degree. By way of contrast, in the second studio room, a different side of the artist's personality emerges. Instead of spiritually inspired canvases images of carnal and earthly delights are housed. Bikini clad women cavort with lusty bullish yaks, while in other stylized compositions the ages of man are marked by delight and decay.





In a manner rather more challenging to the orthodox, the artist **Gade** has interwoven the religious and secular, his canvases representing some of the more notable productions in this field. A founder of the seminal Gendun Choephel Artist Guild<sup>1</sup>, Gade saw early on that Tibet's traditional ways were under threat from secular and consumer culture. He responded rather than reacted, creating stylish amalgams of Buddhist, Socialist and Capitalist iconography; a disaffected trinity in constant and conflicted discourse. The young however, he suggests are far more enamored of the latter than they are with the former, disbelieving it would seem of their powerful local inheritance.

Of those living abroad, **Gonkar Gyatso**, now a British citizen and sometime resident of New York, has similarly addressed the problem of cultural dilution and loss. His well-known signature works, in which the Buddha and other deities are composed of disposable pop-culture stickers, are thoughtful reflections on the relationship between ancient and modern beliefs. Though clearly objects of critique, in Gyatso's work one wonders whether outside culture is flooding in or Tibetan imagery proliferating around the world. Given the popular success of Tibet's Mahayana traditions, especially in the context of Western nations, such an assertion is no mere act of conceit. Clearly the dissemination of the dharma is politically persuasive as well.



It is however, in the context of China that the wounds of its people must ultimately find resolve. Politically conceived, as indeed so vexed an issue must be, one might be forgiven for erring pessimistically. Divisiveness if we are to believe the world's media commentators is the only game in town. And yet, in the bars and galleries of Lhasa, and it is here that I must declare my optimism, the question of autonomy and détente may yet be softly won. Although it would be naïve in the extreme to imagine that relational shifts may occur without political backing, culture as China's avant-garde has shown can lead where others fear to tread; the genie, so they say, must eventually escape the bottle. For a younger generation of Chinese, especially those now seeking the road less travelled, the culture to be found in Tibet is a thing to be celebrated and embraced. This as we know will not be enough by far, but as the inheritors of a new and changing Republic, the possibility of cultural acceptance might at least stem from productive engagement. With this in mind I head to the artists' studios, to see their latest work and to hear what inspires their practices.



Photo by Damian Smith  
Gonkar Gyatso. Beijing 2010



First up, in a new multi-storey apartment complex, **Nyandak** ushers us in to his work space, a standard off-plan layout but bare to the concrete render. A youngish man of watchful disposition he brings out a number of paintings in progress, and later there are new conceptual photos which strike a contrasting note. Of the paintings, a response to witnessing the recent unrest, the artist took as his starting point the painful moments of the uprising. Where one may have anticipated anger, Nyandak was moved moreover by the compassion of his fellow bystanders. He set to work at his canvases with a view to enhancing their stance, seeing in his artistic endeavors an opportunity to promote that which was positively conceived. Consequently, bearing witness to harrowing events provided the opportunity to generate an outward expansion of tenderness, not merely to those who suffered but to all who are bound in its web of cause and effect. The prominent motif employed in his paintings is that of a pink-skinned baby, wandering in an empty landscape as if abandoned to its ultimate fate. Of the photos, the fragility of life, which remains a theme of prominence for the artist, is once again asserted. This time it is in the guise of delicate eggs. Row upon row they lay while hammer and boots perch ominously over their cradles. Be they life in any theatre of conflict, it is clear that their fullest capacity for blossoming is nothing if not uncertain. Suggestive of bardo existence, or of life under watchful regime, they await rather forlornly for an occasion to rise anew.





At the chaotic studio of **Nortse** (Norbu Tsering) newly painted canvases show bronzed Buddha statues broken unceremoniously at the waste. No longer objects of devotion they are the receptacles of daily life. Toothbrushes, razors and combs poke vertically from these hollow bodies, while in another desecrated sculpture a clutch of kitchen utensils suggest a spiritual legacy in decay. In other corners of the studio, the artist, who one could easily mistake for an actor, has stacked his well-known self portrait paintings. His face at times is masked, an allusion he explains to the period when SARS caused panic in the streets of his city. In other instances the artist is bandaged beyond recognition, about which he has said "I have been continually using 'wrapped or bound-up' as the principal identifying symbol or insignia of my expression, as it is the mental concept most closely interwoven with my childhood memories."<sup>11</sup> In this context he is depicted again and again at a sparse cloth-covered table, reminiscent of a Christian man of sorrows, or simply an everyman of worldly pain.

Whilst their reason for doing so may be one of discretion and tact I found that, when asked to describe their work, many of the Tibetan artists will invoke the 'intentional fallacy'. What it might mean to me, they say, is not what it means to another. Arguably subjectivity is an important Buddhist tenet, but political expediency must also enter the equation. In the case of Gade's latest work, for instance, the human condition is depicted as one in which personal autonomy is anything other than assured. Flayed beings are manipulated by the strings of a puppeteer, conveying something of a hellish if not tortured existence.





On something akin to a hunch, I mention to Gade the work of Louise Bourgeois, only to discover that the artist had visited her New York atelier. Although only mildly surprised, for indeed little in this place of incongruity strikes one as improbable, I find the connection to Surrealism rather aptly applied. Indeed, both Magritte and the painter Paul Delveaux seem to inhabit the canvases of many a Tibetan painter. Take for instance, young guns like **Puhurbu** whose painted cupboards open on otherworldly realities or **Tashi Norbu**<sup>III</sup> whose human and Buddha realms are depicted as interacting. **Benchung** (Chungda Benpa) too, whose studies in Oslo opened for the artist new pictorial vistas, has taken issue with the reality presented to him. Of all the artists in this field his work was to me the least 'Tibetan' in appearance (rather more relative to Kitaj and Paula Rego), but for whom the philosophy of his homeland was clearly a thing of concern. His headless bodies suggest a life of physical affliction, a world in which the mind is powerless to act. Pastel-hued yet Kafkaesque, Benchung's paintings are scenes of unease and subversion. If they are dreams, they are nightmarish. If a mirror of societal structures then alien is the world he perceives.

Photo by Damian Smith  
Benchung, Lhasa 2010



So much of what I saw was things of fracture and loss and pain. At other times as well, political disclosure was playfully aired in the work. In this arena of practice, one artist of note was **Keltse**. Although we were unable to meet, his photographic works were hanging at the GC Art Yard, a two-storey building on the outskirts of Lhasa, directly adjacent to the dry river bed at its edge. Small photographic pieces show Tibetans in touristy tee-shirts, across which is written 'I love O2 deficiency'; the same also appearing on placards. Ultimately it's the thing that keeps the visitors at bay. Phurbu too had made a creative shift, creating also recently an impressive sculptural piece. Composed of traditional barley beer storage vessel and multiple hose pipes and taps, the likes of which sprout from the ancient container, the work is a sardonic allusion to the industries now draining Tibet's most precious resources. This is something that from time immemorial the Tibetan's never did. In light of the region's status as the delicate 'third pole' of the planet, neither should it go unnoticed.



Photo by Damian Smith  
Phurbu, Lhasa 2010

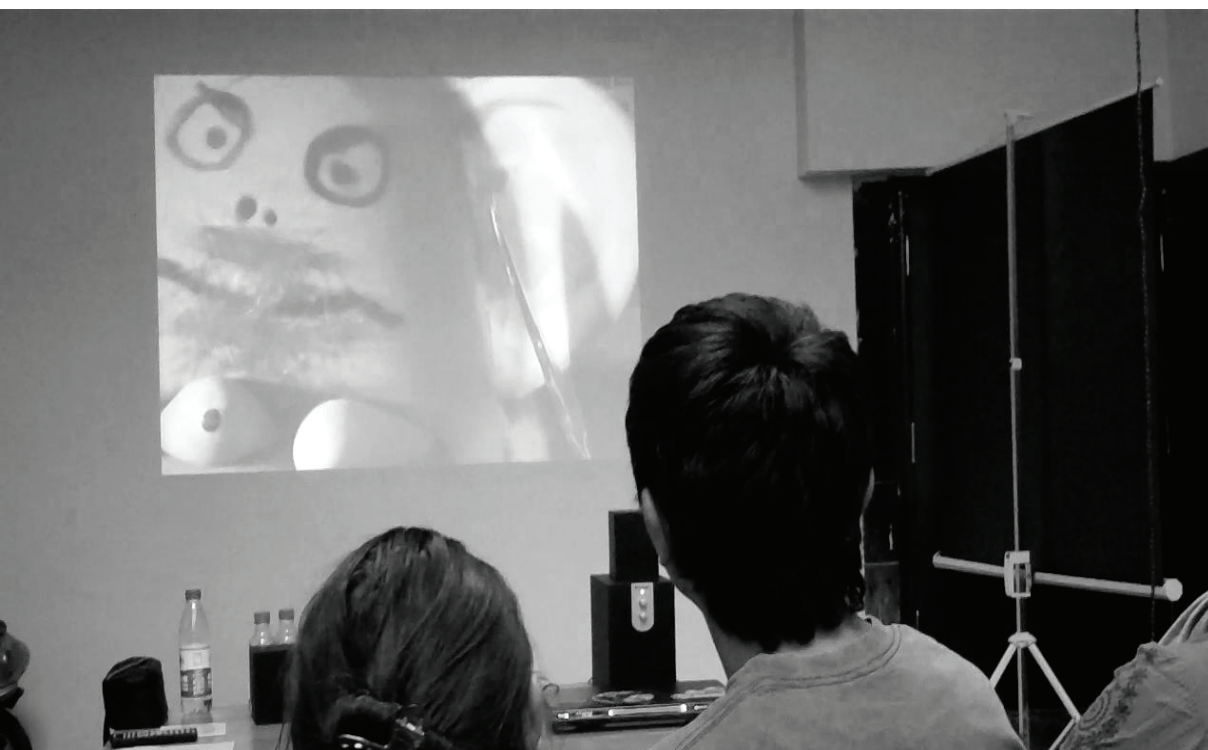


Indulging my interest in obscure art locations and with a view to contextualizing the practices of Tibet's contemporary artists, I made a sortie to the legendary Kumbum Stupa at Gyantse, a 15th Century construction boasting 75 tiny chapels. Here at the height of Tibet's internecine period, a local warlord attracted artists from near and far. The paintings, of which there are many, are as beautiful in my opinion as anything done in Italy or Europe at that time. Take for instance the luminous tantric deities, so delicately articulated by sweeping curvilinear outlines. Harmoniously balanced and serene, they contrast ever so dramatically with the frightening Mahakala, the wrathful manifestation of Chenrizig lurking in the darkness of a neighboring chapel. To approach such images one must crest a 5,000 metre pass, rub shoulders with prayer-wheeling pilgrims and skirt the revered and jasper-hued Yamzhog Lake, context which cannot be discounted in this place where interconnection and religion is all. Returning to Lhasa therefore, my thoughts were far from the contemporary scene. Even so, that was exactly the moment when Brit Art curator Tim Crowley rolled into town offering his road show of post-Punk video art to anyone who cared to watch<sup>IV</sup>. Neither myself nor Crowley were the first to visit this region, but his travelling exhibition seemed to highlight just how porous this arena has become, with curators and artists aplenty passing by or alternatively exporting their wares.



**Photo by Damian Smith**  
**Kumbum Stupa, Gyantse, Tibet**  
**Completed circa 1427**  
**It contains 75 painted chapels**





**Photo by Damian Smith  
Jake & Dinos Chapman  
Sacrificial mutilation and  
deaths of modernism  
Lhasa debut, 2010**

So who is he, I wondered? His tee-shirt said YOUNGHUSBAND, as in the soldier who invaded Tibet, only his name was written backwards. Like Crowley he's not what you think, recanting his military actions, he found god in the Himalayan foothills and proffered what might be the earliest of new-age mutterings. For his part, Crowley, appropriating something of the methodology of his hero Ken Keasey, that denizen of hallucinogens who shook the cobwebs in a few sleepy towns, borrowed a room at the local artistic guild with a view to shifting perceptions. Of note in his presentation, Jake and Dinos Chapman enacted the great deaths and splatters of modernity. Along with a handful of perplexed locals, we watched as Andy got blown away, Vincent took off an ear and Jackson demolished his Ford. There were more besides, Paul McCarthy, Sara Lucas etc, but none quite as funny as the brothers. Their characters were blood filled puppets and the soundtrack hard-core metal. Not what I was expecting in Lhasa, and certainly the reactions of the locals were mixed; Crowley however found some who were up for making more of the same. I left them to it and headed instead to the Summer Palace, where under the few tall trees of Lhasa I indulged a reality that had ceased to be.

Close to the completion of this article, I flew again to Beijing, where artist Gonkar Gyatso was opening his latest show. Busy as ever he rallied against a last-minute change of plans by throwing himself and his team into the completion of two enormous works<sup>v</sup>. Displayed at Space Station Gallery in the 798 precinct, one was a nine-metre long diorama in which deities were cut up and reconfigured, and the other a sprawling floor-piece mandala evocative of the sand-painted works of tradition. To a limited extent the show confirmed the acceptance of Tibetan art in the Chinese arena, the crowds gathering at the opening even as the assistants were adding a few final touches. There was much in this exhibition which spoke of dislocation and erosion, where glittering stickers and mercantile mantras replaced the compassionate stance of tradition. Political references however remained for the moment discrete.



The pointy-ended naysayers have not always been kind to these artists. Demanding at times a mirror of their own fervid beliefs, they remain oblivious to the subtleties and dilemmas of people both notionally 'Chinese' and apart. Aboriginal Australians, so often importuned to adopt the mainstream, will be quick to identify this dilemma as will other first nation people; I for one would not be so hasty to judge. I end this commentary however, not with the words of a contemporary artist but with the remarks of a well travelled pilgrim, one who completed a four year cross-country prostration before establishing a tavern in Lhasa. Situated in a back-street lane, it's a place where Tibetans, Chinese and others come and go, principally to watch the soccer but also to drink and sing. None of this is particularly remarkable, but at the entryway of the building a billboard of prostrating travelers bears a caption that seems to sum up so much of my experience to date. Emblazoned in the various idioms of the patrons, it reads didactically as follows: 'Snow Territory Travel Concentration Camp'. It is as its author explains, an evocation of a grand Tibetan ritual; that is a time of 'camping' in the freedom the open plains, when the mind, wild thing that it is, can at last find 'concentration', hence its honored 'concentration camp' status. With my head swirling from the Chang I headed vaguely towards my lodgings, only to be picked up by the local police. Personally I was happy to hang with the nighttime pilgrims and chant at the gates of the Jokhang temple, but alarmed by my late night vagrancy they frog marched me to where I apparently belonged, safe in my tourist hotel. "Stay in," said the sergeant of arms, "you may not know it but this is a dangerous town and things are not always what they appear". "So it seems," I shot back, my mind ablaze with contradictions and concerns, but my fascination with this land even stronger, "so it seems".



Photo by Damian Smith  
Bar sign, Lhasa 2010



## ENDNOTES

- I. Gendun Choepahl, (1903 - 1951), Tibet's mad monk of modernity, whose memory is honored by the Lhasa-based guild bearing his name, was a scholar and intellectual who demanded both open-mindedness and critically rigorous discourse. Outward looking at a time of monastic insularity his observations, though prescient, were ultimately the source of his undoing. His poetry in particular is a testament of his wide-ranging interests.
- II. Quoted in *Nortse Self Portraits – The State of Imbalance*, exhib. cat., Rossi & Rossi, 2008, p.7
- III. Both Phurbu and Tashi Norbu are members respectively of the newly emergent artists groups 'Milong' or 'Mirror' and 'Shune Dame', 'The Young Invincibles'. The development of these groups follows the success of the Gendun Choephah Artist Group and subsequent GC Art Yard and the Sweet Tea House artists who first showed their works in cafes and bars around Lhasa.
- IV. Tim Crowley's video project *28 Reasons Why We Still Need Superman*, which includes artists from Europe and Asia has been shown in locations from Hong Kong to Lhasa.
- V. Originally intended as an airing of Gyatso's nine-metre Shanghai Lhasa Express, (an expansive work that waxes pessimistically on the train to the Tibetan capital), last minute negotiations between artist and curator concluded that China was not yet ripe for this piece. Indeed the train that links these centres remains an abiding point of contention. Great Wall in scale it confirms Mao's national unity agenda. Equally it accelerates the speed with which Tibetans are being outnumbered in the foremost place of their culture.



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