



SAPIENZA, UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA  
DIPARTIMENTO DI STUDI ORIENTALI

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TIBETAN ART  
BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT:  
STUDIES DEDICATED  
TO LUCIANO PETECH

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EDITED BY  
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TIBETAN ART BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT.  
DIALOGUE WITH THE PAST:  
AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY  
TIBETAN ARTISTS

FILIPPO SALVIATI

Tibetan contemporary art is a relatively new phenomenon that has emerged mostly in the last decade, provoking a reconsideration of many long-held views about Tibet and its art. This article provides a general historic overview of the recent developments occurred in contemporary Tibetan art and is complemented by selected artists' statements which provide an 'insider look' on the major trends in Tibetan contemporary art.

CONTEMPORARY Tibetan art is a relatively new phenomenon that has invested the world art scene in the last decade and which has forced the Western audience in particular to change long-held views about Tibet and its art.<sup>1</sup> The dramatic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which were generated by and which followed the Chinese annexation of the country have deeply shattered and forever altered the traditional social, political and religious Tibetan systems. The year 1959, when the Dalai Lama left the country to go to India in exile, may be taken as a watershed date signalling the beginning of a new era in the history of the highly conservative Tibetan civilization: artists were forced to abandon completely the traditional religious subjects and were trained in Western techniques such as oil painting and forced or induced to produce paintings in the style of Chinese socialist realism with topics and subjects serving the renewed political agenda, especially during the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).<sup>2</sup> It was only with the more relaxed policies introduced in the 1980s by Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) that the situation changed and Tibet gradually opened up to new visitors from China and, to a lesser extent, the Western world. Several Han Chinese artists, filmmakers and writers came to Tibet "to escape the drudgery and regimentation of life in China and to bask in the glow of the mystical vitality of Tibet's culture and people".<sup>3</sup> Amongst these Chinese artists there were also important figures such as Han Shuli

<sup>1</sup> Though this paper focuses primarily on those artists whose ground-breaking and thought provocative work challenges the traditional artistic heritage of Tibet or moves into directions detached from the religious lore, for the sake of completeness it is necessary to mention also the existence of artists who are nowadays continuing to work within the framework of traditional religious painting and who decorate monasteries and temples, especially those rebuilt or restored after the damages inflicted by the Cultural Revolution: see for example LO BUE 2009, pp. 99-104.

<sup>2</sup> A detailed account of the developments of the arts in this period is offered by HARRIS 1999.

<sup>3</sup> ASLOP 2005, p. 20.

(b. 1948), who had arrived in Tibet in 1973, and Yu Youxin (b. 1940 and living in Lhasa since 1982), respectively chairman and vice-chairman of the Tibet Artists Association, an organization which played an important role in encouraging and supporting the work of the young Tibetan artists.

In the mid 1980s, Shöl (Zhol), an area situated just beneath the Potala Palace, had become Lhasa's 'art centre', where galleries displayed the work of contemporary Tibetan artists, sold to the many Chinese tourists travelling to this exotic land. In those same years and alongside the state-run galleries, a number of Tibetan artists and art students created an informal group called "The Sweet Tea Artists' Association" (*Cha ngarbo rimo tsokpa / Ja dngar bo ris mo tshogs pa*), referring to the tea houses in Shöl where they used to meet and discuss a number of issues related to their work. Since their intention was also to challenge, in their paintings, the kind of exotic imagery associated with Tibet which was literally sold to the Chinese tourists in the Shöl galleries, the "Sweet Tea Artists" may thus be regarded as representing the first conscious instance in modern Tibet to give birth to a new form of art, defiant of the strict Chinese ideological framework within which it had been constrained since the 'liberation' of the country and trying to provide an 'image' of Tibet in contrast with the one constructed by the Chinese propaganda. In the words of one of the founding members, Gonkar Gyatso (b. 1961), the "Sweet Tea Artists' Association" actually had to create a "specifically Tibetan modern art".<sup>4</sup>

The association however did not last long and the group of artists was forced to break up following the dramatic events which marked the uprisings in Tibet during the pro-independence protests, started in September 1987 and culminated with the introduction of the martial law by Chinese authorities on 8 May 1989. During this turbulent period, several artists left Tibet to go and live either in India, the United States or Europe, similarly to what was happening in China in those same years, when many artists, writers and intellectuals left the country just before or shortly after the 1989 student protests in Tiananmen square. In this way, both Tibetan as well as Chinese artists of the diaspora who decided to go and live in the Western countries played a significant role in bringing their work to the attention of a larger audience and to introduce the people to new forms of art, either challenging the traditional background and/or provoking the viewers with groundbreaking works which warranted this 'new art' the label 'contemporary'.<sup>5</sup>

Amongst the Tibetan artists who fled their home country and went to live and work in the West there was also Gonkar Gyatso, who moved to London where, in 2003, he opened the first gallery in Europe devoted to the promotion of contemporary Tibetan artists. The gallery, named "The Sweet Tea

<sup>4</sup> HARRIS 1999, p. 185.

<sup>5</sup> On the Chinese artists of the diaspora see Salviati and Jones 2006, pp. 34-111, while a brief presentation of the work of some of the principal Tibetan artists now living away from their homeland is outlined by BREMM 2010, pp. 48-55.

House” and thus evoking the former Lhasa based association of artists, is “dedicated to promoting contemporary Tibetan art and bring together artists from inside Tibet and from abroad, regardless of their political stand, situation, background, and education”.<sup>6</sup> Gyatso’s work is significant in epitomizing the type of art generated by the encounters with traditions differing from the traditional one within which Gyatso, as the majority of Tibetan contemporary artists, was trained. In fact, Tibetan artists, when confronted with the international art scene have reacted in various different ways to the current artistic trends and have evolved their own individual styles, nevertheless always keeping their allegiance to their own peculiar cultural identity and traditions which remain at the core of their artistic output.

The artists who had instead remained in Tibet, and part of whom have been travelling in the Western world to exhibit their work between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new century, joined again their forces to create a new private association, called the “Gendün Chöpel Artists’ Guild”. The association, whose name is a tribute to one of the leading and most provocative Tibetan intellectuals, the monk and painter Gendün Chöpel (1905-1951),<sup>7</sup> considered as the initiator of a new trend in Tibetan art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, opened its public exhibition space in Lhasa on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 2003. The artists who played a pivotal role in the creation of the ‘Guild’, whose purpose is “to keep the production and exhibition of contemporary Tibetan artists’ work in their own hands and to create greater opportunities for self-expression”,<sup>8</sup> were Tserang Dhundrup (b. 1964), Tsering Dorje (b. 1958) and Gade (b. 1971) who, in 2001-2002, had spent four months in the United States as part of a residency program organized by the Trace Foundation, New York.<sup>9</sup> Back in Lhasa they joined forces with Nyandak (b. 1974) and other artists, such as Dedron (b. 1976), the only female artist of the ‘Guild’ whose colourful, almost naive paintings draw inspiration from the traditional Tibetan folklore. Even today the Guild remains the most important private association of artists in Lhasa, providing a referring point for all young artists who want to promote their work in the domestic as well as on the international art scene.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> As stated in the home page of the gallery website, <http://www.sweetteahouse.co.uk/>.

<sup>7</sup> On Gendün Chöpel as an artist see HÖFER 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Paola Vanzo as quoted in SHEEHY 2010, p. 161.

<sup>9</sup> A detailed account on how the Guild was created, who were the artists involved and which are the policies of the association is provided by Paola Vanzo of the Trace Foundation, New York, SHEEHY 2010, pp. 159-171. Paola Vanzo has also recently curated a stimulating exhibition of Tibetan art (Palazzo Nerucci, Castel del Piano, 14 July to August 7 2011) where the works of contemporary Tibetan artists have been placed alongside old, traditional artefacts, see DONATI 2011.

<sup>10</sup> The leading gallery in the Western world which has significantly contributed to publicize, sponsor and support the work of Tibetan contemporary artists living at home and abroad is that of Fabio Rossi and Anna Maria Rossi, based in London and New York. Leading dealers of ancient Tibetan art since 1985, they have staged regular shows of contemporary Tibetan artists since 2005, when they presented the collective exhibition *Visions from Tibet. A Brief survey of Contemporary Painting*. For additional information and a comprehensive list of the artists represented by the gallery see the website <http://www.rossirossi.com/>.

Despite the various forms of associations created by the contemporary Tibetan artists, they never formed a homogenous group, or an artistic movement with a manifesto: they have all retained their personalities, acting as individual figures, eventually sharing in their work common traits and experiences but nonetheless each of them manifesting his or her utterly unique personality as an individual and as an artist. The main characteristic shared by virtually all of them in their artistic production is the relationship with their cultural roots, with the Tibetan religious or popular lore, regardless of the style in which they convey their own personal interpretation of these roots, revisited in the light of their different experiences and feelings. This is the one common feature that identifies them all and justifies the label of ‘contemporary Tibetan art’.

Though their work is not completely detached from the old tradition of painting and they welcome in their works elements of the past religious tradition, this is however only a component of a more variegated approach to art and its contents which reflect a different sensibility and touches upon a number of interrelated social, cultural and political issues, such as the role and function of the artists within modern Tibetan society and in the framework of a globalized context, their cultural identity as individuals and as Tibetans, and so on. The complexity of their cultural identity remains present and for all of them, though especially for those artist who live in exile, or who were born in exile and educated in the West, such as Kesang Lamdark and Palden Weinreb: for the diaspora artists, ‘...creating artworks enables a personal exploration of the multiple states of being that they inhabit and a format in which to express Tibetaness in the era after exile’.<sup>11</sup> The fact that some of them were forced to live in exile has had a liberating effect to most of these artists since they have been freed from traditional iconographic traditions, from a fixed set of canons so that they are now free to express their own individuality. This is even the case for such artists as Nyima Dhondup (born in Tibet in 1970) and Livia Liverani (b. 1962) who adhere more strictly to the rules of devotional paintings but feel free to improvise.<sup>12</sup> Since in Tibetan artistic tradition art for its own sake does not exist they are interesting in that they are free to reinterpret their tradition whether they know it or not –since Tibet means Buddhism as a flag of identity. The Buddha is still the iconic point of departure, the vehicle for expressing their own search for artistic expression, be it the images of Buddha constructed with stickers, which have become the landmark of Gyatso’s work, or the images of Gade, who reinterprets the traditional *tangkas* and *maṅḍalas* in the light of modern imagery, but technically following the

<sup>11</sup> Clare Harris in the introduction to Rossi&Rossi 2011, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> The work of the two artists is presented in the exhibition catalogue, see LIVERANI&DONDHUP 2010. For some images, see Livia Liverani’s contribution in this same volume.

teachings of the past. These artists are free to express their own vision of Buddhist philosophy in unprecedented ways, and to use the tradition and transform it into something universal; they have brought the Buddha, so to say, 'down to earth', amongst the human beings, in so doing making somehow more accessible to the general public an iconographic tradition which has been often quintessentially esoteric. Each of the Tibetan artists shown in the west gives his own answer to the tension of new inputs from other contemporary expressions on all media and give their own interpretation according to their own personal history and artistic training: this is their unmistakable originality.

Very often the comments written about the work of contemporary Tibetan artists have been written by critics, scholars and connoisseurs of the Western world, since it is due to them that the necessary critical attention has been paid to the work of this new generation of artists. But how does react a Tibetan to these new forms of art? In this respect, it is interesting to quote at length a post by a Tibetan, Tenzin Nio, who reports his impressions after a visit paid to Gonkar Gyatso's gallery in London:

My afternoon at the gallery had reinvigorated my love for art and I found myself excited at the prospect of young Tibetans one day dominating and changing the face of the international art scene. Tibet and her people denote spirituality and political flash point to the world at large but we are not known for creative achievements. Buddhist art was never designed for personal expression, and paintings bore no signatures. For Buddhists, it is the subject and not the artist that endures so it was intriguing to find artist's signatures prominently stamped on their work at the gallery. It was reflective of the modern times where Tibet's visual culture was evolving into the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century, for better or for worse. [...] These art(works in the gallery) imitated life and vice versa, and implied that the Tibetan agony is, in part, that of a medieval culture passing violently into the modern world. They were not just works of vanity and self-cherishing but they served far more profound purposes. The artists were sensitive in all senses, emotions and intellect, and they represented us, the contemporary youth and interpreted our collective experiences as colonial subjects and expressed what we deeply felt. Above all, their work provoked and encouraged independent thinking. [...] It is inevitable that religious influences, iconographies, symbols and folklore's will be infused in contemporary art because Buddhism pervades every aspect of Tibetan life. It is much more than a system of belief, it encompasses the entirety of our culture. Contemporary Tibetan art refers to the modern art of Tibet, or Tibet post the 1950 invasion. Just as politics cannot be separated from Tibetan identity, Buddhism too has profoundly shaped our very consciousness. [...] Art is the representation of the inner-self and artists have played a key role in the cultural life of Tibet. Both traditional and modern artists demand respect, not condemnation. Like books need to be reviewed and rewritten every few years, I am a firm believer that traditions and faiths too need to be reviewed and reformed from time to time. The current emergence of contemporary Tibetan artists promises glimpse of exciting chapters in our future, impacting our society with their creative power to envision and offer new stimulating thoughts

and emotions of ourselves and our changing world views. They are on the threshold of a new frontier. Are we ready to embrace them?<sup>13</sup>

It is true that we are on the threshold of a new frontier: in slightly more than the years Tibetan contemporary art, something which did not exist before, has emerged globally as a new phenomenon and has obtained by the scholars, galleries, museums and collectors the success and the attention it deserves. It will be interesting to see where this new path will lead in the not too distant future.

#### APPENDIX: ARTISTS' STATEMENTS

##### Gonkar Gyatso

My current work comes out of a fascination with material and pop culture and a desire to bring equal attention to the mundane as well as the extraordinary, the imminent and the superfluous. These contradictions are often found in the same painting. The work can be very silly and uncanny and at the same time come out of concerns that are shaping our times. I love poking fun and fill my work with a kind of unabashed whimsy and imagination. As my own experience has been one that reflects a kind of hybridity and transformation my work also holds this quality. We are all repositories of our time and place and I think the work can not help but reveal the politics and cultures that have shaped me. In this way my work has a spatial and temporal component to them; where time and place collide into each other. While in the past I have not intentionally been overtly political, I have explored political themes. And just as the identity of my motherland, Tibet, cannot be separated from religion and politics, I think my own sensibility has been shaped by the undeniable bond between the two.<sup>14</sup>

##### Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild

Usually groups are formed through someone's initiative. However, this particular Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild came together naturally through shared experiences and common interests. We were all born in the turbulent 1960s and 70s. We lived through the rationing period of Chairman Mao, and remember his passing away. We also have experienced the radical modernizing changes brought about by Deng Xiao Ping throughout China.

Like other young people, we like to keep up with the time and trends, but we also respect and value the traditional aspects of our unique cultural aspects of our unique cultural heritage.

<sup>13</sup> Posted in the website "Lhakar Diarica", <http://lhakardiaries.com/2011/09/14/the-art-of-continuous-future/>, on September 14, 2011, by Losang Gyatso, artist and director of the Mechak Center for Contemporary Tibetan Art ([www.mechak.org](http://www.mechak.org)).

<sup>14</sup> From the website of the artist, <http://gonkaryatso.com/about-the-artist/artist%27s-bio>.

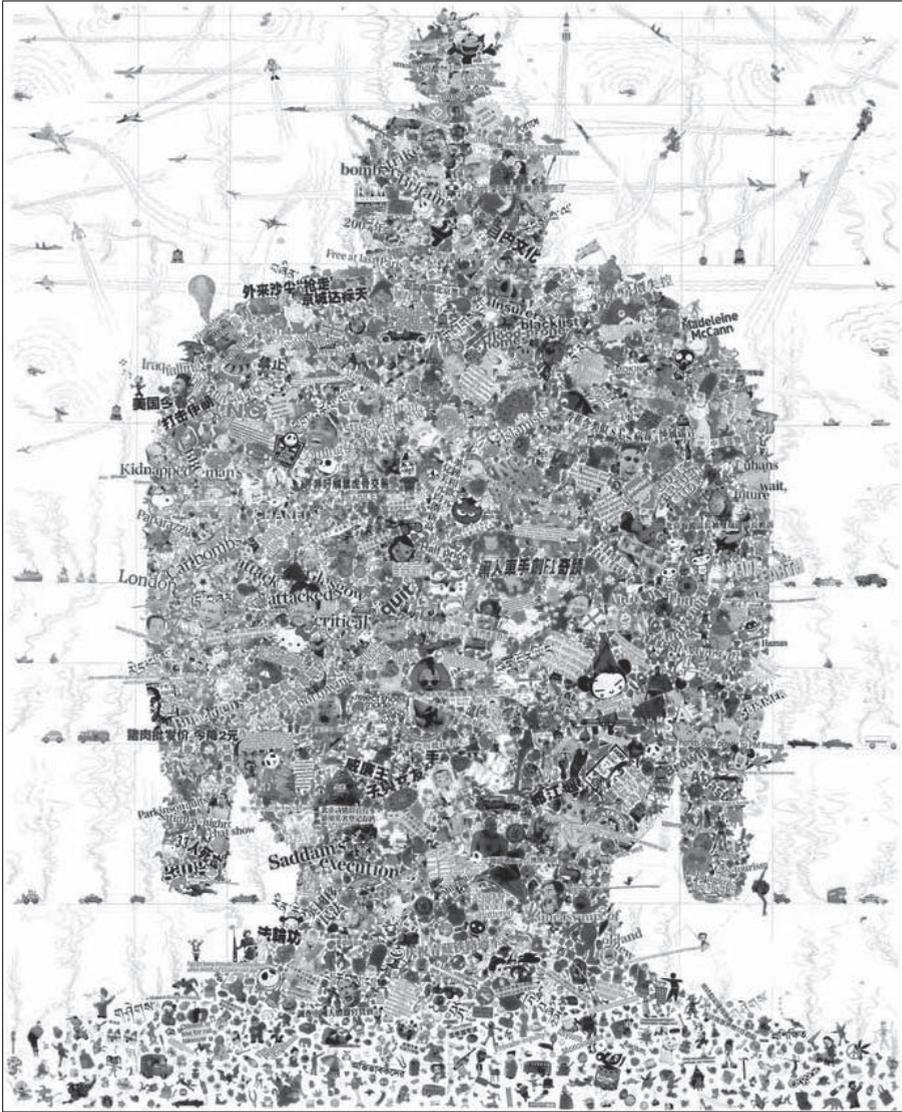


FIG. 1. GONKAR GYATSO, *Summer Buddha*, 2007-2009,  
mixed media on silk-screen print on fine art paper, 85 × 67 cm.

Some of us were born here in Tibet, and some have come from other places. However, we always stick to drawing out originality and inspiration from the new multifaceted Tibet, which is far beyond the image of many outsiders, thus, with our shared ideas and vision, we have formed this Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild in 2003, the very year of the centenary birth an-

niversary of 20<sup>th</sup> century Tibet's great leading intellectual and artist, Gedun Choephel, an inspiration whose spirit is living in us to this day.

We do not wish to simply make a living from our art, but wish to contribute to the development of contemporary art. We want to faithfully show our innermost thoughts and feelings through art by whatever medium we choose to use.<sup>15</sup>

### Dedron

In 2009, I completed my tenth year as a painter. Thinking back on a decade of activity, I was suddenly inspired to pick up my brushes and paint. I was about to begin another canvas. I was suddenly at a loss; I had no idea what I wanted to paint. So I put down my brushes, and decided to analyze the work I had done in the past decade.

My earlier works strangely moved me. I discovered in them the passionate love I have for the Tibetan people and their unique culture, and had expressed it with all the passion I could muster. Such a love was essential for me as an artist; in the context of Tibetan civilization, however, with its thousands of years of history, these concerns were merely matters of formalism or representation. This gave rise to another question: Where does the creative energy inherent in the aesthetic that manifests itself through the rough, stony lines, striking colors and fluid sense of design characteristic of Tibetan art come from? And where is it going? I knew I might not be able to answer that question directly, but perhaps I could understand it better, using my imagination, and even make reasonable guess, simply by continuing to paint.<sup>16</sup>

### Gade

In the paintings created from 2007 to early 2008 and made on Tibetan hand-made paper and canvas, I have extensively used forms and elements of traditional Tibetan painting which are familiar to me, as I have been imitating and practicing these techniques for a long period of time. These include the drawing of clouds, the modeling of figures, and the unique depiction of time and space in classical Tibetan painting. This body of work has been very significant to me as I feel it has enabled me to fully express my feelings and thoughts.

To locate traditional Tibetan art in a contemporary context is something that I have always been thinking of doing. I try to imagine what a Tibetan painting looks like when it is detached from religion. Although it is indeed very personal, my work does offend many Buddhist believers. I know this is

<sup>15</sup> Text originally from the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild brochure, Lhasa, and posted in <http://asianart.com/gendun/about.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Rossi&Rossi, 2009, p. 7.

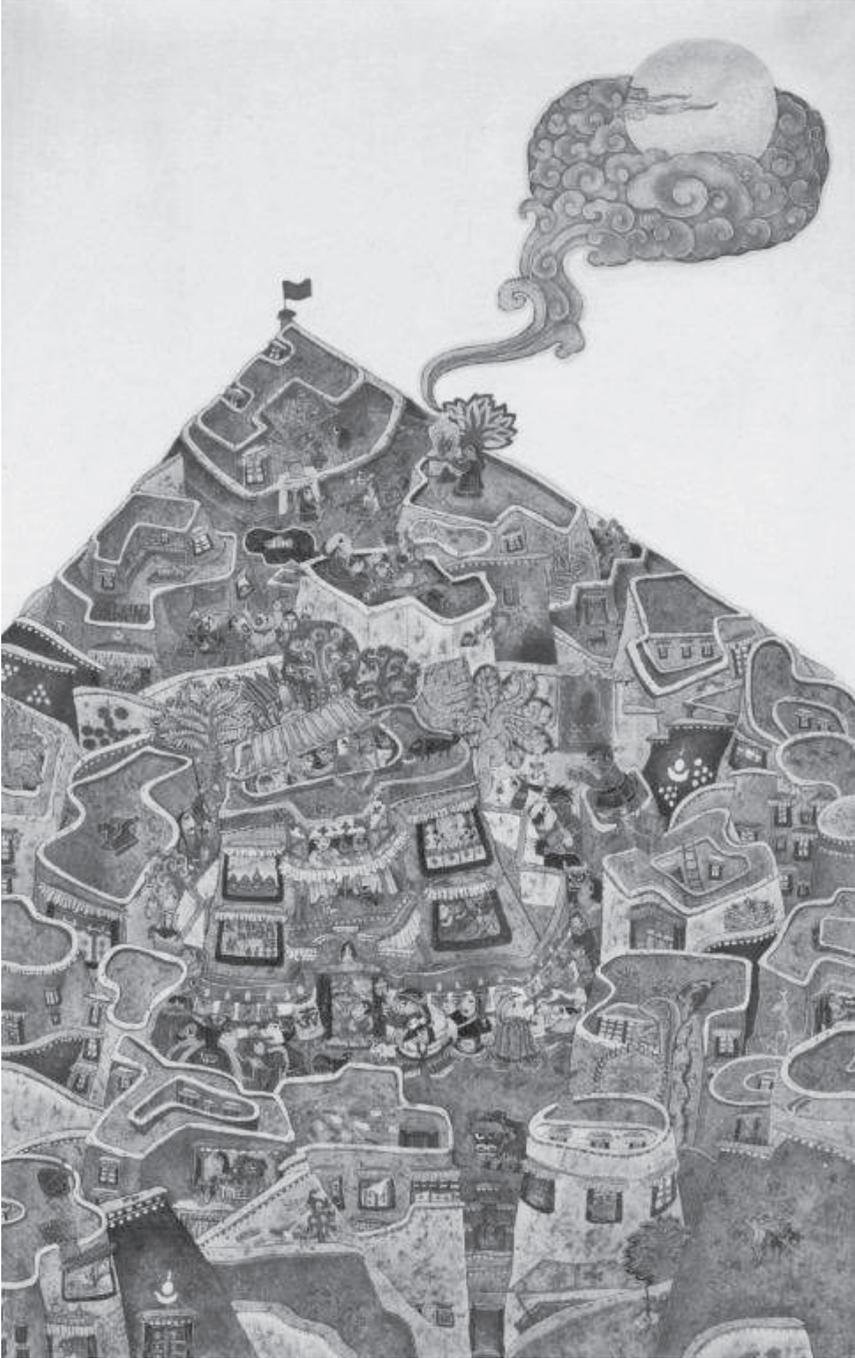


FIG. 2. DEDRON, *We are the nearest to the sun*, 2009,  
mineral pigment on canvas, 169 × 110 cm.



FIG. 3. GADE, *The Hulk*, 2008, mixed media on canvas, 147 × 117 cm.

something that they do not want to see, but I am bored with the ‘Shangri-la’ that Tibetan art has been depicting so far. I want to truly reveal my life, no matter how silly and trivial it is, to depict it whenever it is real. To this extent, I regard my work as realistic.

Based on the thoughts I mentioned earlier, the series ‘Mushroom Clouds’ and ‘Modern Tangkas’ share the same concept with the 108 ‘New Lectures’

that I created earlier. People who know Tibetan tradition will realize the big difference between what is traditional and what is contemporary.

Cultural icons such as Mickey Mouse, McDonald's, Mao Suit and The Cross, are actually a reflection of the current cultural state of Tibet affected by the Cultural Revolution and globalization. From my experience there is no longer a single, homogenous culture in Tibet. Rather, it is hybrid and diverse. I am interested in the state of people who are living in this ever-changing society. With the change in Tibet, all these issues can only become more prominent.

One of the other issues confusing me is my identity, as I have both a Tibetan and Chinese background. Many Tibetans do not recognize me as Tibetan. Many Chinese do not see me as Chinese. We have a title to describe this group of people – 'Half Tibetan Half Han'. I always claim that I do not belong to any of these ethnic group, or sometimes, that I belong to the ethnic group of Number 57. I realize that many of my works reveal the confusion of my identity. For example 'Wedding Ceremony' and 'Origin' depict my father's image in the same way as he appeared in my previous works 'Family Portrait' and 'Old Soldiers in the Mountain'. He also features in 'My Father's Nightmare', which will be showing in this exhibition (my father may resemble Mao as they are both from the Hunan province). I will title my next exhibition 'Half Tibetan Half Han'.

Ultimately, I hope that through my exhibition, people will change their preconceptions about Tibet. I would like to state that I'm neither criticizing nor praising. I merely want to document my life, which is not the same as news reporting. A hundred people will each have their own interpretation of my work. Even though I was born and live in Tibet, my interpretation of the place only represents a personal, not authoritative, point of view.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> From the website of the Plum Blossoms Gallery, Hong Kong, [http://www.plumblossoms.com/Gade/Final%20Texts/Artist%20Statement/Gade\\_Artist%20Statement%202008.pdf](http://www.plumblossoms.com/Gade/Final%20Texts/Artist%20Statement/Gade_Artist%20Statement%202008.pdf).

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