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Introduction to the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild:

Exploring the Lost and Found

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

In Culture and Performance

by

Deborah Beth Cohen

2014

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Introduction to the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild:
Exploring the Lost and Found
by

Deborah Beth Cohen

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Donald J. Cosentino, Chair

This thesis/exhibition book describes two presentations of paintings by members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild (GCAG): “Pictures of Gedun Choephel” for the *Gedun Choephel Centennial Conference* at the Latse Library, November 2003, New York City; and “The Train” for the *Peaceful Wind Gallery*, September-October 2006, Santa Fe, New Mexico. These two shows introduce the Gedun Choephel Artists’ Guild’s earliest work and represents some of the first generation of Tibetan artists to produce contemporary art from inside Tibet. The discussion includes an overview of history of the groups forming and organization, and the political, cultural and artistic influences embedded in the work. These exhibitions provide an opportunity to enter into dialogue with artistic language, points of view and tactics of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. Trained in art schools in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the 1980s and 1990s, the artists employ modern and post-modern era international contemporary art theories into their practices. Contemporary Cultural Studies discourses that deconstruct totalizing notions of conditions and circumstances of people in crises further illuminates the discussion, reinforcing the sense of urgency when considering work that embraces the complexities and complications posed by cross cultural exchanges and catastrophe.

The dissertation of Deborah Beth Cohen is approved.

Allen F. Roberts

Peter Sellars

Saloni Mathur

Donald J. Cosentino, Committee Chair

University of California

2014

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my mother Gertrude Cohen who blessed me with her tenacious spirit and insatiable curiosity, supporting me in every way from the moment of my birth to the day she died at age ninety-two. To the members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild who adopted me as one of their own; their generosity and splendid art carried me across the turbulent waters of dissertation writing. And to the memory of Allan Sekula who always let me know he was on my side.

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I am forever indebted to Dr. Lopsang Dhondup who arranged my stay with his sister Wangmo during my first trip to Lhasa. Unbeknown to me, they both risked serious consequences for their generosity. Fortunately all went well. My appreciation goes to Douglas Wilford, who maintained an Internet café in Lhasa, which was a haven for world travelers. Serendipity showed her delightful face when he and I realized we shared

experiences in the Expanded Arts Department at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, where we both had lived. Our candid conversations informed my research.

I want to acknowledge the role Chogyam Trungpa played in my life, and my journey into the world of contemporary art in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China. His writings on and about Tibetan Buddhism, which includes his first-hand experiences of the obstacles in transporting philosophies across cultures, provided a light toward understanding the art. My personal encounters with him brought to life the concepts he wrote about in his books, "spiritual materialism," and "orderly chaos," which expressed feelings I heretofore had been hard pressed to articulate. I am grateful to him for providing the language to discuss concepts I feel are relevant to my thesis.

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Many, many people came forward to support this project. For a long time I was in a state of limbo academically called “ABD” (All But Dissertation). However, inexplicably, I knew that one day I would finish. I was told by a graduate from a prestigious university, whom I met in passing, that there are only two kinds of dissertations, “ones that get written, and ones that don’t.” This dissertation was completed with the heft of all those who pulled me along, and who I have acknowledged. If I have missed anyone please accept my apologies. You can be sure it was an unintentional oversight. Thank you all.

VITA
Education

- 1998 Bachelor of Architecture
California Institute of Architecture, Los Angeles
- 2006 M.A. Culture and Performance, Department of World Arts and Cultures,
University of California, Los Angeles

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- 1960-1969 Dancer in films and on television, *Westside Story*, *American Graffiti*, *Shindig*
Hollywood, California
- 1974- 1980 Instructor, Dance and Meditation, Naropa Institute,
Boulder, Colorado
Instructor, Dance and Hatha Yoga, City of Santa Monica
Santa Monica, California
- 1982-1987 Artist in Residence, Theater and Performance, Ohio Arts Council
Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky
- 1987-1989 Founding Director, Experimental Ballet Training Program.
Director Dance Program, St. Stephens Community House, Columbus, Ohio
- 1989-1991 Cultural Outreach Specialist, Los Angeles Job Corps
Los Angeles, California
- 1992-1993 Work study resident, Gampo Abbey, Tibetan Buddhist Monastery
Cape Breton, Nova Scotia
- 1994-1997 Teaching Assistant, Southern California Institute of Architecture
Los Angeles, California
- 1998 Architectural Designer *Estilo Salon* renovation, West Hollywood, California
- 1998-2002 Lecturer, Marymount College, Los Angeles, California
- 1999-2014 Educator, Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles (MOCA)
- 2004 Study leader, Smithsonian Journeys' Los Angeles Architecture
- 2004, 2009 Educator, Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles, California
- 2004-2008 Teaching Associate, UCLA Department of World Arts and Cultures;
Department of Asian Languages and Cultures
- 2009 Instructor, Oslo University Lhasa Architecture Program, Tibetan
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1996-1997	SCI-Arc Undergraduate Director's Service Award SCI-Arc Merry Norris Scholarship SCI-Arc Ebell Scholarship SCI-Arc Kenneth Hale Boswell Scholarship
2002	Lester Horton Dance Award Nominee, Outstanding Choreography and Performance
2004-2005	FLAS Fellowship, Tibetan Language, University of Virginia UCLA Summer Study Fellowship, Tibetan Language
2006-2007	UCLA Graduate Research Mentorship, UCLA Graduate Summer Research Fellowship UCLA Graduate Summer Research Mentorship
2008-2009	UCLA Faculty Women's Club Fellowship UCLA Graduate Student Support, Department of World Arts and Cultures
2009	Asian Cultural Council Fellowship Resident Scholar, Red Gate Gallery. Beijing, China
2010	UCLA Dissertation Year Fellowship Graduate Division

Presentations and Publications

Cohen, Deborah. *In Your Face*. 90 minutes. One-woman show. Dance Theater Workshop
New York City. 1986

_____. *Sticks and Stones*. Public Access Press Series, SCI Arc, Graham Foundation,
LEF. Printed Matter: New York, 1994.

_____. *The Mole and the Navigator*. Public Access Press Series, SCI Arc, Graham
Foundation, LEF. Printed Matter: New York, 1994.

_____. *The Lumine: Theater Design in Los Angeles after Modernist Edward Gordon Craig*.
Bachelor of Architecture Thesis Book. SCI-Arc, 1998.

_____. "What is the Tibetan Avant-Garde?" Lecture Psi #13. NYU. 2007
China Undisciplined Conference, UCLA. 2008. Presentation

_____. "Contemporary Art in Tibet" Pecha Kucha, Lecture Series Forum for Art
and Architecture. Los Angeles. 2009. Presentation

_____. "Introduction to The Gedun Choephel Artists Guild." GCAG Gallery in
Lhasa; and Red Gate Gallery Studio Showing Beijing, China. 2009.
Presentation

Productions

Videos:

Dora's Granddaughter and Her Camera. 58 min. Video Documentary, Columbus, Ohio 1985
Three Little Pieces for Video. 6 min. Dance Video, Columbus, Ohio 1986
Du Armer You Poor Fool! 13 min. Dance Video, Columbus, Ohio 1986
Heart Piece. 13 min. Dance Video, Columbus, Ohio 1987
In Your Face. 90 min. One-woman show. Dance Theater Workshop, New York City. 1986
Casa Solari. 20 min. Video Documentary., Corona, Switzerland. 1997
The Bus. 30 min. Video Documentary. Los Angeles, California 1998
Playpen, 4 min. Video dance with drawing, text, projections. Los Angeles, California. 2002
Planplay, 5 min. Video composite of on-site dance. Los Angeles, California. 2002
Wangmo's House, 18 min. Video document. Lhasa, TAR 2007

Performances:

In a Landscape after John Cage. 8 min. multimedia dance. John Cage Retrospective,
California Institute of the Arts, Valencia. 2003
SSAS, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Schindler House, Los Angeles,
California. 2003

Philosophical Toy: The Docent 25 min. Multimedia performance.
Process Works, Sushi Performance Space, San Diego, California 2002
Dance Moving Forward Festival, Highways Performance Space, Santa Monica,
California 2002
MAX 10, Electric Lodge, Venice, California. 2002
MOCA Guest Artist Performance, Los Angeles, California. 2004
NOW Festival, Cal Arts, REDCAT Theater Disney Hall, Los Angeles, California
2004.

Through a Glass Brightly. 15 min. Multimedia performance. Dance Under Construction
Conference, Kaufman Foyer, UCLA 2005

LANGUAGES: Tibetan (basic reading, speaking), French (basic reading)

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The mention of “contemporary” art that is produced in Tibet typically elicits one of two responses: “Tibetan paintings are amazing!” which usually means the person assumes “contemporary” art in Tibet somehow means “traditional” Tibetan *thangka* painting; or a quizzical, “I didn’t know there was contemporary art in Tibet?” The latter is a more judicious response since the concepts “contemporary” and “Tibetan art” rarely share the same space in a conversation. This dissertation will examine what “contemporary” means in the Tibetan context by looking at early work of the Lhasa-based Gedun Choephel Artists Guild (GCAG), which formed in Lhasa in 2003 in response to the announcement by the Chinese Government of its intention to build a Train linking Beijing to Lhasa. The announcement alerted the artists to the need of protecting the independent contemporary Tibetan voice that speaks to the transforming Tibetan culture through its art.

The artists of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild create language that gives voice to the material, cultural, social and political upheaval represented in both local and global conditions. They help themselves to the cornucopia of ideas, gleaned from centuries of global art making that include recognizable themes such as: converging cultures; dreams and visions; history and memory; ceremony and society; cosmology and belief; death; domestic life; writing; portraits; the natural world; urban experience; conflict and resistance and the body. They operate in a nameless space, a gap between what once was and what will be, imagining, inventing identity. In a void, created by fifty years of state sponsored cultural suppression the artists reshape, restructure, and rethink their culture. As other cultures have

reinvented themselves under the pressures of “capitalism,” “imperialism,” “colonialism,” “modernism,” “fascism,” “communism” the members of the GCAG address their loss as an invitation to imagine themselves without restraint. While under state constraint they remain relatively unknown, not yet categorized into a marketable type beyond usual references to traditional Tibetan painting. They do not hide, though sometimes they assume camouflage, using their images as ammunition while engaging in skirmishes with the world.

This thesis focuses on the earliest work of the Guild: “Paintings of Gedun Choephel” for the *Latse Library* in New York City, and paintings of *The Train*, a show at the *Peaceful Wind Gallery* in Santa Fe, New Mexico. This early work shows the seeds of ideas already planted in the artists’ minds as they moved into a completely new art movement inside the heart of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). The notion of potential is at the forefront in reviewing this work. These artists are working very hard to speak to the future. In a conversation with Guild artist Tserang Dhundrup in 2009, he expressed frustration in not finding a voice within himself that went beyond depicting everyday life of the Tibetans in the city of Lhasa: crumbling temples, homeless boys, lone monks and stray dogs—pictures in the tones of “soy sauce” that resonate with poignancy.

I first learned about the artists quite by chance when planning fieldwork to Tibet in 2006 to research the subject of my Master’s thesis, *Mandalas and Modernism*. I came across their name and the mention of a centennial conference on the man Gedun Choephel that had been held in February of 2004 at the Latse Library in New York City, which I had unfortunately missed. The shift in my research from the relationship between traditional Tibetan “mandalas” and “modernism” to contemporary Tibetan art was supported by my work as an educator at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles where

for over a decade I studied the museum's comprehensive permanent collection of contemporary art dating from 1945. I became aware of current trends and art market practices and watched the global art market expand beyond an Eurocentric/Western focus to encompass contemporary art from everywhere around the world, including art from the People's Republic of China (PRC). Until meeting the members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, I was unaware of any contemporary art being created in Tibet. Once I found them I began researching the movement. Important accounts about the creation of the Guild had not yet been published. (See Sheehy, Vanzo 2010, 161, and Harris 2012, 239) The Guild's online website provided information written in both Tibetan and English that included interviews, images and a manifesto that immediately caught my attention. The astute, poetic manifesto presented the Guild's pledge to bring attention to the rapidly changing Tibetan culture by expressing themselves as contemporary artists in and of that culture.

I am not a neutral witness to what is unfolding in Tibet and to the members of the GCAG both as artists and as people. But I come to my subject with an assortment of luggage that included growing up in the shadow of 1950s anti-communist fervor in the United States, alongside capitalism's utopian ideas of "modernity." In my relationship with Tibet and the Tibetans I retained images culturally presented to my child's mind. One of the earliest works that captured my interest in magic and glamour was the 1937 movie *Lost Horizons* directed by Frank Capra, based on the 1933 novel by the Englishman James Hilton. The story of *Shangri-La*, a fictional place invented by the author, where, nestled in the snowy, inaccessible Himalayan Mountains, a utopian kingdom exists with indoor plumbing and people who don't grow old—irresistible. Not only did I not know Tibet but also I assumed

it was “magical” along with my “cold war” assumptions that Communism had turned the magical place into a concrete block. My interest in the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild began unpacking these preconceived ideas, which simultaneously developed into this thesis. I read several books, I am certain not all of them, by authors who have to varying degrees succeeded in deconstructing the “myths” of Tibet. They have inspired my own need to unpack imaginary Tibet. “Myth,” “Tibet,” “Lost,” “Tibetan Buddhism,” and “Shangri-La,” “West” and “Western” figure prominently in their names. A selection of these books’ titles is presented in the following short list in the order of their publication dates. *A Portrait of Lost Tibet*, 1980 by Rosemary Jones Tung; *The Myth of Shangri-La Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape*, 1989 by Peter Bishop; *Curators of the Buddha a Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, 1995 edited by Donald S. Lopez Jr.; *Tibet Through the Red Box*, 1998 by Peter Sis; *Prisoners of Shangri-La Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, 1998 by Donald S. Lopez Jr.; *Dreamworld Tibet Western Illusions* 2000 by Martin Brauen; *Virtual Tibet Searching for Shangri-La from the Himalayas to Hollywood*, 2000 by Orville Schell *Imagining Tibet Perceptions, Projections and Fantasies*, 2001 edited by Thierry Dodin and Heinz Räther; *Tibet Tibet A Personal History of a Lost Land*, 2003 by Patrick French; *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India*, 2004 by Gregory Schopen; *Shangri-La* a catalogue documenting an on site performative art installation for the Hammer Museum, 2005 by Patty Chang; *Lhasa Streets with Memories*, 2006 by Robert Barnett.

PREVIOUS WRITING ABOUT CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN ART AND THE GCAG

What is missing in these readings is anything about contemporary Tibetan art in the TAR. But that appears in 1998 with the publication of Clare Harris's seminal book, *In the Image of Tibet Tibetan Painting After 1959* that was published in 1998. It is the first and foremost study of the vicissitudes of Tibetan art since the Chinese occupation and colonization of Tibet. Harris's account takes 1959, the year the Dalai Lama escaped from Tibet, as the moment the Tibetan diaspora arose. She discusses how exiled Tibetans transferred a reconstruction of Tibet to India while the art emerging inside Tibet is responsive to a newly imagined Tibet. She introduces her subject by documenting the steady unraveling of the culture that had been Tibet prior to 1959. She looks at the changing role of traditional thangka painting and thangka painters; the influence of Socialist Realist painting from the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China on Tibetan visual culture; and she considers existing Chinese, Tibetan and Western images of Tibet. At the same time Harris expresses concern for the contemporary Tibetan artists as they work with the changes. She leaves her readers with a thoughtful summary:

“Tibetans must be credited with the power by which they have imagined themselves and reflected upon their history and which they utilize in difficult conditions both inside and outside the TAR. It is up to others to look and listen.” (Harris 1998, 201)

It was Harris's directive to “look and listen” that propelled this study. Her book was published in 1998, five years before the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild formed, and eight years before I encountered them. I looked for preliminary historical data on the founding of

the Guild that I found in articles by Paola Vanzo, Director of Communications and Development at the Trace Foundation, based in New York. She was representing the Trace Foundation in Lhasa when discussion of formation of the Guild occurred between 1999 and 2003. During this period and beyond thoughtful articles and essays on the subject of contemporary Tibetan art appeared, all attempting to describe and understand the emerging art. An important informant was artist Gonkar Gyatso who had left Tibet to open a gallery in London to pursue a “freer” environment to practice his art and provide a venue to show contemporary Tibetan art. Harris quotes him extensively in her first book and again in her latest book, *The Museum on the Roof of the World* published in 2012 that focuses on Tibetan artists in the diaspora and the role the art market and art institutions play in determining what happens to these artists. I met with Gyatso in Los Angeles and we discussed his story and the history of the Guild, which I refer to in Chapter Two. Gallerist and collector Fabio Rossi, of Rossi and Rossi Gallery in London, who worked closely with Gyatso and his gallery for a time, began creating one-person shows of the artist’s work, which generated catalogue essays, which have been useful in my research. The Red Gate Gallery in Beijing produced two shows of contemporary Tibetan art. The first in 200, *Lhasa—New Art From Tibet* co-curated by Tony Scott, the Gallery’s Special Projects Manager and contemporary Tibetan art scholar Leigh Miller Sangster who had already curated shows of the artists work in their gallery in Lhasa. The second show was *Return to Lhasa the 2nd Annual Tibetan Exhibition* curated by Tally Beck, with Sangster writing the forward in the catalogue. Catalogue essays for the artist’s shows have been brief and designed to introduce the audience to the work. The format does not invite deep readings or analysis. Longer articles appeared after Harris’s first book. These articles have served as signposts for me as I proceeded to learn about the

artists. Tibetan novelist and political commentator Jamyang Norbu wrote an essay called “The Tractor in the Lotus” in 2005,¹ and Kabir Mansingh Heimsath’s “Untitled Entities,” written in the same year, each present aspects of the work being generated by the Guild artists.

Norbu begins his article with a disclaimer confessing a limited knowledge of art but proceeds to write a valuable account of the influences of the Soviet and Chinese Socialist Realism art movements on particular contemporary Tibetan artists’ depictions of “ordinary” people. He notes the artists’ departure from formulaic traditional Tibetan thangka painting that depicts idealized images of deities. And he makes the observation that, “Nowhere in the Tibetan artist’s imagination or visual world does ‘Communism,’ ‘China,’ or the ‘Chinese’ appear, as it does in the new work of contemporary Chinese artists who freely satirize, and even maliciously joke about Mao and the Cultural Revolution.” (Jamyang Norbu, 2002). On closer inspection, after having analyzed some of the Tibetan artists paintings, it became clear that Norbu had not picked up on, or did not want to draw attention to, the subtler approaches taken by the Tibetans to express their relationship with China.²

Heimsath had been doing fieldwork for his doctoral dissertation on the ethnography of Tibetan homes when I met him in Lhasa 2007. Though his background is in comparative religious studies and his thesis *Dwelling in Contemporary Lhasa: an Ethnography of Tibetan Home—Spaces* had nothing to do with contemporary art, he had met members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild and other contemporary Tibetan artists working in Lhasa and decided to interview them and write about their work. His 2005 article “Untitled Identities,” published in the Asianart website is replete with the artists’ ideas and opinions, with references to prescient topics in cultural studies that situate the artists in colonial discourses.

In describing the artists' paintings, Heimsath refers to the postimpressionist Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh, American modernist photographer Paul Strand, and others. But, for the most part, he sticks to what he knows, cultural studies. In our conversation he made the point that everyone he knew doing research in Tibet, including himself, had limited knowledge of contemporary art. He felt that my perspective and knowledge would be useful in understanding what was going on with the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. Until that point, I had not realized that my perspective would produce a different vision than what had been offered to date. I took his observation to heart; at the same time I continued looking and listening to what the artists were telling me.

Norbu and Heimsath's essays emphasizing the context of the artists work were useful in grounding my analysis of the artist's paintings in their history and surroundings. However, when considering notions of "modern" and "modernity," I realized these terms needed unpacking, especially regarding their cross-cultural readings. The model of a Western-European, white male driven "modern" had worn itself out in the last century when Western colonialism imploded. Communication technology loosened cultural isolation and moved social transformations forward worldwide. At the same time the Western notion of "modern" persists that sets a "standard" for the rest of the world to negotiate. It produces a conundrum for artists and audiences worldwide, including the Tibetans. I was relieved to read *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter's interpretation of the problem when writing about contemporary Indian art in the show "Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose (1882-1966)." In his article called "Indian Modernism via an Eclectic and Elusive Artist," Cotter says,

"What is still probably news to many people...[is] that modernism

wasn't a purely Western product sent out like so many CARE packages to a hungry and waiting world. It was a phenomenon that unfolded everywhere, in different forms, at different speeds, for different reasons, under different pressures, but always under pressure. As cool and above-it-all as modern may sound, it was a response to emergency." (Cotter 2008)

The Tibetans readily admitted being in a state of "emergency," which they described to me in our first group meeting in their gallery in Lhasa in 2006. They felt the urgency to do something to protect their culture at the time of the announcement that the Lhasa Beijing train was going to be built. Looking for a precedent to this kind of colonial infiltration and the subsequent "modernisms" that followed I attended to what happened in India when the British colonized it. Indian art historian and critic Geeta Kapur speaks to the idea of "modernism" and the problem of cross-cultural interpretations in her essay "When Was Modernism in Indian Art?" that speaks directly to the problem of cross-cultural interpretations of "modern." (Kapur 2000) She discusses India's century-old transformative dance with its British colonial legacy and beyond. Her particular interest in the social and political underpinnings that went into creating contemporary Indian art includes her clarification of how the use of the words "modern," "modernism," "modernization" are incontestably ascribed to "underdeveloped/developing societies." She says, "Modernism is a cultural term strictly relating to the arts and situated at a particular point of western history—the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century." (Kapur 2000, 276) Kapur says using the term "contemporary" gives a definitional ambiguity to the present, which she says can be correct[ed] by giving contemporaneity an ideological mantle of the modern." (Kapur 2000, 276) However, she says this doesn't solve the problem either

because of the colonial underpinnings of “modern.”

When speaking about and with the artists of the GCAC there was the nagging question of labeling them. Were they modern artists, avant-garde, contemporary? Artist Gade comments on the Guild’s challenge of the idea of “modern” in his first manifesto written for the Guild in 2005. He says,

“[We are] like an underage person without preparation and experience facing a life-and-death crisis, at the same time facing the bars and fetters of his own ancient culture, and the stereotypes of the outsider, hampered by a lack of the information and communication with the external world. The development of Tibetan modern art is difficult from the very beginning... Modern art in Tibet never seems to relate to the modern art movement in the outside world. ...The development of Tibetan modern art is difficult... Perhaps what the artists thinking about modern art in Tibet is just in their imagination—or maybe there is no modern art in Tibet.” (Gade 2005, 16)

Finally, after some fits and starts on my part and after speaking with the artists, we agreed that being called “modern” or “avant-garde” did not work for them.³ Gade told me he thought “contemporary” was a good enough label. And, according to Kapur, that definition allows some vagueness, ambiguity in the present-day. (Kapur 2000, 276) I have used the term “contemporary” throughout the thesis, which does not sidestep the question of “modern” since the subject persists when considering the art that uses techniques and references ideas identified as “modern” such as “abstraction” and “ready-made.” I have attempted to address the issue head on in the context of the art I am looking at.

Though the Guild members do not consider themselves “modern,” which would require placing themselves in the lineage of “modernity” set up by centuries of international

exchange, they have experienced being taught the legacy of “modern” in the art schools they attended, and some of them have become teachers themselves incorporating syllabi prescribed by institutions that embrace “modernism’s” vocabulary. Artist, teacher, and Guild member, Benchung explained to me that art history taught in Chinese art academies teaches Western modernism up to Picasso. Both teachers, Gade and Benchung said they use, and direct their students to use, the Internet to fill in current information. Even Americans in the 1940s and 1950s made a point of getting away from Picasso and getting “modern” out of Europe. They made a new “modern” that turned out to be “abstract expressionism” that impacted the worldwide discussion of contemporary art. However, artists interpreted abstraction differently worldwide. For instance, after WWII, in the countries that experienced the War on their home fronts, Europe and Japan, artists made paintings that expressed the frustration and destruction of their homelands and cultures. These torn and tattered works were interpreted as abstract, and at the same time had narratives that were not separate from their time and place. (Schimmel, 2013, 188) This was very different than the Americans’ abstract expressionism that avoided any references to narrative interpretations.

While considering the Tibetan’s position as either “modern” or “contemporary,” I recognized their closest influences were in China, and China had another idea of what “modern” meant; this was an idea that impacted the Tibetans who had for the past half-century been schooled by the Chinese educational system. To untangle these layers of cultural difference, I found the most comprehensive description of the story of Chinese contemporary art in the writing of independent art critic and curator of contemporary Chinese art, Li Xianting. He notably discusses the history of contemporary Chinese art as its champion and defender. He has suffered the consequences of falling out of favor with the

Government when these movements were considered subversive. He found his way through to become one of the most influential art critics in China. He was Editor of *Meishu Magazine* during the early 1980s when “abstract” art was deemed subversive by the government. He went on to become founding Director and Curator of Songzhuang Art Center in Beijing. In 2007 Li attended the *Lhasa—New Art from Tibet* show, previously mentioned. Because of that show Li decided to curate a show of contemporary Tibetan art called *Scorching Sun of Tibet*, which opened at the Songzhuang Museum of Art in 2010, and included a large catalogue with essays by Li and Gade. It was the first museum show of contemporary Tibetan art and the most comprehensive exhibition yet produced. I refer to Li’s writings, interviews, and essays to discuss Chinese contemporary art history that include its outside influences, and inside pressures later in this chapter. He is the quintessential art critic in that he is committed to inclusivity in his view of art. Particularly useful to my dissertation are his insights into the role of the American artists Andrew Wyeth and Robert Rauschenberg in the story of Chinese Contemporary Art. I discuss Robert Rauschenberg’s role later in this chapter and Andrew Wyeth’s part in Chapter Three. Li’s insights on the history of contemporary Chinese art are recorded in a gripping video interview from 2007 prepared by *Asia Art Archive* called “Materials for the Future Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990,” a project documenting Chinese art history, viewable on their website, www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/12304 That Li found his way to include contemporary Tibetan Art in his life long projects has been an inspiration for this dissertation, reinforcing my resolve to share insights into their work. I describe his role with the Tibetans later in this Chapter.

Woven throughout the dissertation are references to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy because traditional Tibetan painting and Tibetan Buddhism go hand in hand. Determining how to engage in the subject I was motivated by deeply affecting accounts of religion and art in Donald Cosentino's writings on artists in Haiti, and Allen and Polly Roberts writing in *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* on representations of the Sufi saint Amadou Bamba that I refer to in Chapter Two. Cosentino's understanding of the role of art in culture in Haitian society educated me to the complex way culture, religion, art, and politics interweave forming the warp and weft of transforming societies, which are not necessarily made of "right angles." Reviewing his books, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, *Divine Revolution The Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié* and *In Extremis Death and Life in 21st-Century Haitian Art*, and the Roberts' work, I am shown how to inhabit a landscape that allows broad inclusive reading of art, which is produced in complex conditions that are continuously changing. It may be the case with any art criticism that staying abreast of the time and place of the arts creation informs the criticism. In the case of contemporary art making in Tibet, where restrictions produce serious consequences, that knowledge is crucial. At the same time it need not be the only criterion for analyzing the work.

The depictions and examinations presented in these works washed over me as I wrestled with the role of Tibetan Buddhism in the life and art of the contemporary Tibetan artists. In this regard I realized two aspects needed to be addressed, the place of traditional Tibetan painting in the history of Tibet and the role of Tibetan Buddhism in construction of traditional Tibetan painting. For references to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy I depended on the writings of Chogyam Trungpa, an incarnate Lama who was born in Tibet and escaped to the West in 1959. His numerous writings present Tibetan Buddhist philosophy for a Western

audience. I attended numerous lectures he gave during a three-month seminary that presented the Tibetan Buddhist teachings to the assembled 200 participants, as they may have been experienced in a Tibetan monastery. And I spent ten months at Gampo Abbey, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery that Trungpa founded in Cape Breton Nova, Scotia where classes and lectures on Tibetan Buddhist philosophy were regularly presented for participating residents. Trungpa's lectures and his writings are foundational in my reading of the paintings when referencing Tibetan Buddhist philosophical ideas.

BACKGROUND OF THE GEDUN CHOEPHEL ARTISTS GUILD

In the remaining portion of this introductory chapter, and before embarking on an analysis of the paintings in Chapter Two and Three, I am including an overview of the founding of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild; an introduction to the man Gedun Choephel, and a presentation on the influential Tibetan artist Gonkar Gyatso who was prominent in the founding of the group. I am also including an interpretation of the role of Tibetan Buddhism in Traditional Tibetan painting and how that impacts the work of the artists in the Guild, and a review of Chinese Contemporary Art history as it pertains to my thesis on cross-cultural readings of “modernism” and “abstraction.” I conclude the Introduction with an analysis of what I consider a significant example of cross-cultural exchange in what I call Robert Rauschenberg's romance with Tibet, which describes the unfolding of his ambitious project the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (*ROCI*). The information presented in this Chapter is meant to fertilize the field from which the analysis of the paintings grows. It is meant to produce an atmosphere that asks the reader to join in the interpretation of the work of the GCAC.

The analysis of the paintings of Gedun Choephel in Chapter Two considers concepts associated with contemporary art, modernism, and post-modernism, including discussions of the figure, abstraction, narrative and text, and the use of grids and white walls. Chapter Three provides a historical background for painting pictures of the train; an analysis of the Guild artist's Train paintings in relationship to the political, social and cultural conditions in Tibet; and an analysis of a cross-cultural incident with the American painter Andrew Wyeth that impacted contemporary Chinese artists and subsequently influenced one of the paintings made for *The Train* show. The Epilogue introduces more works made by Guild members after their Train paintings up to the present that figure in my consideration of the artists place in a broader discussion of their role in the art world. I conclude the Epilogue with an overview of what I have deduced from reading the paintings in context to the problems uncovered when doing cross-cultural readings, with attention to State ideologies that influence art, whether the work is adamantly focused on a personal narrative or not. Analysis of these works enhances my argument that contemporary Tibetan art in the TAR has its own particular language while it monitors global art historical discourses. As I repeat later, the artists of the GCAG are not a lost or floundering group, but a legion of savvy, sophisticated artists whose accessible work provides insight into their culture and times.

History of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild

The Gedun Choephel Artists Guild formed in Lhasa in 2003. When I arrived in Lhasa in 2006, I went looking for Guild's gallery on the *Barkhor*, a market place and prominent tourist site in Lhasa. Barkhor Street originally arose as a circumambulation route around Lhasa's most famous monastery, the *Jokhang Temple*, built around 642. The Temple,

along with the Dalai Lama's *Potala Palace*, also in Lhasa, is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site and is a spiritual center of Lhasa. Lhasa is the administrative capital of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). The landmass of all of the TAR is the second-largest province-level division of China by area, spanning over 460,000 sq. mi. It contains over 3 million people who are spread across the land. Because of the mountainous terrain it is the least densely populated area of China. Tibetans are one of fifty-five different ethnic minorities in the PRC. These minorities represent only three percent of the total population. The other ninety-seven percent are Han Chinese.⁴ Lhasa, the capital of the TAR occupies about 1200 sq. mi, one of the highest cities in the world at an altitude of 11,450 feet above sea level. In 2006 the population was about 500,000, the same as Toledo, Ohio. In area Lhasa is the size of Detroit, Michigan. I provide this comparison as a simple reminder of the significance of setting and space when considering specific places and people.

Lhasa was the home of the Dalai Lamas, and the center of the Tibetan state. Important temples and monasteries made it the destination of religious pilgrimages. What unites the Tibetan people across Tibet's vast landscape is the belief in the lineage of the Dalai Lamas and the 14th Dalai Lama's role as their religious leader. The lineage of the Dalai Lamas began in the fourteenth century. The name is a combination of the Mongolian word *dalia* that means "ocean," and the Tibetan word *lama* that means "guru, teacher, mentor, or monk." He is believed to be the incarnation of the deity or *bodhisattva* of compassion known as *Avalokiteshvara*. The name "ocean monk" was bestowed on him because he is regarded as "the ocean of compassion." He was the spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism and, until the establishment of Chinese Communist rule, the spiritual and temporal ruler of Tibet. He is the last Tibetan head of state to live in Tibet until he was forced to leave in 1959 when the

Revolutionary forces of the PRC entered the capital Lhasa. He established the Tibetan government in exile in Dharamsala, India. The Chinese government considers the Dalai Lama to be the instigator of a rogue separatist movement and, because he has the support of virtually all Tibetan people both inside and outside of the TAR, he is viewed as a major threat to the stability of China. The Chinese Government's efforts to criminalize him only draw the Tibetans closer together regardless of their regional cultural differences.

As I walked around the Barkhor market place in 2006 I noticed the local people, tourists and police moved at a leisurely pace in a traditional clockwise pattern when circling this sacred place. When I arrived at the Guild's Gallery. I saw the Gallery's large mounted handmade sign written in Tibetan, English and Chinese in front of the entry. (Fig.1.1 a, b, c, d, e) The traditional whitewashed building had three floors. The footprint on the ground floor of the building is 80 square feet, but upstairs it is nearly three times as large. It included gallery spaces where pictures hung, and a roof space furnished with tables and chairs that provided places to work, sit and talk. Visible from the roof were prayer flags that strung across the adjacent rooftops and were fluttering in the wind. The sounds of the busy market place below filled the air. Once inside I met a young woman, Wongmo, who acted as receptionist and guide. The gallery was open seven days a week to people who came and went and the Guild artists took turns being there. Wongmo phoned Guild artist, Tsering Nyandak, who is fluent in English and interested in communicating with people. Within an hour several artists came to the gallery to meet me. A thermos of tea arrived and we began contact that developed over my three field trips to Lhasa and Guild members' visits to Los Angeles that included artists' residencies in Santa Monica, California. We continue our cross-cultural exchanges between Lhasa and Los Angeles via the Internet.

While sitting with the artists it occurred to me that my connection with them might not have happened half a century earlier. Technology and the political incidents of the recent past produced this moment. This is not to say Tibetans did not have copious cultural exchanges in their long history, which have to some extent been well documented.

The once independent Tibetan Lamaist State, in spite of its isolation, skillfully and on its own had warded off unwanted intrusions from the British, Chinese, and Russians. yet it absorbed information from those cultures through trade and diplomatic exchanges. It did so at a leisurely pace that did not upset deeply rooted systems. But since the Communists had taken over changes were occurring so fast, faster than any Tibetans had previously experienced in its thousand-plus year history, that the assimilation of these changes has been difficult. The anti-tradition, anti-religious zeal of the Cultural Revolution particularly affected the millennium-old Tibetan culture impacting all aspects of Tibetan life. In this transforming environment the contemporary Tibetan artists of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild were living and working. It was an environment I could only understand in a perfunctory way, as an outsider having had no first-hand experience. All I could really do was to listen to those immersed in the changes.

The groups' history had starts and stops culminating in 2003 when fifteen artists joined together to form the collective. The discussion began a couple of years earlier when four Tibetan artists, Tserang Dhundrup, Tsering Dorje, Benchung and Gade returned from a four-month artist residency in New York City. The artists from Lhasa went to New York City in 2001-2002 for an artist in residency program sponsored by the Trace Foundation, the Asian Cultural Council and the Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island, which had been running international artist residency programs for over 14 years. In an interview

conducted by Michael Sheehy with Paola Vanzo, a worker of the Trace foundation who lived in Lhasa for several years and who became a friend and supporter of the artists, Vanzo described the circumstances leading up to, during, and following the residency in several interviews and articles published online and in catalogue essays and interviews published since 2006. She explains how the residency provided the groundwork for the four artists to create the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild in Lhasa in 2003. (Vanzo, Sheehy 2010, 159)

Seeing communities of American artists working together with studios in Brooklyn and Chelsea gave the Tibetans the idea to create a commune in Lhasa. At the same time they knew they didn't want to reproduce the life of a New Yorker.(159) Tserang Dhundrup understood that he couldn't copy or adopt the styles he had seen in New York. "It is not my life!" he said. "It does not relate to this place, or to most people." (Heimsath 2005) Dhundrup was interested in cultivating the kind of atmosphere that allows for change and creativity. Artist Gade commented about the multimedia and performances work saying, "You can't just go out and make an installation or video without some kind of background." (Heimsath 2005) A few years later another Guild artist, Tsewang Tashi, did learn about video and digital art while doing graduate work at Oslo University in Norway, where he was introduced to the work of western multimedia artists including that of Korean American multi-media avant-garde artist Nam Jun Paik. (Interview with author 2009).

Having experienced contemporary art from around the world, the Guild artists grew farther and farther from fixed notions outsiders have of Tibet, Tibetans, and Tibetan art. Nevertheless, as Gade points out, "We want to change but foreigners want us to stay still!" (Heimsath 2005) Contemporary Chinese artists had also traveled to the West but had the opportunity much earlier; like renowned Chinese artist Ai Weiwei who spent twelve years

between 1981 and 1993 in New York City where, for a short time, he attended Parsons School of Design before just absorbing the atmosphere of the City. But, as just described, the Tibetans did not get to New York until 2001.

By 2003 the artists were ready to come together to commit themselves to forming their group. They rented space that had been a restaurant on the Barkhor. The owner, a Tibetan from Kham agreed to RMB 3000, about USD 400 a month, with everyone giving 10% of what they made to the co-op for rent, utilities, and taxes and to help Guild members who needed additional support. Rotating positions of management kept the organization going. There was no director. Running of the gallery, organizing exhibits and presentations, and relating with the local government were all achieved by group consensus. An example of Guild involvement with the local government occurred in 2007 when Barkhor shop owners were informed that the signage on their shops was to be stripped and cleaned up to become uniform according to designs submitted by the government. Guild members explained to me that the order was issued anticipating tourist traffic to Tibet during the 2008 Olympics. The shop owners, or whoever occupied the shops, were responsible for implementing and paying for the changes. The artists knew the latest requirements would permanently alter the historic site, but complied with the order. It was and continues to be important to them to maintain a fluid and stable relationship with the local government while remaining autonomous.

The initial group of mostly men and a couple of women were born between 1958 and 1978. They are university trained artists; some studied at the University of the Minorities in Beijing, some at the Central Academy of Art in Beijing, others graduated from art programs in Tibet University in Lhasa, and one is self-taught. They work as set and costume

designers, as teachers to children of all ages in public schools, as well as professors in the Art school at Tibet University in Lhasa. Their work has been shown in major cities throughout the world including London, New York, Los Angeles, Beijing, Shanghai, Singapore, Tokyo, Sydney, and Oslo. The artists' initial decision to organize as a "Guild," and to create Tibet's first culturally cooperative gallery, affirms the artists' interest in both the individual and the community. Vanzo reports, "They wanted to open a Tibetan window to the world." (Vanzo and Sheehy 2010, 162) The seminal idea of the self-financed project was to deliver a free communication space that provides a platform to promote Tibet's contemporary art. The Gedun Choephel Artists Guild status as a nongovernmental organization meant they had to apply for a permit through their local branch of the Civil Affairs Ministry. The difficulty of acquiring this status varies according to the political climate and the requesting organization's purpose. There is no indication that in 2003 the Tibetan artists in Lhasa had any particular obstacles in creating their Guild. They didn't appear subversive. The atmosphere in China about group organizing has changed since 2003, especially concerning minority groups. As artist Gade, founding member of the Guild and Professor at Tibet University, said, "China wants stability in Tibet...it worries about the "3 Ts," Tiananmen, Taiwan, and Tibet, because they are volatile and represent possible instability that could create upheavals for China."⁵ This thinking is shadowed in the government's behavior reflected in recently adopted policies taken at the 2013 Third Plenum of the Communist Party. According to a December 2013 *New York Times* Sinosphere article by Didi Kirsten Tatlow, the Communist Party supports creations of non-governmental organizations and lists a set of new goals of reform that include No. 12, "Social Management" that promises to "stimulate the vitality of social organizations." "Social organizations" is understood to mean organizations outside of the

party. These organizations can hold meetings and don't have to pay taxes. But Tatlow reports that not all groups are granted this status. One group was refused a request to organize because they were homosexuals wanting to address the rapid rise of H.I.V in China. (Tatlow 2013)⁶

A few art dealers and gallerists as well as independent patrons, have been instrumental in showing the artists' work outside of Tibet. Fabio Rossi of Rossi and Rossi Gallery in London and Ian Alsop of the Peaceful Wind Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico explained to me that for quite a while they each were dealing in traditional Tibetan Art when they independently came across the contemporary work. They were so taken with the work and the artists that they began arranging shows and acting as their dealers. And Brian Wallace, the Director of Red Gate Gallery in Beijing, one of the first galleries to show contemporary Chinese art, also championed the Tibetans by showing their work at his satellite gallery in the 798 Arts complex in Beijing. He also gave money to establish a scholarship fund administered by the GCAG for promising Tibetan artists in the Art School of Tibet University in Lhasa. On one of my field trips I was a visiting scholar with the Red Gate Gallery Artists and Scholars-in-Residence program, which provided housing for me in Beijing in 2009. As fluid as these exhibition opportunities seem the whole enterprise is contingent on the political climate. At that time I went to Lhasa and spoke with Tsering Nyandak about recent demonstrations in Lhasa. Nyandak, fluent in English and my primary informant, told me that when economic recession hits the region, local unrest grows. The Government responds by infusing large sums of money into the local economy hoping to stabilize it, even as the instability increases. People thought when the train came in 2006, the prices would drop and when they didn't there were demonstrations and those

demonstrations turned political, forcing China to close Tibet during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

Since Lhasa became off limits to tourists and the artists wanted more space, they decided to move the Gallery from the Barkhor site in 2009 to a building they designed on the outskirts of Lhasa. They used Red Gate Gallery's now defunct 798-satellite gallery in Beijing as a model for their gallery space, which mimics the white box modernist galleries operating worldwide. (See Fig. 1.1f) The next year, 2010, the artists were invited by Li Xianting, who has come to be thought of as "the Godfather of contemporary avant-garde Chinese art" by the artists and gallerists I have spoken with, to participate in a large show of contemporary Tibetan art that would include artists from the TAR and the Tibetan diaspora.⁷ *The Scorching Sun of Tibet* was held at Li's Songzhuang Art Museum, located in Xiaopu Songzhuang Village, a major artists' colony on the outskirts of south Beijing. The importance of Li's support cannot be underestimated. He is Han Chinese, the director of a large successful museum and not unfamiliar with controversy, as previously mentioned. As editor of the officially-supported *Fine Arts Meishu Magazine* in the early 1980s, he enthusiastically supported the works shown in the *Stars Exhibition*, and in 1989 he participated in organizing the 1989 "China Avant-Garde Exhibition" in Beijing, a show which was shut down within days of its opening because the Government felt it to be subversive. In 1992 he coined the term "Cynical Realism" in an article in the Hong Kong journal *Twenty-first*, which described the Chinese artists' work that was commenting on the history of Socialist Realist Art. (Barmé 2000, 173) And in 1993 he curated the "Mao Goes Pop" exhibit as well as the China Pavilion at the 45th Venice Biennale. (Art Speak China 2014) Li spent weeks with the Tibetan artists in Lhasa as he and his collaborators chose

pieces for the show. (Gade 2010, 11) The artists, their work, and their circumstances moved him. He writes about it in *The Scorching Sun of Tibet* catalogue.

“One evening during my stay in Tibet, I was wandering on the square in front of the Potala. Since the fifties almost all of the squares in China are built as result of the ideological predisposition. This square is just an exact imitation of the Tiananmen Square, with a same towering monument on the other end. The only difference comes from a musical fountain now often popular in many cities. Along with the spurting water of the fountain, the high-pitched loudspeaker broadcasting popular songs soars across the sky of Lhasa. Amidst the colorful neon lights and the playing crowd I looked back and saw the magnificent and mysterious Potala Palace looking down at the noisy world with elegance and pride. I suddenly felt unspeakable anger and a sense of helplessness. Li Xianting 2010-9-1 at Seven in Early Morning” (Li 2010, 9)

Government interference with Tibetan artists began as early as 1986. At that time a group of art students from Tibet University in Lhasa came together to present their work in response to a University proposal that its students exhibit at the World Youth Day festival in Lhasa. The group called themselves *The Sweet Tea Artists Association*, referring to their gatherings in the teahouses in the Shöl district at the foot of the Potala Palace, where, as Gonkar Gyatso describes it, the artists had been gathering for well over a year to have heated discussions that included ideas about Marxist dogma and the Tibetan’s cultural presence. (Harris 2012, 235) When the artists realized they would only be allowed to exhibit work in the festival whose social meanings conformed to the government's views, and that of all the Tibetan artists who applied to exhibit only a couple were chosen, they decided to show their work in another space instead. Gyatso was participating with the group. He had just returned

from studying in Beijing. While in Beijing as a teenager in the 1970s he had been influenced by the Beijing avant-garde that introduced him to Western Modernist art. But he was also a Maoist ideologue and became the first Tibetan to paint a mural for the Tibet Reception Room in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in 1985. The year before on his return to Lhasa to prepare for his graduate show at Tibet University, he had a sudden realization about Tibet when seeing the landscape of his mountainous homeland from a plane that changed the trajectory of his life. Because of this, and along with his experiences in Beijing, he became committed to uncovering the Tibetan voice in contemporary art. As part of the group, he described their decision to make their own space. He likened it to what he had learned about the early Western modernist movement. He said, “Having the model of the Parisian Salon des Refusés in mind we decided to show our work in the alternative spaces where our discussions had taken place.”(185) He pointed out that at this time the artists were painting for each other, not for an international audience. Shortly after the show, the group disbanded because the regime pressed them to include Chinese members. Gyatso says, “We wanted to reinstate our Tibetanness and to reject the styles and institutions of our Chinese teachers.” (Gyatso in conversation with author in Los Angeles in 2007) Years later, after Gyatso left Tibet and established his own art gallery in London, he touchingly named it *The Sweet Tea Gallery*, remembering and honoring that time in Lhasa when the artists came together as a group.

In 2013 the GCAG moved their gallery back to the same building they left four years before on the Barkhor. In an email message to me Nyandak wrote,

“Since 2013 our gallery has been run by Pendron; ex wife of Gyatso la [an early supporter of the GCAG] in partial collaboration with another lady who

is the head of Tibet Relic [The Lhasa City Tibet Relics Bureau] Thus, the 25 male members are not involved in daily management of the Guild anymore. Presently our Guild is an officially registered cultural company. Being back in the old venue, the rental expenses incurred are taken care of by Pendron and her partner, while we took care of the payment of RMB 70,000 [USD 11,500] for the rights to a 6-year lease of the house from the owner. That fund came from member fees collected since 2009 until this year.” (Nyandak 2014)

Nyandak affirmed in the email that the Guild continues to function. It has grown to twenty-five members since the original fifteen in 2003 when the entry fee was RMB 3,000 (USD 440). Now the new member’s entry fee is RMB 20,000 (USD 3,276) that is paid over a three-year period. According to Nyandak there haven’t yet been any women artists interested in joining. In the current unstable Tibet, the artists no longer are able to leave the country easily; the government will not release their passports.

When speaking with Guild members about politics, they agree in their desire to express themselves and their culture in their art, and to not speak directly about politics. Nyandak told me he doesn’t want his work to be politically driven. Another Guild artist, Tsering Norbu (Nortse), says, “It is only when one completely gets involved in actual society and one’s own personal experiences that one can successfully reflect or give expression to the modern Tibetan art scene.”(Nortse 2008) When the demonstrations occurred in Lhasa in 2008, Nortse told me that if these events had happened twenty years earlier he would have been on the streets with the people, but now he hides inside his house, frustrated by the hopelessness of “acting-up” against the powerful Chinese authority. Frustration within the Tibetan community is rising. According to the International Campaign for Tibet between February 2007 and September 2014 there have been 132 self-immolations of Tibetans. Six of

these immolations occurred in exile.

I have not been to Lhasa since 2009 and have not seen the artists since 2011, communicating only through emails. I learned about the changes in the Barkhor through the activist, blogger, poet and essayist Woesser who lives under house arrest in Beijing because of her critical articles about the government's treatment of Tibet and Tibetans. Her article, "Our Lhasa is on the Verge of Destruction! Please Save Lhasa," was originally written in 2013 for the Mandarin service of Radio Free Asia on May 4, revised on May 6 and posted on her blog. It was translated into English on May 7 on "The High Peaks Pure Earth" blog.

"The Chinese Government is taking the Tibetan self-immolations very seriously. On May 27 last year two Tibetans committed self-immolation in the space between the Jokhang and the Barkhor police substation. The Barkhor police substation was immediately elevated to the level of "Barkhor Ancient City Public Security Bureau." The Mandala Hotel in which the two Tibetan self-immolators had taken lodgings was seized by the authorities and turned into the "Lhasa Barkhor Ancient City Management Committee." The Old City of Lhasa was renamed the "Barkhor Ancient City."

But the large-scale rebuilding of the Old City by the authorities that resulted from this was actually a case of killing two birds with one stone; it was even more suited to the goals and plans for "maintaining stability." And now, the area in front of the Jokhang, which has borne witness to so much change over the ages, has no more of the pilgrims from Kham and Amdo who prostrate themselves all the way from the far borders to Lhasa; no more lamp pavilions in which thousands and tens of thousands of butter lamp offerings were lit every day. Only snipers poised on the roofs of Tibetans' homes, and fully armed soldiers on patrol; only the opening of one massive government-business sector joint venture shopping mall after another, each with inflatable blood-red plastic columns before their doors, flaunting the

vulgarity and invasiveness of these new upstart operations.” (Woesser 2013)

No reference or indication that any of these changes are taking place in Lhasa came to me from the artists in emails or phone conversations, except a cursory email from Nyandak in February 2012. He and Wongmo had just returned from a trip to Kathmandu to attend a ceremony conducted by the Dalai Lama. As Edward Wong noted in a *New York Times* article on April 7, 2012, over 3000 people, including Chinese citizens, attended the event, but when people returned to China the government detained the Tibetan “pilgrims” who attended, requiring they undergo re-education schooling. Nyandak was one of those detained. He responded to a couple of my emails saying, “Sorry for the long silence, things here are back to normal again after all...no more schooling... ha!” And in another email when I asked if I could call, he answered, “A phone call is not a good idea for the time being. I will have my home Internet back...I will be more conveniently writing email then.” (Email message to author, April 24th & April 25, 2012)

The Guild members continue to produce art, which suggests perhaps the conversation about politics has been submerged deeper into their art. In *The Intelligence of Art*, Thomas Crow discusses a relationship between politics and art determined by the intention of each. He writes,

“Anxiety comes when the political overshadows art, because politics is, by definition, concerned with convincing, persuading, and winning. It overshadows more thoughtful, complicated productions whose outcome may not be known. This unknowing is unacceptable in political discourse. To not know in politics is to be deemed inept. This fierce judgment produces nervousness when it rubs up against art, which by nature is more complex.”(Crow 1999)

Gedun Choephel

As gallerist Ian Alsop suggests there is no “school” in this group of artists, no movement other than an attempt to express in their painting what they see, feel and experience. (Alsop 2005) However the artists have chosen to identify with one of the most controversial figures in modern Tibetan history by naming themselves after Gedun Choephel, the monk, scholar, and artist who embraced socialist ideas while remaining steadfast in his Buddhist beliefs. Depending on who describes him, Choephel was either the first “modern scholar,” the first “modernist,” an important political “dissident,” or all of these. Choephel has been the subject of articles, books and a documentary film. I have referred to writings on Choephel by Donald S. Lopez Jr. including his essays and translations of Choephel’s Buddhist treatises, poetry and commentaries. He thankfully clarified the fact that in his research he discovered at least twenty versions of how to write Choephel’s name. (Lopez 2006, 3) In this regard, I have chosen one way and stuck to it through out the dissertation, while honoring the spelling in the titles and references of others. Lopez biography of Choephel is linked to Choephel’s treatise on a Tibetan Buddhist text, *The Madman’s Middle Way Reflections on the Reality of the Tibetan Monk Gendun Chopel*. Another of his books on Choephel, *Gendun Chopel Tibet’s First Modern Artist*, was produced as a result of the of the Gedun Choephel Centennial event for the Latse Library, that Lopez helped organize. The Guilds paintings of Gedun Choephel were first hung in the Library on the occasion of this symposium.⁸ The reproductions in Lopez’s book of Choephel’s paintings, water colors and drawings, most of which I had viewed at the Latse Library in 2008, reminded me of the delicate, thoughtful, careful way Choephel drew likenesses of his subjects, and his

appreciation for the body in motion as expressed in beautifully drawn quick line sketches.
(Fig. 1.2 a, 1.2 b)

I have also referred to biographical material from *dGe-'dun-chos-'phel* by Irmgard Mengele, and Heather Stoddard's comprehensive biography of Choephel, *Le Mendiant de L'Amdo*. I have also found the translations of Choephel's writings informative, Toni Huber's translation of the travel diary written by Choephel, *Guide to India a Tibetan Account by Amdo Gendun Chöpel*, and Jeffrey Hopkins translation of Choephel's writings on the *Tibetan Arts of Love Sex, Orgasm & Spiritual Healing*. Luc Schaedler's 97-minute documentary *Angry Monk* includes a revealing interview with Tibetan monk Golok Jigme, who knew Choephel and was able to describe him in a way that brought Choephel to life for me. These works are a selection of the many sources that provided a window into the spiritual and emotional life of the man Gedun Choephel and have brought me closer to appreciating the complexity of the Guild's choice in taking the renegade monk as their namesake. He was a figure whose life came and went before any of them were born.

Choephel called himself "the mad man of Amdo," renegade monk, translator, and writer. He was multilingual, including Sanskrit and English. His biographers tell us he was alcoholic and loved women. He left the monastery in the 1930s traveling and translating throughout India and Sri Lanka. He wanted to modernize Tibet while watching firsthand Indian artists' responses to India's struggle for independence. As a scholar, socialist and Tibetan Buddhist, he wanted to bring Tibet into the 20th century but was punished for it by reactionary elements of the Tibetan Government. He was an artist who was also a political figure. It is possible to get the impression that Tibetan history might have been very different had he succeeded in bringing Tibet into the 20th century, or even as Lopez points

out, had Choephel come to New York, which he had planned on doing but WWII broke out and he was forced to remain in Tibet and continue his travels in India. (Lopez 2004, 7)

However, the artists of the GCAC have, in one skillful gesture, revitalized the liberal, controversial figure while measuring themselves against this remarkable man. I discuss Choephel further in Chapter Two in the context of the Guild's paintings.

Guild artist Tsewang Tashi's painting of Choephel figures prominently in the group of paintings made for the Latse Library. His family had ties to Choephel and one of Choephel's collaborators in India, Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947). It is a story of serendipity worth repeating in context to cross-cultural exchange. As a fourteen-year-old student, Tashi was interested in oil painting and drawing. In this pursuit he copied a picture of a painting of the Tibetan landscape published in an Indian newspaper. The yellowing newspaper photo of a painting called *Tibet Himalayas* was of a 1933 painting by Russian Theosophist Nicholas Roerich. The clipping itself had been in a collection of papers belonging to Gedun Choephel. While in India Choephel knew Roerich and his son Tibetologist George Roerich, and had apparently cut the picture out of the newspaper. (Lopez Jr. 2006, 32) Nicholas Roerich played a confused role in negotiations with Russia and Tibet, which will be discussed in Chapter Three. The collection had come to Tashi's father from another of his renowned friends, Tibetan thangka painter Amdo Jampa (1911-2002). Amdo Jampa had been a student of Gedun Choephel. (Heimsath 2009, 12) Tashi's father, along with Jampa, and Horkang (a member of an influential noble family in old Tibet), were all interested in art, photography and music. Tashi's father had been part of the reformation programs in Tibet until the Cultural Revolution when he was delegated to menial positions and work units. Interestingly, his parents did not harbor negative feelings about these times, but always

encouraged Tsewang in his interest in art. The auspicious set of circumstances that brought Gedun Choephel's papers to Tashi's father inspired Tashi to make the watercolor from the yellowing newspaper clipping of Roerich's painting. (Fig. 1.3 a)

Roerich's landscapes often included a religious solitary figure, or distant scenes of human activity within the monumental landscape that he calls out in titles like, *Compassion*, or *In Thought*. Tashi, however, did away with any reference to spiritual quests or activities in his copies. The prayer flag in the original Roerich picture, *Tibet Himalayas*, is not in Tsewang's copy, though it may have been cropped out in the newspaper clipping. (Fig. 1.3 b)

Choephel's student, Amdo Jampa, had been celebrated by both the Dalai Lama and later by the Chinese authorities. He managed to survive the Cultural Revolution by making Socialist Realist paintings, however Jampa somehow didn't absorb that ideology, instead retaining a devotion to his religious practices doing his "kora," religious circumambulating around Lhasa every day. (Harris 2012, 214) He died in Lhasa in 2002 at the age of 91. Tashi describes his childhood as being fun. He relished the brightly colored simple graphics of Socialist Realist posters of Marx and Mao plastered all over Lhasa while he was growing up, not for their ideological messages but for the monumentality of the images, which eventually inspired the portraits he has produced beginning with the portrait of Choephel discussed in Chapter Two. He produced a conventional portrait of himself around the time he copied the Roerich picture that mimics the proportion he would use in painting Gedun Choephel twenty-five years later. (Fig. 1.3 c) No other direct references to Choephel have emerged from other Guild members; but it is clear the Choephel is a formidable figure in the history of modern Tibet, and most all Tibetans know something about what he attempted to do for Tibet.

The Discerning Artists

The Gedun Choephel Artists Guild name includes not only Gedun Choephel's name but also the word "guild." They didn't call themselves "association" or "group" and I thought their choice warranted investigating. Naming is sometimes used to describe or even flaunt an organizations intention; at other times it hides them. In the case of the GCAC the use of Choephel's name is pretty forthright, assuming you know who he was. According to Tsering Nyandak the use of the word "guild" may have come from the name *Lhasa Artists' Guild* that was the name of an open studio set up by Guild member Tserang Dhundrup, one of the artists who went to the Snug Harbor residency in New York between 1997 and 1999. For a short time Tserang shared his studio with an American painter who could have suggested the use of the label "Guild." Nyandak says the word has its counter part in the Tibetan word *mtshun tshogs* that translates as "council," "society," or "association." (Kapsner, Wynniatte-Husey 2006) A 2006 article on the website NepalsCraft.com explains that prior to the Chinese entry into Tibet the tradition of guilds was the common organization of Tibetan workers, whether carpenters or thangka (religious paintings) painters. Entrance into the artist guild was considered particularly prestigious as art painting was considered a religious activity and so the artists enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom. The guilds disappeared or were inactive between 1949 and the late 1970s when restoration began on the art and architecture destroyed during and after the Cultural Revolution. At a 2006 conference entitled "The Return of the Guilds" that was organized through the London School of Economics (LSE), papers were presented that acknowledge that guilds and guild-like institutions were not limited to medieval and early modern Europe, but existed in other societies too—in China, Japan, the Ottoman Empire, India, and elsewhere. (Lucassen, De Moor, Van Zanden 2008,

5-6) Tibetan art associations have not been referred to as guilds since the Chinese Revolution in 1949. Chinese historians dislike the label “guild,” agreeing with the Marxist view that, “The European medieval model of a guild is equal to ‘feudalistic capitalism’ that stifles entrepreneurship and innovation by laying down specific rules for the production of goods and services.” (7) When the Communists took over China there was theoretically no longer any need for guilds or unions or chambers of commerce since the entire system is predicated on the welfare of the worker, who ostensibly is the owner of the state that runs the factory. The official government arts organizations in the TAR are called *The Association of Tibetan Artists*, and the *Autonomous Region Federation of Literature and Art Circles*. Members of these groups have participated with members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild in group showings, an example being *The Train* show, which I discuss in Chapter Three. The Guild Artists did not model their organization on Tibet’s traditional arts and crafts production that worked with the Lamaist regime. In that system artisans worked for the religious hierarchy. The Guild artists were also not interested in joining the Chinese government’s arts organization that seemed to them like joining another hierarchy. In some ways the GCAG operates like an “old-fashioned” guild, making decisions by consensus, providing practical support for its members, including helping each other’s families when necessary. The Guild’s vision is to sustain the living transforming Tibetan culture by continuing a presence as artists in the center of Lhasa that indicates the desire to communicate with the immediate community is in the forefront of their vision.

The artists are fiercely independent in their sense of Tibetanness, even those of mixed heritage, who have one Tibetan parent and one Han Chinese parent. Outsiders tend to perceive Tibet as a unified culture in which people are using the same language, eating the

same food, and practicing identical daily rituals. The reality is that Tibet is diverse and complicated with various Tibetan dialects emerging over the centuries producing language barriers between people of the same ethnicity from different locals, though Lhasa dialect is the most recognized throughout the area. No matter what dialect is used the sense of Tibetaness prevails with the people. The Han Chinese have a different sense of themselves than the Tibetans. In an essay about being Chinese in the PRC, “In the Middle of the Goldrush,” published in *China ArtBook* 2007, Birgit Hopfener says that if you are an individual in a country of over a billion people the chances of standing out or being recognized is very slim. (Hopfener 2007, 16) The Tibetans do not experience themselves as part of a population of over a billion people. They recognize themselves as belonging to a small group of people compared to the Han. I became aware of their perception of themselves in an incident in 2006 when Guild artists Nortse and Nyandak made a short stop over in Los Angeles on their way to the opening of *the Train* show in New Mexico. Besides visiting the Hollywood sign and Hollywood Boulevard, we visited the Santa Monica Pier where they met a Chinese painter who had been a filmmaker in China. The painter had hoped to get work in Hollywood but landed on hard times so he was earning his living painting portraits on the pier. The three men spoke together in Chinese, clearly enjoying each other’s company. Afterward, the Tibetans walked away chatting in Tibetan saying they were glad to be Tibetan. I asked why and they answered, “Because there are fewer of us,” which I took to mean that they as Tibetans had less competition and so their ambitions could more easily be fulfilled. (Fig. 1.4) Even though the Chinese artist clearly had distinguished himself from “the crowd” of over a billion Chinese, the Tibetans continued to view him as one of many, and they as privileged. Their sense of “uniqueness” was

emphasized when earlier that day, after viewing an exhibit at the Japanese American National Museum called *100% hapa*,⁹ an exhibition of portraits by filmmaker and artist Kip Fulbeck that depicts people of mixed-race heritage, the Tibetans commented that they weren't represented in the show; none of the portraits included anyone half-Tibetan.¹⁰ The artists experienced the absence of a Tibetan not as an exclusion, but as a reminder that though it has been over a half a century since China claimed Tibet, creating the Tibetan diaspora, Tibetans who live, work and raise families outside of Tibet have not wholeheartedly left their Tibetan community to join other communities. In a *New York Times* article, May 7, 2014, "Indian-Born Tibetans Allowed to Vote, but Few Take Offer," the author Anuradha Sharma says that in Dharamsala only 237 eligible Tibetan refugees submitted voter registration forms by the deadline. There are 13,701 Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala, the home of the Tibetan Government in exile, and 94,203 Tibetans in all of India. When asked why they didn't vote, most said their main goal was to liberate Tibet from Chinese rule and to one-day return to an Independent Tibet, adding they felt no particular connection to their host country, even though they had been born there. A few felt appreciative for the opportunity to be part of the system that would ultimately give them a voice about Tibet and other things as well.

In China the Tibetans are an "ethnic minority." From the 1950s onward China's ethnic minorities had been classified according to the evolutionary principles of the nineteenth century American anthropologist Henry Lewis Morgan and viewed as "living fossils" of earlier stages of evolution, while the Han were presented as more evolved. According to this model Tibet was a feudalistic backwater of the nation where the erasure of all things ancient and traditional was sorely needed. (Harris 2012, 219) Outside China

Tibetans are thought of as everything from exotic and mysterious, primitive and/or on the verge of extinction, or not thought of at all. During the Cultural Revolution, many Han Chinese settled in Tibet where they met their partners and had children. In the TAR there are mixed marriages and children of mixed marriages. Several Guild members are children of these marriages. They choose to identify as Tibetan as most of them grew up in the TAR. Guild artist Gade admits that one of the issues confusing to him is his identity as Tibetan and Chinese. His father was a Han soldier from the People's Liberation Army and his mother embraced Communism. In his artist statement for his 2008 show, *Gade Mushroom Cloud*, he describes his feelings, which resemble feelings voiced by the mixed-race young people recorded in the *100% Hapa* show previously mentioned. Gade says,

“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[s], or sometimes that I belong to the ethnic group of Number 57. [There are 56 officially recognized ethnic groups including Han in China]. I realize that many of my works reveal the confusion of my identity. ...In “My Father's nightmare,”...(my father may resemble Mao as they are both from the Hunan province).” (Gade 2008) (Fig. 1.5)

The Han Chinese members of the Guild feel an affinity with Tibet and all speak fluent Tibetan along with Chinese, which everyone speaks. The artists living in Lhasa identify with the place. Tibetans living in the diaspora continue to consider themselves citizens of Tibet and feel supported by that identification. The question of identity pervades discussion whether inside Tibet, or outside. In her book, *the Museum On the Roof of the World* Clair Harris takes on the issues of identity and citizenship in the complicated subject of the

Tibetan artists in the diaspora, and presents a comprehensive analysis of artist Gonkar Gyatso's life outside of the TAR. A resident of both London and New York, Gyatso shows his work internationally. (Harris 2012, 239)

In 2003, Gyatso produced a telling work about his own struggle with identity called *My Identity* that addresses his role as a Tibetan painter, which could be asking, "Who is the real Tibetan painter?" I met Gyatso in Los Angeles at the Christopher Farr Courtyard Gallery in November 2007 for the opening of a group show of contemporary Tibetan artists called *Past & Present – Tibetan Art – 13th to 21st Century*. Gyatso was wearing a *chuba*, a Tibetan style jacket of black silk lined in light blue silk. Chubas are usually made out of wool so this was particularly elegant. (Fig. 1.6) That he chose to wear the Tibetan dress suggested he meant to identify with his Tibetanness in the context of this show, rather than appear an independent internationally recognized artist whose nationality might be considered second to his art. The show included contemporary art from the TAR, including work from Guild artists and Tibetan artists from the diaspora. None of the artists from the TAR were present, only the Tibetan artists living in the diaspora were able to attend the opening, and none of them wore traditional Tibetan clothing. The show contained pricey antique thangkas and sculptures alongside the contemporary art. All the work was for sale. Gyatso presented his iconic work *My Identity*. (Fig. 1.7 a) The series of four photographs each depicts a Tibetan painter performing a different role at a different time. The series expresses the political situation and the transformation of cultural identity. Gyatso plays the painter in each staged photograph, paying great attention to detail. The subject looks directly at the camera that records the scene. First, dressed elegantly in traditional Tibetan costume, he is painting a thangka, second, dressed in the uniform of red army soldier he's painting a portrait of Mao;

next, he is an exiled longhaired painter in a shack painting the portrait of the Dalai Lama; and, finally, he is the immigrant Tibetan in England working on an abstract painting. In each single frame of this documentary he gets the rooms, décor, hairstyles, and clothes just right. He is producer, director, writer, designer, and performer in a seamless production that does not reveal how much preparation and support staff was necessary to produce these small (15 in x 20 in each) pictures. The pictures are what could be called a “mockumentary.” Gyatso has problematized each photograph producing a ruse played on Gyatso’s Chinese, Tibetan and Western audience who may deconstruct the pictures, as does Harris in *The Museum on the Roof of the World* in order to uncover their layers of meaning. (Harris 2012, 250) Harris lets us in on the ruse, beginning with the observation that the first picture is a copy of a 1934 photograph of a Tibetan thangka painter by Charles Suydam Cutting, made at the Dalai Lama’s summer palace in Lhasa. The photograph appeared on the cover of a ‘How to Paint Thangka’ book in 1984, which Gyatso saw in London but was not circulated in Tibet. Gyatso had no first-hand knowledge of the history of thangka painting since he grew up in China at a time when references to Tibetan Culture were scrubbed clean from public discourse. This fabricated “documentary” is a watershed moment when considering contemporary Tibetan art, especially from the diaspora. It has been seen all over the world, but not in its entirety in China. In the 2007 *Lhasa—New Art From Tibet* show, curated by Leigh Miller Sangster and Tony Scott for Red Gate Gallery, Scott explained to me that they wanted to show the work but worried about the image of the Dalai Lama, which is banned in China. So they decided, with the approval to Gyatso to show the work in the show and in the catalogue without that picture. (Fig. 1.7 b) Though government agents perused the exhibit at the opening, no one seemed to mention the absence of the picture. This show

introduced the influential Chinese art critic Li Xianting to the work of the contemporary Tibetan artists. Three years later he produced the museum show in Beijing *Scorching Sun of Tibet* referred to above.

Gyatso also offered two Buddha figures for the show. Using grid lines, the traditional technique for constructing the drawing of a “Buddha,” Gyatso leaves the lines visible on the paper in order to demystify the process. (Fig. 1.8 a, b, c) He fills the figures with Pokémon stickers that are the quintessential representation of pop culture and successful marketing trends. The Pokémon characters themselves exude the tenets and attitudes of videogame player’s worldwide who love them. Gyatso’s Pokémon sticker Buddhas shimmers with their stories and jokes about life and politics. He embraced the idea of using the Buddha form when his friend from Lhasa, artist Gade visited him in London in 2003, and showed him his work with traditional Tibetan Buddhist iconography and cartoons. Gyatso made his first Pokémon figure in 2004 after seeing Gade’s work. (253)

Harris’s analysis in *Museum on the Roof of the World* of the importance of the role of the “emptied out Buddha” by Tibetan artists inside and outside of Tibet, hinges on her idea that the tactic of using the Buddha figure has internationalized the contemporary Tibetan artists into a cohesive group irrespective of geographical boundaries. (252) She further suggests that this emptied out Buddha art being shown in an “ideologically neutral domain of international art exhibitions and fairs allows the Tibetan exiles and artist from Lhasa to meet in the virtual paradise of art.” (255) Harris does an excellent job of discussing the artists in the diaspora, like Gyatso one of the earliest to forge an independent path outside the TAR. But the totalizing tactic of putting all the contemporary Tibetan artists, inside and outside of Tibet, together does not serve to produce a useful account of the artists in Lhasa who, I believe,

produce work that is much affected by their circumstances, which significantly differs from the work of the artists living in the diaspora. As Harris suggests in her chapter, “The Invention of Tibetan Contemporary Art,” in her book *The Museum on the Roof of the World Art, Politics, and the Representation of Tibet*, she says in regard to the artists living in the TAR who are under direct censorship,

“They cannot make images of the Dalai Lama or subject their own history to the kind of critique that Chinese artists of the post-Tiananmen era have done with Mao. Nor can they possibly assault the icons of the People’s Republic, even if only by fabricating the hacked-off roof of Beijing’s Temple of Peace or making a multimedia installation about Chinese colonialism. [References to a 2006 installation piece *Railway from Lhasa to Kathmandu* by Chinese artist Qiu Zhijie, and the Shanghai artist Xu Zhen’s 2005 installation *8848 minus 1.86*]” (237)

These denied ways are not the only ways to address prescient issues, which the Tibetans have figured out. They are navigating subtler ways, which is generally what artists do anyway. The challenge comes in interpreting the work in an atmosphere dulled by a glut of mass produced definitions. Harris believes that the “Tibetan artists have...treated the international art world as a new Shangri-La, a place of peaceful coexistence with other artists, where ethnicity, politics, and nationality are irrelevant and talent is rewarded. By inventing the term *Tibetan contemporary art*, they could at least ensure that their artworks would escape to this distant utopia even if they could not.” (237) Has she considered that the artists living in the TAR may not see the international art world as a new Shangri-La? During my interactions with the artists in the Guild I never felt they wanted to escape their homeland.

Rather, their particular obstacles challenged them, just as artists in the diaspora are challenged by their circumstances.

The day following the opening of the Farr show Gyatso took a bus to Disneyland and the following day he asked me to take him to see the Hollywood sign, but we only got as far as the top of the parking structure of the Grove shopping center in West Hollywood. From there he could see the sign in the hills, which he photographed. Gyatso was aware that the year before, in 2006 Guild members Nortse and Nyandak visited me when they had a stopover in Los Angeles on their way to Santa Fe, New Mexico for the opening of *The Train* show. One of our jaunts was to the Hollywood sign and Hollywood Blvd. (Fig. 1.9 a, b) Instead of doing that, Gyatso and I went to a mall department store in the Grove where he bought an expensive jar of wrinkle crème for the puffiness under his eyes. We then ate a hamburger before he had to catch a plane.

When Gyatso left China for the first time in 1992 he wanted to learn traditional Tibetan painting, so he went to Dharamsala in India where he stayed for three years. The task of determining and preserving what would be considered “authentic” traditional Tibetan thangka painting associated with the practice of Tibetan Buddhism went to the Tibetan Government in exile in Dharamsala, where lengthy debates decided what is considered “authentic” and representative “traditional Tibetan thangka painting.” These decisions currently define how thangka painting is taught in Dharamsala. (Harris 1998, 58-60) and (Harris 2012) When Gyatso went to the thangka painting school in Dharamsala, he realized the practice did not suit him. His teachers were put off by his experimental paintings and he was told that the European and American students in his class were more Tibetan than he. Had he been accepted into the fold in India he might have stayed there. But the rigidity of

the teachers view and training left him depleted and discouraged. He told me that when he left Dharamsala it was the lowest point in his life. (Gyatso, 2007) He eventually went to London and acquired British citizenship in 2003. As already noted his art practice has developed and flourished, and he continues to employ thangka painting techniques infused with pop culture imagery, including the Pokémon figures he used to make his art.

In Tibet the practice of thangka painting persists. While in Lhasa in 2009 I spoke with Guild member, Jhamsang, who told me that while he was an art student at Tibet University, he decided to study thangka painting with a famous local thangka painter. Though the teacher told him to forget thangka painting and focus on his contemporary work, Jhamsang felt drawn to understanding the deeper elements of the practice. At one point he even took a job with the local Government to interview monks in the monastery at a particularly volatile time when the threat of demonstrations loomed. He took the job so that he could find out from the monks about thangka painting, not about covert activities the government thought they were doing. He said it was risky to be asking questions about art but he wanted to understand as much as he could about painting thangkas, and he was also curious about life inside the monasteries.¹¹

Tibetan Buddhism's link with thangka painting challenges contemporary artists, dealers, curators and audiences in a variety of ways. For instance, the group show at the Christopher Farr Gallery in Los Angeles, *Past & Present – Tibetan Art – 13th to 21st Century* created what almost all shows of contemporary Tibetan art do, they cross-reference traditional with contemporary art even when they do not include actual pieces of traditional Tibetan art. However, in the Farr Gallery show pieces from the 13th century were present and for sale alongside the contemporary art. Producing theme shows that couple traditional

and contemporary Tibetan art haunts curators, collectors and dealers because while the practice draws audiences and sells pictures, the assumption that contemporary art needs the reference of the traditional art to make it appear “authentic” limits discussion about the contemporary art. Instead, it produces predictable discourses taken up by well-intentioned but uninformed historians and critics. Perhaps the Tibetan artists’ practice of freely borrowing from their traditions without attempting to replicate them, or apologize for the appropriations, or even explain their intentions, gives quarter to those critics who try to decipher the mysterious symbolism. The need to bring the past and present together in the gallery shows suggests curators and critics are looking for a way to adequately discuss the relationship between traditional Tibetan arts, its link to Tibetan Buddhism and contemporary Tibetan art. The links need not be ignored but the connections invite deeper explorations. For this discussion I have chosen to look closely at the contemporary artists’ work, the concepts, narratives, and use of materials as a rich resource for extensive discussion beyond simply comparing and contrasting the old with the new. It is an attempt to freshly consider the ideas of the contemporary artists in the TAR without further burdening them with the shadow of a two-millennium old legacy, or with the tone of frustration, alienation and longing expressed by the artists in the diaspora.

When I met the artists the thought of “traditional” didn’t cross my mind because their way of life merged with my experience of other contemporary artists in major cities around the world, except that for the most part the Tibetans were more affluent. Most have homes and studios, drive SUVs, and have ranking positions as teachers and designers, or are comfortably retired. Therefore, I assumed they engaged in the same art practices as contemporary artists around the world, when in fact their particular circumstances dictate

different choices, including materials, mediums and subject matter. Before the Guild formed the artists working independently used materials in a way they thought would demonstrate their Tibetaness. It was a way to separate themselves from the thriving contemporary Chinese art movement, which was simultaneously addressing influences of movements associated with socialist realist painting, abstraction, and pop art. In an email exchange with Guild artist Nyandak, he described the 1980s and 1990s paintings the Tibetans were making using handmade paper colored with burnt tea to evoke old Tibetan thangka and texts. He wrote,

“... [The] artists here had been trying to evoke the Tibetaness through use of materials like tea, smoke grease from kitchen to give the overall feeling of burnt (brownness) on other mediums like water color and oil. This period we called soy sauce period. This still applied to some artists who work with Tibetan paper and thin canvas where you don't see much colors in impasto. Acrylic has recently been used by many artists apart from oil...Materials outside khatak [traditional white silk offering scarves], prayer flag and other relatively traditional ones are not common until now...they mostly serve to strengthen the identity issue...Mineral color, which is used commonly in good thangkas are used by quite few artists too.” (Email communication with the author, April 7, 2007)

By 2003, the artists had let go of the burnt tea and smoke idea. When asked if he felt the pressure of representing Tibet in some way Nyandak answered,

“We used to think that Tibetan artists should have this strong feeling of Tibet...we call it the ‘smell of tsampa’ in our painting. So if your painting was too bright, it didn’t come up [to] this smell. So for many artists here there was a period that I call the ‘soy sauce’ period because all the paintings were tinged with this layer of brown-black so the work would not be so bright—

so the smell of yak butter or tsampa would come up. It was a kind of motto for us—for Tibetan artists in the late 1990s especially. But now it's becoming much less so...because artists realize it's not the only way for art to be interesting [to an audience]." (Nyandak 2007)

Examples of the artists' transformations are visible through their works, but it should be noted that they are discriminating in their experiments. For instance Heimsath asked them about exploring other mediums in their work, like installations or performances. Heimsath writes,

"I was pushing my own interest in Tibetan "space" and advocated experimentation with installations when one artist sarcastically pointed out that they were almost done building a massive piece with two iron rails right across the northern landscape of Tibet. [One of the artists said,] 'Perhaps I could use that as my installation?'" (Heimsath 2005)

However, they were less savvy in 1986. When Robert Rauschenberg asked them if they thought of using anything other than paint in paintings, they were genuinely baffled, replying that they had not. (Gyatso 2007) I will elaborate on the incident in the following pages about Rauschenberg's time in Tibet.

Gade and Jhamsang refer to thangka painting both loosely and directly with the "soy sauce" affect, and then successfully drop it to explore cartoon-like, bright, glossy depictions. (Fig. 1.10 a, b) Artist Benchung began with a smoky hand process that painted on rough cloth, sewing pieces together. The work is reminiscent of post WWII Italian doctor turned artist, Alberto Burri, who in the early 1950s produced sackcloth paintings described as "bleeding wounds and scarifications" sewn together with sutures by an artist with a "scalpel." (Schimmel 2012, 193) (Fig. 1.11 a, b, c, d) Though Benchung, as far as I know, was

unaware of this work, it is interesting that, as Schimmel suggests “patching things together” seemed to be a common theme after the War. Though Schimmel is referring to WWII, Benchung’s Tibet had experienced the ravages of the Cultural Revolution that had literally torn Lhasa apart, its public and private buildings, its landscape, its artifacts. Eventually, Benchung moves away from these kinds of handmade laborious depictions into what he describes as *Colourful Darkness*, which is also the title of his 2009 one-person show at Rossi & Rossi Gallery in London. These works painted in luminous transparent pastel shades depict brawny, strapping headless men doing mundane and shocking things, like picking up a flower, or pointing a gun to their own head. (Fig. 1.12 a, b) The hidden trauma expressed in the gestures and narratives of these works follows the sentiment of German artist Joseph Beuys, who was deeply affected by events during WWII. Beuys said, “Show it! Show the wound that we have inflicted upon ourselves during the course of our development...the only way to progress and become aware of it is to show it.” (Storr 2012, 243) (Fig. 1.13)

Benchung is an art professor at Tibet University, and besides having been an artist-in-residence at Snug Harbor, New York, he did graduate studies at Oslo University in Norway. He invited me to give a talk to his graduate seminar about the GCAG. The talk was held in the Guild Gallery in the summer of 2009, not on the University grounds because he did not want to call attention to the Guild, or a visitor, as all would be tightly scrutinized. Benchung had a one-man show at Rossi & Rossi Gallery in London, but was unable to attend because the University wouldn’t release him from his teaching duties. I arranged for a residency for him at 18th Street Art Center in Santa Monica, California, in 2011, but again his passport wouldn’t be released from the University, which acts as an organ of the Central Government. After some thought it occurred to me that Benchung was not that interested in

taking another trip to America. He had already done the New York residency in New York, and another residency in Norway. His art practice had found footing evidenced in exhibits of his work internationally. That the University in Tibet decided not to release his passport may not have been that problematic for him, practically speaking. On the other hand, I know he would have liked to go to the opening of his one-man show at Rossi and Rossi Gallery in 2009, but again he was not allowed out.

On a visit to Benchung's house/studio in 2009 I saw images of the work he had just shipped to London. He showed me a 15-minute video called *Floating River Ice* that he shot in 2003. (Fig. 1.14 a) The unsettling document shows him covertly spreading lines of white powder at night on the wet streets of Lhasa. Customarily, auspicious decorative patterns are drawn at crossroads in early morning with the white powders to stop phantoms during ceremonial occasions like marriage or death. He explained that through the night the ground froze, locking in the lines. Then as the day warmed up and cars drove over them, they melted away. Traditionally when someone dies in Tibet a chalk line is made along the path from where the body is taken to its burial place, usually from the home into the mountains for a "sky burial" in which the body is dismembered and spread on the ground for the vultures to eat and carry away, a practice the Chinese Government is trying to phase out. (Fig. 1.14 b) Occasionally, one sees these chalk lines on the street of the Barkhor emanating from a residence where someone has recently died. Through the day the chalk line disappears. The unmistakable reference to the Buddhist notion of "impermanence" remains remarkably poignant. In the United States any ordinary signs of death are scrupulously scrubbed from the possibility of entering the everyday consciousness of its citizens. It would be hard to imagine such lines drawn in the streets of Los Angeles. Benchung understands

this piece made in 2003 continues to remain prescient and so did curator Li Xianting when he included it in the 2010 *Scorching Sun of Tibet* show in Beijing.

Though the link between Tibetan Buddhism and contemporary Tibetan painting is broken Tibetan rituals and cultural practices continue and are evident in everyday life. The Dalai Lama was quoted as telling a refugee community that, “You don’t have to worry if everything is destroyed in Tibet—such as thangka paintings or statues of the Buddha—because if a person treasures the real holy thing in himself, he can reproduce the spiritual objects because they come from the spirit with the person.” (Kamenetz 1994, 166)

Thangkas are still painted and Tibetan Buddhism is still practiced. The Tibetan artists do not miss the formal link because they are not painting thangkas. All the artists I have spoken with have a profound respect for what they know about Tibetan Buddhism, and for what they know about thangka painting. None of the artists, as already indicated numerous times, have voiced insecurity about references to tradition in their work. Their religion is in their art, and their art is in their lives. Guild artist Gade says,

“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 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.” (Gade 2008, 63)

Gade’s statement reminds me of a story told by Chogyam Trungpa, incarnate lama, teacher, scholar, artist and controversial figure in the dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism in

the West. (Fig. 1.15 a, b) In his book *Meditation in Action* he quotes a *sutra* wishing to dissuade his Western students from their desire to “purify” themselves in hopes of avoiding suffering in their lives. Trungpa paraphrases the *sutra*,

“It is said...in the *Lankavatara Sutra*, that unskilled farmers throw away their rubbish and buy manure from other farmers, but those who are skilled go on collecting their own rubbish, in spite of the bad smell and the unclean work, and when it is ready to be used they spread it on their land, and out of this they grow their crops. That is the skilled way.” (Trungpa 1976, 20-22)

He continues in his own words,

“Through thousands and thousands of lives we have been collecting so much rubbish that now we have a wonderful wealth of this manure. It has everything in it, so it would be just the right thing to use, and it would be such a shame to throw it away...[If we did that] all that struggle...and collecting would have been wasted, and you would have to start all over again from the beginning...there would be a great feeling of disappointment, and it would be more a defeat than anything having been gained...all sorts of things...not particularly good things...may have happened...undesirable and negative. At this stage there are good things and bad things, but this collection contains good things disguised as bad and bad things disguised as good.” (23)

Trungpa concludes the thought with,

“One must respect the flowing pattern of all one’s past lives and the early part of one’s present life right up to today. And there is a wonderful pattern in it. There is already a very strong current where many streams meet in a valley. And this river is very good and contains this powerful current running through it, so instead of trying to block it one should join this current and use it.” (23)

Gade is the master of appropriating everyday cultural icons into his pictures: Mickey Mouse, McDonald's, Mao Suits, and the Cross are reflections of the current cultural state of Tibet affected by the Cultural Revolution and globalization. Gade paints images full of people, cartoon people, and, as he says, his images are sometimes ironic. (Gade 2008, 63) At the same time, he holds on to the tradition of thangka painting because he says he wants to preserve particular characteristics like using the same pigments, handmade paper, and painting the deities in real gold. Describing his process in a pamphlet produced by Rossi and Rossi for the 2012 Hong Kong International Art Fair, he follows up with a question about thangkas.

“Does thangka still exist once it loses its divinity?... Modernization has redefined Tibet and the people who live there. It has also corrupted people's minds and taken away happiness. The continuity of our culture and the substance of our spirit are destroyed when modern civilization begins to take place. If this is the price we must pay for modernization, I doubt if it will bring true happiness to people.” (Gade 2012)

The implication is that things might have been better before, maybe even for thangka painters. However according to Chogyam Trungpa thangka painters were not always religious monk types, but rather more like bands of gypsies that went from monastery to monastery. They got paid by how many and which “deities” they painted, and by how many furls in a scarf. The longer it took the more money they got, which is why thangkas sometimes were crowded with many deities—the more deities and furls the more money. In addition artisans were paid with parties, presents, and beer. Trungpa says the practice

deteriorated into making “pretty” pictures instead of for their intended use as a “physical support” for Buddhist visualization practices. (Trungpa, Niland, Wigman 1971)

When Trungpa escaped from Tibet in 1959 to become a Spaulding Fellow at Oxford University, eventually landing in Colorado in 1971, he commissioned some experimental thangka painting by a young American, Jack Niland, who was interested in the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, which Trungpa had begun teaching in the West. Niland’s pictures have only recently been published on the website *The Chronicle Project* along with an interview with the painter who recollects Trungpa’s commentary on traditional Tibetan art. Trungpa told Niland that his 1971 painting *Sara* was the first Western thangka. (Fig. 1.16) Trungpa didn’t have a problem with “authenticity.” He was interested in transmitting Tibetan Buddhist teachings to Westerners whom he experienced as having unclear impressions of Tibetan Buddhism, and little if any knowledge of the Tibetan culture, not unlike art audiences looking at contemporary Tibetan painting today. In any case, he understood that Buddhism is not a fixed entity, but a dynamically changing arrangement. In a seminar on Buddhist history that Trungpa gave in 1972, he describes the trajectory of Buddhism after it left India. It was transformed first by the cultures of Burma, Thailand and Ceylon, where ascetic practices developed; and then to China and Japan where philosophical discourses and institutions were created. Finally it arrived in Tibet in the 7th and 8th century when Tibetan Buddhism was created around the concept of ‘the middle way.’ (Trungpa 1972)

Trungpa’s understanding of the global history of Buddhism let him see that Buddhism was undergoing another transformation, in which he was a player, as it was being adopted in the West, taking on the cultural trappings of the West. Little did he know that the books he was writing in English for Westerners about Tibetan Buddhism would one day find

their way back to Tibet, which I discovered on one of my field trips to Lhasa. While visiting artist Nortse's home/studio with Nyandak in Lhasa, I noticed *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* on a side table in the sunroom off the patio. (Fig. 1.17) When I asked about the copy of Trungpa's book, Nyandak said, "Oh! that's where I left it!" The dog-eared copy had obviously been read, but when Nyandak said he'd read it six times I was surprised. Nyandak said Tibetans knew Trungpa as a powerful lama who went to the West. I did not see books by Trungpa translated into Chinese in Lhasa but I saw Chinese translations of books by his foremost student Pema Chödrön in a bookstore on the Barkhor.

In *The Madman's Middle Way* Donald S. Lopez Jr., describes life in Tibet before Modern Buddhism arrived. There was no movement to ordain women, no publication of Buddhist magazines, no formation of lay Buddhist societies, no establishment of orphanages, and no liberal critique of Buddhism as contrary to scientific progress. No Tibetan delegates had been sent to the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. There were no efforts by Tibetans to found world Buddhist organizations. Since Tibet never became a European colony, Christian missionaries were never a significant presence. Buddhist monks were not taught European languages, European educational institutions were not established, and the printing press was not introduced. Thus, both Asia and the West considered Tibet a pure abode of Buddhism, unspoiled by the forces of modernity. (Lopez 2006, 250)

After the eighth century, the arts in Tibet developed in the service of "a pure abode of Buddhism" and the institution of the Lamaist State. The government conscripted artists, patrons commissioned paintings for religious practices; public ceremonial purposes; births and deaths in the family. There were also commissions to publicize events, and for storytellers who functioned as traveling teachers. Paintings were used in rituals to summon

deities for support and to remove obstacles. (Jackson 1984, 9-10) The government conscripted artists, and paid them well. Patrons and artists agreed on minimum payment before the work began as well as on the amount of gold used in the painting. Payment to the artist at the completion of the work was thought of as a pious offering of the sacred image to its new home, a kind of religious “ransom payment.”(12) There was the belief that the artists’ spiritual development, mastery of religious doctrine, and practice were more valuable than their artistry. (5)

The Tibetan religious doctrine is based on the idea of “the middle way,” which acknowledges something called “ordinary mind.” (Trungpa 1973, 218) Gedun Choephel’s major philosophical writing is on the ‘middle way,’ “A Complete Treatise on the Certitude of the Third Yana: The Middle Way.” (Lopez 2006) Trungpa’s writings are based on the middle way, as well, except he had to adapt them to communicate with the Westerners he was teaching and whom he says are regrettably inclined toward theism. (Trungpa 1972) Gedun Choephel and Chogyam Trungpa represent Tibetan Yogis, accomplished practitioners of the Tibetan teachings of Tantric Buddhism that embraces the idea of “ordinary mind.” (Trungpa 1973, 59) Both men followed unconventional paths that included a deep interest and respect for art, and an unwavering commitment to the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism that say every person has the potential to “wake up” in this lifetime. (Trungpa, 1973, 218) Both Choephel and Trungpa had the benefit of the strict training of incarnate lamas in Tibet before the Communists dismantled the system. Both Choephel and Trungpa pointed out that the system was already faltering before the takeover. But each was determined to keep the Tibetan Buddhist teachings alive, Choephel in Tibet, Trungpa in the West.

In Tibet there was a brief period before the total dissolution of the Lamaist state, when experimentation in the arts was appreciated. In 1954 one of the court painters of the Dalai Lama, previously mentioned, was Choephel's student, Amdo Jhampa, the friend of Guild member Tsewang Tashi's father, who was once the Head of the Artists Association of the TAR. He accompanied the Dalai Lama to Beijing to participate in the Conference of the National People's Congress. While in Beijing, Amdo had a short training in the Central Academy of Fine Arts where he did a painting, "Chairman Mao and the Tibetan New Life." (See Fig. 1.18) The Dalai Lama gave Amdo's paintings to Chairman Mao. Amdo's combining the Tibetan thangka techniques along side socialist realist techniques influenced generations of Tibetan painters that followed. (Li 2010, 5) Gongkar Gyatso considers Amdo Jhampa the most important Tibetan modern artist. (Conversation with the author 2007) Jhampa, like Choephel and Trungpa, retained an absolute commitment to the Tibetan Buddhist teachings through their very different, but challenging, lives.

Currently, high quality traditional thangka paintings are available in the TAR alongside less costly works produced for a mass market. (Heimsath 2005) The tradition of commissioning artists to paint pictures by the State disappeared, but artists who temporarily stopped painting or worked "underground" during the Cultural Revolution began painting again, independently from local shops, gathering students and clients. The thangkas are often inscribed on the back with a Sanskrit word (*Mantra*) for "sacred utterance" that is usually associated with a particular deity. Traditionally it was up to the owner of the thangka to do recitation and visualization practices with the picture to get the "blessings" of that particular deity.

The artists of the Guild contend their relationship to Buddhism is ‘personal.’ Some have shrines in their living quarters and studios, and some do not. Some participate in traditional rituals; others do not. They do not champion individualism, nor do they condemn collectivism. They practice making art both inclusively, working individually and as a collective. Their first priority is to make art in the world they live in. They are “cross-cultural” both in terms of their own historical culture and contemporary world culture, and their closest and most challenging relationship is with China. The Chinese Revolution in 1949 brought social, political, economic, and personal changes to every Tibetan remaining in what would become the TAR. The new Revolutionary government had ideas about the role of art in their new society. It resulted in an official stance toward the making of art and the methods to produce this art that was taught in art schools throughout the PRC. The contemporary Chinese artists had to break through those lessons to enter the 21st century. Contemporary Tibetan artists have pushed through this official training with the help of their Tibetan teachers to discover their own voices. Nevertheless, some of the official training lingers as it was zealously imposed on the students alongside Communist dogma. The shadow of this training permeates contemporary Chinese and Tibetan painting. The official Chinese art of the Chinese people after 1949 was called “New Realism.” The assumption was that culture needed to be made part of the Communist Revolution by making art accessible to the masses, and this was deemed the way. The leaders decided to eradicate *Guohua*, or “national painting” that for millenniums had been produced by an elitist class of *academic painters* and *literati painters*. The *academic painters* were professionals employed by the Imperial courts; they were highly skilled craftsmen in their use of colors, realistic conventional representations of people and things employing precise detail, and gold leaf,

but they were not poets. The *literati painters* were amateur painters, independent wealthy scholar-officials who could afford to devote themselves to self-expression by writing poetry and painting abstract poetic ideas, often based on religious and philosophical themes swathed in Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. The Communists' plan to dismantle this millennium old literati tradition with "New Realism" painting was intended to eliminate the gap between "the people" and "high-class" art that had been the norm in Chinese culture for centuries. (Andrews 1994, 25) To move their idea forward the Communists borrowed painting techniques from the Soviets and then introduced the theories into the art academies throughout China. (Li 2010) "New Realism" was the foundation of Socialist Realist Art, which thrived through the Cultural Revolution. Writer, critic, curator and historian Li Xianting points out, "Revolutionary realism didn't just come out of thin air." (Li 2007)

After the Cultural Revolution ended, in the latter half of the 1970s and 1980s the country opened to foreigners resulting in a cultural liberalization period in China. And then artists began a roller coaster trip that revisited *literati* painters of previous decades and traditional abstract landscape painting, which had been out of favor until the 1970s, and they re-examined Western modern art that included early modernists, impressionists, the Fauves, cubism, and later on the abstract expressionists. That openness began to close down again during the 1980s when abstraction fell out of favor with the Government that thought it was a bourgeois, capitalist silliness as well as a throw-back to China's own elitist traditions. (Li 2007) This shutting down by the Central Government denied contemporary Chinese artists information about the abstract expressionist movement and its discontents in the United States as well as the myriad of art movements it spawned. Thus the Chinese artists would not have face-to-face contact with Western artists until the 1990s. (Li 2007)

While the “Realist Art” movement took hold in China, the Chinese artists who had been experimenting with abstraction found they were without support. Li Xianting, in his interview for *Asia Art Archive Material of the Future*, pointed out that when he was editor of *Meishu Magazine* in 1982 and 1983, the magazine decided to publish articles and reproductions of abstract art that they found valuable and interesting. They understood rigorous artistic experimentation by its nature was not for everyone because it was unfamiliar, and often in an unrecognizable language. The art and accompanying discourse about the art was inherently exclusive, which the editors knew would limit their audience. The Chinese authorities that oversaw the editorial staff of the magazine did not approve of this approach so the magazine was not able to follow through with its plan to investigate abstract art, and Li was relieved of his post as editor. (Li 2007)

In the West, abstract expressionist painters were comfortable with both the notion of “elite” and “pure” because they realized a certain amount of knowledge was required to “get it,” at the same time they had faith that everyone actually could appreciate it because it evoked emotion, and spoke to the senses. It was a question of exposure and time. Meanwhile, the next generation of American painters following the abstract expressionist painters, including Robert Rauschenberg along with Jasper Johns and others, thought the idea of ‘pure painting’ was wrong, elitist and alienating. Unknown to them they were in agreement with the Chinese government about elitism and alienation. However the notion of pure art did not really bother the Chinese when applied to “Realist Art.” They simply transferred the idea onto that movement along with the caveat that it mattered who made the art and who it was made for. They said “Realist Art” was pure art because it was understandable to everyone, and most importantly an elite class did not produce it.

The Tibetans picked up some of these ideas about “Realist Art,” as expressed in Amdo Jhampa’s painting, *Chairman Mao and the Tibetan New Life*. (Fig. 1.18) The Chinese art movement incorporated “pop” images as well. Some critics read them as “cynical.” Critic Li Xianting coined the phrase “cynical pop” when describing this work. The notion fell in line with literary critic and Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson who identified ‘pop’ with “post-modernism,” which he considered a commentary on capitalism. Jameson introduced his ideas of “post-modernism” to China in 1985 with a series of lectures at Peking University and Shenzhen University in Guangdong. “Post modernism” had become the topic to discuss in Chinese art academies in the 1980s. (Wang 2005) Jameson defines “post-modernism” as the “cultural logic of late capitalism.” Jameson’s sense was that capitalism’s speed was producing a complex display of alienation and despair. However, according to Wang, young Chinese scholars influenced by Jameson’s ideas who translated his books into Chinese misinterpreted the ideas. Instead of recognizing Jameson’s original idea about late capitalism producing alienation and despair they read it as an enthusiastic endorsement of mass culture, and this was interpreted as a new space of popular freedom. (Wang 2005, 20) Jameson’s original idea was turned into dust, but the idea was not lost on the Tibetans, who have experienced “late capitalism” as Jameson describes. This becomes apparent twenty years after Jameson’s lectures, when in Heimsath’s 2005 article, “Untitled Identities, Contemporary Art in Lhasa, Tibet” he asks why the new Tibetan art from Lhasa does not exploit the global art markets impression of China’s recent traumatic history, using images of Mao and propaganda for the Cultural Revolution as sources of their commentary as the contemporary Chinese artists do, with their “pop” imagery. It is because the Tibetans don’t see the “charm” in turning the Socialist Realist’ pictures of the Cultural Revolution into

“pop” commentary. Why would they want to recollect those images unless to use them in biting critiques, which, in fact, they cannot. As Harris points out, Tibetans are not allowed to be cynical about Chinese icons. (Harris 2012, 237) And the Tibetans realize cynicism does not serve them. (In conversation with Gade and Nyandak, 2009) The Chinese Government moved beyond the overtly oppressive tactics of Cultural Revolution to embrace capitalism and the rise of the market economy. The Tibetans experienced these changes, and in some ways welcomed the disruptions that turned their lives upside down. Money was flowing into Tibet. The Tibetan artists in Lhasa had studios and homes. They supported themselves and helped each other when necessary. The irony here is that now that they are successfully making “modern art,” its production serves the Chinese Government, which has determined “their” Tibetan ethnic minority has been raised from its primitive past, proving that their policies toward Tibet are working. As long as the Tibetans don’t bring too much attention to themselves, they are able to continue to make art in Lhasa. They address the current capitalist-influenced Communist state, as it affects the majority, as well as closely watch the particular state policies aimed directly at them, like the suppression of their language.

The Guild members are in agreement with the focus of their organization. The artists’ voices vary in regard to the social and economic changes in China. Some famous and well thought of Chinese artists like Ai Weiwei understand the problems his country is experiencing, and his art addresses it while he draws attention to himself to make his points. Ai has often shown sympathy for Tibet. On one occasion he asked the members of the GCAG if they were interested in collaborating on a performance. After consideration they declined the offer, realizing they would be subsumed into Ai’s fame and his controversial art might even put them in danger with the Government. (In conversation with Nyandak in

Lhasa 2007) Interestingly, the politically, socially conscious artist Ai Weiwei, known for his astute observations of government policy toward its citizens, has an older half-brother, Ai Xuan, who paints large format pictures of Tibetan Nomads, which he sells for high prices in auction and privately. His portrait “Tibetan Girl” sold at auction for \$5 million in 2011. In a 2013 *Wall Street Journal* article “Meet Ai Weiwei’s Artist Brother,” the older Mr. Ai says, “I think people are attracted to my paintings because of the solitude, the pride of the individuals despite the harshness of the natural environment, the bitterness of life.” His nomads, burly men and beautiful women and children, huddled in the snow, seem deeply entrenched in formulaic clichés about the “Tibetan minority.” Ai Xuan and Ai Weiwei’s father, Ai Qing, was a renowned poet who was denounced during the Cultural Revolution. Along with Ai Weiwei’s critical work come the stereotypical paintings of his brother. From within one educated and elite family, the family’s experiences of trauma during the Cultural Revolution produced two artists who could not be more different in their reading of China and in their art practice. Ai Weiwei’s critical performative work is met with the stereotypical paintings of his brother. In fact, Ai Xuan’s view of Tibetans represents the view of the majority of Han Chinese in the PRC. Ai Weiwei does not make work about Tibet specifically, but his work is about injustices in China which most people feel helpless to change. Ai Weiwei is famous and well respected internationally and cannot leave China because the government is holding his passport. His brother travels freely.

When speaking with the Tibetan artists about the contemporary Chinese art movement, Heimsath reported some GCAG members felt the Mainland China artists were too absorbed with their own image and too enthralled by whatever proves fashionable at international exhibits. They spoke about a tendency of the Chinese to mimic anything that is

hot in New York galleries and that they explicitly wanted to distance themselves from such trends. (Heimsath 2005) As Harris suggests, the artists of the GCAG choose not to reference China's political narratives because their immediate concerns are more present. Artists in the diaspora, among them Gonkar Gyatso, address China's policies toward Tibet in their works, such as, *Reclining Buddha: Beijing Tibet Relationship Index*, and *The Shambhala in Modern Times* that can be displayed in international venues like the Venice Biennale in 2009. (Harris 2012, 260)

Artist Gade wrote a statement in 2008 that is the best overall account of the Guilds aims as well as an in-depth portrait of him. Gade writes:

“I was born in 1971 in Lhasa. I attended the Central Fine Art Academy in Beijing, China's premiere art school, studying Chinese painting, art history and art theory. I chose to study Chinese paintings, as it was less restrictive than Tibetan painting, then returned to making traditional Tibetan painting but in a new way. My art might not be seen as contemporary in a western manner since the cultural pulse in Tibet is very different. For a long time Tibetan Buddhism had a strong and undeniable influence on many Tibetan artists. I myself was under such influence in my early days and you can see the magic and secret spell of Buddhism, with its symbols and icons, reflected in my paintings. In my studies I explored techniques that would allow me to express the themes I was then inspired by, but slowly I started questioning myself, my art and my life and realized I was getting myself trapped along the wrong path. Firstly, I only had a superficial understanding of the deepest meaning of Tibetan Buddhism so by trying to represent it in my work; my ability fell short of my wishes. I was running the risk of depicting the myth of ancient Tibet that you can find in textbooks, or the legendary land of magic that people are so much talking about, while what I really wanted was to paint my Tibet, the one I grew up in and belong to. My generation has grown

up with thangka painting, martial arts, Hollywood movies, Mickey Mouse, Charlie Chaplin, Rock n' Roll and McDonalds. We still don't know where the spiritual homeland is, New York, Beijing or Lhasa. We wear Jeans and T-shirts and when we drink a Budweiser it is only occasionally that we talk about 'Buddhahood.' Now in my work I look for signs of a culture that speaks of ages as well as modernity, as if my brush is a thread that connects the past and the present. I depict Tibet as a society in transition, which has received outside cultural influences and underwent major changes, a Tibet shaped by present realities and connected to the rest of the world. More recently, my work has filled with more ironic elements, this is not my way to criticize anything, just an effort to give reality a more authentic appearance. When I am pretending to represent deep philosophical and religious concepts I start painting more freely and in a more relaxed way, and any soul or object can find its own place in one of my paintings and by doing so I found again the happiness I felt in my childhood while drawing cartoons.” (Gade 2005, 17)

Gade says, “I look for signs of a culture that speaks of ages as well as modernity...a thread that connects the past and the present.” However, occupying the past doesn't guarantee safety in the present. The “now” is not without obstacles; indeed, it is fraught with confusion. Hidden layers of meaning abound in contemporary cultures subjected to, and immersed in, commercial and political propaganda. Using his insight he unreservedly adopts the metaphors of popular culture, and makes new ones, recognizing that everyone knows how to read them. He pretends, imagines, and makes it up as he goes along. A 2013 *New York Times* article by Randy Kennedy, “A Maverick as Student and Teacher” is about American artist Mike Kelley, called a ‘terrorist and a healer’ by film director John Waters. Kelley is quoted as saying,

“I think [pop culture] is garbage...but that’s the culture I live in, and that’s the culture people speak. I’m an avant-gardist. We’re living in the postmodern age, the death of the avant-garde. So, all I can really do now is work with this dominant culture and flay it, rip it apart, reconfigure it, expose it—because popular culture is really invisible. People are really visually illiterate. They learn to read in school, but they don’t learn to decode images.”

As far as this writer can tell Gade, though he doesn’t disparage pop culture, accepts it for what it is, throwing it into his pool of tricks that includes appropriating his past while engaging the present.

During an interview Gade balked at the suggestion that he and the other Guild members were the first Tibetan avant-gardists. He vigorously objected, pointing out that an avant-garde requires something to reject, but there is nothing left in Tibet to reject; the past has been torn away. He added that maybe the next generation would respond and react to what he and the other members of the Guild are doing now, and that generation would be the first wave of an avant-garde movement of artists in Tibet. Unlike Mike Kelley, Gade is not an avant-gardist. He is rather a member of a small ethnic minority living in a Communist country with a one-party system that is determined to rule absolutely. Under these constraints he has come to make art that makes him happy.

In the following chapters I discuss the paintings of Gedun Choephel by the Guild and the paintings in *The Train* show. I push through the nagging notions of a magical and tragic Tibet to see the contemporary art made by the Tibetan artists in Lhasa. I have touched on incidents and ideas the artists shared with me, and recorded events to cobble together a picture of the evolving scene in Lhasa. In 1999, contemporary Chinese art was introduced to the West Coast of the United States in a show called *I Don’t Want to Play Cards With Cezanne*

at the Pasadena Art Museum just outside of Los Angeles. While Chinese artists were showing work in the West and visiting and engaging in residency programs outside of China, no one knew, or even thought of what might be happening with contemporary artists in Tibet.

However, in 1985 there was one artist, the American Robert Rauschenberg, who was wondering about what was happening in China and especially in Tibet. His interest and curiosity turned out to be a watermark of cultural exchange that occurred in 1985-1986 just at the moment China was experiencing its “New Realist” art movement and the Tibetans were looking for ways to shore up their presence as contemporary Tibetan artists. The event represents a quintessential instance of confusion that cross-cultural exchange can produce. The episode attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable by redefining ideas about “abstraction,” “realism,” “purity,” and the “ordinary” by suggesting new definitions born of necessity and good intentions. The events occur but the results are not as easily interpreted as one might expect. And so, with a light touch, I add to this preliminary discussion of the paintings of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild the story of Robert Rauschenberg’s trip to China and Tibet so the reader may consider an exemplary incident of cross-cultural exchange to bear in mind when looking at the work of the GCAC.

CROSS CULTURAL INCIDENT: RAUSCHENBERG AND HIS INFLUENCE ON THE GCAG

An egalitarian notion of art was in the forefront of the thinking of Robert Rauschenberg when he imagined sharing art across cultures and continents. Explaining his intentions about his new project, Rauschenberg said, “I thought it would be terrible to live in

this world and not know what another part of the world was like.” (Kotz 1987) He also had a deep respect for the idea that art was the best communicator. And so, with one million dollars of his own money he created Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange *ROCI* (the acronym *ROCI* referred to the name of his pet turtle) that traveled between 1984 and 1991 to ten countries considered at the time to be politically sensitive by the United States Government—Mexico, Chile, China, Tibet, Venezuela, Japan, Cuba, Germany, Malaysia, and the USSR. (Kotz 2004, 20)

His intention was to provoke dialogue with “local” artists about art by making and showing art in these countries. He chose to go to countries where there would likely be a cultural disjunction. In some instances, his project appeared to be a vanity—dropping one’s art into a country by first soliciting, then gaining an invitation. On the other hand for just these reasons, the outcome of this seeming folly couldn’t have been more interesting.

Rauschenberg’s privilege as an independent artist in the West was his freedom to act in confounding ways; and his challenge was how to breakthrough the elitism that had endlessly been associated with ‘fine art.’ His tactic was to act on his faith in audiences’ capacity to comprehend complexity and in the audiences’ ability to catch up and come along “for the ride.” He and his peers of fellow artists did not appreciate the elitism surrounding the “abstract expressionist” movement alive in the 1950s in the United States, but they did appreciate the egalitarian notion of “action,” “improvisation,” and “spontaneity” that the abstract artists brought to the field of contemporary art. That practice evolved into what became known as “performance art.” In 1953, before Rauschenberg achieved notoriety, he created a “performative” piece of art; “performative” in that it was an act that uttered its meaning in its action. The piece, *Erased deKooning Drawing* was the result of Rauschenberg

erasing a drawing by the famous Dutch-American artist, Willem DeKooning (b.1904 - d.1997). He approached deKooning, procured a drawing from him, and proceeded to erase it. It took a month to obliterate the charcoal, oil, pencil, and crayon drawing. Rauschenberg says it was a protest against abstract expressionism, and an example of the farcical thinking employed to judge the already preposterous idea of “pure art;” and a commentary on the hopelessness of trying to erase the past. The 1953 work became famous and hangs in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Even before erasing the DeKooning drawing Rauschenberg’s explorations of discovery took him to Europe. In 1951 he met post WWII European artists, who, alongside the artists from Japan, had experienced the ravages of war on the battlefields and on their homelands. They were not interested in “pure” painting. They used ordinary objects and everyday found items because sometimes they didn’t have access to canvas and paint. In Italy, Rauschenberg spent two days in the studio of artist Alberto Burri who had served as a surgeon in Italy’s army before being captured in Tunisia by the allies and put in a prison camp in Gainesville, Texas, where he began to paint. He collected used burlap bags and when he returned to Italy after the war, he used his surgeon’s sewing skills to fabricate paintings out of the burlap. According to Rauschenberg neither he nor Burri spoke each other’s language, and yet they understood each other. Burri was engaged in creating paintings constructed of fabric, glued and sewn together. (Fig. 1.19) Burri didn’t use text in his work but other artists in post WWII France did. French painter Jacques Villeglé mounted weatherworn torn posters on canvas that revealed layer upon layer of fragmented traces of text and images of paper and glue that was part of the advertising campaigns of urban life. (Schimmel 2012,179) (Fig. 1.20) Using materials laden with history, these artists produced

paintings that expressed the strain and complexity of their lives. When Rauschenberg returned to New York, he began making oil paintings on paper, and gluing and collaging found and fabricated materials onto his canvases using newspaper and embroidered linen. (Fig. 1.21) The experiments led to his 1960s painting/sculptures he called “combines,” his word for sculpture and painting combined. The combines pasted pants on paintings and painted coca cola bottles, and freely incorporated text from found objects like books, comics, newspapers and magazines. By the 1980s, Rauschenberg was a successful international artist. Just as the abstract expressionist movement had influenced him he was now influencing subsequent art movements, such as, pop art. Rauschenberg’s Coca Cola bottles inspired Andy Warhol’s silkscreen paintings of Coca Cola bottles. The two were born three years apart, but while Warhol spent the 1950s as a successful commercial artist, Rauschenberg was scavenging the streets of New York eating peanut butter sandwiches and creating his combines. When Rauschenberg became successful into the 1960s he adopted the use of silk-screening inspired by Warhol’s silkscreens, and Warhol’s interest in travel was sparked by Rauschenberg’s ambitious *ROCI* project.

Rauschenberg’s remarkable project transpired in China between November 15, 1985, and December 5, 1985. Three hundred thousand people visited the, *ROCI* exhibition in Beijing. The show inspired heated discussion among academics, students, artists, and the public. Teachers in the academy argued that Rauschenberg’s work was “not art.” (Li, Xianting 2008) The opinions voiced in Beijing came out of a long history of art in China that was not separate from its millennium-old political history. Robert Rauschenberg was probably only discursively aware of this history that included transition from traditional painting, through experimentation, to “New Realist” official art. However, he was well aware

of what shaped his own views, like the local and global events of WWII, and most importantly the influence of the generation of abstract artists who preceded him in the United States and in Europe. Armed with his own history, but with little knowledge of others' history, he experienced incidents of mixed communication. It turns out that concepts like "realism," "abstract," and "pure," do not translate equivalently across cultures.

It was during the Government's period of official support of "Realist Art" that *ROCI* arrived in Beijing. During his visit he met a group of underground painters and sculptors who were committed to 'abstract art.' These artists had painted impressionistic landscapes in the 1970s and moved to abstraction in the 1980s. (Ikegami 2012, 184) They had no official art education at academies or elsewhere, but they understood a need to be underground since the government let it be known that it did not approve of abstract art—artists had been imprisoned for displaying abstract paintings. (Li 2007) They went underground exhibiting their work in clandestine "apartment shows" where guests used secret entrances and exits. The reception for Rauschenberg at the "apartment showing" produced surprising results. Hiroko Ikegami, in her essay "*ROCI East Rauschenberg's Encounters in China*," describes the meeting as revealing—what she calls an "issue of cultural time lag." (Ikegami 2012, 184) It began when Rauschenberg expressed his disappointment in seeing the artists' work, which he considered regressive. From his point of view, he had already dealt with the elitism and the stance of abstract expressionism as a "pure form" three decades earlier. He recognized its importance as seminal to the art that followed, including his own, but he thought it no longer a viable "new movement." With well-intended arguments, Rauschenberg shared his insights with the young artists in the effort to liberate them from a type of painting he considered passé; after all, he had already figured out how to go beyond

‘pure abstraction.’ He was simply trying to be helpful, presenting what he considered the newest wave of contemporary art. The artists at the “apartment show” did not appreciate his point of view, and Rauschenberg failed to understand their position. (Ikegami 2012, 184) This was not about timing, as Ikegami suggests, but rather a substantial difference in cultural experience.

The Chinese artists and Rauschenberg had experienced completely different histories while both using the labels: abstract, realist, pure. The concepts and meaning of these terms differed between cultures; and within each culture the concepts themselves changed meanings depending on the systems and standard adopted at the time. Li Xianting describes the problem when discussing Chinese cultural history in an informative interview on “Chinese Contemporary Art in the 1980s” for the project, *Asia Art Archives Materials of the Future*, posted online. Li discusses the construction of value, asking, “On what basis do you judge good-bad?” He responds to his own question by explaining that the answer is not in the work itself but in the surrounding changes in systems and standards that produces the atmosphere for judging the value, worth, substance of behaviors and things, actions and objects. He provides the following examples of circumstances in China saying,

“After 1949, being born well-off meant the family was dirt poor. Before 1949, however, being born well-off meant the family had land and money. ...By the mid 1980s you could see another change in the meaning. When one says a person is born well-off it means he was born into a literary family. The meaning turned around again” (Li 2007)

As for notions of “purity,” Li says Chinese art was never “pure,” it always involved political and social questions. (Li, 2007) Not knowing Chinese contemporary art history, and

not knowing the Chinese interpretation of “pure” and “abstract art” hobbled Rauschenberg’s arguments. It was a culture clash based on class relations determined by political systems. The underground Chinese artists had not been trained in the academy and were perhaps not familiar with the subtler theoretical arguments against abstraction relating to the elite poetic literati art movements of the past. They knew the Government’s “realist, thematic standards” and were objecting to the dogmatic official view and their intolerance for complexity, by adopting their own fixed view, digging in their heels to what they considered the purity of “abstract art.” It really was a statement against the Government’s decree as to what is considered art, and what is considered pure.¹² They did not have the liberties Rauschenberg was afforded when he erased the de Kooning drawing, or put pants on his paintings. Rauschenberg was asking for a dialogue between artists of different cultures, perhaps not recognizing the depth of that difference, acting on the assumption that artists around the world shared knowledge of a Western view of contemporary art history, but they didn’t. As a result he was baffled when his arguments were challenged.

When meeting with some students and their professors associated with the Central Academy of Art, Rauschenberg felt their resistance to his ideas. He said, “I think they really were just beaten down. They had exhausted any initiative, any hope of anything changing. Once you kill the curiosity, everything else goes ...But I wasn’t there to offend or criticize anyone...”(Rauschenberg and Saff 1991, 161) But Rauschenberg wasn’t totally discouraged, he left feeling that everything he had aspired to in 1982 when planning the tours was realized at the 1985 *ROCI* exhibition in Beijing. (161) However, the time in Beijing must have been trying, leaving him frustrated with not being able to fully translate his ideas to the Chinese

artists. By the time he arrived in Tibet he felt enormous relief when meeting the Tibetans who were “sprinkling everything with yak butter.” It was enough to genuinely lift his spirits.

The art Rauschenberg brought to Tibet was completely new to the Tibetans. His improvisation and spontaneity was appealing to them, even if not comprehensible. The Tibetans were not fixated on the “official” rules that had been laid down in art school; and they were sensitized to the heavy-handed propagandizing of Socialist Realist Art imposed during the Cultural Revolution. They were ready and open for new experiences. And so was Rauschenberg. He had just left what he considered a crushed group of artists who were flailing against a powerful authoritarian system. In comparison, the Tibetan artists and Tibetan peoples response to him made Tibet seem like “paradise.” Tibetan artists were not an organized group. If they went to college, it was a government institution like Tibet University in Lhasa, or the school for minorities in Beijing or outlying cities. They were not part of the big art dialogues about abstraction and realist art that were being discussed in articles in *Meishu Magazine*. Tibet was far away from Beijing, and there was no train. The Internet did not exist; exchanges were still difficult, and Tibetans were considered a project for the Central government that decided this minority needed to be brought into the 20th century.

Two decades earlier, after the 1959 ‘uprising’ in Tibet, there arose an influx of Chinese painters who found Tibet to be excellent subject matter. The idea of depicting Tibetans in their homeland and documenting their being liberated and shepherded into the Communist fold appealed to the Communist Party, which provided large sums of money to the Chinese painters who went to Tibet to paint. Apparently, the unified agreement about the Tibetan crisis after 1959 was one of the few issues the Chinese leadership seems to have

agreed on. (Andrews 1994, 265) For the most part these Chinese painters attempted to fit in and were sympathetic to the Tibetans as they created romanticized depictions of ordinary Tibetans in ordinary life. The “realist” paintings by Chen Danqing and Nawang Choedrak and others would become the quintessential images of the Tibetan people that circulated throughout China during the ensuing three decades. The contemporary Tibetan artists were left watching themselves be represented by Chinese painters. They were open to possibilities but not offered many opportunities, and so were floundering.

When the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange *ROCI* arrived in Lhasa, students from Tibet University, like twenty-two year old Shelka, volunteered to help mount the *ROCI* exhibit. (Fig. 1.22 a, b, c) Shelka described being struck by watching Rauschenberg spontaneously make changes in the art, using ordinary scraps found on the installation site as it was being incorporated: a stuffed angora goat with a tire around its belly and paint spattered on its snout was thought to be a yak that Rauschenberg either found dead or killed while in Tibet and then had stuffed. (Fig. 1.23 a, b, c,) The piece called *Monogram* was made in 1955 and I had to convince Shelka this was not a yak but a stuffed angora goat and that Rauschenberg had made the piece in New York City where he found the stuffed goat in a pawnshop.¹³ Hearing the story of the rumor from Shelka gave me the sense of how much the Tibetans needed to make sense of Rauschenberg’s presence and his art. If they could say this was a “yak” then Rauschenberg, would somehow would be engaged with their homeland, which would be, a sign of his diving into their culture instead of just some ready-made object to display. In fact, part of Rauschenberg’s intention was to make art in each place he went, and he did make a piece in Tibet called *Song for Tibetan Saga*, which he ended up remaking the following year into a piece called *Garden Song*. (Fig. 1.24 a, b)

Rauschenberg met with some of the Tibetan artists when the *ROCI* show opened in Lhasa in December 1985. Gonkar Gyatso, twenty-five years old at the time, was in Lhasa to complete his graduate studies. His own graduate show would take place in the same venue as the Rauschenberg show after it closed. That site had been cleared and painted white, according to the *ROCI* stipulations. Gyatso and other art student attended a meeting with Rauschenberg and as mentioned previously Gyatso reported that Rauschenberg asked them if they ever thought of using anything other than paint for their paintings they replied they had not, which surprised Rauschenberg, but it reminded Gyatso how far behind he and the other Tibetans were in terms of thinking “out of the box.”¹⁴ However, Rauschenberg was so taken with the performative aspects of Tibetan culture, which he felt was a fundamental component in the Tibetan experience, he was confident that whatever the artists did or planned to do would be creative in their own way and express a reverence for ordinary things. The following statement describes Rauschenberg’s feelings about Tibet and the Tibetans.

“In Tibet they have this ceremony that goes along with painting the rocks and picking up feathers. They are in awe of something, mysteriously or religiously. They carry around a jar of yak butter, rancid yak butter, and anoint the object. ...they have the total respect for all things. You know, whether it’s an old dog bone or a chicken feather or a Buddha, there is no hierarchy in materials. ...We had to put up a string, not a fence, around the works that could be harmed by the yak butter. I kept thinking about the works and *ROCI*’s next stop and the insurance company but in my soul I really thought that nearly everything I’d ever done needed some yak butter.” (Rauschenberg 1991, 169)

Rauschenberg has identified with the Tibetans, which might be explained in their shared intentions. His observation suggests a gap in notions of exclusivity in cultural integrity, suggesting their shared ‘intention’ is their bond. Rauschenberg’s interpretation of the Tibetan’s ritual may differ from the Tibetan’s version, however, if one understands “intentions” as did the poet William Blake: “The truth that is told with bad intent beats all he lies you can invent.”¹⁵ It appears that Rauschenberg and the Tibetans do share the same “wholesome” intentions, that is, an appreciation for ordinary materials and a reverence for life. Though Rauschenberg the artist is not performing a religious ritual, and the Tibetans performing ritual acts are not creating artistic performances, both display devotion consigned to ordinary things. Rauschenberg did not experience the likes of these similarities anywhere else in the world before meeting the Tibetans, and the amity he felt for the Tibetans lasted his entire lifetime.¹⁶ At the opening of the *ROCI* Lhasa show he read a speech he wrote out in long hand that expresses his deep regard for the Tibetans. (Fig. 1.25) He says,

“Thank you important new friends. You spoke of the mysteries of Tibet. Secrets are kept more securely in high places and this is the highest, the life of exploration of mysteries and the unknown. Everything is in our presence we only have to practice to see, in order to see it. It is up to all of us to find new energy in the familiar. I am kind of an archeologist of the present. I search out sensitive places of new experiences, sing my song and gather new information for another song which will be sung in the next camp; this is in the hope that soon more of us all over the world will know the unique wonders of most of us. This will create trust and might bring about happiness even with our problems. When one realizes there are many

alternatives, then difficulties may be an invitation to a new inspired reality. I believe if one is open-minded that art can teach this message.

I wish to thank the people of Tibet for welcoming [me] so warmly and wish everyone a more beautiful and longer life. I will never forget you and if I have my way, neither will anyone else. Thank you.”¹⁷

On the same paper he wrote, “For Chun Wuei” –his Chinese connection who arranged the visit, and signs it Bob Rauschenberg. The opening of the show was December 3, 1985, and all the artists who would become members of the GCAG were less than twenty-five years old.

Newly graduated Tibetan artist, Tsewang Tashi, was teaching in Beijing at the time of Rauschenberg’s show and went to see it. It inspired him to experiment with the idea that painting could use diverse materials and imagery to produce something “original.” He painted *Snowland* in 1986 in direct response to seeing Rauschenberg’s show in Beijing. He said, “I was never interested in traditional styles, I really wanted to create something NEW. In China at that time there was this tremendous energy in all things to be creative and do something that had not been done before.”(Heimsath 2009, 13) His first attempt was a painting he called *Snowland*. (Fig. 1.26)

Snowland contains a narrow horizontal band of snow capped mountain ranges stretching across the canvas, a light filled horizon behind the landscape giving way to a very blue sky, a postage stamp size self-portrait of the artist pasted on top of the landscape, and floating in the dark blue sky is a rectangle filled with an army of Tibetan monks weighted down by their maroon pleated robes with only the slightest glimpse of the tops of their heads visible. The faceless monks are ascending into an imaginary unseen horizon while the

face of the artist looks at the viewer, his head slightly protruding out of a rectangular frame he has put himself in. He is wearing what appears to be a white dress shirt, and a circa 1986 haircut. He has painted himself emerging from a window cut out of the landscape and the sky, and cuts another rectangle in the sky for the retreating monks. His painting *Snowland* is as much a commentary as an experiment, an improvisation on the techniques he recognized in Rauschenberg's work, creating meaning by juxtaposing dissimilar elements on one page. He is experimenting with the perception of space and narrative. A decade later he chose to paint the landscape not as an improvisation, but as "realistic" depiction of what he saw from his studio window. (Fig. 1.27) (Fig. 1.28) A few years after that he chose to copy a photograph to portray Gedun Choephel.

Rauschenberg's assumptions that art transcends cultural bias turns out to be a complicated matter. The notion of 'intent' may be bigger than the idea right and wrong, which Li Xianting reminds us changes with regimes. In any case context plays a role in deciphering meaning and purpose in works of art. That Rauschenberg used his own money to produce *ROCI* could be construed as an anti-government stance that believes in the altruism inherent in independent wealth and the corruption of public institutions. However Rauschenberg didn't take money from private corporations either. He was not cynical; he was a citizen of the United States who believed in the righteousness of people and the need for public discourse, especially in regards to safe-guarding freedom of expression he believed inherent in the making and showing of art.

Now, the test of the breadth of the vision of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild is in studying their work. Unpacking the art works rests in a tradition beautifully expressed by American artist Allan Sekula who labored to uncover a new language to read photography

and art. Sekula's curt retort to hearing the time worn phrase 'one picture is worth a thousand words' was, "No, one picture is worth a thousand questions."¹⁸ Questions float continuously through the task of the emptying-out and making meaning associated with deciphering works of art. By continuously referring to these questions, more questions surface. And like an archeologist at an archeological dig one persists in poking and prodding because the site promises to give up its secrets, which inevitably raises questions. Framing questions in local and global contexts begins an exploration that undoubtedly raises more questions.

While looking at the artist's work I am asking, "What are they afraid of losing? And what are they trying to find?" And in the shadow of those questions are some persistent questions, which hover over contemporary art criticism:

Is contemporary art always seen in a western manner?

Is religious iconography sacred, pure and cemented to its source?

Are western cultural motifs exclusive to the west?

Is time recordable?

Is irony art?

Is authenticity recognizable?

Chapter One Notes

¹Jamyang Norbu was born in Darjeeling India but lives in the United States. He is active in the Tibetan Independence movement. As of 2010 his essay no longer appears online since he is working on a book on the subject of contemporary Tibetan art. (Harris 2012, 294n20)

²Norbu does not explain his evocative title “The Tractor in the Lotus,” perhaps because he considers the connotations of “tractor” and “lotus” self-evident. The “tractor,” brought into Tibet is a powerful rural motor vehicle, often summoned in Socialist and Communist propaganda to represent notions of happy empowered farmers and workers toiling the land in a communal effort to feed one another. The lotus grows from muck and slime to become a beautiful flower and is used as a metaphor for enlightenment and transformation in Hindu and Buddhist art. It is adopted worldwide, especially when summoning references to the East. Norbu’s juxtaposition of the “The Tractor *in* [my emphasis] the Lotus” requires manipulating the scale of tractor and lotus so that the tractor can enter the lotus; or so the lotus can be big enough to accommodate the tractor. The tractor in my imagination is small and enters into the folds of the lotus—a “Utopian modernity” entering the traditional world of “the lotus,” leaving a metaphor that suggests the Communist world is inseminating the Buddhist world.

³In 2007 I met with Gade and Nyandak in Gade’s studio in Lhasa and we spoke about the use of the words “modern” and “avant-garde.” We all agreed these terms did not suit them.

⁴Population statistics for Chinese regions vary according to sources. Online sources like http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinicization_of_Tibet and websites like <http://www.savetibet.org/destruction-of-lhasa-revealed-in-new-images/> provide a cross section of information about populations in Tibet. Depending on who is doing the reporting the statistics change. It serves different groups’ own purposes to make the population numbers rise or fall depending on social and political circumstances.

⁵This conversation with Gade occurred in his studio in Lhasa in 2007.

⁶Didi Kirsten Tatlow reports about “a group [that] wanted to educate people about homosexuality.” The Government’s response was “homosexuality is against spiritual civilization construction...in violation of morals.” And “social organizations must respect the constitution, the law, regulations and policies and may not violate social morals and customs, and homosexuality contradicts our country’s traditional culture and spiritual civilization construction so a group cannot be set up.”

⁷http://asia.library.cornell.edu/Wen/li_xianting.php

⁸When Lopez was a visiting scholar at the Getty Research Center in Los Angeles in 2008, we met and discussed the GCAG. At that time he suggested I write my dissertation on Gonkar Gyatso, the artist responsible for helping to develop the idea of an independent organization of contemporary Tibetan artists in Lhasa. But I convinced him this thesis needed to focus on the art that was being produced in Tibet. At some other time it would be interesting to focus on the artists in the diaspora. Clare Harris has begun this discussion in *The Museum on the Roof of the World Art Politics, and the Representation of Tibet*.

⁹*Hapa* was originally a derogatory label derived from the Hawaiian word for half, but the word *Hapa* has been embraced as a term of pride by many with Asian or Pacific Rim ancestry.

¹⁰ Mixed marriages in China are sometimes problematic. I am reminded of the story of one of my USA summer institute Tibetan language tutors, a young Tibetan woman, educated in Lhasa, who spoke English fluently and had traveled widely. While in Europe she had fallen in love and married a Han Chinese man from Mainland China. With the threat of losing his inheritance the family persuaded him to divorce by suggesting she had married him for his money. They were both heartbroken. She felt helpless in the face of the arbitrariness of the discrimination toward her, but told me the attitude was common among Han Chinese of the middle and upper classes. She now lives in the United States.

¹¹ I interviewed Jhamsang in 2009 in Lhasa. We met several times, in his home studio and in restaurants. When we spoke in public, he was very cautious and quiet, being sure no one was listening in on our conversation. Nyandak was present during these conversations and also expressed concern about the nature of the conversations in a public place.

¹² A well-documented incident of culture clash with China and the West came in 1972 when the Chinese government invited Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni, to make a documentary film about China. The film *Chung Kuo* was produced at the end of the Cultural Revolution. Subsequently, the Chinese cinema establishment singled out the documentary as insufficiently flattering, banning the film and the director from the country for the next thirty-two years. Antonioni made the mistake of thinking the Chinese understood 'abstraction' as he did, not realizing the depth of miscommunication operating between himself and the Chinese. By 1985 Rauschenberg's visit seemed less radical, however, like Antonioni, he miscalculated the lines of communication between himself and the Chinese.

¹³ Rauschenberg tells the story of seeing the goat in a pawn shop in New York and not having the money to buy it. He eventually made a deal with the pawnbroker to buy it in several installments. After having paid one of the installments, he returned to the shop one day to find the shop had closed, the store empty. So he never paid the whole price for the goat. He also said the goat was a mess when he bought it. After creating the piece, part of the installation process in whatever venue it shows, requires the installers to groom the goat's hair with a comb especially designed for the task. I learned these tidbits during the retrospective show of Rauschenberg's combines at MOCA Los Angeles in 2006. The educators received walkthroughs with the curator, Paul Schimmel and others who told wonderful stories about Rauschenberg and the art.

¹⁴ Gyatso relayed this story to me in my home in Los Angeles in 2008. He was in Los Angeles to attend a group show art at the Christopher Farr Gallery in West Hollywood, which included his work and work of members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. As previously discussed, the show was about the relationship between contemporary and traditional Tibetan. During the same conversation he expressed his desire to help the artists in the diaspora organize into a group that could make a difference in the distribution of their work, and their communication with each other.

¹⁵ From William Blake's poem *Auguries of Innocence*

¹⁶ This story was told to me by the daughter of Stanley Grinstein, a guest at one of the last dinners Rauschenberg had for friends at his home on Captiva Island. Someone asked him if he could return to anywhere in the world where would he go, and he answered Tibet. He said everyone should go to Tibet.

¹⁷ Mary Lynn Kotz, one of Rauschenberg's biographers kindly gave me a copy of the handwritten text by Rauschenberg.

¹⁸ This incident was told at the memorial for Allan Sekula in Los Angeles, October 6, 2013.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Figs. 1.1 a, b, d, e, f, g Photographs by Deborah Cohen
Fig. 1.1 c Photograph © Jason Sangster



a.



b.



c.

Entry

Gedun Choephel Artists Guild Gallery Barkhor, Lhasa, 2006



d.

Gallery Signage on wall facing the Barkhor
Gedun Choephel Artists Guild Gallery, Barkhor, Lhasa, 2006



e.

On the roof of the GCAG Gallery, 2006
Clockwise left to right:
Gade, Penpa, Nyandak Nortse, Shelka, Keltse, Ang Sang, Zungde.

Figures 1.1 f, g



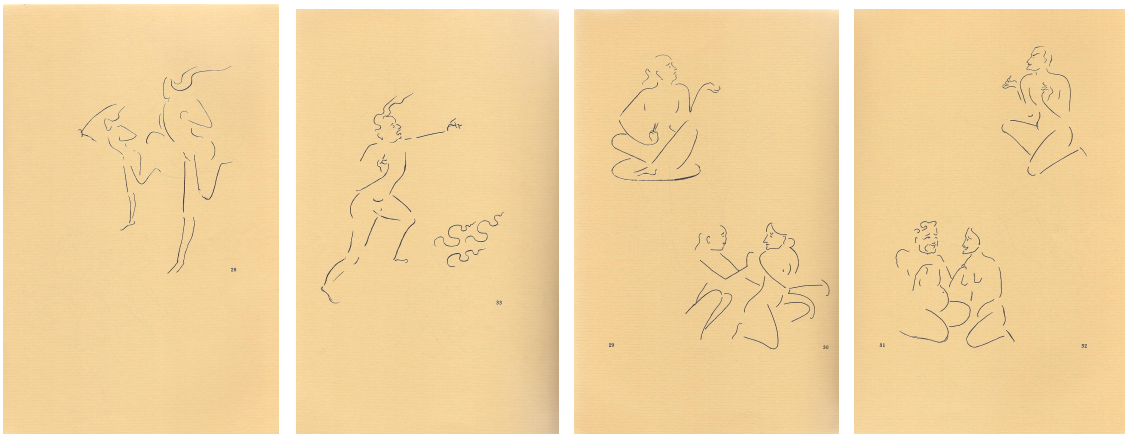
f. New GCAG Gallery on the Kyichu River 2007



g. Gallery foyer sculpture by Tsering Nyandak

Fig. 1.2 a, b

Photographs by Deborah Cohen with permission Latse Library New York



a Drawings by Gedun Choephel from his notebooks

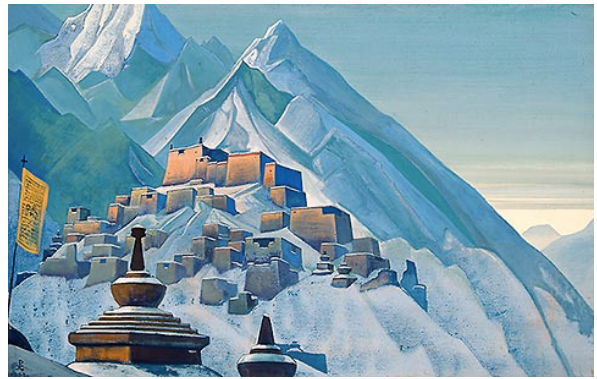


b. Painting by Gedun Choephel

Figure 1.3 a, b, c



a.
Tsewang Tashi drawing, 1975
pencil on paper, 12 in. x 20 in.,
Photograph by Deborah Cohen
By permission of artist



b.
Nicholas Roerich, *Tibet, Himalayas*, 1933
oil on canvas, 29 in. x 45. in.

Tashi's drawing copied from newspaper clipping of Nicholas Roerich painting *Tibet, Himalayas*, but he did not include the prayer flags that appear in the Roerich painting



c. Tsewang Tashi *Self Portrait*
Lhasa 1978, oil on canvas, 9 in. x 12 in.
Photograph by Deborah Cohen
By permission of the artist

Figure 1.4



Nortse and Nyandak chatting with Chinese portrait painter
Santa Monica pier 2006
Photograph Peter Alan Roberts

Figure 1.5



Father's Nightmare

Gade
Lhasa 2007
Mixed media on canvas,, 57 in. x 46 in.
By permission of the artist

Gade points out that his Father looks like Mao in this painting, which subsequently creates some confusion for the observer. However the 'mushroom' cloud already illicit lively debate.

Figure 1.6



Fabio Rossi, Gonkar Gyatso, Edward Wilkinson
Christopher Farr gallery, Los Angeles 2007

*Figures 1.7 a



no. 1



no. 2



no. 3



no. 4

My Identity nos. 1-4

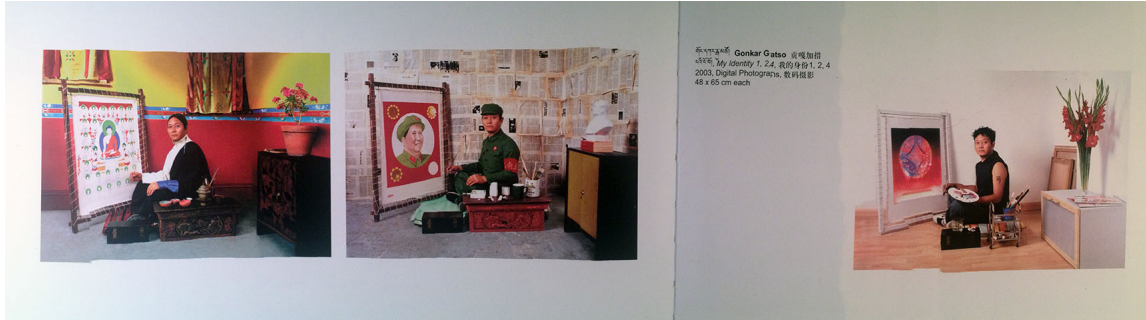
Gonkar Gyatso

London 2003, photographs, 15 in. x 20 in. Limited edition of 50

*Gyatso created Figure #5 in Lhasa in November 2014, viewable on his website.

<https://www.facebook.com/studiogonkargyatso/posts92022235>

Figures 1.7 b



My Identity nos. 1, 2, 4

2003, Digital photographs, 19 in. x 25 ½ in. ea.

Catalogue images from show *Lhasa-New Art from Tibet*. To avoid censorship of the work shown in the Beijing show at the Red Gate Gallery, image # 3 was purposely left out.

Photograph © Jason Sangster

Figures 1.8 a, b, c



a. *Pokémon* Full Figure

Gonkar Gyatso

2007 Stickers on paper

Photograph by Deborah Cohen with permission of the artist



b. *Pokémon* Buddha Head

These works were presented unframed at the opening of the show *Past & Present – Tibetan art – 13th to 21st century* at the Christopher Farr Gallery in Los Angeles 2007

Figures 1.8 c



c. (detail Buddha Head)

Figure 1.9 a, b



.a

Nortse and Nyandak at Hollywood Sign,
Los Angeles 2006

Photograph by Peter Alan Roberts



b.

Nortse, Hollywood Walk of Fame, 2006

Photograph by Peter Alan Roberts

Figure 1.10 a, b



a. *King Kong*
Gade
Lhasa, 2010
mixed media, 39.3 in. x 39.3 in
By permission of the artist



b. *Avalokiteshvara*
Jhamsang
Lhasa, 2010
mixed media, 70 in. x 37.3 in.
By permission of the artist

Figure 1.11 a, b



a. *Tibetan woman*
Benchung
Lhasa 2007, Oil on patched cloth
Photographed by Deborah Cohen in artists studio
By permission of the artist



b. (detail *Tibetan woman*)

Figure 1.11 c. d



c. *Sacco e oro* (Sackcloth and Gold)
Alberto Burri
1954 Burlap and gold on canvas
49 in. x 43 in.
Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezioni
Burri, Città di Castello

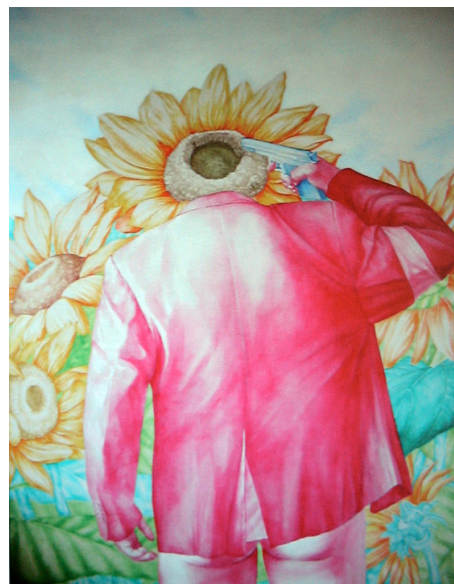


d. *Untitled*
Robert Rauschenberg
1953 Oil, paper, fabric, and dried
grass on wood box
15 in. x 15 in. x 2 in.
Photograph by Tom Warren
Private collection

Figure 1.12 a, b



a. *Portrait No. 2*
Benchung
Lhasa 2009, Acrylic on canvas
65 in. x 49 in.
Photographs by Deborah Cohen with permission of the artist



b. *Sunflower No. 089*
Benchung
Lhasa 2008, Acrylic on canvas
65 in. x 49 in.

Figure 1.13



Joseph Beuys, wearing hat & Dalai Lama) 1982

The Dalai Lama viewed contemporary art in Germany. dalai_lama_art_louwrien_wijers.html

Figure 1.14 a b



a. *Floating River Ice*

Benchung, 2003. Stills from 15-minute video



b. Photograph by Ilya Tolstoy and Brooke Dolan.
1942-1943 By permission Holt Rinehart and Winston

A family member of this house in Jyekundo had died. The designs on the road (the eight precious Buddhist symbols) mark the route of his funeral procession..

Figure 1.15 a, b

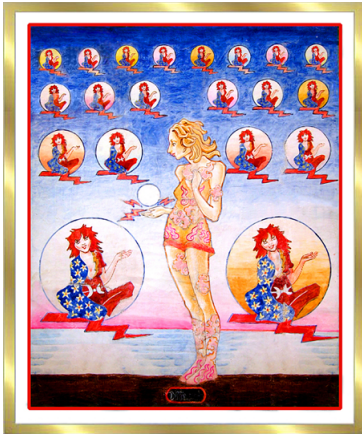


a. Chogyam Trungpa
In his office in Boulder, Colorado
Late 1970s
Photograph by Blair Hansen
By permission of Shambhala Archives



b. Trungpa giving a lecture c 1978
Cover Image from a small pamphlet of
photographs taken by Trungpa
Photographer unknown
By permission of Shambhala Archives

Figure 1.16



Sara
Jack Niland, Acrylic 1971
By permission of the artist

In an interview with Jack Niland, published on the website *Chronicle of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche*, Niland reported that in 1971, Trungpa told Niland that his painting *Sara* was the first Western thangka. (Niland, 2009)

Figure 1.17



Nyandak, Nortse, and Jiang Yong in Nortse's home studio Lhasa, 2007
Nyandak is holding Trungpa's book *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*.
Photograph by Deborah Cohen

Figure 1.18



Chairman Mao and the Tibetan new life.

Amdo Jhampa

Beijing 1954, Oil on canvas

Jhampa made the painting while accompanying the Dalai Lama who participated in the 1954 Conference of the National People's Congress in Beijing. Jhampa gave the painting to the Dalai Lama who gave it to Mao Tse Tung. (Li 2010, 5)

Figure 1.19



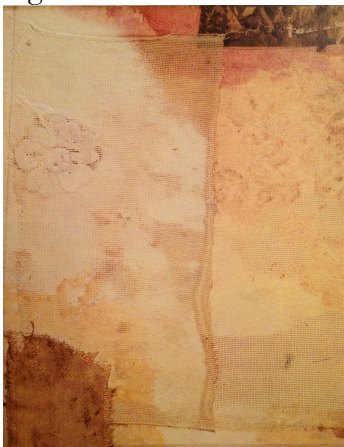
Alberto Burri
Bianco (White)
1952, Oil, paper, and muslin on muslin
39 ¼ in. x 34 in.
San Francisco Museum of Art

Figure 1.20



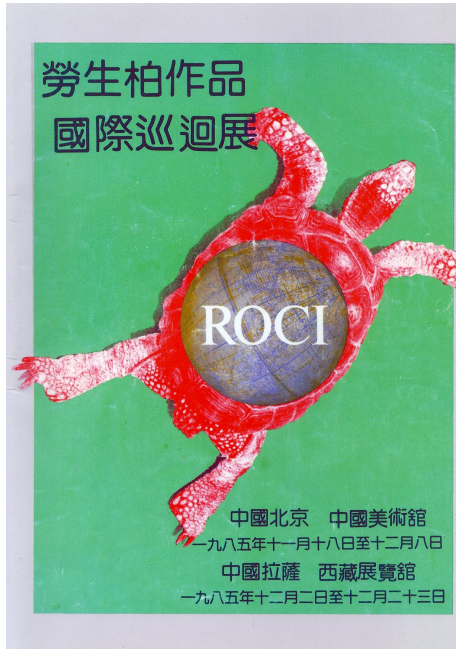
Jacques Villeglé
Rue du Faubourg Saint Honore
1961, Torn posters mounted on canvas
63 in. x 51 in.
Collection of Marie-Alin and
Jean-Francois Prat

Figure 1.21

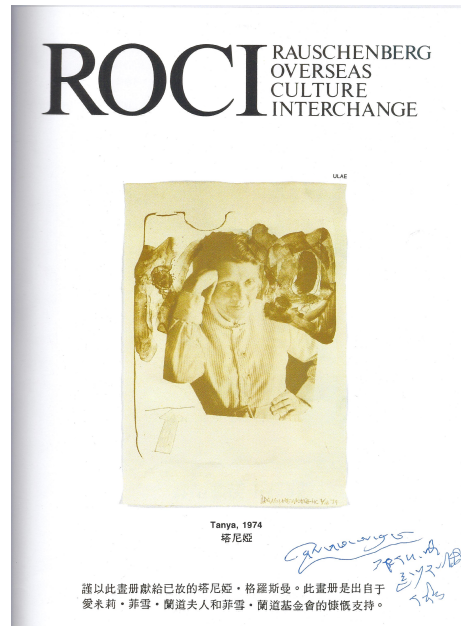


Robert Rauschenberg,
Untitled
1957, oil, newspaper, and fabric, collage, 9¼ in. x 7 ¼ in.
Location unknown

Figure 1.22 a, b, c,



c. ROCI catalogue cover 1985



d. ROCI catalogue, inside cover 1985

Figure 1.22 c



c. ROCI TIBET catalogue page 1985

This is a copy of the Chinese *ROCI* catalogue belonging to Guild artist Shelka, who worked to mount the *ROCI* show in Lhasa in 1985. He made a Xerox copy of the catalogue, and gave it to me.

Figure 1.23 a, b, c,



a. *Monogram*



b. *Monogram*

Robert Rauschenberg

1955-1959. Oil, paper, fabric, printed paper, printed reproductions, metal, wood, rubber shoe heel, and tennis ball on canvas with oil on Angora goat and rubber tire, on wood platform mounted on four casters.

42 in. x 63 ¼ in. x 64 ½ in.

Moderna Museet, Stockholm



c.

Monogram

(detail)

Figure 1.24 a, b

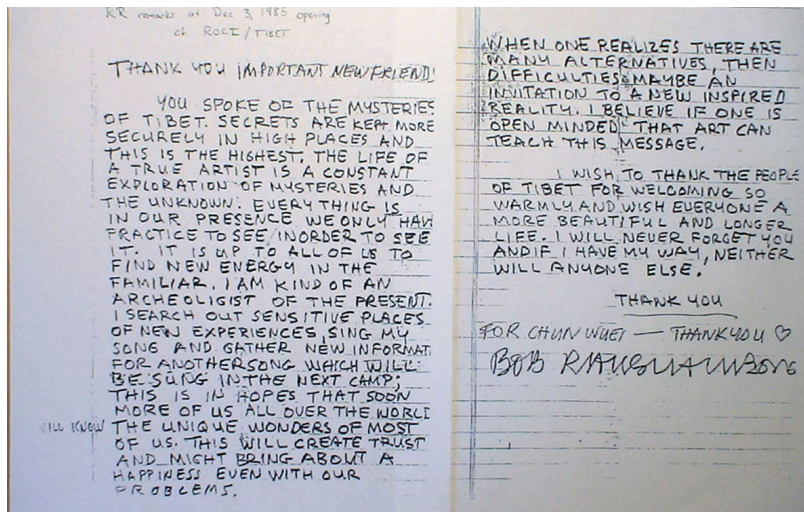


a. *Song for Tibetan Saga/ROCI TIBET*
Robert Rauschenberg
1985 Assembled construction with glycerine
47 ½ in. x 22 in. (diameter)



b. *Tibetan Garden Song*
Robert Rauschenberg
1986 epoxied cello, Chinese brush,
chromed basin, mirrored Plexiglass
and glycerine
43 in. x 18 ¼ in. (diameter)
National Gallery of Art, NGA proof (edition
of 25),

Figure 1.25



Robert Rauschenberg's hand written notes for his speech to Tibetans at the opening of ROCI Exhibition in Lhasa, December 1985.

Courtesy of Mary Lynn Kotz with permission of the Rauschenberg Foundation.

Figure 1.26



Snowland

Tsewang Tashi

1986, oil on canvas, 54 in. x 36 in.

Photograph by Deborah Cohen

By permission of the artist

Figure 1.27



View seen through screened window of Tsewang Tashi's studio.

Photographed by Deborah Cohen, Lhasa, 2009

Figure 1.28



Mountain-River triptych

Tsewang Tashi

1997 Oil on canvas, 36 in. x 108 in.

Photographed in Tashi's home in Lhasa by Deborah Cohen

By permission of the artist.

Chapter Two

Offering for the Latse Library

In November 2003, members of the newly formed Lhasa based Gedun Choephel Artists Guild offered to produce paintings for the conference at The Latse Library in New York City's commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Gedun Choephel's life. Several Lhasa artists were already familiar with the Latse Library through the Trace Foundation, which had sponsored a four-month residency for them at Snug Harbor Cultural Center in New York between 2001 and 2002. Making paintings for this 2003 conference made sense in that it allowed them to introduce themselves to an American audience, and it addressed their relationship to the renowned artist Gedun Choephel. The year was auspicious for its association with the anniversary of Choephel's 100th birthday. It was also the year the Chinese government announced its intention to build a high-speed rail line between Beijing and Lhasa. The shock of the news inspired the formation of the Guild. The artists realized the train would bring millions of tourists to the region; it would escalate exploitation of the Tibetan people and their land; and it would disrupt the fragile ecological balance of the region. Threatening the stability in their already vulnerable society made the artists feel it was time to do something to uphold their Tibetaness in whatever way they could.¹ But it would be three more years before they addressed the issue of the train. In the meantime, they established their intentions by recognizing the importance of the anniversary of Gedun Choephel's birth and offering to make paintings for the celebratory conference at the Latse Library.

The new group's decision to choose Gedun Choephel (b. Amdo 1903 - d. Lhasa 1951) as their namesake left no doubt as to their commitment to the complex narrative of

Tibet, which included people like Choephel, whose lives crossed cultures, classes, and ideologies. Choephel was a consummate example of a socially and politically aware artist/writer/scholar monk with national and international experience, who, through his writings and art, “talked the talk and walked the walk.” The paintings depicting Gedun Choephel, made for the Latse Library conference, begin a journey of exploration for the contemporary Tibetan artists in the Tibetan Autonomous Region TAR and for their audiences who may become informed through the art about contemporary Tibet. Choosing a variety of approaches to portray the luminary, the artists’ paintings produce a cluster of ideas that calls to mind Walter Benjamin’s concept of *constellations*, which proposes that the virtual objectivity of an idea represents the reconfiguring of actual phenomena in the manner of an astrological constellation that forms comprehensible groups from clusters of individual stars. The praxis suggests a fluid and temporal movement, like an encircling dance, which frees the discussion of the Guild’s paintings from the “temporal naturalism,” associated with historical discourses into a more complex notion of time. Using Benjamin’s metaphor, the discussion of the artist’s work can be looked at in terms of time that is fluid, mutable, volatile and alterable, which does not make an object belong to the “past,” but brings action into the present moment. Time exists without being trapped in the vertical and horizontal steps associated with “progress” and its hierarchy of moral overtones.

About Gedun Choephel

Gedun Choephel, considered one of the most important figures in Tibetan modern history, lived a life bracketed by two of the defining moments in its history, the entry of British troops into Lhasa in 1904, and the entry of Chinese troops into Lhasa in 1951. He

represents the spirit of individualism and modernization to Tibetans. Donald S. Lopez Jr., the author of *The Madman's Middle Way*, describes Choephel, the translator, poet, and Tibetan Buddhist scholar as, “an avant-garde intellectual who explored new forms (from the Tibetan perspective) in his prose, in his poetry, in his painting. He associated with social and political revolutionaries during his years in South Asia, and he constantly called upon Tibetans to break with the past.” (Lopez Jr. 2006, 248) During the twelve years between 1933 and 1945 that he traveled between Tibet, India, and Nepal, he met Western scholars, learned about the scientific approach, and came in contact with the realities and ideals of twentieth century political turmoil. Choephel's travels followed in the footsteps of Tibetan scholars who had for centuries made pilgrimages to India to locate Sanskrit texts, translate them, and bring them back to Tibet. It was a way of bolstering one's reputation. (Trungpa 1970) For Choephel, however, the conventional led to the unconventional in that he found himself absorbed in what was happening in India during the last stages of British rule. This transitional atmosphere shaped his thinking. Choephel accompanied his long time friend Rahula Sankrityayana, a champion of Indian Independence and a Communist, on expeditions from Tibet to India and back to Tibet in search of ancient Indian Sanskrit manuscripts that were missing from Indian archives.² Apart from translating the Sanskrit texts, Choephel made drawings, and he read about political turmoil in Europe while experiencing India's colonization and struggle for independence. The escalating Second World War forced India to wrestle with questions of loyalty while gathering support for its own independence. Choephel was a communist sympathizer attending meetings, supporting causes, and writing pamphlets. All the while he remained constant to his roots in Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and traditions.

Before Choephel left Tibet he showed interest in changing Tibet's social system. He was part of the monastic system but was bothered by the corruption in the Lamaist State. He distinguished himself as a skillful debater, and completed studies for the *Geshe examinations* but never sat for the exam, sometimes using the *Geshe* title anyway.³ Fluent in English, he made translations of Tibetan into English though there is no record of his having translated English literature into Tibetan. (Lopez Jr. 2006, 250) Because of his unpredictable actions that were out of the mainstream of Tibetan life, he was thought of as a renegade. He became known as an accomplished painter of "realistic" pictures who used unusual colors. He was able to support himself by painting portraits of nobility and Buddhist notables—though he didn't paint pictures of the Buddha. (Karmay 1980) Influenced by modernist art exhibitions and literature brought to India by the Empire in the early 1930s and 1940s, Choephel produced poetry, paintings and drawings that broke from traditional Tibetan art and literature. He experimented with techniques that would liberate his imagination and produce art. Heather Karmay writes about an incident in 1938, which describes Choephel's drawing technique. On this 1938 trip Sankrityayana invited Fany Mukerjee, the expedition photographer, and artist Kanwal Krishna (1910-1993) to join him and Choephel. They all traveled together for six months. Mukerjee related the following story to Heather Karmay who suggests it reveals Choephel's "scorn of convention." In Karmay's telling Mukerjee says,

"We used to talk about art a lot. I was educated in the western tradition in which art is one activity that can be picked up at a moment's notice and put down again, but dGe-'dun Chos-'phel said the most important thing is concentration. The mind must be totally absorbed in the subject. One day for a joke he said that he would show me what he meant. He went to the market and bought a bottle of arak, he started to drink. He drank and

drank and kept asking whether his face had gone red yet. By the last drop he was quite inebriated. He stripped off stark naked and sat down and started to draw; he drew a perfect figure of a man starting off at one fingertip and going all round in one continuous line until he ended back up at the fingertip again.” (Karmay 1980, 148)

Choephel’s behavior is reminiscent of other artists who have looked for ways to “liberate their creativity.” For example, Japanese film director Yasujiro Ozu and his screenwriting collaborator, Kogo Noda, used to measure the progression of their scripts by how many bottles of sake they had drunk. They believed sake stimulated their imagination. (Richie 1977, 25) Choephel’s sensory curiosities also led him to seek sexual encounters to explore the human experience of passion and desire that led to writing his book on erotica, *Treatise on Passion*. (Hopkins 1992) His love of freedom to travel and study excluded notions of conventional stability and security evidenced by his refusal of a job offer to teach Tibetan at Rabindranath Tagore’s Santiniketan University, which means “abode of peace” in Sanskrit. Choephel wanted nothing to do with utopian enclaves.

After living away from Tibet for twelve years, he returned to Lhasa in 1945, where he continued to earn his living by drawing and painting, patronized by the well-off nobility, who remained in Lhasa even with the imminent invasion by the Communists. In 1947, the Lamaist Government in Lhasa, threatened by Choephel’s social ideas and allegedly controversial activities, put him in prison for three years, where he languished in declining health. Shortly after his release in 1951, he died. He was 48 years old. Choephel’s traveling companion in India, Golok Jigme (b. 1920 Tibet, d. 2005 India) candidly sums up the man

Choephel saying, “He was an incarnate lama but he didn’t act like one, he drank, smoked, [and] screwed women.” (Schaedler 2005)

The Paintings of Choephel
by the Guild Members

“Most accounts of modern art say, basically, one thing: the West creates while the world waits, like a grateful beggar, for a nourishing handout. This is false history. Modernism has always been a global adventure happening for different reasons, in different ways, on different schedules, everywhere.”

Cotter 2013

Portraiture

Fifty-two years after Gedun Choephel’s death, twelve members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, who were all born at least a decade after his death, challenged themselves to depict Choephel in all his complexity. They had no restrictions except their choice to make the pictures all the same size. The artists used four existing images of Choephel for reference, three anonymous snapshots dated between 1936 and 1950, and one painting by the Indian painter Kanwal Krishna who accompanied Choephel on a trip to Southern Tibet in 1938. (Fig. 2.1 a, b, c, d, e, f, g) They used painting techniques developed in their individual practices and gleaned from art school experiences that included modern and post modern references alongside allusions to Tibetan traditional painting and photographic reproduction.

Portraiture was unheard of in Tibet until 1910 when the Thirteenth Dalai Lama overturned the Tibetan taboo that only allowed portraits of religious figures to be made after death. (Harris 1999, 91) He was exposed to the technological advances of the Empire through his friend, the Englishman Sir Charles Bell, while he was temporarily sequestered in

India. At that time the Dalai Lama asked that a camera be the vehicle to make his portrait and so the photograph of his “living body” was taken. As the language suggests, “living” vs. “dead” is emphasized. Since then, as Harris suggests, images of likenesses of living icons, like the Dalai Lama and luminaries such as well known and admired Lamas, appear in murals and traditional paintings. (Harris 1999, 53) The images reflect influences on the Tibetan painters by Western portrait painting that might have used photographs as a reference. In 1910, curiosity about the notion of *aura* which may be translated as “living” was very much alive, accompanying the arrival of photography into Tibetan society. The presence of photography began in the mid 19th century through tourists’ propensity to take pictures of individuals and families, and through the aristocracy’s interest in commissioning pictures of themselves.

It should be noted that portraiture is generally assumed to be representation and/or interpretation. It includes notions of likeness, personality and mood. The diverse mediums associated with portraiture include painting, sculpture, film, and photography. When mechanical reproduction arrived in the nineteenth century, the photograph and motion pictures democratized portraiture and some confusion arose as to the living presence of the subjects, which has been discussed by Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in which the *presence* and *aura* of images and objects transforms from something living to dead, and then again to living albeit in another way. As Benjamin points out the age of mechanical reproduction ended the ability of the works of art of Greek, Roman, Medieval, and Renaissance Europe to produce the “magic” of transubstantiation through aura. Instead, aura transformed from being attributed to an “one and only one” into exhibiting mechanically reproducible objects, whose mechanically reproducible materiality lingered with the object and its performance. (Benjamin 1955, 217)

Benjamin also argued that materials are not separate from feelings. In his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, he says, “Every feeling is attached to an a priori object and the presentation of the object is the phenomenology of the feeling.” (Benjamin 1963) Hovering over every object is subjectively determined sentiment/emotion, while the materiality of the object is considered.

Deliberations on the portrait include considerations of “likeness,” “similitude,” and “simulacrum,” often associated with ideas about “truth” and “authenticity.” The 21st century experience of political inventions of truths and technologically produced representations of virtuality leave little room for proven, unqualified, absolute “truth.” Instead, there is the belief in similitude being its own reference, not second best, and therefore “authentic,” even “original.” As Jean Baudrillard suggests in *Simulacra and Simulation*, the simulacrum is true because it is the truth that hides the fact that there is none. (Baudrillard 1994) This idea is close to the Tibetan Buddhist notion of the “two truths,” a concept hotly argued among Tibetan Buddhist sects because of its references to “absolute and relative truth.” How the idea translates into images produced in traditional Tibetan visual culture, and the introduction to mechanical reproduction into that culture comes alive in the circumstances of the first photograph of the 13th Dalai Lama in 1910. Is the photograph a facsimile with a relative counterpart, or is the photograph an absolute thing in itself? The chapter on “Tibetan Images in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in Harris’s *Painting in Tibet After 1959* provides details of how Bell’s photograph of the 13th Dalai Lama was converted into an object of veneration by Tibetans. (Harris 1999, 91) As Harris explains, the process involved the collaboration of three agents: The Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Sir Charles Bell, and an anonymous Tibetan painter. Though Bell had taken many pictures of

the Dalai Lama after 1910, even as late as the 1930s, it was the first picture that became iconic. Bell had given many copies of the 1910 picture to the Dalai Lama who distributed them to individuals and monasteries. When the Dalai Lama died a copy of the picture Bell had taken was given back to him, but as Harris describes, “with accretions...with both the seal and signature of the Thirteenth, emphasizing the sense of direct-indexical-contact with its subject. (Harris 1999, 92) “Also, the picture had been tinted by a member of the Thirteenth’s retinue in Darjeeling.” Harris recounts that Bell noted, “The artist used the appropriate colours for his hat, his robes his throne, the religious implements...and the silk pictures of Buddha which formed the ...background of it all.” The picture had been Tibetanized by an anonymous Tibetan artist, which included not putting any pigment on the body, head, arm and hands of the picture. The prohibitions against portraiture “allowed the camera to produce the simulacra of a religious body, just as, according to Tibetan accounts, the living Buddha could only be depicted from a reflection in water or an imprint on cloth.” (92)

Portrait photography occurred in Europe at the end of the 19th Century and took hold in colonies of the Empire. Sir Charles Bell’s photograph of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, made while they were both in India became legendary with the help of an anonymous painter. The power of aura held in the photograph was both a Tibetan phenomenon, utilizing traditional Tibetan Thangka painting as a backdrop for the photograph, and a portal to experimenting with the materials of “modern” art practices—using mixed media, abstraction, and experimentation with modes of two and three dimensions. Using the photograph as a catalyst for this kind of investigation was not exclusive to the Tibetans. In Senegal in 1913, an unnamed photographer snapped a picture of Sheikh Amadou Bamba (b.

1853, d. 1927) while he was under house arrest by the French colonial authorities in Senegal. It is the only surviving photograph of the holy man, and has been reproduced all over Senegal and the diaspora. Creative images playing off of this one photograph of Amadou Bamba abound as documented in the Roberts' *A Saint in the City, Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal*. (Roberts and Roberts 2003, 43) The power of the photograph and the myth of the man in combination is the catalyst for innumerable interpretations of the man and his message channeling the aura of the "holy man." Since the Tibetans have the tradition of reincarnation, aura takes on another dimension. The burden no longer rests solely on the photograph, especially if the person is alive. In the People's Republic of China the aura around the Dalai Lama's picture is still so strong that pictures of him are banned—which has the effect of creating more desire for and around them. What is prohibited becomes more precious and valuable and loaded with energy.

The Paintings⁴

Tserang Dhundrup

(Fig. 2.2)

"Every birth of a new trend and thought of art has its origin in a past tradition. Thus we should question the existence of an entirely new art form. And I clearly accept the importance of digesting the giant tradition we had behind us to formulate our own personal ongoing searches. In doing this, the instinctual rebellious part of an artist should come forth and be sensitive to the stimulus of our surroundings while remaining in a realm of freedom that is not affected by convention. To put it simply, being free in expressing one's real feelings is important for an artist." Tserang Dhundrup 2006

The painting of Gedun Choephel by Tserang Dhundrup uses the photograph of Choephel as a reference, but in no way attempts to make a reference to the picture as a photograph. Instead, Dhundrup makes a painting in the manner that only could be thought of as “conventional,” something a patron might have commissioned for himself. The subject is attractive. The painting technique is “good.” What is not immediately apparent is the subtlety of expression Dhundrup has given Choephel. Choephel looks positively delicate, and at the same time inscrutable. His skin looks transparent; the tiny spidery veins visible on his ear. The light beaming off his forehead is luminous. His short-cropped hair is baby fine; the eyebrows are delicate wisps. Dhundrup clearly knows how to paint the human form. He knows bone structure, muscle, sinews and ligaments, and the flesh. One sees the human form beneath the surface. Choephel’s nose, mouth, chin and jaw are perfectly sculpted. Choephel’s neck is thin, strong and straight. His rumpled shirt and jacket gently drape his ample shoulders. But it is the light that Dhundrup paints which almost brings one to tears. It is luminous, the way a Rembrandt portrait is luminous. The dark parts are really dark, not black but subtly mottled, setting off the bright parts. Dhundrup has painted Choephel’s eyes as dark pools, as dark as the background, and highlighted them by painting reflecting light off the glass of the wire frames of his spectacles. The face is open, serious, and ephemeral, almost otherworldly. It is the face of a poet, someone who “sees,” who “understands,” but is not confrontational. He is a man of letters, a moral man, and so delicate. Dhundrup has given the viewer a glimpse of these qualities in the “realistic” style of the picture. The orange/brown tones evoke the maroon color of the monk’s robes Choephel wore. In a conversation I had with Dhundrup in 2009, he said he is looking to portray real people,

humankind, not something exceptional. (Dhundrup 2009) Yet, his painterly skills and sensitivity to his subject has produced something exceptional. He invites the observer to experience and appreciate qualities that confound notions of heroism, and nonconformity.

This romantic picture asks the viewer to consider Choephel, the man, and his life. .

Dhundrup's determination to depict life in Tibet was reinforced after being an artist in residence at Snug Harbor Cultural Center in New York for four months between 2001 and 2002. After being exposed to the New York artists work he strongly felt his own roots as being very different from what he experienced in New York, and he had no desire to mimic that culture, but to immerse himself in his own.

Tsewang Tashi
(Fig. 2.3)

“What I pay attention to is to the real people and environment as my source of inspiration. I believe that if contemporary life around us is ignored, real contemporary art cannot be created. I avoid seeking novelty in my works, because a lot of these things are imaginary or expectations by outsiders who are looking for 'Shangri-La' or 'Savage Culture.' I am living in a real society and have feelings and thoughts as other people in the world. I want to speak as humankind in general.” Tsewang Tashi 2006

By the time Guild member Tsewang Tashi decided to paint Gedun Choephel from one of the reference photographs, he had experienced the metamorphosing role of photography, iconography, and portraiture in his homeland, and had considered and reconsidered it as an art student in the TAR. There was no question that Gedun Choephel was not the Dalai Lama, or the Muslim Sufi Sheikh Amadou Bamba for that matter, or Mao

Tse Tung either. But to historians and to Tibetans, Gedun Choephel means something. He is famous and his activities are known through his writings and art works.

An anonymous photographer took the reference photo, a group picture, with Choephel being one of three people in the picture, and little is known about the circumstances in which the picture was taken. (See Fig. 2.1c) Choephel was a man among many in that he was an ordinary person who went to the monastery as a young boy and became a monk. He traveled to India, as had been the practice for Tibetan scholars through previous centuries. Nevertheless, he distinguished himself in a way that has become significant in the time and place of its happening. Tashi decided to just paint Choephel's face, without any reference to his time and place through clothes, glasses, or haircut except as the framing and tonality alludes to photography. In that way, it is closer to pictures of Mao Tse Tung than of the Dalai Lama or the holy man Amadou Bamba. He didn't paint over or around or on a photograph either, as was done with the picture of the Dalai Lama in the attempt to leave its aura intact, or allow abstract shapes to form the high contrast version of a black and white photograph and thus dominating the image, as was done by followers of Amadou Bamba. What did Tashi paint? By giving up any sense of aura, he calls attention to the material construction of a painting of a portrait based on a photograph that reveals Choephel as a twenty-first century man. He also shows that neither he, Tashi, nor Choephel are limited by signs that read as "modernity."

Tashi's painting brings "realism" and "documentary" into the genre of contemporary Tibetan painting. Tibetans are familiar with the socialist realist propaganda of paintings and posters made famous by the Russians and Chinese during the 1950s and 1960s. Those who lived through the oppression of the Cultural Revolution are not nostalgic for photo-realism

in painting because it reminds them of the disruption imposed on their cultural landscape by the PRC. Having grown up during that time, Tashi is very familiar with those images. In 1986, as discussed in Chapter One, he experimented with a self-portrait in his painting *Snowland* in which he superimposes his image on a landscape and includes references to Tibetan monks. (See Fig. 1.26) He paints the likeness of Choephel with a soft approach that incorporates an airbrushed finish, filling the entire canvas with a monochrome picture of Choephel's bespectacled head. The picture mimics black and white photographs. Color reads as decorative and artificial, none of which supported Tashi's intention toward making a "document." Tashi adopted the premise that the traditional portrait photograph is a declaration of social citizenship: you look alert and present yourself to the world, as you want to be seen. The painting's grayness supports the idea of the photograph as a depiction of "authentic" and "real." It doesn't imply a transmission of aura through the face of the subject. Instead, we have a reading that supports the notion of Choephel the man, the citizen.

Tsewang Tashi's monochrome picture has an aura, in spite of itself, an aura of austerity and of "realism" that works both against Tibetan Buddhism's colorful visual depictions, and against the cheerful colors of the socialist realist paintings of the Cultural Revolution. The somberness of Tashi's painting of Choephel, reminiscent of a puritanical reaction to their perception of Catholic excess effectively produces an image that looks out at us and says, "Don't forget my face, don't forget me, and don't forget what I stand for." Tashi will continue to use photography as both a reference and a medium throughout the next decade. The other Guild artists explore Choephel's personality, his accomplishments and the myths surrounding him, but none of them attempt to address the notion of the transference of aura into the twenty-first century, as does Tashi.

Zungde and Tashi Phuntsok

(Fig. 2.4 and Fig. 2.5)

“In my childhood, there were some odd pictures always emerging in my dreams, I do not remember the concrete contents of the dream, but visible or invisible appearance of these forms always entwine with my soul together, often making me fidgety. Later one day I unintentionally drew a few sketches and my heart started to feel calm, and had an indescribable pleasant feeling, then I took the paint brushes and another world was discovered. I do not understand what is art, and do not want to understand, and I feel only to paint, and this lets me feel happy, and I paint to pursue a simple, innocent life. Emphasizing this kind of emotion, I paint in fact to examine my own heart, pacify my uneasy emotion. I and the canvas rightly meet each other in the process of seeing one’s soul. If I can't paint, life seems to be pale and meaningless, because painting has already constituted my life and it has become indispensably part of myself. Regardless of any circumstances, I would continue to paint for ever.” Zungde 2006

There is no record of statements from Tashi Phuntsok about his picture of Gedun Choephel, and he didn’t paint a picture of the train for the Train show at Peaceful Wind Gallery, however he participated in the 2010 *Scorching Sun of Tibet* exhibition in Beijing in which he presented paintings with much optical interest somewhat like kaleidoscopes though more like plays on repetition and pattern evolved from ordinary objects. His bio says he is a trained painter who works as a primary school teacher in Lhasa.

The pictures of Choephel by the Chinese artist Zungde and the Tibetan Tashi Phuntsok both depict Choephel behind bars, barefoot and cowering, and looking deeply

tired and defeated respectively, showing that Choephel became more and more beaten down through his life. The squiggly black lines in Zungde's picture enclose Choephel behind bars, referencing his imprisonment at the end of his life. The black lines don't cover his head, which is delicately drawn. His arm and feet show from behind his robes. Zungde's drawing lets us see and feel the sweetness on the monk's face. The picture gives us Choephel's seated body carefully tilting as his upturned head looks to the side. The slight incline of his head adds a graceful feeling to the figure.

On the other hand Tashi Phuntsok portrays a sad, older-looking Choephel with paint dripping down the canvas that looks as if the drips were carved onto the surface rather than painted on. Because of the overall roughness of the application of paint, the coarseness of the artists' strokes, and the expression on Choephel's face, the picture portrays deep despair. It is hard to look at because there is no respite from the sadness. Phuntsok presents no "other side" to this picture, no transcending idea, just the nakedness of Choephel's dejection. He paints Choephel with his tongue out slightly, making the traditional Tibetan welcome greeting of sticking out your tongue. The small gesture seems particularly sorrowful under the circumstances. There appears to be no reprieve from the tired face of Choephel.

These expressive portraits show no figure but Choephel, no landscape or supporting objects, suggesting we are to engage in the mood of the man and guess his circumstances. They give us a chance to consider the man's state of mind in his time and place. His philosophies, ambitions, hopes and fears are enclosed in his form. The viewer is able to project Choephel's past and future onto the pictures.

Progress and Its Discontents

Walter Benjamin suggests “progress” only goes so far. (Benjamin 1955, 253) Believers in “progress” encounter complexities in the contradictions and dystopian places it creates. Choephel believed in it without abandoning Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, hoping for a way through to “now,” even as he wrote controversial commentary debating theories long held in Tibetan Buddhist texts. Folding in new ideas and practices into Tibetan society was an impossible concept for both the Lamaist State and the invading Communist Chinese leadership under Mao Tse Tung whose belief in “progress” was meant to denigrate and tear down the old in order to build up the new, as demonstrated during the Cultural Revolution. The idea of progress left no room for alterity or appreciation of difference. Consequently, this performance of “progress” isn’t really progress at all but “anti-progress” because it results in un-building and de-struction that releases conflict and violence, which cuts and fragments the substances and philosophies of history. Each wrenched particle holds the intensity of its undoing taking on an implosive power at least equal to its explosive counterpart. This is not the description of a poetic metamorphosis but of radical transmutation whose consequences haunt all the players, willing, unwilling, and neutral. No one is left untouched.

Penpa

(Fig. 2.6)

“Through the years of my artist career, encountering too many trends and style of art has made it a challenge to find an individual style. But in the course of time, the social surrounding of the place I live in played an important role in me to take up my present style. The use of primary colours

in my paintings for me is relevant of the genuine nature of the people I associate with daily. Like myself they are going through time of changes and it seems like what I am doing is just holding by the tail a passing train...and my paintings hold a few glimpses of a vanishing vista of the last dream.”

Penpa 2006

Guild member Penpa, whose day job was teaching young children about the theater, paints Choephel as the “modern” communicator emerging from the torn remnants of a traditional painting of a Buddha. Themes in the paintings include Choephel’s interest in the “modern” world, his drinking, his adventuring transformational spirit, and his connection with Tibetan Buddhism. The pictures include references to Tibetan culture and traditional Tibetan Buddhist painting, not as nostalgic past but as living present, communicating now. Penpa has Choephel emerging from dark cave-like surroundings dressed in a bright yellow mandarin collar shirt, bespectacled, and hooked with earphones to a globe that hovers above his head. The earphones, circa WWII 1940, seem quaint, as if from a period war movie. He gazes off to the right, but he’s not looking at anything outside. He’s listening to what he hears in the earphones. This suspended “inward looking” moment allows us to look around as one does when intently listening. We see a partial picture of two Buddhas with topknots drawn in the traditional measured manner, mostly pinks and reds, wrinkled, stressed, and shredded with torn borders. Out of this display Choephel emerges with earphones linked to the globe. The mottled golden color of Choephel’s head is picked up in both his shirt and the globe. His spectacles gleam in the light. His dark round eyes fill the space with thoughtfulness and slight sadness. Indistinct images titillate the viewer from the darkness behind, while the space behind the globe is pale blue as if it is hovering in the sky. The gap of light blue appears to be seen through a hole in a cave, which brings to mind centuries of

rich art produced in cave paintings, such as those at Ajanta in India and at Dunhuang along the Silk Road, where Choephel spent time drawing. These paintings are not only treasured for their virtuosity but also for their reference to Tibetan Buddhism. Is Penpa suggesting the outside world is breaking through the walls of the cave?

The picture suggests a “break-through” in time and a “gap” in space, including a “then” hovering behind, and a “now” in the praxis of listening to the image of the “World” poised over Choephel’s head. “Then” and “now” remain connected by lines on the gridded globe that draw attention to the shredded lines of the torn picture. The entire picture is bordered in black that creates a picture on a picture. Choephel is suspended in endless blackness, except for his earphone connection to the world through the hole in the cave that gives way to the sky. The metaphor fits Choephel’s utopian ideas of bringing Tibet into the “modern” age where scientific advancements would create better living conditions, provide a good education for everyone, and deliver people from provincial thinking and the corrupt, tightly controlled Lamaist State. The painting gives a glimpse of Choephel’s vision with the suggestion that, “it’s not over,” “we’re connected,” “it’s just begun.” The contemporary world is coming into Tibet, and the paintings are going out and, in this case, Choephel is the link. The ripped, brutal tearing has not obliterated the hovering Buddha, still visible and beautiful. This is not about getting rid of the old to make room for the new, like the notion of progress that fueled the government policies carried out during the Cultural Revolution, and like other utopian ideas associated with Western European’s Industrial Revolution that sped into a disastrous future. What lies ahead in Penpa’s picture is not defined. What is recorded is the gap, the moment of listening and looking. There’s no sense of the propagandists idea of progress. Penpa’s generation lived through Communism’s progress.

He documents these changes in his picture, *Three Generations on Three Roads*, for the Train show in 2006. Then, seven years later in 2010, for the *Scorching Sun of Tibet* exhibition, he produces a series of mixed media, black and white pictures of himself as a grown man embedded with layers of Tibetan text—*Five subtle Desire in 1 Flavor, Five subtle Desire in 2 Body, Five subtle Desire in 3 Sound, Five subtle Desire in 4 Touch*—that evoke a despairing present and perhaps an even darker future, no hopeful utopia, just rage and despair.\

Tsering Namgyal

(Fig. 2.7)

“I have lived in this clean and full of the religious atmosphere holy land since childhood. The spirit of the Tibetan Buddhism is my spirit pillar. It is my inspiration source and gives me the larger freedom of expressing the inner emotion and not just a record. I want to harmoniously mix the Buddhist spirit into my painting and to express Buddhist spirit and actuality of life as much as possible and gradually setup the special own artistic features and language, which will be the consignment of my soul and body.”

Tsering Namgyal 2006

Another fragmented Choephel appears in the painting by Tsering Namgyal. The picture shows a half naked figure, a holy man clothed in the manner of a mendicant monk. The beat-up face is in profile but both eyes show. The spectacles magnify the half closed red eyes of the figure. The head is twisted in a ninety-degree angle to the front facing body. The mouth is open as if speaking. The body and head are painted in skeletal gray tones, the rest of the painting done in browns, oranges and yellows. Around the figure are tiny flickering flames. Small symbols shaped like colored tiles peak out from the strokes each outlined in black, which look like small clay icons of deities called *tsa tsa* in Tibetan. In Choephel's open

right hand rests a small Buddha figure; his left hand is concealed under his robe. The open right hand points to the ground and is not fragmented like the rest of the painting. The flesh toned fingers palm and wrist are neatly drawn. The gesture evokes the *Calling the Earth to Witness* posture that signifies the moment Buddha overcame the fears and temptations of demons that attempted to defeat him.⁵ It is considered his moment of enlightenment. Behind Choephel the peacock, the Tibetan Buddhist symbol for “poison destroying,” “protector,” “preserver,” looks out with one eye. The angle of the head and look of the eye mirrors Choephel’s head and eyes. Choephel is both the “poison destroying,” “protector,” “preserver” and the enlightened Buddha. The picture might be saying, “I may be torn to bits but I am protected by the figure that rests in the palm of my hand and who looks over my shoulder, and I am guarding the Buddhist teachings.”

Wangshiming
(Fig. 2.8)

Wangshiming depicts Choephel protected behind sunglasses. Squiggly sperm like shapes move upward to the canvas top and swim over and around him. Choephel’s head emerges out of water, greenery and rocky shapes. Hidden in the deep is a small Buddha statue resting between rock and the stony head of Choephel. The abstraction in this picture, which includes the juxtaposition of approximate, unknowable, and recognizable images, echoes the tactics of certain writers living in repressive societies who produce oblique metaphors to describe censored subjects—coding. One must read between the lines and hold mirrors up to the text to decipher the author’s intent as he circumvents the censors who we know hover and make arbitrary decisions. The tactic of hiding and discovery is

familiar in Tibet. Known to have begun in the 8th century, Tibetan Buddhist esoteric teachings were hidden in rocks and buried in mountains to be found at auspicious times by adepts called Tertöns. The objects include texts called *terma*, which means “hidden treasure.” The practice not only represents a sophisticated tactic for the communication of ideas, but also reflects the tradition of continuing revelation in Buddhism. The objects portrayed in both Tsering Namgyal and Wangshiming’s pictures reflect this tradition. Wangshiming is an ex People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldier who bicycles frequently to the Nyang Ra valley west of the great monastery of Sera where he gets inspiration for landscape painting. He uses the *alla prima* technique of painting—wet oil paint layered on top of wet oil paint to produce undulating layers. The method requires quick action; the layering must be done before the paint dries. The result allows the viewer to see the painter’s process. However, the finished figure usually overrides the detail of its making, in effect hiding the process. This two-fold phenomenon seems a skillful metaphor for the process of hiding and discovering “hidden treasures.” (Alsop 2005, 12)

Dedron
(Fig. 2.9)

“My work is very simple, it is based on experience of the simple and honest nature life—all these are not artificial but from this miraculous land, simple life, with the silent and historic monument, which let me think and imagine freely. Based on the special Tibetan region and culture background I create my own form; absorb the nutrition from the soil of the ancient and old traditional art. But it is not a reproducing of old tradition. My work is not bound by any rule and stipulation. I have pursued the simplest life of Tibet and beauty of nature, and use that emotion with most earnestness of mine to feel a simple and mysterious painting language.” Dedron 2006

Artist Dedron's portrayal of Choephel also suggests Choephel is a *Tertön*—a discoverer of ancient texts. Dedron shows a wide-eyed Choephel, staring through his spectacles looking at the creations around him. The magical poet is engulfed in buildings, sunflowers, drums, peacock feathers, a winding river, clouds, and creatures swimming and flying. Choephel peers out of the foliage and fauna as if in hiding, looking into a place that looks like Lhasa. The whitewashed buildings have decorated windows and doors, the swirling clouds hover above the Kyichu River that winds its way through the landscape. The density, color, and flatness employ multiple perspectives, bouncing between two and three dimensions. The picture's points of view jump from above, to eye-level, to perspectival views. The scene is reminiscent of paintings by Henri Rousseau (b. in Laval France 1844, d. 1910) whose mysterious foliage provides a setting for intense and haunting creatures that hide and appear. The lively scene Dedron creates is about the imagination and vigor of Gedun Choephel, but also about his chameleon-like cover, his capacity for manifesting as multiple identities. She uses fragments to produce a colorful patchwork of the place that at times envelops the central figure. Because the images are not easily recognizable, the viewer is invited to scrutinize the painting until the objects reveal themselves. Her picture is about the city, the river, the clouds, and the interconnectedness of the man and the place and is not without reference to the Buddhist culture: Choephel is in his monk's robes and other monks are tucked among the foliage and buildings. The variety of images in the picture provides a rich narrative reading that may be inspired by Dedron's experience as a teacher in a school for blind children who "see" pictures by hearing or reading descriptions.

Zhang Ping & Jiang Yong

(Fig. 2.10 and Fig. 2.11)

“Living in a third world country, the tradition of the Orient facing the influence from machinery of industrialism is a strong stimulus for us to speculate upon the fate of people around us. It is sad for us to see that humans have discarded long valued respect of mother earth & different faiths of old time. Especially coming here to Tibet, we are bewildered to see the postmodern impact reaching every nook and corner of the land. Thus in this shock of contrast, our fantasy; we hold of the place and the reality itself become a strange symbiosis which we use in our works as main inspiration.”

Zhang Ping & Jiang Yong 2006

Zhang Ping & Jiang Yong are married. They came to Tibet in 2000. They share mutual feelings about Tibet, the place and people and so decided to submit seen above.

Evident in Choephel’s poetry, prose, and translations, alongside his indefatigable interest in beauty, art, and the kaleidoscope of human experience, is his critique of the social, political, and economic conditions in pre-communist Tibet. His health suffered from a lifestyle of excess and he expressed frustration and fatigue in his writings. Guild member Zhang Ping, a Chinese member of the Guild, picks up on the sacrificial aspect of Choephel’s life. She came to Tibet in 2000 and mused over what she saw. She writes, “It is sad for us to see that humans have discarded long valued respect of mother earth & different faiths of old time. Especially coming here to Tibet, we are bewildered to see the postmodern impact reaching every nook and corner of the land.” Her feeling of despair plays out in her

depiction of Choephel whose listless brown body is positioned on the lap of a seated, faceless red-haloed Deity. A puddle of red paint empties from Choephel's left hand that lightly touches the ground—another reference to the iconic earth witnessing gesture of the Buddha's enlightenment. In the painting his right arm straddles the Divinity's chest, actively reaching across to hold on to the figure's right shoulder. The painting's reference to Jesus draped across the lap of the Virgin Mary in the Pietà is hard to avoid, though Choephel is not a dead Jesus in Zhang Ping's picture. Or perhaps he *is* dead and coming back to life. Behind Choephel the head and arms of a horizontal stick figure reaches toward Choephel, emerging from the shadow of a pool of red paint that forms an encompassing circle of a large red heart that includes a bright green halo that surrounds The Deity and Choephel. Is this a resurrection? Is Choephel, the sacrificed martyr, coming back to address what Zhang Ping describes in her quotation? She signs her painting in Chinese, acknowledging her position as an outsider.

Jiang Yong
(Fig. 2.11)

Jiang Yong and Ping came to Tibet in 2000. The sentiment of his picture is similar to that of his wife. They share their biographical sketches remarking on the “shock of contrasts” in Tibet being the inspiration for his work. He depicts a rebirth scene, an embryo cradled inside a Buddha's torso. The Deity's head is visible from the tip of the nose down; the eyes and top of the head are cut off at the top of the canvas. The chin, mouth, long earlobes, neck and torso show the Buddha's open left hand raised, palm forward. In Buddhist iconography the right hand represents the male aspect of method or skillful means, and the

left hand represents the female aspect of wisdom or emptiness. The figure includes arm and neck jewelry and exaggerated looped earlobes as depicted in Indian iconography. The half-head is backlit with an orange glowing halo. An arched opening reveals a hallway behind the figure where twenty-five male closely cropped heads fill the space with their chanting. One head is masked in the manner used when making offerings during some Tibetan Buddhist ceremonies. All are engaged in a group assembly behind the image of the Buddha. You can hear the thick deep drone of chanting coming from the multitude. The brown tones surrounding the embryo emphasize its placement and illumination in the heart center of the Buddha. The brightly illumined “embryo” inside the Buddha appears to be praying in its coiled fetal position. The watery space of the embryo animates the painting with expectation and projects “hope.” It is up to the viewer to complete the narrative.

Tsering Nyandak: The Two Truths—A Buddhist Proposal

(Fig. 2.12)

“(My) themes share similarity with other artist in certain treatment. Though not so sociable a person, I am keen at observing social phenomena; subjectively, I can’t say I am critical, political, or any other things. But I should say that I am sensitive and artful in depicting my themes. And that feels like tasting a strange food without commenting about it but bodily expressing something about the taste.” Tsering Nyandak 2006

The painting of Choephel by Tsering Nyandak could just as well be a depiction of creativity and resilience as of disruption and contestation. Linking these pairs of opposites corresponds to ideas put forth in the Tibetan Buddhist notion of “the two truths.” The first truth is that there are two truths: relative, and absolute. The second truth is that these two:

relative truth and absolute truth are inseparable. This twenty-five hundred year old Buddhist theory proposes the indivisibility of “absolute truth” and “relative truth.” Nyandak’s painting evokes consideration of this moment of disruption and resilience, where the one would not exist without the other. According to an early treatise on Tibetan Buddhist philosophy called the *Madhyamaka*, or “the middle way,” all phenomena are empty of “substance” or “essence” because they are dependently co-arisen. These ideas were written down from notes on oral instructions by Gedun Choephel and published as, “Eloquent Distillation of the Profound Points of the Madhyamaka: An Adornment for Nagarjuna’s Thought.”⁶ (Lopez 2006, 47) Also, according to Chogyam Trungpa, it is because phenomenon are dependently co-arisen that they have no intrinsic, independent reality of their own. (Trungpa 1973, 190) Even projecting meaning in this way would have been grounds for debate by Gedun Choephel. Biographer Donald S. Lopez Jr. says Choephel’s text was considered extreme from the moment of its publication and remains so today. He says, “Dge ‘dun chos ‘phel...presents his own middle way, one between wisdom and ignorance, certainty and doubt, faith and skepticism—a middle way that calls everything we know into question because rather than in spite of [these relative conditions], the enlightenment of the Buddha [occurs].”(Lopez 2006, xi) Nyandak’s rendering of Choephel teases out profound pieces of Choephel’s legacy by presenting an ephemeral transcending Choephel in a state of shock. The picture invites discussion on what is “truth” in a discourse on Tibet, the culture and the place.

Tsering Nyandak does not bring Choephel into an earthly plane, except in the uneasy feeling of its absence. Instead he gives Choephel wings and turns him into a mythical creature, an angel, and a phoenix rising from the ashes. Naked, his heavy monk’s robes tear away as his wings shoot through them in a wide sweep filling the canvas. The whites of

Choephel's eyes fill his face as he glares into the expanse. His lower legs are mired in the ashes of the world, shown in the bottom third of the canvas. The curve of the horizon line suggests a mountaintop. The light off the clouds and tips of the wings are as bright as the whites of Choephel's eyes giving the picture an illuminating glow. Choephel is now free of the traditions that bound him. He's becoming unshackled, liberated. But he looks alarmed. The picture is reminiscent of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* or "New Angel" that Walter Benjamin refers to as the "angel of history." Benjamin's description is apropos of Nyandak's painting of Choephel in that the sentiment is remarkably similar in both pictures. Benjamin describes the catastrophe he is witnessing during the outbreak of WWII. He writes:

"A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, and his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." (Benjamin 1969, 257) (Fig. 2.13)

One wonders if Nyandak knew the Klee painting or Benjamin's reference to it. Nyandak's painting is the most transcendental picture of the twelve pictures painted of Choephel by the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild in that it presents something ephemeral. The picture points to something ominous, but what? There's no mistaking the violent

ripping and tearing of the monk's robes, his wide eyes, or mired feet smoldering below. He looks like some newborns do when being pulled from the womb. The complicated meanings gleaned from this picture mirrors the artist's complex interpretation of Choephel as a man subject to his time, place and culture. He has sited him in a threatening landscape of a blackened mountaintop and storming sky, while its limited palette of dark washes of gray, pink, red, blue and white produces a cool depiction of a painfully hot subject.

Jhamsang: The Landscape is the Homeland: Text on the Place
(Fig. 2.14 a, b)

Artist Jhamsang's landscape painting remembers Gedun Choephel not by a figure of a person or a "realistic" painting of a landscape, but by an ascending unfolding group of mountain ranges, that includes a Tibetan cultural icon, the Tibetan Windhorse (*lung ta* Tib.—speed, wind, and strength) The Windhorse is a mythical creature, holder of "good luck," and/or the inner air or wind within the body. Windhorse *lung ta* is also the name for horizontal prayer flags strung along mountains and peaks in Tibet. These flags are stamped with sacred text and mantras and they spread messages of peace, compassion, strength and wisdom as they blow in the wind. The horse is associated with the deity *Hayagriva* who is known as the horse-necked one and wears a horse's head in his crown and is sometimes winged. The neighing of the horse frightens demons away. Rows of mountain ranges expand horizontally off the page into an imagined infinity and ascend upward to snow-capped peaks with sky and clouds just visible at the top as is often depicted in thangkas. There is no central deity in the picture as would be usual in thangka paintings but there is the iconic horse with smoke rising from a crevice between ranges. Rays of light emanate

downward from the mountain cliffs toward the spirited white horse that is rearing up, its mane and tail flying. The poised energetic horse prances in the surrounding rays of light silhouetted by blackness. The rising ranges of mountains that look like body parts dwarf it. The color palette reinforces the illusion of flesh: golden, pink, red, browns and deep blacks emanating from the deep valleys between crevices and the ever-rising ranges toward the white snow capped summits. The white horse and the waxing moon next to the central snow-capped peaks are decorations on the mountain blanket. Windhorse ceremonies include a *lhasang*, a smoke offering to the gods, in which juniper branches are burned creating thick sweet-smelling smoke that is meant to fumigate the space that increases the strength of the four empowering animals of the cardinal directions who appear on the flags—tiger, snow lion, garuda, and dragon. The secular ritual requires no presence of any special overseer whether public or private. It is usually held on a waxing moon, which Jhamsang included at the top of the painting. (Karmay 1998, 413) Horizontal bands of dark color create the appearance of ridges providing texture to the land. On close examination the bands reveal themselves to be threads of Tibetan U-chen, the block style script in *pecha*, Tibetan religious texts. This is the script used to produce the *mantras* stamped on prayer flags. Wood block prints of the Windhorse always include mantras written in U-chen text across the plate. Jhamsang's horizontally sewn script makes stratifications on the mountains that look like the lines of mortar spread between individual brick or concrete blocks holding them together to form a wall. The empowering rows and rows of messages hold the homeland together with a blanket of protection.

Text is an intrusion on the image, even a negation or interdiction as René Magritte's famous painting *The Treachery of Images* confirms. (Mitchell 1994, 209) Gonkar Gyatso wrote

text across his canvas in a 1993 black and white painting *A Prayer* in which he covers the torso of a blackened “Buddha” figure with white U-chen script. His painting includes white birds in flight and an eclipsed ball in the palm of the figure’s hand. Like Gyatso, Jhamsang is stamping the landscape with the culture’s signature, the Tibetan script. He is not inventing a new language but riffing on familiar performances. Instead of putting prayer flags on the landscape, Jhamsang writes the words from the flags on the ground itself, as the Tibetan’s have been doing for millennia. As noted by Rauschenberg and also by visitors to Tibet for centuries, the Tibetan’s writing on rocks, pillars, and cloth is purposeful and reverent. The Tibetan script is a central link to the Tibetan culture. Texts are treated with high regard by being placed in sacred and honored places in the environment. During the Cultural Revolution (1964-1972) the Red Guards destroyed millions of Tibetan manuscripts while creating socialist realist posters plastered with text. Anything traditional and old was banned, yet the government somehow ignored the presence of prayer flags throughout the TAR leaving threads of the “living culture” that continue into the present.

Jhamsang’s painting was originally two canvases stacked one above the other forming a rectangle the size of a thangka. Thangkas, traditionally painted on cloth, are intended to convey iconographic information in a pictorial manner. Traditionally, a thangka would include the form of a deity, which is associated with a particular *mantra*, or set of sounds to be repeated while imagining the qualities of the deity. The mantra is not usually written on the picture. Jhamsang paints the icon and the text together. They also come together in Tibetan Buddhist rituals where painting on rocks galvanizes the material world. But who authors the text? Does the icon displace the text? Does the text displace the icon? In terms of western “modern art,” the pure viscosity or painterly form of *abstract expressionism*

meant the repression of literature, verbal discourse, or language. As W.T. J Mitchell suggests, texts are more threatening to the “integrity” or “purity” of images than vice versa—on the image, on the wall, in the air through which the image is seen. (Mitchell 1994, 114)

American minimalist, post-modernist artist Robert Morris suggests that theoretical resources for textual accompaniment of texts are to be found in structuralism and deconstruction. (222) These theories emphasize that the elements of human culture must be understood as larger interrelated structures. A close examination of the language and logic of philosophical and literary texts shows they are characteristically “binary” and “hierarchical,” like nature/culture, speech/writing, and mind/body, and shows that neither term is primary. The speech/writing opposition, according to which speech is “present” to the speaker or author and writing “absent,” is a manifestation of what *Derrida* calls the “logocentrism” of Western culture—i.e., the general assumption that there is a realm of “truth” existing prior to and independent of its representation by linguistic signs.” (Derrida 1976) The theories sound as if they are floating in the same constellation as Choephel’s controversial text of the *Madhyamaka Two Truths* previously mentioned, in which he delves into the binary, oppositional nature of concepts in the face of the Buddha’s ‘enlightenment.

Furthermore, one of the principal doctrines of abstract art is that although iconography and represented objects may disappear, content and subject matter do not. The paintings are not just decorative. They are read “between the lines,” so to speak, of the text and the space between the viewer and the painting; the space between the arts of eye and ear, space and time, image and word. And there is an aesthetic of invisibility, a conviction that “the deep truth is imageless” and that language is the best available medium for evoking that unseeable, unpicturable essence. (Mitchell 1994, 114)

Jhamsang's picture is the only painting in the group of pictures for the Latse Library with no image of honored Choephel. Instead, Jhamsang takes hold of the idea of depicting Choephel with an image preeminent in Choephel's life, his homeland. Unlike Dedron's painting of Choephel peering out from behind the buildings and landscape of Lhasa, Jhamsang is painting Choephel as the mountains, his homeland, and as the Windhorse, sending his message across the land. Jhamsang has flattened the power of the landscape into a storybook telling that mirrors the use of similitude in traditional Chinese landscape painting, in which he takes into account the actual conditions of this imagined place. Alongside Jhamsang's didactic gesture that says "look and see—ownership," is an animated metaphorical picture about mystery, magic and secrets hidden in the natural world. The layering of ideas expressed in the picture is a glimpse into the hierarchical layered world of Tibet and of Gedun Choephel who wanted to open up prospects for the Tibetan people beyond what they were being offered. At the same time, Jhamsang suggests the homeland could use fumigating. But most importantly the image invites a discussion about text. Fittingly, a 2008 book published by Duke University Press, titled *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*, used the top portion of the painting, the one without the Windhorse, for the front facing.

When American conceptual artist Barbara Kruger (Newark, b. 1945), who is primarily concerned with issues of feminism, consumerism, and power, explains her use of text in an interview, she says,

"The brevity of the text is about cutting through the grease. I just want to address people in a very forthright manner...Direct address has been a consistent tactic in my work...I try to deal with the complexities of power

and social life, but as far as the visual presentation goes I purposely avoid a high degree of difficulty. I want people to be drawn into the space of the work. And a lot of people are like me in that they have relatively short attention spans. So I shoot for the window of opportunity.”(Kruger 1997)

Kruger’s *Untitled (Questions)*, 1991, uses the American flag as reference for the graphic depiction of concerns about the United States. The flag is a sign of her homeland, as are the mountains for Tibetans. By stamping the flag, Kruger addresses patriarchal values, and discourses on the gaze and critiques of consumerism that are tied to late capitalism where everything can be bought, sold, and owned. (Calack 2008) Kruger’s intention is to wake her audience to the problems, pointing out the incongruities and untruths perpetrated by the American system by means of text on its landscape—the American flag. She has “written” this painting, conjuring the language and image.

Before Kruger began working, American artist Jasper Johns painted *Map* (1962) depicting the North American continent with the USA centrally located and bits of Canada and Mexico at the top and bottom. The map, painted in gray tones, drips down the canvas partially concealing the fact that under the paint is a layer of newspaper. An encaustic seal, made with hot melted beeswax, covers the paint producing a layer of glue-like dripping that reinforces the idea of a meltdown. The image looks like a piece of camouflage cloth adding to its abstract expressionist appearance. The font depicting the states appears to be made with stencils, usually identified with public and governmental institutions like the armed forces, hospitals, and the post office. As a whole, the picture poignantly demonstrates the arbitrariness of boundaries and the power of the institution to make or break rules and set boundaries. Johns’ commentary shows a meltdown that was occurring in the USA in 1962,

in which rules and institutions were being called into question. His abstract painting also directly responds to the proceeding abstract expressionist movement that held there could be no figures, or political commentary in pure painting.

Jhamsang's stamping text on his landscape is more than a commentary it is a prayer to preserve the homeland in the face of several hundred years of efforts by colonizers to appropriate, buy, sell and own the Tibetan landscape and culture. Fifty-two years earlier Gedun Choephel understood the conundrum of his homeland and how it could not be easily solved. Just before the Chinese army occupied Lhasa in 1951 Choephel, though a socialist and Communist sympathizer summed up his impression of the political events of his era with the remark, "Now we're fucked." (Schaedler 2005) Choephel understood the rigidity of the oncoming Communist System. He had a close friend in Rahula Sankrityayana (1893-1963), one of the most widely traveled scholars of India, who wrote books and pamphlets on communist ideology. An article "The Scholar the Drifter" on the website Sulekha.com quotes Sankrityayana who wrote, "It was easier for a student of Buddhist philosophy to understand Marxist philosophy." Later he was expelled from the Communist Party for his radical views and denied travel into Central Asia to complete research on a volume of history he was writing. At that time the article quotes him as saying, "If there was any major fault of the Soviet administration it was the extent of suspicion which had reached its highest point."

For Tibetans the use of Tibetan text to seal the language to the culture has become more than one of the tactics just described as used by Jhamsang. The Tibetan language is, aside from the Buddhist religion, the most threatened part of the culture. In 2010 the Chinese government banned using the Tibetan language in public schools in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. In response Guild artist Nortse made an installation called *30 Letters*

exhibited in the *Scorching Sun of Tibet Show* in Beijing in 2010. (Fig. 2.15) He fashioned the thirty letters of the Tibetan alphabet with welded iron large enough to fit into a coffin. He laid each letter on a mound of colored earth in the shape and size of the coffin. He enclosed each plot with an outline of iron bars extruding up from the ground creating the impression of a box; and he placed a butter lamp--the kind used as offerings to commemorate the dead in Tibet, outside the box, at the head of each letter. The “coffins” are arranged in three rows of ten in each row. The installation is placed in a seamless white space, employing the modern and postmodern strategies of “white walls” and the “grid.” Curator Li Xianting writes in the introductory text of the shows catalogue, “Heavily and firmly embedded in the earth, every letter is framed with black iron metal and all the letters are covered with rust stains and spots symbolizing Tibetan heart and soul, they remain firm and staunch!” (Li 2010, 6)

Nortse has been working on projects with the theme of the threatened Tibetan language since I first met him in 2006. At that time, I acquired one of his works that uses Tibetan letters, a kata, and Chinese checkers to depict how China is playing chess with Tibet. Nortse explained it would be dangerous to show the work in Tibet. This piece has never been exhibited inside Tibet.

The Place

Most of the paintings of Choephel show him in monk’s robes and include other references to Tibetan Buddhism, such as traditional images of Buddha figures sitting in the crossed-legged lotus position, and hand and finger gestures called *mudras*, identified with symbolic or ritual gestures in Hinduism and Buddhism. The pictures focus on Choephel’s personal journey by presenting his countenance with varied expressions. However, the

geographical “place” is uncertain and only hinted at. Places identified with a particular geography usually point to something noteworthy about the physical place. When a local TV newscaster in Los Angeles announces, “from the mountains to the sea, to all of Southern California, welcome to the evening news,” the landscape is the code. Denis E. Cosgrove suggests that, “There is a lot to say about the relations between land and human life as they are expressed in landscape.”(Ziady DeLue 2008, 3) This is particularly relevant for Tibetans in that studies show it has taken about 3000 years for Tibetans to adapt genetically in order to thrive at high altitudes and low oxygen levels.⁷ The air is thin in Lhasa, which is 13,000 feet above sea level, but Tibetans don’t need any additional oxygen to live there. Newcomers need to take medicine and/or oxygen to avoid altitude sickness. The train provides oxygen to help travelers adjust to the rising elevation on the 1594 mile, 48-hour ride from Beijing. The attention outsiders must pay to their oxygen intake reinforces notions of an exotic Tibetan people in a fantastical land.

Tibet’s geographical tags of “remote,” “exotic,” and “extreme” began as early as the 9th century when Songstan Gampo, the leader of the Tibetan Empire, married a Nepalese Princess. By the 12th century, Europeans ventured into the remarkably difficult and forbidding terrain, which along with the high altitude, presented the most formidable obstacle to accessibility. The remoteness slowed down access to Tibet and became the protection the Tibetans clung to through the harshness of their occupation during the Cultural Revolution and afterward. By 2006, the remoteness was no longer an obstacle because the new train began bringing millions of travelers to the region. Tibetans and interested observers believe the change brought on by this speedy infiltration threatens the survival of every aspect of the Tibetan landscape and culture. However, there is no evidence

that Tibetans think of themselves as exotic. They, like all humans, perceive their home through accumulated and lived personal experience, whether imagined or “real.”

Clifford Geertz says, “The sense of place, and of the specificities of place, seems, however tense and darkened, barely diminished in the modern world,” which seems to contradict the current idea of an irrevocably lost “Tibet.” (Geertz 1996, 261) His statement may read as metaphor except that he makes the argument that “place” is closely linked to the “land.” Unquestionably, the Tibetan landscape is being cannibalized through deforestation, which began during the Cultural Revolution; pollution is being created through irresponsible manufacturing practices; dangerous mining methods tear into the landscape and jeopardize workers’ safety; Tibetan nomads are relocated away from their animals and land into cinderblock towns disrupting centuries’ old ways of life; “sacred” places are destroyed; and the Tibetan language is being lost by eliminating its use in public education. These examples reinforce the notion of an irrevocably lost Tibet; yet as Geertz suggests, the Tibetan people’s sense of place and cultural identity is barely diminished, perhaps because they have inhabited the land for over two millennium and have a comparable sense of “time.” Steven Feld and Keith Basso maintain that the relationship to the “and” is not separate from “time.” In *Senses of Place*, they offer this quote written in 1913 by Willa Cather: “We come and go, but the land is always here. And the People who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while.” Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (Basso 1996)

Homeland is Art

“If you want to rule a kingdom, you have to have a kingdom,
And a kingdom is a culture, and a culture is art.”

Chogyam Trungpa (Trungpa 1971)

“Kingdom” may convey too much association with “Empire” to fit the Tibetan’s relationship to their land. But “homeland” works well to describe the place of Tibet for Tibetans. Homeland in Tibetan is called *payul*, and is associated with the place where one is born and, more importantly, where one feels he/she belongs. James Elkins says, “Landscape [as historical phenomenon] is an exemplary encounter with subjectivity...a kind of unity—“framed” or otherwise “composed” and always “seen”—which reflects, or articulates, the sense of self.”(Elkins 2008, 273) He suggests perception evokes bias and bias infers someone’s point of view.

Gonkar Gyatso’s Homeland

Exemplary of the idea that seeing betrays the seer is Tibetan artist Gonkar Gyatso’s story of discovering the Tibetan landscape from a plane while traveling from Beijing to Lhasa in the 1980s. He describes looking at the landscape from the point of view of a Chinese looking at Tibet, not a Tibetan looking at his homeland. (Harris 1999, 179) Gyatso’s revelation from the plane came from observing that the Chinese painters had made the Tibetan landscape pretty, when it was actually hard and stark. As an art student in Beijing, he had studied the history of nature in Chinese gardens in which Northern Song 12th century artists used similitude to express spatial depth in painting. These paintings were fabricated from the artists’ imagination informed by research done on the truths of plant growth, the flow of water under various conditions, and the marks of weathering and time on the surface

of natural objects. (Powers 2008, 274) However, Gyatso saw that these techniques were not applied to painting the Tibetan landscape. Several factors account for the mistake: Tibet's inaccessibility, making first-hand observation difficult; Chinese artists' habit of using similitude to paint landscapes; and outsiders reports that likened Tibet to an exotic fairy tale land. No wonder Gyatso was surprised by what he saw from the plane. He said, "Everything about it, the strong colors, clear air and empty valleys contrasted with China." (Harris 1999, 179) What he learned under Chinese tutors, with their pretty, exotic or extreme portrayals, did not do justice to the homeland. Furthermore, these characterizations didn't serve the Tibetan artists' view of Tibet. Gyatso recalls an attitude change by the Tibetan artists about portrayals of the Tibetan landscape in the early 1990s. He says, "By taking inspiration from the shapes, elements, and events in our own environment, I, along with a group of art students in my college, were striving to create a form of specifically Tibetan "modern art." (185) And so, according to Gyatso, the Tibetan artists made a link between the actual land and the depictions of the land through artistic practice, which were informed by possibilities, provided by the landscape itself and the compelling concept of "modern art." Gyatso himself experimented with "modernist" techniques in works he painted in the 1980's: *Lhamo Latso*, *Cubist Composition*, *Cloud*; and in the 1990's paintings *A Prayer*, *Red Buddha*, *Buddha and White Lotus*. (Harris 1999, 181) He described himself as "a product of occupied Tibet," and, as such, used every tactic he could think of to reclaim his culture, including appropriating and remodeling popular images from his culture.

Tsewang Tashi's Homeland

In 1996, Lhasa artist Tsewang Tashi painted the Tibetan landscape in direct rebuttal to the training he received in Chinese art schools. It was a few years after Gyatso observed the landscape from a plane, and before the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild formed. Instead of imagining the landscape, or even interpreting it as a modernist abstraction, he painted what he saw outside his studio window in Lhasa. About his painting *Lhasa-Mountain-River*, Tashi says, “They seem to be a witness of history and have stories to tell. I felt that landscapes were a reliable subject, and as readable as a human face.” (Heimsath 2009, 13) Tashi was aware of the break he was making with both traditionalists and his peers who wanted to make Tibetan modern art. To guests visiting his studio, including me, he would point toward the window saying, “Look, I painted what is there. I didn’t invent it.”

Tashi, Gyatso, and the other contemporary Tibetan artists who studied art history and theoretical interpretations of “modern” in art schools, learned both Eastern and Western points of view. They are familiar with ideas about transculturation, which go back and forth between the contenders, each taking what suits and fits the moment, and they also struggle with the confusion of identity created when cultures are colonized. (Elkins 2008, 141) When art critic Geeta Kapur writes on transculturation associated with colonization, she arrives at the question, “When Was Modern in Indian Art?” A question already asked about the West’s idea of “modern” by theorist Raymond Williams whose enmity for the term “post-modern” inspired his 1989 essay “When Was Modernism?”⁸ In Kapur’s analysis, the making of “modern” includes processes involving competition, envy, and displacement as much as direct imitation. (Kapur 1991, 9) However, in the case of the Tibetans, imitation takes another turn. The Tibetan artists choose to lean into their violently eroded and appropriated culture and traditional art practices. As mentioned, Gyatso already felt like “a

product of occupied Tibet.” Not wishing to be objectified by the memory of their own traditions, or obliged to imitate their ancestors, the artists chose instead to transform their legacy into “modern,” thereby embracing a sense of pride and ownership. They refer to their own traditions found in their everyday lives, which, to the outsider, seemed exotic, but, to them, ordinary and even mundane. They revisited, unpacked and problematized these loaded images of mandalas and deities, while engaging with their exceptional urban and rural landscape. It wasn’t easy to do. Outsiders had entrenched ideas about Tibetan visual culture, even when they were not strictly tourists and were sympathetic to the Tibetan people.

Hanging the Pictures

The artists’ pictures of Choephel are responses to contemporary pop culture; expressions of hope and fear; revelations of Tibetan Buddhist practices; lessons about landscape; transformational narratives; and reminders of Choephel’s legacy. The artists didn’t initially intend to put their pictures into a grid, but it turned out to be an expedient way to hang them, given the space available at the Library. Decisions about how to compile the pictures included input from architect and professor of Tibetan architecture, Knud Larsen, who was visiting the artists in their gallery in 2003. He helped them photograph and arrange the 24-inch x 24-inch pictures of Choephel. (Fig. 2.16 a, b, c) He said that after some time and considerable discussion, it was decided to put all the pictures together to form one whole picture, four pictures high by three pictures wide forming, in effect, one picture eight feet high and six feet wide. (Fig. 2.17) The artists sent a diagram of the layout to New York.⁹ (Fig. 2.18 a, b) (Fig. 2.19) Tserang Dhundrup’s picture was hung separately. (See Fig. 2.2) The diagram of the picture layout shows Dhundrup as #7 and picture #7 hanging on the

wall. Dhundrup's color painting sensitively portrays Choephel in a more conventional painterly style. Apparently, the artists felt it would need no additional explanation and so could be hung "by itself" at the conference. In snapshots taken during the symposium, the picture appears on the wall in the conference room. The decision to keep the painting out of the group of pictures allowed room to put in both parts of Jhamsang's landscape. The group of pictures were hung, and continue to hang in the entry of Latse Library—on a white wall, eight-feet wide by twelve-feet high. Below the picture sits a "modern" chair, about the width of each picture; its tan color mimics the colors in the pictures. (Fig. 2.20)

The White Wall

The white wall has become synonymous with the exhibition of "modern" art. The idea being that white walls provide a *tabula rasa*, or, as the dictionary suggests, "mind prior to experiences," or a "chance to start afresh" for whatever hangs on them. It could be the picture window that seems at once both opaque and transparent. Donald Saff, Artistic Director of the ROCI tour, describes needing to teach each venue in all the countries they visited about white walls, with no floor or crown molding in the gallery and museum spaces, for their shows. He said, "We never had enough white paint...[And] only the Russians refused to remove the molding."¹⁰ Eighteen years later, the Guild members, familiar with the convention, painted the walls of their Lhasa Barkhor gallery white. With each new generation of contemporary artists internationally, the idea of white walls has been critiqued, yet the convention persists. Rauschenberg recognized the Tibetans had their own notion of space, appropriating any space small or large, manufactured or found, to produce the artifacts of their visual culture, like painting pictures large enough to cover the face of a

mountain or burying tiny sculptures in the ground; nevertheless he created a white space to show his work in Lhasa.¹¹

The Grid and the Guild's Pictures of Gedun Choephel

The Guild's twelve pictures of Choephel produce a window with twelve windowpanes. Through the windows the viewer sees "Tibet." Tsewang Tashi's centrally located monochrome head of Choephel stands out as the largest single figure in a window, and, as such, appears closest to the viewer. The picture is reminiscent of Tashi's 1986 painting *Snowland* (See Fig. 1.25)) in which he appears to be looking through a window, as if a hole has been cut in the canvas from which he is looking out. In the photographic like painting of Choephel, the window defies the flatness of the grid, challenging the materiality of the grid while suggesting the presence of the spirit of Choephel. The portrait behaves like a Deity in a thangka painting. The Buddhist deities are stylized, idealized volumes in space. Deities are supposed to be forms that are hollow and filled with light; pure volumes—spheres, cylinders and cones, three dimensional shapes joined together, without wrinkles, muscles and sinews. When the viewer sees the shapes, the brain translates the form back into volumes. The deity is always supposed to be seen as hollow, a hole in space, so the viewer can visualize him/herself as the deity. The idea is that space is solid and forms are hollow. (Niland 2009) Choephel, the hollow Deity exuding ephemeral light, is looking through a hole in the canvas, witnessing the surrounding blanket of colorful pictures that present varying degrees of spatial depth, each constrained in its own frame. The portrait acts as a void that frees the eye to continually return to it while perusing the rest.

The grid lines separating the pictures of Choephel are produced by butting each of the twelve identically sized frameless canvases up against each other with no space between. The grouping could be mistaken for a patchwork quilt. There is no distinguishing seam between pictures, no identifying stitch, but the orderly boxes fit the interpretation of a “grid.” Though grids have been used in picture making in Tibet from the eighth century into the sixteenth century, they were used in the construction, but hidden in the final product. In the eighth century, beautifully proportioned deities of volumetric forms were created with grids in Thangka paintings. In Europe, in the sixteenth century wonderful construction of perspectives are evidenced in process drawings by famous masters who used grids. The pictures were calculated to seduce the viewer into an experience beyond the mundane, or at least produce a modicum of astonishment at their creation. The grid was applied in service to this end, at which point it was made to disappear, leaving no trace, sacrificed to the final product. The process was a means to an end. Modernism, on the other hand, appropriated the use of the grid from science and logic, not from mysticism and magic; the grid reappeared producing revelations for the searching eye and mind.

Rosalind Krauss’s essay “Grids,” argues for tying grids to the modernity of modern art. (Krauss 1979, 50) She suggests four ways the modernist grid performs: 1) It declares the space of art to be at once autonomous and autotelic; 2) It encloses the visual arts into an exclusively visual realm and defends it against the intrusions of speech; 3) Its mythic power directs the viewer into thinking the picture deals with materialism—science and logic, ironically providing release into “belief,” illusion or fiction—spirituality. For example, Krauss points out that Modernists, such as painter Piet Mondrian (b. 1872 Netherlands, d. 1944 New York), did not discuss his canvases or pigments or graphite or other form of

matter, but instead talked about Being, or Mind or Spirit. (Krauss 1979¹²: 4) The spatial organization of grids provides a structural mode of analysis that allows for presenting the contradictions—the myths are hiding, just as anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss deconstructs myths into their structural elements.

The Guild’s assemblage is a “modern” device. The artists’ grid of paintings can be analyzed by Krauss’s method, which is to examine the forms, colors and references to Tibet. The paintings ask how does this picture veer away from and/or reinforce “outsiders” notions of Tibet—“outsiders” since the pictures were compiled for a western audience. The use of the grid defies easy meanings or glib language. It is a patchwork of possibilities, with Tashi’s monochromatic portrait providing an anchor for the roving eye as it attempts to make connections and see patterns:

the eyes	Choephel on	a landscape cut	five of the
the gaze	Buddha’s lap	in two	twelve pictures
the spectacles a	an embryo	squiggly vertical	
a languishing	nestled in	lines covering	
	Buddha’s chest		

Krauss says the grid produces a “pure” order that abolishes the notion of the rights of natural objects. Indeed, whatever meaning arises in the form of a narrative is fragmented. The surface explores pigments, form, abstraction, and coordinates; the interior “meaning” looks to identity. The process brings the conversation to the present and away from nostalgia by the persistence of the moving eye, which is not allowed to rest for very long in any one place. This is not the “persistence of vision” described by Leonardo Da Vinci that makes fragments appear as seamless movement, but instead a reading that holds on to its fragmentary construction.

The paintings are at once mirrors and windows to be entered by the eyes and mind as in Jean Cocteau's 1950 film, *Orpheus*, when the hero finally passes through the mirror into another world. Or, as Alice would do in "Wonderland" where she finds meaning turned on its head, re-minding the imagination. The shape shifting that occurs in spiritual discourses on "states of mind" also exists in discussions on art, perception, and the human endeavor of making meaning. The assemblage of pictures of Gedun Choephel allows a philosophical reading, even as it tears at and struggles with modes of "modernity." Traditional Tibetan painting, mandalas, and Thangkas, are all about states of being and mental fabrications. The grid of Choephel pictures has allowed these Tibetan artists to respond to the tyranny of their own traditions while respectfully referring to and adopting some of its tactics. Reference to traditional Tibetan mandalas could be made when referring to the assembly of Choephel pictures by adopting a system that follows the method suggested in Levi-Strauss's, "The Structural Analysis of Myth," that proposes deconstructing a story's sequential elements to re-evaluate, to see anew, what has been fabricated. (Levi-Strauss 1963) Making associations in this way is similar to the process of creating a *mandala*. According to Chogyam Trungpa, the word "mandala" literally means "association" and "society." It comes from the Tibetan words "center," "fringe," "gestalt," and "area around." He describes "mandala" as a way of looking at situations in terms of relativity: if that exists, this exists; if this exists, that exists. Things exist interdependently. (Trungpa 1966, 15) In other words, one cannot rest on either order or chaos but continually "dance" with the two. Looking at the compilation of pictures of Choephel, there is the temptation to understand the whole and come up with some logical meaning. One can see the grouping as folk art, a cultural artifact, a wall hanging, a tapestry. It can be primitive, arbitrary, charming, exciting; depressing, uplifting, or crude—a symphony

of chaos. Totalizing aside, consideration of the space produced by the grid challenges the viewer. Seduced by the photo-like image in the center, the observer engages in a back and forth trajectory across the pictures. The space becomes a field of the unknown where intuition and emotion mingle. The experience replicates engagement with mandalas and their intricate engagement with the mind. (81) Fittingly, Choephel is a catalyst for the Guild's mandalic experiment since he tenaciously questioned the habitual ways of looking at his own culture. As an artist, writer, monk, political activist, drunk, soothsayer, and trickster/saint, he probably would have enjoyed this assemblage a lot.

The Guild artists never again put their pictures together to form one picture. Their initial intention was to paint pictures of Choephel that would hang separately, never thinking the canvases would be put into a grid to create one picture. Communally, they agreed to the tactic, perhaps realizing the impact of each picture is improved by joining them together. Afterward, any use of grids by the artists in their work is intentional.¹³ They use the device as all contemporary artists do while looking for the "new" in the "ordinary." James Clifford suggests it is through disruption that ethnographers must look at their subjects. The process is intentionally destabilizing. For Tibetan artists in the PRC, this is particularly dangerous as "stability" is the watchword the Chinese use when referring to Tibet. Architect Michael Rotondi affirms the threatening position of the artist when he says, "Artists [are] inherently subversive: they work to redefine what has been passed over, to define the ground they are on, and to shape the future. A dedication to redefining the world as it exists and to resisting the status quo is the fundamental responsibilities of the creative person." (Rotondi 1987)¹⁴ The contemporary Tibetan artists have the combined good fortune to be artists and be Tibetan. They are by definition subversive, and culturally in peril. The work reflects this in

their processes, subjects, and materials. As art critic Holland Cotter suggests, “As cool and above-it-all as ‘modern’ may sound, it is, after all, a response to emergency.” (Cotter August 2008)

Chapter Two Notes

¹ Conversation with members of the GCAG in their Gallery in Lhasa 2006

² Raul Sankrityayana (1893-1963) Indian scholar, Marxist, and member of the Communist Party met Choephel in Lhasa in 1934. Choephel became his translator for all things Tibetan. They traveled together in 1934, 1936 and 1938. See H. Karmay "Dge'-Dun Chos-'Phel, the Artist."

³ *Geshe degree* --Tibetan Buddhist academic degree that literally means "virtuous friend" in Tibetan. The degree, bestowed by the Gelugpa and Sakya monastic lineages, proclaims proficiency in dialectical debate and knowledge.

⁴ Introductory quotes by the artists have been compiled from artists' catalogues, articles, personal communications, and web sites, including the Asianart website, <http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/lhasatrain/bios>

⁵ It is the story of how the Buddha meditated all night to overcome the fears and temptations sent by the demon Mara to defeat the Buddha. Instead, the Buddha called the Earth Goddess to witness that the Buddha achieved enlightenment in order to share with the rest of the world. Witnessing that, the Earth Goddess wrung her hair, releasing floodwaters that swept away the Demon Mara and all the temptresses he had released.

<http://www.thebuddhagarden.com/blog/buddha-poses>

Mara is a powerful god who dwells in the highest abode in the Realm of Desire, the master of illusion who attempted to prevent the Buddha from attaining enlightenment at Bodhgaya. For the Dharma practitioner, Mara symbolizes one's own ego clinging and preoccupation with the eight worldly concerns. Generally, there are four Maras or obstructions to practice of the Dharma: *the mara of seduction* (attachment to pleasure and riches), *mara of kleshas* (confused emotions accompanied by aggression), *mara of skandhas* (experiences of giving rise to a false sense of self), *mara of death* (fear of death and attempt to overcome our death and not get old. (Trungpa 2013, 32) Sometimes the four Maras are mentioned by name; Lord of Death, Godly Son, Klesha and Skandha (Rangjung Yeshe RY) (The Tibetan & Himalayan Library- THL Tibetan to English Translation Tool)

⁶ Choephel's last and most controversial writing is a commentary on the *Madhyamaka*, an early treatise on what is called "the middle way." The treatise was written down by Zla ba bzang po from notes on oral instructions by Gedun Choephel and published as the *Eloquent Distillation of the Profound Points of the Madhyamaka: An Adornment for Nagarjuna's Thought*. It was translated into English by Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Lopez 2006, 47)

⁷ A comparison of the genomes of 50 Tibetans and 40 Han Chinese shows that ethnic Tibetans split off from the Han less than 3,000 years ago and since then rapidly evolved a unique ability to thrive at high altitudes and low oxygen levels. The genome-wide comparison, performed by evolutionary biologists at the University of California, Berkeley, uncovered more than 30 genes with DNA mutations that have become more prevalent in Tibetans than Han Chinese, nearly half of which are related to how the body uses oxygen. One mutation in particular spread from fewer than 10 percent of the Han Chinese to nearly 90 percent of all Tibetans. "This is the fastest genetic change ever observed in humans," said Rasmus Nielsen, UC Berkeley professor of Integrative Biology, who led the statistical analysis. "For such a very strong change, a lot of people would have had to die simply due to

the fact that they had the wrong version of a gene.”

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/07/100701145519.htm>

⁸ Williams says, “Modernism, as a title for a whole cultural movement and moment, has been retrospective as a general term since the 1950s, thereby stranding the dominant version of “modern” or even “absolute modern” between 1890 and 1940...Those dates actually overlook the generation prior to the named modernists, who, in around 1840, produced the works that were responding to the unprecedented social forms of the industrial city. People like Dickens who sculpted the language, and Turner who painted pictures truth-to-nature.” Williams argues, “The generation that came afterward was named as ‘the modernists’ because they could be brought into the embrace of the ideas of Freud.” In *New Left Review*. May-June 1989. 23-27.

⁹ I am grateful to Professor Larsen for sharing with me the images he took of the Choephel paintings. His account was helpful in retelling the story of these paintings.

¹⁰ Telephone conversation with Donald Saff in August 2009.

¹¹ Dripung Monastery on the outside of Lhasa unfurls just such a painting during the yogurt festival once a year. And Sera monastery displays a painting at Sera Monastery in Lhasa on the same day.

¹² Krauss suggests the grid doesn’t produce discussion about materialism by the artists but about spirituality and philosophy. She refers to a 1937 article by Piet Mondrian, “Plastic Art an Pure Plastic Art,” that has been reprinted in *Art in Theory: 1900-2000*. ed. Harrison and Wood pp. 387-393.

¹³ Refer to paintings by Gade’s *We Are Artisans for Vacuity*, and Nortse’s *Chess Board*, discussed in Chapter Four.

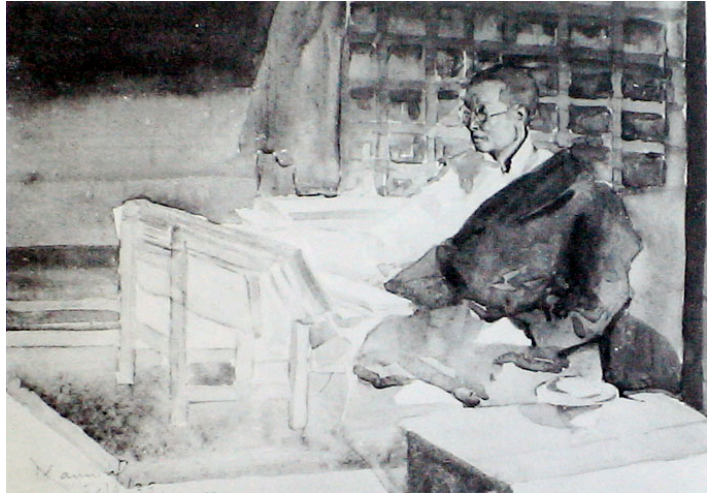
¹⁴ Michael Rotondi, Director of the Southern California Institute of Architecture SCI-Arc between 1987 and 1997 wrote his comments in the SCI-Arc Mission Statement.

Figures

Chapter Two

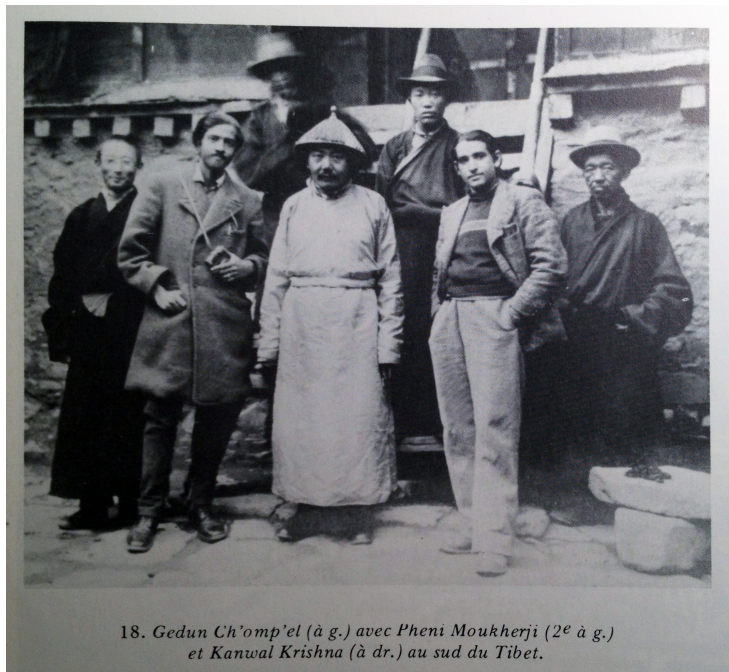
Figures. 2.1 a, b, c, d, e, f, g

Kanwal Krishna,
Gedun Choephel, 1938, watercolor
Unknown photographer
Paintings whereabouts unknown



a.

Gedun Choephel, Kanwal
Krishna
Southern Tibet, circa 1938
Unknown photographer



18. *Gedun Ch'omp'el (à g.) avec Pheni Moukherji (2^e à g.)
et Kanwal Krishna (à dr.) au sud du Tibet.*

b.

T.P.N. Manjushri,
Gedun Choephel,
S. Mahinda, in India,
circa 1939
Photographer
unknown



c.

Gedun Choephel, in
India, circa 1940
Unknown photographer



d.

Rakra Rinpoche and Gedun
Choephel
Lhasa, circa 1949
Unknown photographer



e.

Gedun Choephel
circa 1950
Unknown photographer



f.

Gedun Choephel
circa 1951
Unknown photographer



插图 37 出狱后的根敦群培

g.

Paintings of Gedun Choephel by members of the Gedun
Choephel Artists Guild
Photographed by Knud Larsen and Tsewang Tashi
On the roof the Artists Gallery in Lhasa, 2003
By permission of the artists



Figure 2.2

Tserang Dhundrup



Figure 2.3

Tsewang Tashi



Figure 2.4

Zungde



Figure 2.5

Tashi Phuntsok



Figure 2.6

Penpa



Figure 2.7

Tsering Namgyal



Figure 2.8

Wangshiming



Figure 2.9

Dedron



Figure 2.10

Zhang Ping



Figure 2.11

Jiang Yong



Figure 2.12

Tsering Nyandak



Figure 2.13

Angelus Novus 'new angel' Paul Klee



Figure 2.14 a

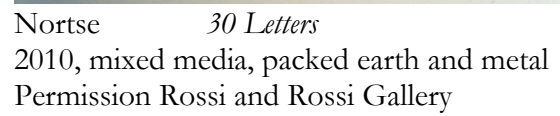
a. Jhamsang (detail)



Figure 2.14 b

b. Jhamsang (Complete)

Installation in exhibition:
Scorching Sun of Tibet. Beijing



Artists on roof of their gallery in Lhasa photographing the paintings of Gedun Choephel

159



b. Penpa and Jiang Yong



c. Tsewang Tashi and Knud Larsen

Figure 2.17

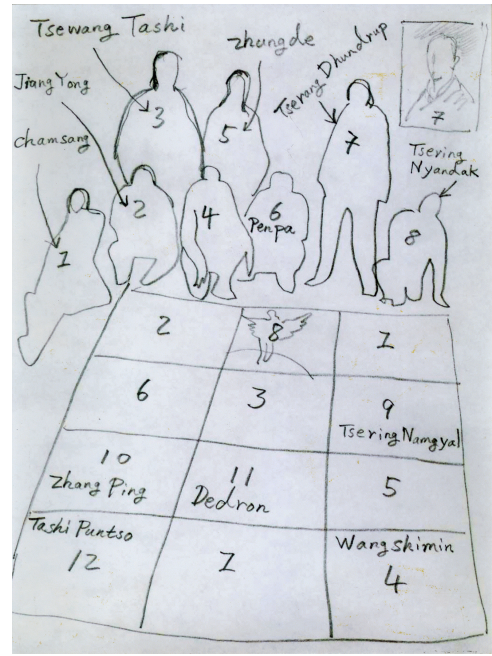


Earlier version of collaged pictures. Note: Jhamsang's picture is in one piece.

Figures 2.18 a, b



a.



b.

a. Gedun Choephel Artists Guild members with final arrangement of pictures.

b Diagram sent to Latse Library indicating placement of paintings and artist's names.

Figure 2.19



Final Version

Figure 2.20



Pictures hanging in the entry hall of Latse Library, New York

Chapter Three

The Train

The GCAG formed in 2003 when hearing about the plans to bring a train from Beijing to Lhasa. They recognized that it seriously threatened their culture with extinction and they felt the thing to do was to make art in order to keep the voice of the culture alive.¹ Their first group effort was to paint pictures of Gedun Choephel. The next year they participated in a group show in London, *Visions from Tibet, A brief survey of Contemporary Painting*, at the Sweet Tea Gallery, which presented various work by the artists covering a variety of themes. This was an important show for the artists as it took place in London and was curated by Tibetan artist, and now Gallery Director/Owner, Gonkar Gyatso, Ian Alsop of the *Peaceful Wind Gallery* in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Anna Maria Rossi and Fabio Rossi of Rossi and Rossi Gallery in London. Fabio Rossi, as well as Ian Alsop, became the first commercial art dealers championing the work of the Tibetans. The following year they were invited by Ian Alsop to make art about Train 27, the Beijing to Lhasa railway, scheduled to begin running in July of 2006. The show took place in Alsop's gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the fall of 2006, and was called *Lhasa Train*. Alsop, like the artists, recognized the significance of this new railway between Beijing and Lhasa.

Train Trouble—The Long History of the Coming of the Train

Just as the British marked domination over the Tibetan landscape by scaling Everest, the Chinese signaled their domination of Tibet with the train to Lhasa. The Beijing/Lhasa train opened in 2003 and marked China's "coming out" as Tibet's colonizer. While it was being built in 2001, former Chinese premier, Zhu Rongji, called the train development "an

unprecedented project in the history of mankind.” In 2006, Hu Jintao, General Secretary of the Communist Party (between 2002-2012), described it as a “magnificent feat by the Chinese people.” Of the 2,525 miles of rail, 341 miles of the track lie across permafrost. Laying track under these conditions needs regular, systematic, artificially cooled maintenance in order to protect the track from losing its footing. This requires vigilant overseeing at great expense. The Chinese government regards the new railway as a means of bringing economic development to Tibet. By allowing access to valuable natural resources in the region, thus exploiting the more than 100 different minerals and river systems, billions of dollars of revenue will be generated. Critics of the railway see it speeding up the dilution of Tibet's population with Han Chinese immigrants who now outnumber Tibetans three to one. Temples and ritual ceremonies are being turned into tourist attractions. It is indeed a remarkable performance that supports the notion of Chinese technological superiority and, for the moment, trumps any other entity with designs on Tibet. The train, which supports the grand narrative of “progress” through producing intentional movement, actually deracinates and displaces everyday social relations. The Chinese are creating an artificial relational space as if there were a thread between Beijing and the Tibetan Autonomous Region, an apron string. In her essay, “New Destinations: The Image of the Postcolonial Railway” in *Tracking Modernity: India's Railway and the Culture of Mobility*, Marian Aguiar describes this subjection as a new kind of movement relations that she calls “*Subjectivity of Traffic*,” which emphasizes connections as sites to interpret new subjectivities and broader social order that includes a “complex interaction and conflict of values” (Aguiar 2011, 106). The eradication of time zones, disposed of in 1949 by the Chinese, makes all of China operate by the same clock regardless of the “sun clock.” While the sun is coming up in

Beijing, it is dark in Lhasa. When the sun has gone down in Beijing, it is still shining in Lhasa.

Since 1802 passenger/freight trains have been built on every continent to transport people and materials, changing the landscape and the behavior of people. (Treuhertz 2008) But not until 2006 did the train come to Tibet. From the beginning of their history, trains were seen as both a symbolic and an actual way of gaining control of portions of the earth. In 1883, the Orient Express linked Paris to Istanbul. In 1869, the transcontinental railroad linked the East Coast of the United States to the West Coast. In 1906 the Russian Trans Siberian-Railway connected Moscow with Vladivostok, with connecting branches in Mongolia, China, and North Korea. Europe's colonialists built railway systems in Africa for trade, war, and mining. The colonized then used them for resistance and revolt. Marian Aguiar's *Colonial Trains, Postcolonial Tracks* looks at the far-reaching consequences of the association with Indian trains that are still being exposed in Indian literary texts, films and Indian national politics. The British colonial administration touted the railway in India as a harbinger of progress and as an emancipating tool freeing Indians from their old fashioned traditions, even as it imposed its rule and exploited India's national resources. (Aguiar 2011) Ethnic massacres occurred on trains crisscrossing both the Pakistan-Punjab and Bengali-Pakistan Border in 1947. During WWII, it was trains that transported Jews to concentration death camps. In the 1920s, the Russian Bolsheviks used agitprop trains, armed with public speakers, writers, stores of books and pamphlets, and printing presses, as a propaganda tool.

Tibet was protected from this kind of infiltration by being one of the most difficult places on earth to reach. The region is a treasure trove of natural resources and a link for global commerce. Its inaccessibility compounded its desirability. Laying railroad tracks was

essential to imperialist schemes, but it wasn't possible to do that across Central Asia's Himalayas and its frozen earth. In 1925, the Russian People's Commissar, G.V. Chicherin, wrote, "Tibet dominates over the ancient main route leading from China to our Semirechie Region [the southeastern part of modern Kazakhstan] and dividing the northern and southern inland deserts. Thus, the major interior roads passing through Asia can be controlled by whoever rules Tibet." (Andreyev 2003, 243) However, Lhasa had been insisting on its full independence since 1913, which did not suit Moscow's or Canton's imperialist aims. Sun Yat-sen regarded Tibet as "the booty of Great Britain" and believed that the country must first be snatched from the hands of the British imperialists, after which it would join—of its own accord—the revived China's "voluntary union" of nations. (183) Another belief of the Russians voiced by the People's commissar Chicherin was that Tibetans had a much greater sympathy for the Russians than the British, mainly due to their common Buddhist interests. However, other interests kept the British, Russians and Chinese from finding opportune moments to take root and get a hold in Tibet.

Britain's Interest in Tibet

In 1904, the British, who were leading Europe's global colonizing on every continent, made their way into Lhasa the hard way by trekking. Had they been able, they would have built a train to Tibet, but they were forced instead to establish some military outposts, a police force in Lhasa, and to climb mountains instead, thereby fulfilling their "destiny of masculinity." (Hansen 2000) The bolstering of the Tibetan army and police by the British was not appreciated by the Tibetan clerics who felt the Tibetan military, with British support, were becoming too strong. The interventions of the British in which

villagers were conscripted into service, and a police force in Lhasa was established, went against the Tibetan cultural and religious ways. Problems with the British led to border closings, not by the Russians or Chinese or other bordering countries, but by the Tibetans themselves. The crackdown on the military and the police by the Dalai Lama changed a modernization policy that had been established for almost a decade to a policy that placed greater importance on spiritual values, not Western innovations. (Andreyev 2003, 240)

The Tibetan's held the British at arms length. Even though the British were ensconced in Lhasa, they had no access to the seats of Tibetan Government, the Dalai Lama's Potala Palace and his summer residence, the Norbulingka. The troops referred to the Potala Palace as "the rock" betraying their frustration at not penetrating the Dalai Lama's palace. One correspondent acknowledged that the only way he ever saw the interior of Norbulingka was obtained by looking down on the whole plain of Lhasa from the high crest of the hill across the river, and that no member of "the force" penetrated into the enclosed garden. The British mapped Lhasa in 1904 and it shows Norbulingka as an empty rectangle. (Landon 1905)² Actually, the garden around the Dalai Lama's living spaces has two walls, the outer and inner. The Tibetans, even today, picnic on the grounds between the two walls during the celebration of the annual *Shoton* Festival, "the yogurt festival." The British, however, didn't participate in the local festivities; instead they focused on the inside of the compound where the Dalai Lama resided. They persisted for fifteen years until finally, in 1919, they entered the garden by proxy. The British mission presented the thirteenth Dalai Lama with a Baby Austin, license plate TIBET 1, which he drove around inside the garden of Norbulingka. It had been carried over the Himalayas in pieces strapped to long bamboo poles. (French 2003, 146) In this way, the mission broke through the boundary, creating a

link between the cleric/statesman and themselves. The vision of the thirteenth Dalai Lama dashing around his garden in the Austin is an example of Homi K. Bhabha's definition of the performance of *colonial mimicry*, as the Lama became "a reformed recognizable *Other* [as] a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite." (Bhabha 1994. 86)

As for the mountains, the British had to request permission of the Lamaist State to climb them. They declared their expeditions "pilgrimages" to convince the Tibetans they thought the mountains sacred. The Dalai Lama granted them permission saying, "From our point of view, almost every snow mountain in Tibet is the seat of the gods and of the guardian deities of the inner religion (i.e. Buddhism), who are very jealous; yet, in deference to the wishes of the British Government and, in order that the friendly relations may not be ruptured, permission is hereby granted." In fact, the permission was granted in exchange for British arms.³ For the British, the scenario of Tibet as a sacred formidable adversary to be conquered manifested in the climbing of Mt. Everest, which took the lives of two climbers in 1922 and 1924. It was finally "conquered" on May 29, 1953, and announced in the *London Times* on June 2, 1953, the day of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation. The sacred crown of Britain and the sacred mountain of Tibet joined in a kind of marriage in homage to power, two performances revolving around dirt and rock, minerals, water, and guns—and still no train.

Russia's Interest in Tibet

The Tibetans had a long relationship with Russia. They fluctuated between British and Russia overtures while depending on their relationship with China. For several decades, the Russian Tsarist Government had successfully denied the British access to Tibet through

the British-controlled states, states along the Indus River. After the Czar was overthrown, the Soviet diplomats pursued meetings with various strata of society in each country they either occupied or intended to occupy. In Tibetan society, they met with lamas, military officers, traders, and government officials, and with the 13th Dalai Lama. (Andreyev 2008, 238) When the British and the Dalai Lama had a falling out, the Russians quickly filled the gap and made their moves into the region, adopting tactics that emphasized a tangential connection between Soviet Communist and Tibetan Buddhist ideologies.

Nicolas Roerich

The British, the Russians, and the Chinese looked seriously at the Buddhist question, each approaching the problem in their own way. Finally, it was the Marxist ideology shared by the Russian Bolshevik's and the Chinese Revolutionaries that produced a bond from which to discuss a possible relationship between them. But before it became clear that Buddhism and Leninism would not mix, attempts were made to link Buddhism and Communism into a "holy union" that would benefit both. The Russian poet and painter, Nicholas Roerich (b. 1874 St. Petersburg, Russia, d. 1947 Kullu, India), who had been an acquaintance of Gedun Choephel while in India, had been a university classmate of Narkom C.V. Chicherin before the Revolution. Chicherin became the head of the Soviet People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs and was the architect of the Soviet active Eastern policy, which had as its chief instrument Lenin's principle of national self-determination. Chicherin was known as "Lenin's Narkom." (Andreyev 2008, 77) Roerich found himself in Europe where he designed the sets for Sergei Diaghilev's premier productions of *Prince Igor* and Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. In 1920, he moved to New York City to work as a teacher and

designer. In 1924, Roerich asked the Soviet Diplomat in Berlin for support from the Soviet Government for his travels through Central Asia. Meanwhile, Roerich was corresponding intensely with the Narkom Chicherin. (308) The Diplomat was impressed with the half-Buddhist, half-Communist artist who understood that Tibet needed to be liberated from the “British yoke.”(297) In a report, the Diplomat wrote that Roerich had “pro-Soviet leanings,” which he interpreted as “Buddho-Communitic;” that he had good connections with Indians and Tibetans because his son Georg spoke 28 Eastern languages; and importantly for the Russians, he was conducting clandestine activities in the service of Soviet Russia.⁴ Roerich had experienced mystical visitations with “Mahatmas,” Indian and Tibetan holy men, through his wife Elena Ivanovna. The two were initiates into Madam Blavatsky’s spiritualist movement, which they first learned about in Europe and then in the United States. Born into an upper-middle class Russian family, Roerich was well educated in Russian universities. He considered himself a “practical idealist” not a mystic. His mystical experiences with Indian “Mahatmas” showed him his mission that was to promote a “New Land,” which would unite Communism and Buddhism, bringing the beliefs of millions of Asian people into a great Eastern Union of Republics. Financed by a Wall Street broker, Louis P. Horsch, and the Soviet government, Roerich brought these ideas to the Russian Soviet leadership. They agreed Roerich provided important opportunities for the Soviets. The proposal revealed to Roerich through the Mahatmas was a utopian dream. It reads as follows:

If the Union of the Soviets recognizes Buddhism as a doctrine of Communism, then our communities will be able to proffer their active assistance [to the country], and hundreds of millions of Buddhists spread around the world, will provide the necessary might most unexpectedly...

- 1) The Buddha’s doctrine presents a revolutionary movement;
- 2) Maitreya [the successor to the Buddha] is the symbol of communism;

- 3) Millions of Asian Buddhists can be drawn in the world movement in support of the ideas of Community;
- 4) The basic law, or Gautama's simple teachings, will easily penetrate into the popular masses;
- 5) Europe will be shattered by the union of Buddhism and Communism;
- 6) The Mongols, Tibetans, and Kalmyks agree about the dates when the Maitreya prophesies will be fulfilled and are prepared to apply these to the present evolution;
- 7) The Tashi Lama's departure from Tibet provides an unprecedented occasion for a [revolutionary] action in the East;
- 8) Buddhism explains the negation of God as a natural phenomenon;
- 9) Action should be urgently taken, jointly with the Soviet Government, taking fully into account the local conditions and the Asian prophecies.

Not only did Roerich have delusional ideas, he did not know that the Soviets had already brokered an agreement with the Dalai Lama, which required no ideological discourse, but rather was limited to arms and trade. The Russians had also discovered that Roerich's Wall Street backers wanted to buy mineral rights inside Russia. The Bolshevik leaders in Moscow were suspicious of this western land grab scheme and had no interest in the Mahatmas proposals for purely ideological reasons. As Alexandre Andrejev sums it up in *Soviet Russia and Tibet: The Debacle of Secret Diplomacy, 1918-1930*, "It was a heretical idea to merge Leninism and Buddhism, much less to place the entire Politburo under the supreme guidance of obscure Indian masters." (301) The Tibetans and Mongolians had their independence since the Chinese Revolution in 1911 and there was in place a Soviet formula for "independent Tibet" inside the Chinese Federation that coincided with two Leninist principles: 1) self-determination, and 2) federalism, which followed the example of the Russian Soviet federal republic. Trade between the independent regions and the Soviet and Chinese Federations was foremost in the minds of the revolutionaries. As early as 1919 the

Republic of China, under President Sun Yat-sen, was thinking about a train to Tibet that took eighty-seven years to materialize.

The train already played a major part in Europe's global project. It was a technological feat that triggered the imagination and changed human demographics, and subsequently human behavior. During this time Tibet was the only Himalayan kingdom free of British influence. However, the British occupied India, Burma, Bhutan, and Sikkim which all flanked the southern border of Tibet, while Russia felt it necessary to tell the British they had no interest in Tibet. The situation left the Tibetan government no alternative but to monitor both the British and Russian behavior toward them. China was preoccupied with colonizers, having just experienced defeat in the Boxer Rebellion, and they were being forced to make concessions with foreign powers in the planning, financing, building and operating of nearly all the railways in China. It is no wonder the Chinese would feel compelled through the following decades to take control of the railways. After the Republic of China was founded in 1912, Sun Yat-sen believed that a national railway network was key to the modernization of China and he worked toward that end. By 1986, every province-level entity in the People's Republic of China had a railway network except for Tibet.

By the end of the 19th century, images of the train showed up mostly in photographs, lithographs, prints, and paintings in a world primarily colonized by Europe. In 1895, a moving train became the "star" of the Lumière Brothers inaugural film, *Arrival of the Train at La Ciotat*. Shown at Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris, the movie apparently had audiences jumping from their seats as the train entered the station. The moving train produced a fantastic spectacle on par with the advancing technology occurring at that time. The moving pictures inspired "modern" images in graphics and art movements. In 1896, the

Lumière brothers' films showed in Xu Garden (*Xu yuan*), a popular entertainment quarter in Shanghai to China. The Chinese had been experimenting with creating silk paintings that produced the impression of three dimensions for millenniums. The challenge to reproduce the real world with light and line has always been irresistible. The new medium was introduced as "*Xiyang yingxi*," or "Western shadow play," which related it to China's ancient shadow play with two dimensional paper cutouts. Painters in Western traditions have struggled with how to reproduce phenomena in two dimensions in order to create the impression of three. And most intriguing and difficult was how to show "time" in two dimensions.⁵ Eastern cultures worked with scrolls, accompanied by storytellers. Tibetan Thangkas were often used as teaching devices for a storyteller who would travel around with the picture, relaying its narrative to audiences. Making static pictures "move" proves delightful to human beings in all cultures. The technology that produced the train, the photograph, and the motion picture, has moved artistic thought and practice in every society. (Benjamin 1955)⁶ Nineteen-year-old Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) arrived in Paris in 1900 in time to see the Lumière movie.

Trains were the perfect metaphor for moving stories along. Depictions of motion could produce the notion of abstraction by creating unexpected juxtapositions, different from reality, creating other perceptions of reality and producing the idea of abstract thinking. Movies introduced editing techniques that created simultaneous parallel action, elliptical shifts in time and location, and the ability to cut away from scenes before completion, the use of "shot" rather than "scene" as the primary unit of composition, and the establishment of causality and meaning between shots. These techniques were transferred to two-dimensional picture making—think of *Les Femmes d'Alger* painted in 1907 by Picasso,

which dismantles the figure to produce multiple gestures happening simultaneously. The techniques are closer to what humans experience than linear story lines and narratives that are constructed to appear logical, one step following the next in a straight line.

Before “time and space” was depicted in abstract art and moving pictures, still-photographers took pictures using techniques associated with painters. Among photographer’s first subjects were trains that represented unbridled exploration and access for a new utopian future. The British and American photographers used the painters’ conventions to compose their pictures, referring to painterly values like choice of scene, and a quality of light to make trains the heroes of the picture. (Craighead 2013) When photography needed to gain artistic legitimacy at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, photographers in America, such as Alfred Stieglitz, produced pictures evoking “atmosphere” by mimicking pictorial painting styles.⁷ But painters, though they painted trains, kept them in the background, focusing instead on the landscape and the environment. (Kennedy 2008, 123) The pictorial trend in photography changed in the 1930s when photographers adopted a more dispassionate approach, in the manner of documentary. After WWII in the 1940s and in the 1950s, abstraction and expressionism joined forces to rescue art from previous notions of “modern” and from an elitist art market.

American abstract painter, Ad Reinhardt, used graphic drawings he collected from old cartoons to produce a discourse on art in America. (Storr 2013) As one of the earliest abstract painters he felt obliged to rally to the defense of the new movement under attack from the elitist art world. In one component of a larger collage made in 1946 titled, *How To Look Out*, Reinhardt uses a cartoon that shows a train coming around a bend toward a child standing helpless on the track. (Fig. 3.1) It is a daylight scene in a rural landscape. The image

adopts the mythic idea that silent movie heroines were tied to the train tracks, leaving the audience desperately hoping for her rescue. Reinhardt's train has signs attached with strings tied to its engine. The flying signs say, "BANALITY" "PREJUDICE" "LINGUISTIC STEREOTYPES" "DRINK" "INFERIORITY COMPLEXES" "CORRUPTION" "MONEY-GRUBBING" "SIN" The girl on the tracks is stretching her arms out toward a man leaping from a low wooden fence on the shoulder toward the track. His outstretched arms are reaching toward the girl. The word "ART," appears printed in a frame on the front of the girl's skirt. And the words "ABSTRACT ART" appear in a speech bubble below the jumping man. Reinhardt's message is, "art is in danger," represented by the damsel in distress. Reinhardt's messenger is, "the train, the vehicle carrying the threatening cargo." (Zwirner 2013, 39) He is suggesting "she/art" might be rescued from getting run down by the train, by "the man/abstract art."

Trains abound in pictorial representations, especially in the movies, whether made by famous and or obscure filmmakers. The train manages to present an imposing presence on the screen that might be fragmented, pictorial, abstract, or historical. Film buffs and scholars compile lists of the greatest train movies ever made; train magazines recount "the magical appeal of passenger trains, steam locomotives, majestic terminals, and so many of the other accouterments of railroading."⁸ Just the names of train films can provoke "auras" and "ambiances," whether actually seen or not:

Arrival of the Train at La Ciotat 1895 Lumiere Brothers

The Great Train Robbery 1903 Edwin S. Porter

Night Mail 1936 Harry Watt, Basil Wright after a poem by W.H.Auden

Eureka 1903 Anonymous, 1974 Ernie Gehr

Meet Me in St. Louis 1944 Vincent Minnelli

<i>Strangers on a Train</i> 1950 Alfred Hitchcock	<i>Dodes'ka-Den</i> 1970 Akira Kurasawa	<i>Class Relations</i> 1984 Jean- Marie Straub
<i>Tokyo Story</i> 1953 Yasujirô Ozu	<i>The Taking of Pelham 123</i> 1974 Joseph Sargent	<i>Throw Mamma from the</i> <i>Train</i> 1987 Danny Devito
<i>North by Northwest</i> 1959 Alfred Hitchcock	<i>Murder on the Orient</i> <i>Express</i> 1974 Sidney Lumet	<i>Slumdog Millionaire</i> 2008 Danny Boyle
<i>World of Apu</i> 1959 Satyajit Ray		<i>Last Train Home</i> 2010 Lixin Fan

The Train Enters Tibet

It seems almost impossible to think of a train without seeing an image and feeling an ambiance. However, for the Tibetans the train does not necessarily evoke these same ambiances. The train has just entered the culture. There has been no time to create a romance with the train. The Tibetan artists have named their paintings with unimaginative titles. More than half of the pictures use “train” or “railway” in the title. *Railway Train*, *Watching the Train*, *First Railway*, *Buddha vs. Train*, *Man and Train*, *Train*, *Plateau Railroad*, *Crowded Train*. The other titles suggest a modest emotion or story, *Laughter*, *Blown Away with Happiness*, *Three Generations on Three Roads*, *Sky Road*, *Three Emotions*, *006/7 NO. 1*, *Last Caravan*, *Who Goes Furthest*. By the titles it is hard to imagine these pictures depict complex conditions and concerns of the Tibetans, yet, as we shall see, they do.

The Tibetan artists first-hand experience with trains has varied. Some have seen trains in documentary and fictional pictures and films, and some have seen paintings or reproductions of painting of trains. However, no train station existed in Lhasa before the Beijing to Lhasa train brought one there. The train was not part of the Tibetans everyday

lives. Their approach to painting the train appropriates many of the pictorial depictions tried by artists worldwide. However, the Tibetans, following their resolve to be inclusive with their traditions, history and living culture, found themselves putting the train in their landscape. The Tibetan's pictures of the train are a sobering reminder that the uninvited train has tenaciously bullied its way into the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

How to Paint a Train

Thus, with much history and many concerns, fifteen artists from the Guild and four artists from the Government sponsored Tibetan Artists Association, submitted pictures for *The Train* show at *Peaceful Wind Gallery* in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Train Exhibition took place between September and October 2006. Seven pictures used mixed media, five used oil paint, and four used acrylic. Two of the artists painted their pictures on cotton. The dimensions ranged from one foot to six and one half feet in either direction. Two women: Dedron, and Zhang Ping, both members of the Guild, participated in the show. Unlike the Gedun Choephel pictures that were displayed as “one” picture for the Latse Library, the artists kept the pictures of the Train separate. Each picture included wall text written with commentary by the artists. This commentary is referred to in the following descriptions of their work. Some of these pictures are impressionistic and some are surreal, others are pop-inspired cartoons. Some look like illustrations for movie posters, paperback novels, and children's books. All employ references used for decades by artists and illustrators in both the east and west. While adopting world wide artistic conventions, the Tibetans include references to their own visual culture and traditions.

The artists understand the importance of contextualizing individual expression in relation to local and global conditions as demonstrated in their pictures of Gedun Choephel. However, the pictures of Choephel were the pictures of an artist, an intellectual and, more importantly, a fellow Tibetan whom they could claim as one of their own. Painting pictures of the Train would be different. The Train, a symbol of the will of the Chinese government, is an interloper disguised as a good-will ambassador bringing what the authorities believe the Tibetan's need, "modernity" and "prosperity." The artists found this intervention so significant they joined together in their own intervention to form their Guild, understanding that the Train was going to change Lhasa, and the lives of all Tibetans forever. This group of pictures tells the story of a moment in the history of contemporary Tibetan society in Lhasa. The gallery director and curator of the show, Ian Alsop, decided to negotiate the sale of the entire group. According to Alsop, as of 2014 he has the pictures, and still has the intention of selling them as a group, but has not had time to put them on the market.

The Artists and the Pictures

Ang Sang

Buddha vs. Train

Tibet, 2006, mixed media, 39 in. x 39 in.

(Fig. 3.2)

"All of my paintings show unintentional emotion, painting to me is Buddha nature in my heart, which I admire and respect unconditionally. My painting is different from Western painting, which emphasizes realistic description or expresses individuality and so on. Also it is different from Chinese traditional painting. Rather it is under the premise of faith and devotion. And it is the art language of the spirituality of our nationality; I am trying to find out the

common point between the ancient Tibetan traditional art and Western avant-garde art. My purpose is to set up a special art language and soul of painting, which is based on our traditional and folk art, and to create special artworks, which have both nationality and modern characteristics. The more it expresses our nationality, the more it will be international.”

Ang Sang, 2003

“This painting of mine is a mixture of tradition and modernity as a motif for this train. The two destinations of the train, Beijing and Lhasa, and the Buddha are in the middle to bless this event. The tradition and the modernity will bring lots of clashes and untold events, so it is necessary to ask for a blessing to bring more ecological and human balance. The tracks represent a film negative; it is an historical event that I have recorded. I wish that everything will become smooth and successful for future generations.”

Ang Sang, 2006

Ang Sang’s picture *Buddha vs. Train* suggests a combative, confrontational reading of the picture that also reassures the audience that the Buddha and the Train are on a par with each other. The Buddha is not passively standing by as the train comes into the station. The statuesque head of the Buddha, with elongated ear lobes and curled hair, is planted in the center of the picture, easily recognizable. The figure is placed in the same position as deities depicted in Thangka paintings as they hold forth in their palaces. The serious expression on the beautifully rendered face of the central Buddha image, along with the text, and mandala-like graphics, and tea-stained paper, create an appealing and enigmatic figure. Is this a plaque over an important doorway, an official seal, and/or a reproduction of an ancient stone etching? The background shows subtle traces of Tibetan text, which are so delicately executed that the shadowy figures appear to be patterns on the landscape. The sepia-toned

tea staining makes the paper seem transparent, allowing the background to melt into the figures. This central Buddha figure's ice blue eyes peer out from what appears to be an ancient space. The four walls and Tibetan Text encasing him, protect him from the Train, like a choker type necklace that forms a tight circle, squeezing around the walls of the Buddha. And around the outside of the circle made by the train is more tea-stained paper with medallions of Sanskrit text in each corner of a box that frames the train and the Buddha. The frame is black. The top and bottom of the frame look like sprocket holes on the edge of a strip of film. The picture looks like one still frame in a filmstrip. In this one frame, everything is held tightly in its place in a kind of strangle-hold. Ang Sang is presenting a wrestling match between the Buddha and the Train, old versus new, tradition versus modern. But Ang Sang is reminding us this is just one frame in a series of frames. This is one moment in time.

- Black lines form a plan view of the walls of a square palace with four doors at the north, south, east, and west, similar to traditional drawings of mandalas. The walls form a “protective” border around the central Buddha figure. Lotus petals surround the palace wall and steps.
- Four Tibetan words are at the palace doors: Beijing on the north, Lhasa on the south, and “good” “luck” spread across from west to east. Each word appears in an arc that looks like a half moon, a medallion or an archway of a building:

	BEIJING (tib. <i>pe ching</i>) north	
GOOD (tib. <i>Bkbras TA</i>) west		LUCK (tib. <i>Shis</i>) east
	LHASA (tib. <i>lha sa</i>) south	

- Black grid lines, representing the train tracks and sprocket holes in a filmstrip, stretch across the top and bottom of the picture and continuing off the canvas. Two black vertical lines join the top and bottom sprocket holes a couple of inches inside the sides of the picture, defining one frame of the filmstrip.
- Two opaque white trains with red and blue stripes and pale blue windows reiterate the cutouts of the sprocket holes. The train forms a circle with intermittent gaps linking the train entrances to the platform. The train does not follow the linear configuration of the sprocket holes across the top and bottom of the frame, but curves and encircles the four-sided palace with its central figure. Between the noses of the two trains, one on the north and one on the south, there is a rectangle with diagonal lines that blocks the tracks. The train is like two snakes surrounding their prey. The diagram depicts the linking of the Beijing and Lhasa railroad train stations by placing the respective names at the top and bottom.
- Outside the palace, between the sprocket holes and the circling train, four decorative Sanskrit syllables are placed in the corners of the frame.

The upper left corner is O, which means
“kiss.”

The lower left corner might be GEM that
may mean ‘great.’

The upper right corner is the letter GI,
which refers to “the present life”

The lower right corner is OM, which is a
mystic sound.

The Buddha’s heavy-lidded, brilliant, clear blue eyes are the same color as the blue emanating from the train windows. The Buddha is in his palace. He is inviting the visitors from the train to enter the palace. He says *Tashi*, which is a form of the Tibetan greeting Tashi Delek that means “welcome.” His face is formidable, yet welcoming. The palace has only two openings beyond the tracks, at the north and at the south, where the fronts and ends of the two trains meet. The corner medallions are offering a kiss, a humming of the peaceful sound OM, and a reminder that this is happening in the present moment. We see

only one frame of the moving picture. There are more frames that we don't see. This is a fluid moment, in which we do not know what the future will bring.

Ang Sang has managed to maintain the exclusivity of the palace of the deity in the picture, re-enacting the Tibetan tradition in which the palaces of the living deity, the Dalai Lama, were protected places in Lhasa. But when the British entered Lhasa in 1904, they tried to enter the summer palace, the Norbulingka. They never managed it. The Dalai Lama kept them at bay with various excuses and so the British were forced to peruse the buildings from their outposts on the hills on the outskirts of Lhasa. The Dalai Lama's palaces have now been turned into tourist sites, and the Tibetan people continue to use the Norbulingka as the picnic site for the Yogurt Festival once a year. The Tibetans have not relinquished their loyalty to the Dalai Lama, much to the chagrin of the Chinese. In Ang Sang's picture, the Train is stopped at the Dalai Lama's house. Possession is nine-tenths of the law. The question is, who is in possession and what does possession mean? The train-snake is surrounding the palace. In fact, the Chinese are now in residence in the Palaces, monitoring tourists as they come and go. Ang Sang's picture is a poetic metaphor that attempts to reinforce the profound isolationism that had been the stalwart condition of the Tibetan culture until 1959 when the dissolution of Tibetan autonomy began its rapid escalation leaving Tibet vulnerable yet tenacious.

Ang Sang writes that he is embracing the "Buddha-nature" nature in his heart. This suggests that "soft-heartedness," a condition of Buddha-nature, has the potential to dissolve aggression. He is painting a "soft-hearted" version of the train's arrival into Tibet, while not relinquishing Tibet's power. He uses the signs often associated with conflict, boundaries, property, and ownership, to evoke the cultural icons of his homeland: the *mandala*, the

Tibetan script, and the Buddha. He takes hold of the practical and emotional conflict by superimposing abstract representations of the material and spiritual objects. He creates a diagram but also explores dimensionality, not only as a concept but as the practical exercise of a painter engaged in the discipline of painting three dimensional objects on a two dimensional surface. He “fleshes” out the Buddha and the Sanskrit syllables and the entire field on which the picture is made by skillfully using conventional techniques, such as painting shadows to create the illusion of dimension. And he has made the Buddha the central figure, knowing the image of the Buddha has been appropriated in the global market to represent peace, harmony, and equanimity, in short “enlightenment.”

Shelka

Last Caravan

Tibet, 2006, paint on cotton 31 in. x 58 1/2 in.

(Fig. 3.3)

“My painting depicts the contrast between new means of transportation and traditional means. I used influences from thangkas and Tibetan murals, like ships disappearing into, and turning into, clouds, and a shepherd holding the cloud like a bow. The traditional means of transportation, especially the yaks, may go away or become useless, but some may have life after death or go to heaven. I used people as a symbol of culture that may or will disappear.”

Shelka 2005

Shelka shows the traditionally dressed Tibetans moving from left to right across a sepia-toned dark, clouded landscape. Thick with heavy clothing, their heads sheathed in halo-like light, one wonders if these pilgrims are in a “state of grace.” Two figures appear to be “protector” deities, one riding a horse and holding a string tethered to the sky as if pulling the dark clouds open to show the lighter sky behind. The other, more animated figure, is

projecting out of a wreath frame of swirling shapes. It has one upheld hand holding a curved staff for beating back the brush; the other grasps the stems of swirling figures that could be clouds or trees blowing in a fierce wind. The traveler pilgrims follow the densely packed line of their yaks. The lead person swirls a prayer wheel, people are supplicating, the children are clinging, and the heavily burdened yaks are moving toward the right edge of the picture. Behind and above the line of yaks is the snake-like shape of the train speeding across a “modern” bridge into the picture—now one-quarter into the frame. The wind is blowing the people and animals in the opposite direction of the oncoming train, and out of the picture. The figure and ground both appear transparent suggesting these people and animals are ephemeral and in a state of disappearing. The painting looks like a piece of fabric blowing in the wind. The use of cotton as the ground for the painting and the drawing of the shepherd “holding the cloud like a bow” support the impression.

The picture is a document of a moment in the history of Tibet. Tibetans nomadic way of life is over. Trade caravans will soon be obsolete. The sliver of a train and the “modern” bridge off in the background are placed at the vanishing point of the perspective. Just under the archway of the bridge a tunnel emerges that gracefully leads to the ladders rising out of the clouds extending up and out of the top of the frame. The whole picture appears to be underwater, except for the upper right quadrant with the emanating light. The effect could stem from the technique of staining handmade paper with tea, but the watery ground also serves to illuminate layers of shapes within shapes that express ephemeral movement, something felt in the abstract. For millennia, Tibetans have experienced light and dark from their position at 13,000 feet above the sea. Indoor and night-light came from candles and the moon and stars respectively. Shelka captures the ephemeral light of the

expanse of the Tibetan landscape in the Tibetan night. The eye follows the light and moving clouds, while the body feels the blowing wind. Something “transcendent” is occurring if the ladders are read as “ascendant,” but it is not clear what that is. The title, however, makes it clear—the 2500-year-old tradition of traveling in caravans is over. This is *Last Caravan*.

Jhamsang

First Railway

Tibet, 2006 mixed media, 19½ in. x 66¼ in.

(Fig. 3.4)

“I wanted to depict this as a kind of divination of a Buddha or a dream. The train will bring modern culture and there will be the contrasts, clashes and even intermingling between modern and traditional. The 2 mandalas represent Tibetan traditional culture, which in the face of modernity is ‘de-colored’. The modernity has the stronger colours, but I feel that eventually everything has a time, as in the Buddhist teachings of impermanence. Eventually everything will be lost or disappear. The woman depicts traditional woman and the man depicts modern man. In the train, romantic things could happen, but I really don't know what results this will bring.”

Jhamsang 2005

Jhamsang shows the halves of two mandalas in the painting, yet the viewer sees only one-half of a black and white *Medicine Buddha* mandala on each side of the picture. The *Medicine Buddha* is known as the Buddha of healing and medicine in Mahayana Buddhism, who cures suffering using the medicine of his teachings. (Dondon 1986, 22) The mandala is recognizable by the depiction of the Buddha who is holding a blue bowl. Jhamsang's mandala has what appear to be hundreds of rays of emanations of the Medicine Buddha spreading out from the central “palace.” The mandala is divided in half along its central

vertical axis, so that the cut line of each half appears on the outside edges of the painting, leaving the emanations radiating into the center of his picture. Apart from the light these figures cast onto the picture, Jhamsang is also suggesting the viewer look with the mind's eye beyond the existing frame in order to complete the mandala beyond the picture frame. It is also possible to imagine that the image has been formed by folding the cut edges back on themselves, by joining them together to form a ring, like a bracelet, necklace, or a belt that would join the two halves to make a whole, or by extending the image further along its linear path to produce a string of mandalas. But if one chooses to imagine wrapping the image in a circle, the central figure takes on further meaning. The color image of an open palm in the center of the picture refers to the *Abhaya mudra*—"mudra," the Sanskrit term for "seal," "mark," or "gesture." It is a symbolic or ritual gesture depicted in Hindu and Buddhist images signifying "fearlessness," "protection," "peace," and a "sense of strong deep inner security." On the seal (*mudra*) is a picture of a train stopped on the tracks with two people on the tracks. The word "Tibet" is printed in English across the front of the train that "waits" on the tracks. As Jhamsang describes it, a "modern man" is escorting a "traditional woman" off the track. The deep orange beautifully shaped hand is illuminated by a glowing radiance from behind that evaporates into a yellowish light, which exudes a warm glow. The Seal rests on an empty field in the space made light by the emanations of the Medicine Buddhas. The spokes whirring past the central picture are spinning into the white vanishing point, which "holds" the hand, which "holds" the man, the woman, the train and the track.

Jhamsang says the train will bring considerable change, both good and bad. At the same time, he recalls "impermanence," the bulwark of Buddhism. He simultaneously shows the modern and traditional, the local and global, the linear and circuitous by presenting

iconic signs, skillfully juxtaposing the seeming pairs of opposites: the man's spectacles and overalls, the woman's traditional costume and her exposed breast, the cartoon-like drawing alongside the skilled detailed rendering of the traditional mandala. This juxtaposition reassigns meaning to pictorial narratives by choosing to color the "new contemporary image," while leaving color out of the traditional picture. Jhamsang elongates the picture frame to invite linear reading. He also splits the mandala in half, leaving it with an ambiguous, undetermined edge, so that the viewer can imagine space snapping together into a loop. Finally, Jhamsang places himself in the picture by signing his name in red and placing it under the central "seal." In doing this he creates another seal, one of the Buddhism's eight auspicious symbols, the conch shell, the emblem of power, authority, and sovereignty, whose blast is believed to banish evil spirits, avert natural disasters, and scare away poisonous creatures. The narrative of this painting is a fiction and a metaphor, but it is based on actual concerns that the train and its tracks have raised as it was laid through the herders' and nomads' grazing lands, changing the topography of the terrain, and putting the people and their animals in jeopardy. Jhamsang's picture identifies Tibetans and their culture by costume and mandalas. He identifies the "others:" the train, the tracks, and the man in spectacles wearing overalls who is undoubtedly Han Chinese as no Tibetans are train engineers. He successfully complicates the interactions in a way that reinforces his statements about the confusion the train will bring.

Tserang Dhundrup

Man and Train

Tibet, 2005 oil on canvas, 28 ½ in. x 36 in.

(Fig. 3.5)

“Every birth of a new trend and thought of art has its origin in a past tradition. Thus we should question the existence of an entirely new art form. And I clearly accept the importance of digesting the giant tradition we had behind us to formulate our own personal ongoing searches. In doing this, the instinctual rebellious part of an artist should come forth and be sensitive to the stimulus of our surroundings while remaining in a realm of freedom that is not affected by convention. To put it simply, being free in expressing one's real feelings is important for an artist.”

Tserang Dhundrup 2005

Tserang Dhundrup has painted a nomad in the landscape. The tiny sliver of a train enters from the left below at the horizon line. The man in the foreground dominates the picture. The bottom of the picture frame cuts off his lower body, and the top of his head, outlined by the sky, almost reaches the top of the painting. He is standing in the parched desert landscape. Tiny grazing yaks dot the background in front of the oncoming train that slithers onto the scene. Small rocks, scattered on the ground, cast little shadows, a low mountain range hovers at the horizon. White puffy clouds rise up from behind the mountains into the brilliant blue sky. The hardly visible train is a thin ribbon between the ground and hills. It is broad daylight. The sun shines, as it does at 13,000 feet, bright and clear. The man is old, but it is impossible to know how old. His face and lightly clasped right hand are parched and wrinkled. His thinning, gray braided hair falls onto his traditional robe, a *chuba*, slung over his left shoulder revealing its yak fur lining. His slightly stooped, sturdy body and tan color skin and clothing blend into the surrounding landscape. He looks with a steely squint in the direction of the sun and oncoming train. The corners of his mouth slant downward. His life is being changed forever. He can hear the train coming but he is not

looking at it, he is looking away. Instead, the viewer is invited to ponder and engage with him and cannot look away. The simple scene is more poignant in its declaration than if the man looked directly at the viewer. His powerful presence equals the power of the approaching train; yet, at the same time it declares a consummate vulnerability. Indeed, the picture, in Allan Sekula's words "asks a thousand questions."⁹ Does the viewer have the mettle for the challenge? The picture presents nothing glamorous or seductive. It offers no respite from the troubling questions it raises.

Yak Tseten

Self Portrait: A Trip to China

Tibet 2006, acrylic on canvas 35 in. x 31 in.

(Fig. 3.6)

"Yak Tseten takes his name from the yak, which is his favorite subject. He calls this a 'self portrait.'"

Notes from *Peaceful Wind Gallery* exhibit *Lhasa Train*

Remember the gaze of the man in Tserang Dhundrup's *Man and Train*? Imagine he turns his head toward the viewer. His braids turn up into Yak horns, his nose and nostrils become longer and larger, and his eyes are no longer squinting but looking directly at the viewer. The face becomes the Yak-Man in Yak Tseten's *Self Portrait: A Trip to China*. Yak-Man is a passenger sitting on a train. His furled brow, slicked back hair, and cocked ear challenges the viewer to engage in dialogue. His piercing look is deflected by the swirls of smoke from the burning cigarette perched between his lips that makes curving lines flowing up past the offering scarf (*kata*) draped around his shoulders. The khaki safari jacket covers his slightly stooped shoulders. The collar of his red-colored shirt folds over the jacket lapels.

His travel bag, imprinted with the iconic drawing of the Buddha's eyes, hangs over the back of his seat. In front of him a fold-down tray-table holds a Chinese version of a "Coca-Cola" can and an urn draped with a *kata* that looks like a reliquary that contains relics, pieces of bone, hair, or nails of important teachers which are traditionally considered precious for their spiritual powers. An ashtray hangs on the wall under the broad window. The picture looks like a scene drawn from literature and movies about a "confidence man" or "adventurer," like Indiana Jones in a Harrison Ford adventure film. Yak Tseten says the picture is a self-portrait, referring to himself as Yak. His belief is that in the future the only "authentic" remnant of Tibet will be the wild Yak; all else will be appropriated and sold. In response he adopts the persona of the Yak, not a domesticated, drooping eyed decorated yak, but a wild one, which makes his direct gaze more threatening. This is his depiction of his authentic Tibetan voice. His representation conjures a traveling salesman, selling cultural artifacts and putting on the face of a wild yak. He is using the portrayal as "yak man" to sell his wares. His "exotic" presence might entice customers, a familiar tactic used in tourist markets.

The artist works as a set designer for stage and film. Painting himself as a yak is a theatrical gesture. Furthermore his production of space in the picture is reminiscent of theatrical sets with "walls" that go up just far enough to give the audience the feeling of being on the train. Out the window appears a moving train with its smoke spewing from its engine, and blowing backward.¹⁰ The passenger's cigarette smoke mingles with the train smoke, providing a link between being inside and outside of the train. The gorgeous open blue sky that is partially but dramatically shrouded in clouds is visible from inside the train. This "opening to the sky" offers a respite from the heavy narrative being portrayed inside

the train, suggesting there is some light coming from “outside.”

This picture opens up a discussion about the onslaught on Tibet as well as the degradation, appropriations and, lastly, the disappearance of “Tibet.” Yak Tseten’s evocation of a dreadful future seems a satirical, reading of linear time rather than of the cyclical time referred to in Tibetan Buddhism in which time is circuitous and change inevitable and therefore expected. However, the form the change takes is worrisome. Yak Tseten leaves the viewers asking, how will Tibetans avoid being made into relics?

Tenzin Jigme

Laughter

Tibet 2006, oil on canvas 37 in. x 39 in.

(Fig. 3.7 a)

“Art should be real & genuine, every single line & colour stroke in my works are true expression of my being associated with the social, natural and geographical elements of place I live in. I am a Tibetan and I learn from traditional culture while being a modern man; I have to use a modern way to see Tibetan culture & the living conditions of Tibetan. I sensitively feel that existence vs. extinction, reality vs. fantasy, materialism vs. spiritualism, decay vs. birth are all inevitable part of life. And all these elements offer me spaces for speculation and appreciation, which eventually I depict in my works.”

Tenzin Jigme, 2003

“The media reports how happy all Tibetans are at the coming of the train, which will bring lots of progress.”

Tenzin Jigme, 2006

Tenzin Jigme seems to be saying, “Laughing, really?!” in the painting he calls *Laughter*. These eight laughing young men look to be more leering and jeering than laughing.

In direct response to “media reports” about “happy” Tibetans Tenzin Jigme responds with irony. The grimacing figures are presented from the neck up, facing straight forward; their eyes are squeezed into slits, with mouths gaping, and full sets of teeth and gums and their tongues exposed. They wear the garments of urban day workers that include a combination of traditional Tibetan, Chinese, and Western clothes. One man wears turquoise earrings, long hair and a traditional topknot; another has what appears to be dyed blond hair in a short “modern” haircut; another wears a white tank top undershirt. These guys are not nomads, but they are not professionals with college degrees, either. The laughing figures dominate the picture. Behind them, in the dark night, hovering over their heads, is the train. Smoke rising from the engine shows it is moving to the right. Though the Beijing Lhasa train doesn’t emit steam, Jigme paints as “historical” train, with smoke streaming from its engine into a deep blue and pinkish sky. The train’s lit windows look like stitches or a strand of tiny luminous seed pearls stretched across the horizon. Light shining on the men’s faces comes from something in front of them: flashlights, lanterns, headlights of a car, or maybe a bonfire?

Are these fellows “happy?” This chorus of distorted faces, illuminated by ghoulis light, laughing “hysterically” in front of a tiny train, in a monumental landscape, makes the clear point that the official reports require some investigation, or at least an inquiry of what is “happy.” Jigme says he wants to paint “genuine” and “real” pictures of his social and cultural life. He proposes that duality is “an inevitable part of life,” so in this painting *Laughter* he provides a display of merriment. It is difficult to interpret because one doesn’t know what these men are laughing about. Are they glad the train is coming, and if so why? Is there irony in the picture? Jigme’s companion picture *Three Emotions* illuminates his aims.

Three Emotions

Tibet, 2006 oil on canvas 39 in. x 31 ½ in.

Fig. 3.7 b)

“The train is a foreign element and brings lots of people; thinking of the train I go through these emotions—angry, sad, happy.”

Tenzin Jigme, 2006

In *Three Emotions*, Tenzin Jigme depicts three men showing different emotions. The painter describes the emotions as angry, sad, and happy, but the reaction of the viewer to these faces is more complex. They are looking face forward, gesturing toward the viewer. Their mouths are open. Their eyes are closed. They are not looking away, nor are they in dialogue with the viewer, but they are trying to tell the audience something. They are not on the train, which is coming right at them. Jigme paints another historical train, bright blue with a blue track. It is a “locomotive,” not a new super speed train. It is not a delicate necklace of light across the horizon as in *Laughter*, but a large engine coming directly toward the gesturing men. The train is coming from Lhasa—which can be seen in the background with the depiction of the Potala Palace. The dark smoke from the engine rolls over the train enveloping the distant building. A horseshoe-shaped field with scarecrow and haystack rests snugly inside the curving track and train. The impaled scarecrow with outstretched arms is dressed in a tattered jacket and bowler hat. It stands alongside a large, blond, straw wig-like haystack that sits on the ground. Both the scarecrow and haystack face the passing train and the trailing clouds of putrid smoke that carefully does not envelop the Palace. The three men, seen in “close-up,” all wear glasses and the same clothes. The three men are, in fact, depicting one man having three separate experiences simultaneously, producing three

moments in one frame. His tailored Tibetan clothes, close cropped hair, and spectacles suggests he is a college graduate, a professional, perhaps a teacher. In fact, it is the painter. As Jigme says in his introduction to the painting, “thinking of the train I go through these emotions...”

Anger, sadness, and happiness are not sanitized in *Three Emotions*. Jigme’s compiled portrait is reminiscent of *Self Portrait (The Desperate Man)* by Gustave Courbet (b. 1819 France, d. 1877 Switzerland), who displays the emotion of an ordinary man without romanticizing him. Tenzin Jigme’s self-portrait is not a romantic picture and the speeding train headed in his direction is not depicted as a romantic moment. However the dramatic angle of the train coming toward the viewer is similar to that of the train in the Lumière brother’s 1895 film *The Arrival of the Train at La Ciotat*. The viewer experiences the train as a powerful, unstoppable force. The figures facial expressions and gestures make the sight horrific. The terribleness of the scene is reinforced by the depiction of the Potala Palace standing alone on a hill, looking monumental. From a distance, it looks down onto the field with the scarecrow in the landscape. The relationship is feudal, that of a palace to its lands. The Chinese explicitly described to Tibetan society, before its intervention in 1959, as feudal. Altogether the scene conjures a frightening dream. Jigme has presented himself split into three emotional states at once—the splitting off in one’s mind that happens under stress when trying to reconcile the irreconcilable.

Both *Laughter* and *Three Emotions* consider the emotion “happy” in their narrative. *Laughter* was painted in response to the “media reports,” of the Tibetan’s *happy* attitude toward the train. In *Laughter*, the workers depict “happy,” albeit ironically. Both pictures depict “happy” with irony, but the meaning of irony in each picture differs. The irony in

Laughter is practical; after all, the train that brings tourism will also bring money, new experiences, and a lot more excitement than what the vast, empty landscape offers. Perhaps the workers believe they will benefit by simply having the “outside” world come in. The intellectual, educated class, remembering history, and recognizing that the balance of power does not rest with them, focuses on maintaining the integrity and stability of their culture. In Jigme’s introduction to *Three Emotions* he says, “The train is a foreign element and brings lots of people—thinking of the train I go through these emotions...” For Jigme and most Tibetans, “foreign” primarily means the ruling government of the Communist Party and the Han Chinese majority who occupy China. The Beijing-Lhasa train can never be separated from the people who control it, and the people and goods it transports. Jigme’s pictures attempt to reconcile the unknown consequences of the train. In his anguished depictions, he mirrors artist Gade’s interpretation of the mixed emotions of Tibetans as to what was happening in Lhasa. Depicting these emotions graphically is challenging. Gade points out, the changes are both unnerving and inspiring for artists, in that they force the imagination into surprising places.

Penpa

Three Generations on Three Roads (triptych)

Tibet 2006 oil on canvas 39 in. x 53 in.

(Fig. 3.8)

“Through the years of my artist career, encountering too many trends and style of art has made it a challenge to find an individual style. But in the course of time, the social surrounding of the place I live in played an important role in me to take up my present style. The use of primary colours in my paintings for me is relevant of the genuine nature of the people I

associate with daily. Like myself they are going through time of changes and it seems like what I am doing is just holding by the tail a passing train...and my paintings hold a few glimpses of a vanishing vista of the last dream.”

Penpa, 2003

“I have seen three changes in road systems. That of my father, my niece, and myself. It is unnatural to experience this in one lifetime. My father wears ‘liberation shoes’ on a very primitive road, I have pursued my dream on TAR highway, and now my niece unexpectedly has the train.”

Penpa, 2006

Penpa paints a daytime picture of the countryside, with plowed fields, a scattering of buildings, and grazing animals. Three figures, his father, himself, and his niece, are painted on three separate canvases and placed next to each other; all face forward toward the viewer. Each figure stands on a path that Penpa points out has changed over an “unnaturally” short amount of time—Penpa refers to changes after 1950 when the PLA came into Tibet. For millenniums prior to that time, the Tibetan landscape had hardly changed, when the Chinese army arrived they brought heavy machinery and the fervor to change the place. Note that although Penpa is suggesting each picture represents the changes in the same landscape, the mountains in the background continue from frame to frame. And therefore, because of the “continuous” landscape in the background, all the roads exist at the same time.

- The painting on the left shows Penpa’s father with short-cropped hair dressed in jeans, a V-neck pullover sleeveless sweater over a white shirt with mandarin collar, and over these is a traditional Tibetan *chuba* overcoat. In his right hand he holds a prayer wheel, which is turning since we see the bead that helps it turn stretched out horizontally, and he has prayer beads that he is rotating in his left hand. These are signs that traditional Buddhist practices have not been abandoned. Penpa refers to his Father’s sturdy boots

as “liberation shoes,” an expression adopted when the P.L.A. assigned Tibetans to crews who were issued work boots for building roads and dams, and cutting down forests in the task of taking down and rebuilding Tibet. He stands on a straight dirt road that lies between plowed rows of green countryside dotted grazing sheep. The hillsides in the background are low and burnished, their growth foraged. In the distance, a man steers a horse pulling a wagon. Small homes sit on the landscape. A stupa sits on the curve of the road; evidence of still remaining remnants of the traditional Tibetan culture. The man’s face is ruddy, he has some wrinkles, and his eyes are turned down slightly at the outer edges making him look both serene and resigned. Altogether, Penpa portrays a pleasant pastoral scene where movement is at the speed of human and animal motion.

- The picture on the right shows Penpa himself, wearing the clothes of a contemporary young man in China: blue jeans, a turtleneck sweater and an opened lightweight shirt and jacket. His shoulder length hair is parted in the middle. His shoes are sturdy. He holds a folded paper in his left hand—is it a map? His right hand is tucked into the pocket of his jeans. He is youthful, standing in the middle of the curving paved road that was once straight. He appears to be walking down the middle of the road, one foot slightly in front of the other. His complexion is lighter than his fathers, and his build appears smaller. His wide eyes are slightly sad. The road is painted with the familiar dashed white line that divides it in two; a solid white line marks the shoulder. A road marker indicating elevation and mileage stands on the side of the road. On the green fields domestic yaks graze. In the background the hillsides are low and barren except on one side a mountainous slope appears. It is high, green and rising up and out of the picture frame. In the distance, a man drives a tractor pulling a trailer down the road. On the side of the road a rectangular sign with the number “2” stands in the place where the stupa had been. The scene continues to exude the atmosphere of a pleasant pastoral, although mechanized, afternoon. Though Penpa is walking down the middle of the road, he is sharing the road with the tractor, which is understood to move slowly. Therefore we read “slow” into the picture. Trains move fast, therefore we read trains as a threat. Here

nothing is threatening to “run him down.” The tractor is at least a curve away. The tractor and Penpa, are compatible, they share the road.

- The central figure shows Penpa’s niece. The pubescent girl stands naked on the railroad track that once was a road. The train is snaking its way on the curving track toward her. The farmland, partially cut away by the tracks, has no animals grazing. The houses in the distance are organized into identical rectangles; the hills behind are mounds of brown earth. The symbol on the road sign is an exclamation point (“!”). The girl’s face is open, her eyes wide, lips full. Her skin is unblemished. She holds no prayer wheel or beads or rolled up map in her hands. She is not attempting to cover herself up; she is not self-conscious. Rather, her open arms and upturned palms appear to be making an offering, a universally understood gesture of openness and honesty that suggests what she is “offering” is genuine. She looks to be offering herself. If Penpa meant this to be a depiction of an actual event, it would be perplexing beyond explanation. An alternative reading would be the girl is a symbol, not a flesh and blood human, but a representative of the artist’s complicated feelings about the train coming to Tibet. One way to consider Penpa’s decision is to look at Tibetan Buddhist iconography, that includes naked figures as well as clothed ones; some meant to be shocking and others seductive and appealing.

In Tibetan Buddhist practices, deities are often used to represent “realms” of existence that humans are able to imagine. The three realms of existence of the Buddha are known as *kayas* (realms): the *dharmakaya*, the *nirmanakaya* and the *sambhogakaya*.¹¹ The deities of the *dharmakaya* represent “emptiness as enlightened potential.” Those deities are represented completely naked in order to display the beautiful simplicity of “emptiness as enlightened potential.” Deity’s bodies are always opaque, smooth, and lineless, because they are not made of flesh and blood and are presented to appear transparent and translucent.¹²

Perhaps Penpa has fashioned his niece as a *dharmakaya* figure, or turned her into a lovely figurine, an object like the “antique” pot at her feet. Even as a fierce wind blows her

short-cropped hairdo across her face, the indomitable figure does not quiver. She is steadfast as a presence of “enlightened potential” and, as an artifact, like the pot at her feet. Is she to be an offering to the tourists arriving on the train? Or is her nudity simply a stripping away of the cliché “accouterments” that mark the girl as Tibetan. Ethnographer Leigh Miller Sangster suggests that Guild member Tsering Nyandak’s pictures of nude women are a result of shedding “so-called traditional ethnographic markers that act as a facade until he arrived at painting nudes.” (Sangster 2012)

Penpa, like Nyandak, recognizes that nakedness is not taken lightly in everyday Tibetan culture; consequently portraying his relative as a naked adolescent girl realistically posed between two clothed men is perplexing. Where else is the tactic adopted? An array of examples in international contemporary art demonstrates the power and shock in representing nudity in surprising contexts. Depictions of nude children are particularly disturbing, whether it is a simple portrait, a document, or fabrication these pictures jolt the viewer. Painter Lucien Freud’s portrait of his 14-year-old daughter, Anna, *Naked Child Laughing*, (1963), curled up on a couch produced lengthy criticism and analysis in an attempt to understand what the artist intended. South African painter Marlene Dumas’ picture of her young daughter, titled *The Painter*, (1994) shows the naked child standing on an empty canvas in a seemingly distressed state, her eyes black and scowling as she glares at the viewer, her hands covered in blue and red paint that conjures images of Lady Macbeth and her murderous act. Actually, the little girl was finger painting, and Dumas snapped a photo of her, then painted the picture from the photo. American photographer Sally Mann creates complex and controversial scenarios while chronicling her children growing up, taking pictures of them naked in natural and ordinary surroundings. She has been accused of

exploiting them, even though the children appear well-adjusted and at ease with it all.¹³

Another painting by Marlene Dumas, copied from a newspaper clipping, provides context for the picture but presents a perplexing scenario. The painting, *The Woman of Algiers*, (2001), shows a small, naked young woman being led by two large partially visible men holding her wrists, one in uniform. The men tower over her, their imposing figures contrasting with the girl's slight frame, tender and vulnerable face. The men's faces are invisible, cropped out of the frame. Compounding the horrendous scene, the newspaper stamped two black bars across the girl's breast and hips, deeming them too offensive to be exposed. Dumas' rendering of the photograph draws out the obscenity in both the story and the reporting of the story. It is a painting about violence.

Penpa's naked adolescent girl has no black bars across her chest or hips, and no men are leading her anywhere. But Penpa's offensive scenario, an adolescent naked girl left standing alone on a railroad track, cries out for a rescue scenario; the train is coming and she is smack dab in the middle of the tracks, with no protection. The two men beside her are helpless. There is no engineer cautiously helping her off the track as in Jhamsang's picture, *First Railway*.

The violence in this picture pretends to be benign. It is camouflaged. The tactic of using cartoon-like renderings in a pastoral landscape acts to conceal the violence. Formatting the picture as a triptych diverts attention away from the troubling aspects by seducing the viewer into comparing and contrasting innocuous details, while looking for minutiae that uncover the picture's secrets. These distractions detract from the perplexing situation facing the people. The picture is a discourse on the abuse of power and authority, and on the resultant submission, and victimization it produces. For the present-day viewer it calls to

mind the shocking acts that are occurring a half a decade later, the self-immolation by one hundred twenty three Tibetan men and women who found no other way to unravel the conundrum of being held captive, silenced and erased. “Nakedness” is crucial to these pictures because it is a stand-in for vulnerability and for power. To depict vulnerability a context is needed to provide the details and delivery of the story.

Penpa’s picture makes public the obscenity of the oncoming train. He exposes the hidden, censored restraints experienced by these three generations of Tibetans. The painting is, after all, about the advancing train and its consequences. Penpa’s turns a subject that on the surface appears normal and commonplace into a representation of what Hannah Arendt calls the “banality of evil.” (Arendt 1963) The conditions of its making, the effects on the people and environment, have been hidden—they are not discussed or considered. The Tibetans were never asked if they wanted a train built that would go from Beijing to Lhasa. The picture also calls to mind Dr. Cornel West’s suggestion that “catastrophe” is what happens when situations cannot be explained away, and cannot be reconciled. Works of art, music, painting, and dances, are made in the face of catastrophe, because nothing else can express it. He says it is what playing “the blues” is about. (West 2012) Finally, after gazing for a while at the picture of the three people in *Three Generations on Three Roads*, each person’s stoic expression creates an urgency that seems to be asking the viewer the question, “So what are we going to do about this?” And there is no answer.

Somani

Christina Dolma

Tibet 2006, paint on cotton, 47 in. x 78 ½ in.

(Fig. 3.9)

“Andrew Wyeth was one of the only artists from the United States who had a strong impact in China during the late 1980s and 1990s for artist who were depicting rural and pastoral themes. Personally [I] feel a strong connection with Wyeth as a source of technical inspiration. His picture, *Christina's World*, helps to show the air of the remoteness or the intimacy that most of his work shows. The train [in my picture *Christina Dolma*] is passing through all those areas which are cut off from the outside world.”

Somani, 2014

It is not possible to speak of Somani's painting, *Christina Dolma*, without addressing the context in which Chinese artists became interested in the American painter Andrew Wyeth. The following discussion contextualizes some aspects of Chinese discourses on art from the middle of the 1970s through the middle of the 1990s when Wyeth became popular. Those decades were at first emerging from influences put in place decades before, prior to and including the period during the Cultural Revolution. In an informative interview in the *Asia Art Archive*, Li Xianting, art critic, curator, and former editor of *Meishu Magazine*, says the first thing that was apparent in Post Cultural Revolution art was, 1) a reaction against realism that was accompanied by an extensive discourse about revising realism and about revisiting the definition of realism itself; and, 2) there was a turn to modernism. He fittingly points out that Revolutionary Realism didn't come out of thin air. (Li 2009) He describes the history from the turn of the twentieth century starting with the May 4th 1912 movement, which was a student crusade against imperialism that launched a new cultural view that opened the door for artists to depict scenes from life. Artists began going into the countryside to learn the art of the peasants. That movement expanded with the influence of a Russian movement called *Peredvizhniki Art* (Wanderer's Art), called the Russian Wanderers

School. The paintings of these artists included subjective narrative content. In the 1940s, Mao Tse-tung was already in communication with the Russians, having imported Lenin's teaching into China, and art had become a lynch pin in the revolution. Continuing to look to Russia under Stalin's regime, China began incorporating "subjectivity" into the service of politics that made it necessary for artists to portray the revolutionary point of view. It included a call for depictions of "realism" to tell a story. To do this, the Russians adopted a drawing method created in the 19th century by a Russian art educator named Pavel Petrovich Chistiakov. The method was a systematic study of the planes observable in three-dimensional objects, and how to draw the five tonalities of light and dark. The method gave artists the ability to reproduce an object on paper "accurately," "realistically," and was considered a way to raise standards when making art. Both the Russians and the Chinese deemed the system scientific. The Chinese embraced the method in 1959 when it was introduced to teachers of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) and most art schools in China. It became the only correct method of teaching drawing fundamentals in China through the period of the Cultural Revolution.

For the most part from 1949 to 1979, the Chinese were isolated from the West. (Andrews 1994). When the atmosphere began to open up, explorations of abstraction entered the conversation. The contrast between the freedom provided by the abstract ideas and the "realist" depictions carried over from the previous decades became the focal point of debate. It was at this point that Andre Wyeth's paintings became the subject of interest for some Chinese artists. In Li's statement, printed in a press release announcing the Wyeth show in China, *Andrew Wyeth In China: An Exhibition of Important Works to be Held in Beijing and*

Hong Kong in April-May 2012, Li, acting as academic consultant for the show, provides an interpretation for Wyeth's popularity in China.

“When Andrew Wyeth's work first caught the eyes of the artists of this generation, we were mainly under the influence of Socialist Realism from the 40s and *Peredvizhniki art*, in which the relation between the narrative and ideology featured heavily. Historically young Chinese artists' classical training was all figurative and representational—implying that each piece of work was supposed to tell a story with a specific subject. At the time, the only way to rebel against Social Realism was to embrace Modernism, entailing a complete abandon of representation. This would have implied, at the same time, renouncing years of artist skills, starting from zero to reincarnate a new self under the banners of Cubism and Abstract Expressionism. And just as artists found themselves at this impasse, Wyeth's works appeared. They were melancholic, poetic, but at the same time they built on the skills and possibilities of representation. This deeply moved the burgeoning Chinese artists and inspired many to ask themselves the question – 'Is possible for us to hold on to the artistic training we grow up with, and still create something new that is different for Modernist art?' And obviously, Wyeth provided them with such a possibility.”

Li, 2012

Not a small factional movement rallied around Wyeth, but a large audience including artists for whom Wyeth became a hero. Art critic Tang Qingnian suggests in his catalogue essay, *I Don't Want to Play Cards With Cézanne and Other Works*, suggests that rather than attacking the traumatic experience of their generation, the artists decided to opt for a concern for the common people and their travails. Andrew Wyeth's paintings exuded this sentiment to the artists. Tang says, “Andrew Wyeth was all the rage in China.”¹⁴ (Tang 1991, 8) According to Ding Ning, professor and Vice Dean at the School of Arts at the Peking

University, “Wyethiana,” as he calls it, spread across China prompting artists to create a large number of figurative works. (Ding 2009, 192) The realism of the Cultural Revolution glossed over life while the post-Cultural Revolution artists emphasized “truth” and “human nature.” (Li 2009) Wyeth was a realist painter who painted warm, humanistic pictures. The measure of success of these pictures was not in Wyeth’s remarkable technical ability to paint realistic pictures, but in his ability to present a narrative that rang true, especially as he depicted isolated figures in the landscape. While the Chinese were able to accept Wyeth’s representational paintings, Wyeth himself experienced a backlash from the abstract expressionist painters of his own generation who let it be known they felt it unnecessary to paint “realistically.” Even as the market for Wyeth’s paintings grew, critics were disparaging his work. In his *New York Times* obituary, Michael Kimmelman recalls a 1977 survey in *Art News* magazine in which an art historian placed Wyeth as the most underrated and overrated artist of the century, nominating him for both categories. (Kimmelman 2009) However, it was different in China. Chinese oil painter Yang Feiyun said on hearing of Wyeth’s death, “I guess, many Chinese painters would feel much sadder than those in the West about the death of Andrew Wyeth.” (Ding 2009)¹⁵

Three decades after Wyeth found his following in China, the Tibetan artist Somani picks up the popular tropes of Wyeth—his technique, and his ability to convey poignant emotions in ordinary settings. Somani points out that the “Train,” the subject of his picture, will go through remote, isolated places in Tibet. Other Tibetan artists pick up the theme like Jigme Trinley’s *Watching the Train*. He paints several versions of Tibetan’s “watching the train” as it crosses the Tibetan landscape. Also, Tserang Dhundrup in his previously discussed *Man and Train* inserts an almost invisible train, one lone nomad and a few yaks into

a pastoral daytime landscape. The realism in these pictures could be identified with the previous decades of Wyethiana in China, however that reference may be too limiting. What Somani does that's different from the other artists, is to directly reference Andrew Wyeth's painting *Christina's World* as his source material. (Fig. 3.10) Chinese artists freely adopted Wyeth's style, but actually never directly copied a work by taking a figure straight from Wyeth. Somani takes the figure and landscape and problematizes it. He takes the image of the isolated girl and flips the figure 180 degrees; eliminates the buildings, changes the landscape, adds a male figure, and a train. All the while, keeping the name "Christina" in his title.

In 2006, any allusion to "The Train" in a Tibetan painting evoked an opinion. The Chinese painters who initially adopted Wyeth as their model scrupulously avoided any conscious political suggestions in their paintings. Somani is breaking that rule by including the controversial train inside a picture that directly references Wyeth's *Christina's World*, which is a poetic statement about an individual. Additionally Somani transforms the Wyeth painting into "*Christina Dolma's World*" *Dolma* in Tibetan means "a female deity," in particular *Tara*, the goddess who takes individuals across the "Ocean of *Samsara*." (A Sanskrit word commonly used in Buddhist and Hindu texts that refers to "the cycle of death and rebirth"). He has appropriated Wyeth's figure of Christina for his purposes much in the same way that Wyeth himself appropriated his model for his purposes. Christina was, in fact, a woman named Christina Olson, who was fiercely independent, who refused to acknowledge her disability but made her way in the landscape as best she could, which sometimes meant crawling. In *Christina's World* she seems vulnerable with her inordinately thin arms and lifeless legs, but Wyeth sees her as a character of great tenacity, a quality the artist admired

most. (Brooks 1998) In some ways, this scenario relates to Somani's Christina Dolma. However, Somani's Christina is Dolma, a deity, not a human being. Deities have a function in Buddhism: they inspire creativity, and they serve as muses. Buddhist philosophy emphasizes that "deities" are not the same as "gods" because deities are figures that arise and return to "Emptiness," and they have no inherent reality so are not worshipped in the sense of idolatry.¹⁶ Wyeth admired Christina; Somani turned her into a deity who is not alone in the picture—there is the train. This is a significantly different picture than Wyeth's *Christina's World*.

The landscape of *Christina Dolma* is harsh. There is no evidence of a homestead or grazing animals. The brown ground is covered in straw-like grass, lightly sprinkled with snow. An incline rises three-quarters up the picture frame where the horizon line cuts across the width of the picture. Another hill rises beyond the line. The sky is a cold grey. The train appears from outside the left frame. It is emerging from what looks like a steep climb showing up on the horizon line. It has made its way about one-third into the picture. The space directly in front of the nose of the train is clear before the next range of low hills appear. Halfway down the picture, below the train, is *Christina Dolma* poised on the ground, in a posture between sitting and crawling. A large formidable male figure, a nomad in full Tibetan nomadic regalia, fills a good portion of the right side of the painting. He is in profile, looking directly past Dolma. His presence creates a frame within the picture that contains Dolma in the center. Above her is the horizon line and the train, to her left and below is the edges of the painting. She is in a box alone except for her Tibetan-style jacket that lies in a heap by her side. Why has she removed her coat? Has she divested herself of something significant, or let go of an encumbrance? Dolma is poised on the landscape, sitting on her

left hip, her left hand twisting slightly behind her body to support her upright torso. Her right hand, barely visible crosses the front of her body rests on the ground. The color of her dress and skin blend into the landscape. Her legs are folded back exposing the soles of her shoes that poke out from under her flimsy dress that reveals her strong back, twisting and leaning, though still upright. Her head firmly sits on her shoulders. Her hair is held with a coral pin fastened in the center of the back of her head. The zigzag line drawn from the soles of her shoes to her hip and up her spine to that coral pin, and then onto the landscape produces another zigzag line that appears to cut and slash the ground, perhaps a foot path left by the workers who made the train tracks. This gash of a path goes directly into the nose of the oncoming train. She is looking forward, focused on the train that slithers into the picture like a serpent. Dolma's posture is urgent, active, aware, and ready to move. The Nomad's expression is sober, steady and stern. His mouth is slightly open as if repeating a mantra. His prayer wheel, at the level of his chest, suggests he is using it. The figures of Dolma and the nomad appear connected though they are not looking at one another but are aware of each other's presence. Is he standing guard? Or is she standing guard? She is the deity that helps to relieve individuals passing through the sufferings of life's cycles. Is she helping to reconcile all the changes the coming of the train will bring to the Tibetans? Has she been summoned by the nomad's recitations? Is she shedding her Tibetan coat to speak in a universal language beyond her Tibetaness?

Using the traditional icons of his culture: the landscape, the nomad, and the deity, Somani present his point of view about the train, Tibet and the Tibetans. The "isolation" that he references is not Wyeth's American individualism, or the post CR Chinese artists attempt to reclaim human depictions of "real life" with the soft muted tones of an Andrew

Wyeth picture. He has produced a hybrid, taking the inherited tropes of Chinese Wyethiana: “realism,” and an ability to convey poignant emotions in ordinary settings, and overlaid them with Tibetan narrative. The dramatic mood in Somani’s picture is more akin to the passion in a socialist realist painting, though without the utopian glaze and prescribed colors. Painted on cotton, Somani’s picture is bathed in the color of hand made, tea-stained paper, the color of “old.” It is a religious picture depicting a horrendous and momentous scene in the history of Tibet. The narrative Somani created in *Christina Dolma* reinstates politics in his appropriation of *Christina’s World*.

Though Somani appreciates Wyeth’s technical ability to paint realistically, it is only a reference for him. Somani’s landscape doesn’t have the realistic detail of Wyeth, and looks as if it was painted in a hurry. His attempt at dimensionality falls short, and sometimes the picture takes on an abstract flavor because of the intriguing way the figure/ground melt into each other. And there is an odd sense of space in the landscape produced by lines of perspective that appear, then vanish. The artist chose to produce a pastiche of the Wyeth painting, turning the ideas over, not replicating or imitating. Dolma and the nomad both express the Tibetan culture under threat, not as individuals trying to survive, but rather as all of Tibetan culture immersed in a catastrophe.

Somani’s decision to allude to Wyeth’s picture and resurrect a two-decades-old practice, adopted by a school of painters in China, is a direct response to accusations of eclecticism, appropriation, and lack of originality projected onto contemporary Tibetan artists. If the Chinese were able to successfully copy a Western artist without being accused of being deficient in originality and ideas, and of practicing eclecticism, then why couldn’t a contemporary Tibetan artist flip *Christina’s World* one more time by adding a figure and a

train, and carve out a Tibetan landscape? Somani is not joining the school associated with Wyethiana, but commenting on it. Wyethiana came out of an older practice of respectful imitation of old masters that played a profound role in the history of Chinese painting. (Ding 2009, 191) He is evoking a tradition from the Chinese culture while remaining loyal to his position as an ethnic minority, under pressure to stabilize and join the Chinese fold.

Different than Western “appropriation art” that gained popularity in the 1970s that was done by artists like Sherrie Levine who intentionally copied directly from respected art to draw attention to the historical fetishization of “originality” in the art world, the Chinese painters influenced by Wyeth never literally copied him. Somani is problematizing tropes believed in by viewers, both in the West and East, who have ideas about Andrew Wyeth, contemporary Tibetan art, copying, Chinese art, abstraction, realism, technique, authenticity. He is throwing these ideas back at the viewer, holding up a mirror, the same way he reversed Christina in his painting. He is using both a Chinese trope and an American trope to produce a Tibetan trope. He has invited dismissal by critics and reviewers, buyers and sellers, globally and locally, from the international art market, and from his own community who struggle with the burden of the idea of the “original.” Somani has done the unthinkable; he has allowed himself to be judged as naïve, the least attractive attribute that could be assigned to an artist and a Tibetan.

The artists of the GCAG have calculatedly not adopted contemporary Chinese artists tactics. They assiduously refer to their own traditions and cultures, and, as hard as it may be, they are inclusive about ideas from elsewhere. At first, it seemed easy to dismiss Somani’s *Christina Dolma* as an eclectic simple-minded picture that is not very well executed. On closer inspection, it becomes clear that Somani is addressing a myriad of issues, heretofore

unexpressed. Rather than trying to be original, he copied; rather than ignoring influences from China, he adopted one of their popular tropes; rather than adopting abstraction he took on realism; rather than appropriating a familiar traditional Tibetan image, he copied an American sacred cow; rather than giving his work an enigmatic name, he tagged on the name of a familiar Tibetan deity to the already well-known name of the painting he copied. He broke out, leapt out of the constraints hanging on to all the contemporary Tibetan artists. He is speaking to the unspoken norms. Somani has produced a subversive work of art. He has been “improper.”

Ding Ning suggests in his article “Artistic Tropes Some Cases of Mutual Chinese American Influence,” that tracing artistic influence across cultures can present a rich and more complex perspective, more than can imitating from within ones own culture. (Ding 2009, 192) He quotes Michael Taussig, who says,

“Imitation of other cultures can be an incredibly potent form of creativity, collective knowledge, and identity formation. The “sympathetic magic” of mimesis—of imitating something from beyond one’s own border—not only enriches the imitator, but also allows the source of inspiration to see a new version of it, to see itself through the eyes of another.” (Taussig 2002, fn 2)

Somani has opened the door to reconsider contemporary Tibetan art while presenting a poignant narrative about the train coming to Tibet. By directing the viewer toward discourses on appropriation and cross-cultural borrowing, he diverts the viewer away from the distressing content of the picture. Perhaps this is an example of the skillful use of camouflage producing several tiers of discourse.

Jigme Trinley

(aka Jimei Chilei) Member of the Tibetan Artists Association

Watching the Train

Tibet 2006, Oil on canvas, 47 ¼ in. x 78 ½ in.

(Fig. 3.11 a)

Beijing-Train-Lhasa triptychs

Tibet 2007, Mineral pigments on cloth, 47-¼ in. x 78 ½ in. x 3 pc

(Fig. 3.11 b)

When Ian Alsop invited contemporary Tibetan artists to submit paintings for the *Lhasa Train* show, he didn't exclude artists who were not members of the GCAG. The policy of the Guild since its founding in 2003 has always been inclusive and open to contemporary artists in the Tibetan community. Jigme Trinley, the elder brother of Guild member Shelka, was one of the artists to participate in the *Lhasa Train* show. He doesn't belong to the GCAG but is a member of the Tibetan Artists Association, an organization sponsored by the Chinese government. Some Tibetans are members of the organization and many members are Han Chinese artists who came to Tibet after the Cultural Revolution to study the ethnic minority. They became residents and supporters of the Tibetan community.¹⁷

Jigme Trinley was born in Lhasa in 1958 and studied Art and Ethnic Arts at Tibet University in Lhasa, and in the Department of Ethnic Arts at the Central Institute of Fine Arts. In the 1980s and 1990s his paintings were shown both locally and internationally, winning numerous awards. Unlike his younger brother, Shelka Trinley, was a teenager during the Cultural Revolution. Afterward, as an art student, he was exposed to artists' debates about "abstraction" and "realism" that influenced his ideas about art. He used realism in his painting while holding on to Tibetan cultural themes, especially by painting Tibetans in their

traditional dress. On the other hand, Shelka, six years his junior, was influenced by Robert Rauschenberg's *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange ROCI* exhibition in Lhasa, which he helped to mount. Shelka's admiration for Rauschenberg included an interest in "spontaneity" and "improvisation."¹⁸ His brother's techniques were based more on conventional realistic depictions of Tibetan culture and Tibetan people.

Jigme Trinley painted two versions of the train coming to Tibet. The first, *Watching the Train*, (2006) is a single picture made for the *Lhasa Train* show at *Peaceful Wind Gallery* in Santa Fe. The second work *Beijing, Train, Lhasa* is a triptych painted in 2007 for *The Realms of Purity, Realms of Experience from Divinity to Humanity an Exhibition of Contemporary Tibetan Art* presented at the Luxe Art Museum in Singapore. The Luxe Art Museum states its mission is "to create awareness for contemporary Chinese fine arts and bridge the stereotyped ideology that has erected a false barrier between traditionalism and modernism."¹⁹ The Museum produced the show with three government-sponsored organizations: the Tibet Autonomous Region Federation of Literature and Art Circles, the Association of Tibetan Artists, and the Art College of Tibet. The Museum with the other Tibetan affiliated sponsors included Tibetan and Chinese contemporary artists in a dialogue about contemporary Tibet. The *Lhasa Train* show in Santa Fe, independently produced by gallerists, was designed to give the contemporary Tibetan artists living in the PRC an opportunity to express their feelings about the newly launched Train.

Watching the Train

2006

Watching the Train was painted for an American audience who are used to depictions of Native Americans as exotic and primitive. These representations came from European

immigrants' constructions of native populations and are not unlike Chinese depictions of the Tibetans. Jigme Trinley seems to have assimilated the similarity in his image of Tibetans watching the Train. He depicts the Tibetans in a way that evokes clichéd images of Native Americans and their connection to the land, the patterned, colorful, hand-woven clothes, and their children tucked into their papooses. He made his painting, *Watching the Train*, calculating his audience's interest in a culture they know nothing about.

In *Watching the Train*, the group of ten people, dressed in heavy layers of traditional Tibetan clothes, stand in a row. The decorative clothing and jewelry produces a colorful banner that looks like a tapestry stretched across the canvas. The people appear linked together as if engulfed in one cloak. The group's clothing indicates they are nomads, perhaps a family consisting of mother, father, children, grandparents, aunts and uncles, which is the structure of a traditional extended Tibetan family.²⁰ With their backs to the viewer they are watching the train moving across the horizon line. The only faces we see are two tiny heads poking out of layers of clothing, their wide eyes looking at us. One other child, held in his/her mother's arms, looks toward the train with the rest of the adults. Together they represent the camaraderie and solidarity that existed in traditional Tibetan life. The elegantly entwined group includes the white-haired grandmother being supported by the father and by a staff she holds in one hand. The staff blends into the folds of the clothes and is the color of the landscape. Trinley paints the ground as if it were an ocean not of water, but of sand. These "sand dunes" are filled with light and look like a mirage of undulating transparent bands rolling in waves across the canvas, illuminating the figures. They leave the impression that the land and the people are interwoven. We, the viewers, are watching the Tibetans who are watching the Train. The children safely wrapped in their parents' robes, cocooned and

cozy, look back at us, making us aware of our participation in viewing the scene. The light and space of the landscape is the background for a restrained depiction of the Train. The rural setting is the Tibetan's homeland. The only insertion into that space is the train that makes a steel line slicing the horizontal plane of the picture. Trinley's apparently simple narrative about tradition facing modernity becomes an exposé, a poignant freeze frame to consider the consequences of the coming of the train to Tibet. The people's body language expresses what we may only imagine is hidden on their faces. The children embody the next generation. They are vulnerable to an unknown future that will certainly be different from what their parents experienced. What will the train bring? The support and warmth of this tight knit group may unravel. In the future who will guide the children? Perhaps this is the theme of the painting. This traditional life, and especially the nomadic life, was already severely compromised because of roads and airplanes and the Chinese invasion by the time the Train arrived. Though the Beijing to Lhasa train probably had a more deleterious effect on the cities than the countryside, Trinley may see the train as another nail in an already existing coffin.

Beijing-Train-Lhasa

Tibet 2007

The year following the Santa Fe show Jigme Trinley uses the same painting, *Watching the Train*, as a reference to paint a triptych. Each painting in the triptych uses the same ten figures, which anchor a narrative that embellishes the story Trinley has already established. The 2007 painting, *Beijing, Train, Lhasa*, was made for a diverse multicultural audience in Singapore comprised of a Han Chinese majority, who are native to Singapore and not to Mainland China. The Luxe Art Museum addresses the fragmentation of the Chinese people's

homeland by creating valuable interchanges and exchanges with the art community on the Chinese Mainland.²¹ The purpose of this particular show was to introduce audiences in Singapore to contemporary Tibetan art, and to art about contemporary Tibet by Chinese Artists. The show included eight Tibetan artists and four Chinese artists. The exhibition catalogue, written by Chinese art critics and historians, describes the paintings with admiration and appreciation, but uncritically, which is not unusual for catalogue essays. Closer reading of Trinley's paintings provides insight into the artist's possible intentions.

Two of the pictures in the triptych uproot the Tibetan nomads from their original site on the Tibetan landscape and puts them into two urban places, Beijing and Lhasa. In one picture, Trinley places the family in front of Tiananmen Square, green landscaping is visible on each side of the monument, but the square is not discernable because the people are far away, as if they were sitting in the last row of a very large stadium.²² The same is true for the other picture with the family in Lhasa, standing in front of The Potala Palace. The building spans the width of the picture and the people appear closer to the building than in the Tiananmen Square picture. The *Train* picture in the center of the triptych depicts a rural landscape. It is bookended by the two urban panels of *Beijing* and *Lhasa*, a rural landscape between two urban pictures. Unlike the calm scene depicted in *Watching the Train* and the *Beijing* and *Lhasa* panels, Trinley injects in the *Train* panel a violent wind blowing the people's clothes and hair.

The triptych displays the path of the train between Beijing and Lhasa. It develops a narrative to include the iconic monuments identified with the sitting government of China and the defunct government of Tibet: Tiananmen Square and the Potala Palace. Trinley directs the viewer's attention to Tiananmen, the Train, and the Potala Palace by placing them

on the horizon line, which occupies the same plane in each canvas, one-quarter down from the top of the page. The family of nomads, centered on the canvas, occupies two-thirds of each picture. Bands of transparent color cross the figures as they did in *Watching the Train*, but now fluctuating patterns are produced from one picture to the next. In the *Lhasa* and *Beijing* pictures the lines are straight. The lines are wavy in the *Train* panel in which the wind is violently blowing from right to left across the painting. The sweeping bands produce a rhythmic pulse capturing the atmosphere in each picture: even/agitated/even. By repeating the images from frame to frame, the viewer cannot help but compare and contrast the pictures, distinguishing similarities and differences. For example, the grandmother's staff that appears in each frame changes color. In the train picture the staff is one color—tan. It is topped with green in the Lhasa picture, and in the Beijing picture the top of the staff is painted revolutionary red and the bottom is painted green.²³

Trinley does not change the figures in each picture. The apparent sameness in the series of pictures has drawn the viewer's eye to the most overt differences while the subtler ones disappear. For instance he adds a notable detail in the *Lhasa* picture, which is not immediately apparent. Looking very closely one sees prayer beads (a *mala*) in the hands of a woman and a man, and they are hardly visible. Trinley did not put the mala in *Watching the Train*, or in the *Beijing* or *Train* panels of the triptych. The malas presence in the *Lhasa* picture links the Tibetan's homeland and their practice of Tibetan Buddhism. Malas are used when repeating mantras that evoke the presence of deities. Many Tibetans wear their malas and use them in their daily life. The presence of the mala in the man's hand has been successfully camouflaged by making it look like another decorative ribbon hanging down the back of the Grandmother's dress. The mala in the woman's hand hangs in plain sight, except that it

disappears as another decorative shape at the farthest edge of the left side of the picture frame.

Using prayer beads by Tibetans in the presence of the Potala Palace, which has not been occupied by the Dalai Lama since 1959, demonstrates the Tibetan's stubborn attachment to the Dalai Lama, and the Lamaist State he represents. Trinley's tactic of surreptitiously inserting the malas into the picture is reminiscent of the famous 1976 picture *The Workers Weep Though the Harvest Is Good: 1976.9.9* by Chen Danqing and Nawang Choedrak. (Fig. 3.12) In this painting the viewer is supposed to assume the weeping "workers" are apparently sad over the death of Mao Tse Tung, since the painting's title refers to the date Mao Tse Tung died. However, on one of the Tibetan "worker" lapels the artists painted a button with a picture of the Dalai Lama. It is a clue that suggests the Tibetans are not weeping over Mao's death but over the eighteen-year absence of the Dalai Lama. The artists found a way to bypass the censors with their title by slipping in the picture of the revered and outlawed Dalai Lama, thereby expressing the real meaning of the painting.

It is not unusual for Chinese people unfamiliar with Tibet to consider Tibetan traditional culture and Tibetan people backward and superstitious. The prejudice is reinforced by Communist ideology that rejects religion. The title of the Museum show in Singapore, *Realms of Purity Realms of Experience From Divinity to Humanity* reinforces the idea with the suggestion of a "coming to earth," to "real life" and civilization from an idealized existence inhabited by angels and gods, the inventions of regressive and delusional cultures. The title proposes that Tibet has transformed from a feudal religious culture into a modern society in which imaginary God realms has been usurped by the humanity realms.

The Chinese curators express ideas of Tibet and Tibetan culture in their choice of artworks and in their catalogue commentary and essays. Their comments may or may not coincide with the artists' intentions. Curator Chen Jiazi reveals his point of view in the following description of Trinley's *Beijing-Train-Lhasa*. Chen says:

On 1 July 2006, The Qinghai-Tibet Railway was officially opened. It is the world's longest railway, built at the highest altitude. The first panel of the triptych *Beijing* portrays a family who has arrived in Beijing on the train. Their eyes are turned on *Tiananmen Square*, a sight dreamt of by generations of Tibetans. The middle panel *Train* depicts a family of herdsmen in the pastures of northern Tibet, looking at the train that resembles a huge dragon of steel. Curious and happy about this development they are yet filled with some trepidation. The last panel *Lhasa* shows the Potala Palace, a symbol of the holy land of Tibet. It is not only a place of pilgrimage for Tibetans, but also a tourist attraction for visitors from all over the world. (Chen 2008, 95)

Chen assumes much in this picture perhaps revealing more about the writer's view than about the artist's intention. For Chen the train is a grand Chinese success story for the government and the Chinese people. He reinforces his point of view by portraying the train as if it were the star of a movie, an impressive "huge dragon of steel," while assuming he knows the Tibetans point of view, "curious and happy...yet filled with some trepidation." He assumes that *Tiananmen Square* is "a sight dreamt of by generations of Tibetans" and he reminds viewers that even though the Potala Palace is a pilgrimage site for Tibetans, it is, more importantly, "a tourist attraction for visitors from all over the world."²⁴ Understanding this perception by even sympathetic Chinese critics, it is no wonder Trinley hid his point of view, instead producing what could be interpreted as benign depictions the Trains trajectory.

As recently as 2008, Han Shuli, Chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region Federation of Literature and Art Circles, wrote in the catalogue a well intentioned “Forward” about the eight Tibetan artists participating in the exhibition. He says,

“They are representative of the third generation of Tibetan artists whom China has nurtured. Their talent in their adoption and extrapolation of the ancient and traditional arts is readily perceived in their works. Even more evident is the exuberant vitality of Tibet’s new society.” Han 2008, 7)

Referring to pictures in the exhibition, Han speaks like a proud father who has nurtured his child, leaving little room for more critical and complex readings of the art. He goes further in his introduction to the show explaining how he and the other Chinese artists weathered the impossible Tibetan climate to become genuine spokesmen for the Tibetans. He writes,

“The other four participating artists, though Chinese in origin, have voluntarily joined Tibet’s quest for a new indigenous culture. For many years, they have subjected themselves to the capricious climate of the high plateaus—rain, snow, wind and frost—and have been cleansed and stripped into becoming Tibetans to the core. In their hearts and minds, China is where they come from, but the Snow Land is where home lies. They have devoted much of their lives to creating a new chapter in contemporary Tibetan painting. (Han 2008, 7)

The romantic and utopian sentiments in Han Shuli’s writing, though genuinely felt and clearly stated, betray the problem existing between the Chinese artists and the Tibetans, which hinge on notions of authenticity, value, and privilege. Being stripped clean and made pure are not the concern of the Tibetans who have experienced the ongoing desecration of

their culture. Jigme Trinley, and the next generation of Tibetan artists who make up the members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, do not need to “subject themselves to the capricious climate” since it is their climate, one in which their bodies have uniquely adapted. Han Shuli’s generation of Chinese artists have a different set of problems than those of the Tibetans. The Han Chinese has mobility that the Tibetans do not have. Reference to their self-induced “hardships” come off sounding like self-serving attempts to justify their inexplicable, consuming interest in Tibet, the Tibetan culture, and the landscape and people who, for over one-half century, faced profound changes at the hands of the ruling Communist party.

The dance between the Chinese and Tibetans via their artists is a delicate minuet, in which the art becomes a looking glass reflecting and exposing everything from subtle to blatant expressions of the artists' points of view. The challenge for the Tibetan artists in the PRC is to continue to make art that is relevant to themselves and to a wide audience. As their circumstances rapidly change, they experiment and explore while slipping past pervasive expectations, using suitable disguises as they go. Artist Keltse goes domestic in his depiction of the train coming to Tibet.

Keltse

Sky Road

Tibet, 2006, mixed media monochrome, 39 in. x 39 in.

(Fig. 3.13)

“The painting is done with marker pen. I call it ‘Sky Road,’ it shows a house with a cupboard with the traditional Losar tsampa container on top and a happy couple, the guy is drunk and has fallen down.”

Keltse joined the Guild in 2005. He is a graphic designer with a government job and, like Tserang Dhundrup and Tsering Dorje, he was a set designer for the Tibetan song and dance troop. When I met him in 2006 he was making ceiling to floor, wall-to-wall free flowing, dense drawings made with paint on paper that filled the walls of his apartment. His more public work takes advantage of the technology available to him in his work, making large digital prints from digitally generated images. He also makes light box transparencies saturated in color to create a nightmarish image. The images include references to traditional Tibetan culture cannibalized by popular culture with narratives that reinforce the notion that commercialism and “the bottom line” are now the prevailing gods. But his picture of the Train, *Sky Road*, seems to hark to a simpler time, like the representation of a folk tale stamped on a tea towel. It has a simpler, more hands-on feel. He made a painting with a marker pen and it meanders off the page in every direction except for a small portion at the top that lets the viewer know there is some breathing room up there. The casual, continuous line feels like stream of conscious writing, in which the lines double as text. Keltse separates images by making them pop out with thicker lines, like the happy couple he refers to in the artist’s statement. As he describes the piece above, “The painting is done with marker pen. I call it ‘Sky Road,’ it shows a house with a cupboard with the traditional Losar tsampa container on top and a happy couple, the guy is drunk and has fallen down.” *Losar* refers to the Tibetan New Year, and *tsampa* is barley powder, a staple of the Tibetan diet. This seems straight-forward enough, but something about his telling is reminiscent of a child describing what she sees in her everyday life that includes a father that drinks too much and falls down.

She is not doing heavy dogmatic finger pointing but revealing something she probably doesn't realize she is exposing. The figures are doll like, with charming expressions. Floating figures, a boy and girl, seem happy to be flying around the city while the train puffs into the city over the bridge. The girl's dress has the word "love" written across the front. The boy has the Tibetan letters that in transliteration spell "god" but mean "loss, misfortune." There are dollar signs drawn on flags waving from the train and bridge. There is a snow-capped mountain, a gift-wrapped box, balloons, dollar signs, flowerpots, a stupa, and a cat looks as if she is snoozing and licking herself. Clouds of little hearts are hovering in the smoke being puffed from the mouths of two heads seen in profile; their devilish eyes betray unsavory intentions. It is for a child's eye: find the cat, find the car, find the vase(s), find the TV, and how many dollar signs are there? The sepia toned picture keeps the viewer focused on the drawing without being distracted by color.

Sky Road is a picture with no resolution. The drunken man at the foot of the picture creates an anchor while his sweetly smiling wife, with extended hand, offers support, or is she just dismayed over his drunken clumsiness. The two figures appear to have halos around their heads, or are those headdresses? The sky is still visible at the top of the densely drawn picture. His title *Sky Train* is beautiful, referring to the fact that this train was built on the highest terrain on earth, which required the most advanced technology and at the expense of many people who risked their lives, along with forever changing the lives of an entire population of Tibetans and others who live on their land. It all seems so cheerful, but how does one become reconciled? By drinking? By acknowledging life as it is?

Gade

The Railway Train

Tibet, 2006, mixed media on Tibetan paper, 23 5/8 in. x 51 3/16 in.

(Fig. 3.14 a, details b, c)

“The whole shape is of the reclining Buddha. Nowadays Tibet has lots of changes brought by the West, and the East too. Our generation is a time when we experience this the most and see the effects from all of these changes. In my painting you can see lots of things, like Disneyland, a China Mobile signboard, Coca Cola signboards, which are seen by us every day in our lives. Of course, Disneyland is not here yet, but just like the train, maybe in the future it will also come to Tibet.”

“Tibet has gone through a Cultural Revolution, and now commercialism, so now Tibetan culture has become some sort of circus center, or resort center, where you can see everything. Some things are very foreign, almost extraterrestrial. All of these changes are not brought only by the train, but the train plays the role of instigator and is a focus point. So now we cannot place our identity in a fixed area, as there are too many things that have happened. And we feel this loss of identity, and maybe we are the only generation to experience such a thing. I am just displaying such circumstances.”

Gade 2006

Artist Gade, Guild member, articulate writer about contemporary Tibetan art, and spokesperson for the GCAG told me he really only likes to draw. The coloring and the rest of making paintings do not interest him.²⁵ I have taken this to mean he likes the ideas that drawings represent. The lines are structure, the skeleton that forms the picture. Drawing is like the letters that make the words that form the story. The drawings, like letters, spell out his narrative. In this way, he has produced his pictures. He did not make a painting of Gedun Choephel for the Latse Library but he made a picture for the *Lhasa Train* show. He

calls it *Railway Train*.

The panache with which Gade has embarked on this Train painting reflects his style in adopting traditional Tibetan themes and transforming them into comic strips of political commentary, which I have already referred to in Chapter One. His train scene is harbored in the silhouette of the famous iconic image of the reclining Buddha, which represents the historical Buddha during his last illness, just before he transcended this life. All Buddhists know the figure. He lies on his right side; his head rests on a cushion as he props himself up on his right elbow, supporting his head with his hand. Inside the figure, Gade has made drawings depicting what he has described: Disneyland, Coca Cola signs, dancing girls and monks holding balloons like tourists at a theme park, traditionally dressed Tibetan nomads in a canoe with their animals rowing across the Kyi Chu Lhasa River, the River that runs right through Lhasa, the Train holding a variety of passengers including one that looks like an alien, various building types, palm trees and sun flowers, a Yak perched on a hill top, a flying monk, and just over the hills factory smokestacks blow smoke along the top edge of the corner of the picture. The snow-capped mountains in the background are formed by the body curves of the reclining Buddha. The scene produces a charming storybook tale that is both playful and at the same time somewhat ominous when considering Gade's commentary about the picture. Though the picture is playful, the viewer is left with an uneasy feeling, gritting ones teeth and asking, what will become of Tibet? He is manifesting what Harris has described as emptying out the Buddha creating a neutral ground for all Tibetans, whether inside or outside of Tibet, to speak together about their circumstances. (Harris 2012)

However, Gade's reclining Buddha, which is inside of the TAR in Lhasa, has honed in on a scene of "charm" that is a rather benign storybook approach. His attitude mimics the

reclining Buddha, as if to say, “Go ahead, inhabit me, it will not affect my Buddhahood. I will recline and wait and will transcend this. There is nothing to fear.” The idea would suit Gade who, as we know, has chosen a path to make him happy. The piece is not “sloppy happy,” or conciliatory or “selling happy,” more like just another walk in the park while setting the stage for whatever might come next with signs like “Coca Cola” and “China Mobile.”

Nortse aka Tsering Norbu

006/7 No.1

Tibet 2006 mixed media

51 x 62 1/2 inches

(FIG. 3.15 a, details b, c)

“This is a record of time with no special name. It is composed of local newspaper stories referring to the train. The Lhasa train is in the center. The ,'balloons' are statements about relationships between different aspects of Tibet and the train.”

Nortse 2006

I first met Nortse in Lhasa in 2006. I found him to be a refined, quiet-spoken gentleman who speaks slowly, carefully choosing his words, leaving the listener with the impression that his intentions are heartfelt and considered. He joined the Guild in 2005 and made the only collage entry for the *Lhasa Train* show. It is called *006/7 No. 1*. When I inquired at a much later date about the title and meaning of some objects in the painting, he said it had been a long time since he made the collage, but, “The meaning of 006/7 is the date July 2006 when the railway was opened...And I don't remember the title very clear...and still can't remember the meaning of NO 1.” In an email to me he explains that,

“The blue person represents the original inhabitant of Tibet, [the other figures in the collage] represent Native plants and animals, traditional culture, religion.” He goes on to say that the original modern means of transport is the plane, and all the figures he represents in the collage will be greatly influenced by the opening of the railway. He completes the thought with, “I tentatively created the work out of concern for the occurrence.”²⁶

As a young man Nortse engaged with his own body in producing an early performance work called *Bound-up Scenery*, in which he places a white cloth and a maroon cloth on the ground in an expansive landscape by a lake. He then wraps himself in these cloths. The event is documented in four photographs called *Bound-up*. (Fig. 3.16) He relished adopting various personas in his production of self-portraits. He paints and draws, uses digital images, photography, and film, appropriates found objects and makes new ones. He explores the notion of diversity and cross-cultural interaction. He is tireless in his experimentation and exploration. He is articulate about the role of culture in art, the importance of tradition, and the effect of social and political conditions facing the Tibetan community. As he explains,

“Every once in a while, I feel I need to change every facet of my style of expression, from technique to medium, because for me ‘duplicating’ myself is a very painful experience, which makes it difficult for me to continue using any one method for very long. This versatile, unfixed way of creating is perhaps a result of reflection of my character, but whatever it is, it validly expresses my personal condition—a type of imbalance, a lack of equilibrium. Yet those who really understand me will discover that in the midst of this fluid ever-changing creative mode, I am throughout continuing or extending, as it were, my personal experience and recollections, clumsily piecing together the fragments of my spiritual, inner life.” (Nortse 2008, 6)

Nortse's experimentation and his tenacity have helped develop his reputation over the years as an iconoclast. (Rigdol 2011) More than any of the other members of the Guild, Nortse exemplifies the ideals of the Dada movement. In Jed Perl's article about the artist Jeff Koons in the September 2014 issue of *New York Magazine*, Perl says that Dada's leading advocate, Duchamp, was "worried that art is 'a habit-forming drug,' and with the readymade, he somehow hoped to break the habit, which is perhaps what every artist hopes to do by inventing art anew." Nortse expresses the importance of tradition, and the effect of social and political conditions facing the Tibetan community. He, like Gade, clearly articulates ideas about spirituality in Tibetan culture and its relationship to art. In his catalogue statement for his show *Nortse Self-Portraits-The State of Imbalance* at Rossi and Rossi Gallery in London in 2008, he writes, "Self-Portraits are my state of imbalance, my loss of equilibrium...I became more and more convinced that none of the formalistic aesthetic standards of any of the various forms of art could solve our modern-day spiritual problems. The deciding factor in the power of the influence of art is culture and not linguistic imagery or formal language. It is only when one completely gets involved in actual society and one's own personal experiences that one can successfully reflect or give expression to the modern Tibetan art scene. All our aesthetic spiritual problems are changing form as Tibetan society transforms and are just as profound and concrete as those transformations. Thus, only if modern Tibetan art holds firmly to its own cultural viewpoint will it have an authentic artistic future." (Nortse 2008,7)

In several of Nortse's quotes he expresses confidence alongside uncertainty. Doubt is not new for artists and is poignantly referred to by Perl in his article about Dada when he

says, “Dada wished to destroy the hoaxes of reason and to discover an unreasoned order. ...Dada was part of a tradition of doubt about the possibilities of art that is woven deep into the history of art...the struggles...to disentangle the relationship between the natural world and the pictorial world...the conflict between the material and spiritual powers of art.” And he continues the thought with, “And where there is no doubt there is no art.”(Perl 2014)

Nortse’s work and some of the titles of these works reflect his point of view, his focus: *The State I Am In*, (Fig. 3.17 a) *Self-Portrait*, (Fig. 3.17 b) *Release from Suffering*, (Fig.3.17 c) *Still Life 1* (Fig. 3.17 d) and *Still Life 2* (Fig. 3.17 e) Though all of Nortse’s works are about something, there remains some significant element of “not knowing” in them. It is as if he is asking what songwriter David Byrne asks in his song *Once in a Lifetime*, “How did I get here?”

However, the modest collage for the *Lhasa Train* show expresses Nortse’s commitment to experimentation in that he can be counted on to come up with something unpredictable, yet prescient. In this instance, he calls attention to the media blitz surrounding the introduction of the Train to Tibet.

Tsering Nyandak

Who Goes Furthest / Pissing on the Tracks

Tibet 2006 acrylic on canvas, 46 in. x 33 in.

(Fig. 3.18)

“The train has been a very hot topic, but over time it will calm down and become very normal and natural.”

Nyandak 2006

“Pissing on the train is actually called ‘who can reach furthest?’ based on kids play competing how far one’s piss reaches. I kind of drew a parallel line with an overtly naïve sense of competition involved in most of these mega

constructions that go on in Tibet. I felt something like that when I did the piece.”

Nyandak 2014

Nyandak is one of the only artists in the GCAG who writes and speaks English fluently. Often his time is spent being a translator and intermediary for the artists, dealers, curators and visitors who want to know about the group, or need to take care of business somehow. His health is a constant concern as he had polio as a child and was left compromised with a limp. Also, he is the only member of the group who never formally went to art school, though a family friend arranged for Tsewang Tashi, an artist and would-be member the GCAG, and a professor at the University, to take him under his wing. Tashi allowed him to attend his university art seminars and classes. It has been a long while since then, but Nyandak often bemoans the fact, true or not, that his own drawing and painting skills are lacking. However, as I discovered in looking at his painting of Gedun Choephel for the Latse Library show, his capacity to paint a meaningful picture is unquestionable.

Like Gade and Nortse, Nyandak has no problem shifting styles as he goes. In the case with the Train picture, Nyandak changed his painting style from the ephemeral picture he painted of Gedun Choephel, to an almost gaudily painted cartoon of train tracks and boys pissing on them. As he says in his statement about the picture, his idea is pretty simple, “Pissing on the Tracks,” and about “Who Can Reach Furthest?”—so to speak.

The boys are having such a good time, their faces genuinely engaged in their game. They’re friends, they’re not yet grown up, they are just out there pissing on the tracks. The landscape is pretty austere, nothing there but the tracks, the gorgeous colors of the ground, clouds, sky, and the pink skin on the boys faces. The light is as it is in Tibet, bright and

sparkling. However, what Nyandak, according to his statement, is saying is that these children, with their rather weak streams of urine who are trying to outdo each other, are simply acting out the competitive spirit that drives private and public institutions, corporations, and nations globally. The global and local meet in Nyandak's mind on the Train tracks.

Nyandak usually avoids any political involvement. However, as I reported in Chapter One, in January 2012, he, along with 300,000 other people, attended a ceremony in Bodhgaya, India, officiated by the Dalai Lama. On his return he, along with many other Tibetans, was detained at the border. Chinese citizens who also attended the ceremony were not stopped when re-entering the country. The Tibetans were required to attend re-education school for a while. Other than this, Nyandak keeps a low profile. His interest is in art and Buddhist philosophy.

When the Guild Artists were invited to paint their impressions of the new train they knew changes would irrevocably impact their culture, but they didn't know their extent. They didn't know that Tibet would receive 21.25 million domestic and foreign tourists between 2006 and 2010, generating \$3.58 billion in income for the country; or that the Beijing installed governing organ in the TAR set a goal to increase tourism revenue between 2011 and 2015 to more than 20 percent of its gross domestic product. In 2010, there had already been a travel ban to Tibet because of the pre-Olympic game demonstrations. That ban was lifted for Han Chinese traveling from Beijing, and groups of at least five foreigners of unmixed nationalities coming from certain foreign countries, excluding any press or military.²⁷ And then in June of 2012, China announced it was "forbidding international tourism to Tibet indefinitely," letting the expected number of foreign visitors to Tibet drop

from millions to zero.²⁸ The announcement followed the self-immolations of two Tibetans in Lhasa, two of 121 Tibetans known to have self-immolated in the PRC since February 27, 2009.

By April 2013, China's travel restrictions to Tibet were eased. Subsequently, travel plans of millions of Han Chinese and other "acceptable" tourists, mostly Han Chinese and fewer Western Europeans and Americans, could now look forward to a trip to Tibet on the train. The complexity of the situation was fodder for the artists in the TAR who are steeped in uncertainty due to day-to-day changing rules and regulations imposed by the government. The artists had taken steps to address their fears of losing their identity, their culture, their way of life, but what remains to be discovered is what they hope to find in their actions as a group and individually. In some instances there seems to be a concrete answer, as when Gade expresses having discovered what makes him happy. For Nortse, he realizes he must have the freedom to experiment. What is apparent is that their individual paths merge with their circumstances, thereby grounding them in their "place," that is the "place" they live inside the TAR.²⁹

Chapter Three Notes

¹ Told to the author by the artists at the GCAG Gallery in Lhasa in 2006.

² The British did some mapping of Lhasa in 1904 that shows Norbulingka as an empty rectangle. A British correspondent describes the Garden as "...a perfectly square garden...surrounded by a well-built wall... [and] a second wall...a house and temple of no pretensions whatever...from the distance, a small gilded roof and half-a-dozen golden 'gyan-tsens' distinguish [it].... was built...only eight years ago [and]...does not claim a greater antiquity than 1870. The trees bear out this statement...all small... The Dalai Lama lives here for two months in summer...with an even greater seclusion [than] at his palace on the rock a mile away." Perceval Landon, 232, 235.

³ Tibet gave permission for British Everest expeditions in 1921. In 1925, however, when Tibet faced few threats from China and elsewhere, and had conserved its stockpile of arms, it was able to deny permission to the British. When Chinese threats reappeared in the early 1930s it again gave permission for a 1932 expedition.

⁴ Gedun Choephel knew Nicholas Roerich when he lived in India and became friends with his son George who was a Tibetologist with a degree from Harvard. George solicited the help of Gedun Choephel to translate the *Blue Annals*, a lengthy Buddhist text. The three-year project gave Choephel the opportunity to learn about the elder Roerich's ambitions and socialist ideas. However, as Choephel biographer of Donald Lopez Jr. discloses, the project didn't end well. The translation would not have been possible without Choephel's expertise, yet George Roerich only acknowledged Choephel's help with a brief sentence in the introduction to the book. Donald Lopez Jr. quotes portions of a poem Choephel wrote about his experience working with George that describes his disappointment:

'Games of lies and deception...so three years of miserable labor have finally come to an end...The abilities of a humble scholar, seeking only knowledge are crushed by the tyranny of a fool, bent under the weight of his wealth.' (Lopez Jr. 2006, 33)

⁵ According to Ad Reinhardt, archeologist George Kubler's book *The Shape of Time*, 1962 closely articulated his own philosophy of life and art including the abstract expressionist movement. Reinhardt referenced Kubler's book, making notations in the book and bringing it up in interviews. See: http://www.brooklynrail.org/special/AD_REINHARDT/ads-thoughts-and-practices/ad-reinhardt-and-the-shape-of-time And: *Oral history interview with Ad Reinhardt, circa 1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.*

⁶ See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*. 217-251.

⁷ See Stieglitz's *The Hand of Man* (1902) and *In the New York Central Railroad Yards* (1903)

⁸ See http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/26/now-boarding-the-greatest-train-movies/?_r=0

⁹ This was Sekula's response to the oft-quoted, "One picture is worth a thousand words."

¹⁰ The representation of "smoke" from the engines of trains in drawing and paintings deserves attention. Only electric trains don't emit any smoke at all, unless malfunctioning. Generally the smoke, present or absent, signals a particular mood and/or meaning. The artist's intention to portray a particular kind of scene rarely depends on whether the engine uses coal, steam, electricity or diesel to run. In the case of T27 Beijing to Lhasa depictions vary. The train can look like a toy locomotive, a fire spitting dragon, a polluting hunk of bulky machinery, or a sleek wisp of stainless steel. When dark, thick black smoke appears it signals pollution and impending doom. The ominous impression is emphasized with the smoke being emitted from its engine at the "head" of the train.

¹¹ The other two *kayas* are, first the *nirmanakaya*, the mode of physical existence, of flesh and blood in which the deity is elaborately clothed and ornamented, displaying the intricacy of form and the physical world. The second, the *sambhogakaya*, is the mode of "visionary energy" in which the deity is naked and ornamented, prayer beads and other ornaments expressing the dynamic connectedness between form and emptiness.

¹² Interview with Jack Nyland about Chogyam Trungpa's teaching on Mandala painting. In *The Chronicles of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche* www.chronicaleproject.com/stories_119.html

¹³ See "The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann" by Richard B. Woodward, in *The New York Times Magazine* September 27, 1992.

¹⁴ The 1991 show of "new wave" and "avant-garde" art was presented at the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California.

¹⁵ Citation quoted in Ding 2009, 203 FN 18 "Andrew Wyeth Passed Away," *Art Weekly* [Meishu bao], 31 January 2009, 4. See http://art.china.cn/zixun/2009-01/23content_2703017.htm.

¹⁶ "Deity" is understood in Buddhist philosophy differently than common interpretations in western thought. In Buddhist thought deities are not worshipped in the sense of idolatry, though certainly it may seem to be so, for example, when someone first encounters people doing full prostrations before images on shrine. <http://www.khandro.net/Deities.htm>

¹⁷ The current Chairman of the Tibet Artists Association, Ma Abo, articulates the position of the organization he represents in the following statement, "The modern Tibetan painters have a high level of skills and have created many works that reflect economic development and cultural prosperity in the Tibetan society. People can appreciate the traditional Tibetan folk culture from the painters' works, not only because the modern Tibetan life keeps traditional customs, but also because artists receive education that perfectly blends traditional cultural and modern life at the outset." He is quoted as saying that, "(He is) gratified that Tibet has trained many art talents since the peaceful liberation of Tibet. Students who are majoring in art have made a big contribution to the society." Julia Chin 2013 (China Tibet online) <http://chinatibet.people.com.cn/8277533.html>

¹⁸Shelka spoke with me at length in Lhasa in 2006 about Rauschenberg's influence on him that began while he was a student at Tibet University when he helped install the Lhasa ROCI show. He was impressed with the "freedom" Rauschenberg demonstrated during the process. Over the years, Shelka strove to incorporate that spontaneity into his own work, which he admits was very difficult. In 2010, he produced a multidisciplinary piece for the Beijing show *Scorching Sun of Tibet* called, "No Ears Series-Sight, Mirror," which included a performance titled, "No Ears Series-Sound," based on his childhood observations during and after the Cultural Revolution when an old Buddhist man sat in the central market place in Lhasa, the Barkhor, ringing a bell and chanting, even as Chinese soldiers occupied the city. It was the "ordinariness" of the man's behavior under extraordinary circumstances that impressed Shelka. He credits Rauschenberg with inspiring his explorations of alternative mediums like performance. (Shelka 2006)

¹⁹ Luxe Art Museum website <http://thelam.sg/>

²⁰ As one Guild member pointed out to me, Tibetan's commonly call each other "auntie" or "uncle," as they all appreciate the idea that they are related to one way or another.

²¹The Luxe Art Museum is affiliated with the Yisulang Art Gallery that has successfully participated in shows in Beijing. The web site states, "In 2004, the Yisulang Art Gallery was proud to have participated in an exhibition at the prestigious National art Museum of China in Beijing. This Exhibition of New Freehand Chinese Ink Paintings by Invited Artists won acclaim from both academics and critics, as did the 2006 exhibition, *Ink and Sex*, at the Beijing Brewery (Jiuchang) International Art complex." <http://thelam.sg/about-us/>

²² The Chinese government has attempted to appropriate the Potala Palace in the service of the government by making a grand concrete square at its foot, a common strategy when building ideological monuments like Tiananmen Square. (Li Xianting 2010, 8)

²³In Tibetan Buddhism the color green signifies the middle of the seven-color spectrum epitomizing the qualities of balance and harmony. It is the color in nature, trees and plants. The deity *Green Tara*'s color represents a blending of white, yellow, and blue— colors which symbolize respectively the functions of pacifying, increasing, and destroying. Green also denotes youthful vigor and activity. *Green Tara* is always shown as a young girl having a mischievous and playful nature. The Buddhist Lord of karma (action), Amoghasiddhi, is also associated with this color, reiterating that green in Buddhist thought is the color of action. (<http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/green.htm>)

²⁴The trailer for the documentary film, *Nowhere to Call Home*, released in 2014 shows the shocking outright racism that Tibetans face in Beijing. <http://tibetaninbeijing.com/watch-the-trailer/>

The filmmaker, foreign correspondent in Beijing, Jocelyn Ford, showed her documentary at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The film breaks down Western romantic Shangri-La views of Tibet, showing it to be a place of hidebound [Tibetan] traditions, especially discrimination against women, and shows many members of minorities lack even basic education. (Ian Johnson, NY Times, "Inspiring Dialogue, Not Dissent, in China" August 20, 2014)

²⁵In conversation with Gade in his studio in Lhasa in 2007, he said he preferred drawing to all else in making art because it involved an immediate depiction of his ideas. The color didn't interest him much. He considers it a decorative feature.

²⁶ Email to me from Nortse on September 26, 2014.

²⁷ In November of 2012, Chinese newspapers from Lhasa reported that Southwest China's Tibet autonomous region had received a record 10 million domestic and foreign tourists. The total number of tourists visiting the region had surged 22.6 percent year on year to 10.34 million, exceeding 10 million for the first time. Revenues from tourism increased 33.9 percent year on year to 12.4 billion yuan (\$1.99 billion). The boom was attributed to nationwide promotion efforts, improved transportation access and an increasing number of individual trips. www.chinadaily.com.cn 2012-12-07

In 2013 *The NY Times* reported that according to the Xinhua state news agency, six million tourists visited Lhasa in the first eight months of the year, a 20 percent increase over the same period in 2012. "Tibetans Call China's Policies at Tourist Spot Tacit but Stifling," by Dan Levin in *The New York Times*, October 24, 2013

²⁸ ABC news, June 7, 2012 "China Forbids International Tourism to Tibet Indefinitely" report by Audrey Wozniak and Gloria Riviera. <http://abcnews.go.com>

²⁹ This Chapter has analyzed a selection of the Train paintings from the *Peaceful Wind Gallery* show, but not all of them. Not because all of the pictures are not worthy of analysis but because, in the process of looking at the paintings, I discovered them to be far more complicated and layered than originally anticipated. *The Train* paintings notably not discussed in this Chapter are: Tsering Namgyal's *Plateau Railroad*, Dedron's *Train*, Zungde's *Crowded Train*, Jang Yung's *Flown Away in Happiness*, Zhang Ping's *Train*, and Tsewang Tashi's *Train With Flowers*, *West (Railway)*. These works, all painted in 2006, at first glance create a sense of "impartiality" toward the coming of the Train. On closer inspection, each painting in its own right has something significant to say about how to read the Tibetan Culture. Namgyal, his wife Dedron, Zungde, Yung, Ping, and Tashi, all painted a picture of Gedun Choephel for the Latse Library show that I have discussed in Chapter Two. The works of the two women artists, Dedron and Jang Ping, particularly deserve further analysis alongside an in-depth discussion of the role of women in the Tibetan artist's movement. This would be a thesis in itself and so I have not ventured into the discussion, though hope to write about their work and this topic in the future. All of these artist's images and statements about their Train pictures are available online at <http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/lhasatrain/index.html#14>: which is a link associated with the *Peaceful Wind Gallery*. The artist's ideas, which they state in their descriptions, have acted as a fulcrum from which many of my ideas about the work have sprung.

Figures

Chapter Three: *The Train*

Figure 3.1



Ad Reinhardt

Cartoon *Joke*

This picture is one component of a larger collage entitled *How to Look Out*, 1946. The collage first appeared on June 23, 1946 in "PM," a daily leftist news publication, which Reinhardt worked for. The dimensions of the collage are 18 5/8 in. x 11 3/8 in. As for the original source of the image (the little girl on the train tracks), it is unknown however, it was likely culled from an old book and or magazine that Reinhardt used to source his images.

*Images are by permission of the artists and Peaceful Wind Gallery, unless otherwise noted.

Figure 3.2



Ang Sang

Buddha vs. Train

Mixed media, 39 in. x 39 in.

By permission of the artist

Photograph © Jason Sangster

Figure 3.3



Shelka

Last Caravan

Paint on cotton, 31 in. x 58 ½ in.

By permission of the artist

Photograph © Jason Sangster

Figure 3.4



Jhamsang
Mixed media, 19 ½ in. x 66 ¼ in.
By permission of the artist
Photograph © Jason Sangster

First Railway

Figure 3.5



Tserang Dhundrup
Oil on canvas, 28 ½ in. x 36 in.
By permission of the artist
Photograph by James Hart

Man and Train

Figure 3.6



YakTseten *Self Portrait: A Trip to China*
2005, Acrylic on canvas, 36 ½ in. x 31 ½ in.
By permission of the artist
Photograph © Jason Sangster

Figure 3.7 a



a. Tenzin Jigme *Laughter*
Oil on canvas, 37 in. x 39 in.
By permission of the artist
Photograph © Jason Sangster

Figure 3.7 b



b. Tenzin Jigme *Three Emotions*
 2005, oil on canvas, 39 in. x 31 ½ in.
 By permission of the artist
 Photograph © Jason Sangster

Figure 3.8



Penpa *Three Generations on Three Roads*
 2005, oil on canvas, 39 ½ in. x 53 in.
 By permission of the artist, Photograph © Jason Sangster

Figure 3.9



Somani

Christina Dolma

2005, paint on canvas, 47 in. x 78 ½ in.

By permission of the artist

Photograph by James Hart

Figure 3.10



Andrew Wyeth

Christina's World

1948, tempera on panel, 32 ¼ in. x 37 ¾ in.

By permission of MoMA

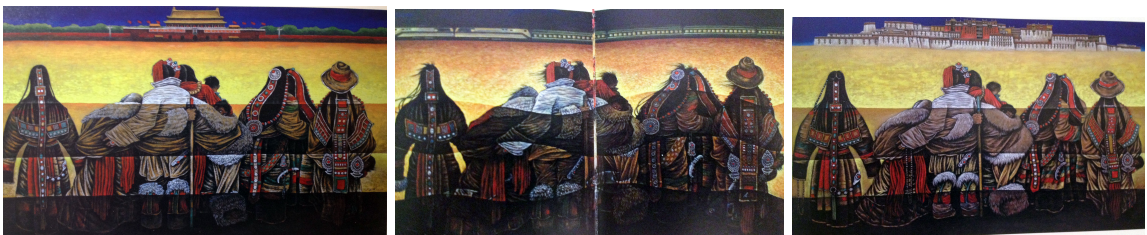
Figure 3.11 a



a. Jigme Trinley
2005, oil on canvas, 47 ½ in. x 78 ¾ in.
By permission of the artist
Photograph by James Hart

Watching the Train 2006

Figure 3.11 b



b. Jigme Trinley
2007, Mineral pigments on cloth, 47 ½ in. x 78 ¾ in. x 3
By permission of the artist
Photographer unknown

Beijing-Train-Lhasa

Figure 3.12



The Worker's Weep Though the Harvest is Good: 1976.9.9
Chen Danqing & Nawang Choedrak
1976. Oil on canvas, 64 ½ in. x 92 ½ in.

Figure 3.13



Keltse *Sky Road*
2005, mixed media monochrome, 39 in. x 39 in.
By permission of the artist
Photograph © Jason Sangster

Figure 3.14 a, b, c



a. Gade
2005, mixed media on Tibetan paper, 25 ½ in. x 51 ¼ in.
By permission of the artist, Photograph © Jason Sangster

The Railway Train



b. (Detail of train with monks)
Figure 3.15 a



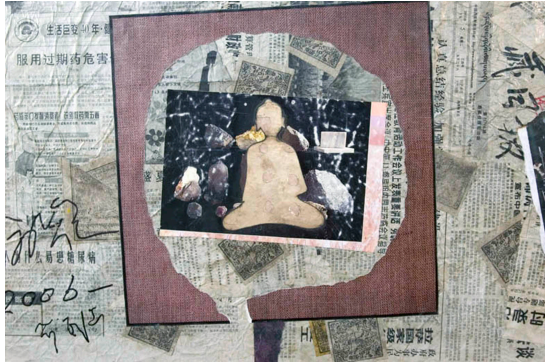
c. (Detail of boat far right)



a. Nortse
2005, mixed media, 51 in. x 62 ½ in.
By permission of the artist
Photograph © Jason Sangster

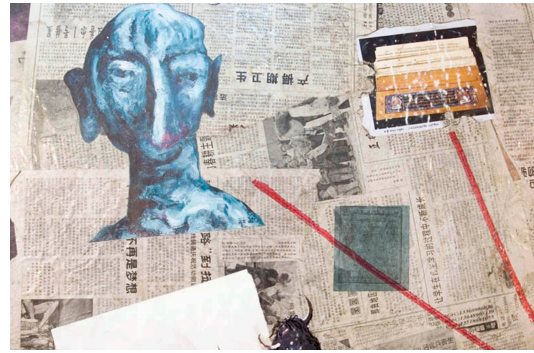
006/7 No.1

Figure 3.15 b, c (*details*)



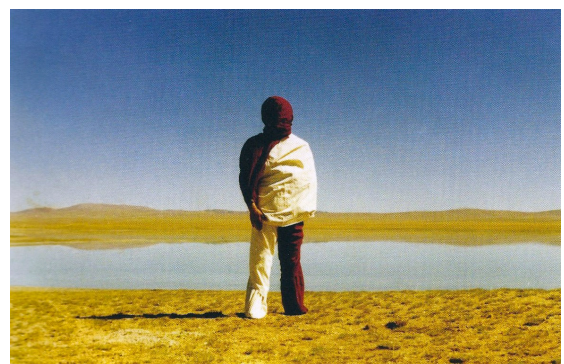
b

bottom detail c.



top left corner detail

Figure 3.16



Bound-up Scenery

Nortse

1987, 4 photographs, Edition of 10, 17 in. x 15 in. each

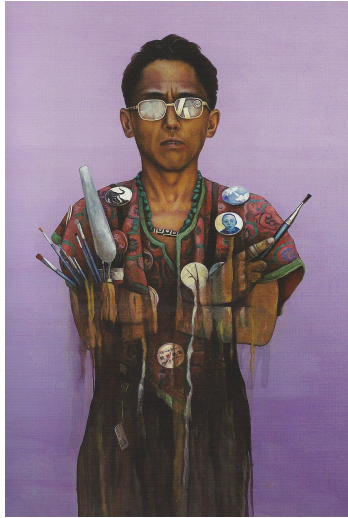
By permission of the artist

Photographer unknown

Figure 3.17 a, b, c, d, e
By permission of the artist



a. *The State I Am I In*
Nortse, 2007
mixed media on canvas
51 in. x 51 in.



b. *Self-Portrait*
mixed media on canvas
53 in. x 53 in.



c. *Release from Sufferings*
mixed media on canvas
62 in. x 51 in.



d. *Still Life 1*
Nortse 2009.
mixed media, 51 1/4 in. x 51 1/4 in.



e. *Still Life 2*
mixed media, 51 1/4 in. x 51 1/4 in.

Figure 3.18



Nyandak *Who Goes Furthest (Pissing on the Tracks)*
Acrylic on canvas 46 ½ in. x 33 in.
Photograph © Jason Sangster
By permission of the artist

*Paintings presented in the *Lhasa Train* show may be accessed on Peaceful Wind Gallery exhibition web site.

Epilogue

While exploring my subject, I wondered how many times the word “lost” and the word Tibet were joined. My own journey began with James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* that popularized the notion of the “mysterious” and “impossible to find” Tibet. Since then I uncovered not an evanescent “lost” Tibet, but a well found[ed] complex Tibet through the work of the artists of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, who, though coming together in fear of what they saw they were losing, found instead their own lively contemporary culture. They began by engaging with definitions of “modern,” influenced by the West and versions China adopted since the 1949 Revolution. They looked at their Tibetan culture, which had lost its footing after the departure of the Dalai Lama in 1959, a loss that was exacerbated by the events associated with the Cultural Revolution. The Tibetans who remained prevailed in that they continued their lives in Tibet, adapting and adjusting, moment by moment. Debate within Tibet about its social and political structure has been going on for well over a century, as evidenced by the life of Gedun Choephel. The generation of contemporary artists who were born at the end of the Cultural Revolution has been consciously debating circumstances since the early 1980s. Cross-cultural exchanges were influential and messy, producing rich readings and misreading of intent and meaning. As previously discussed, culture clashes relating to cultural traditions were a part of discrepant exchanges often based on political ideologies and their changing discourses which influenced artistic practices, a phenomena not exclusive to exchanges between East and West. As with European artists who found themselves in the Eastern bloc of countries after the Berlin Wall went up in 1961, they used the twenty-eight years until the wall came down in 1989 to rethink Western

“modernism,” taking a decidedly different approach that included returning to earlier influences within their own traditions. The paintings that came out of the Soviet system were different from the work produced under the Capitalist system.¹ The point here is, governing ideologies influence art, no matter if the work is adamantly focused on a personal narrative or not. In that regard, the artists inside the TAR who have experienced varying degrees of isolation geographically and culturally have addressed inherited versions of Tibet while paying attention to the present. They looked for, and found, their voices where they live, in a place they don’t have to imagine, thereby producing a unique record of their time. They are able to do this because they accept their position as citizens of the PRC, albeit appreciating their separateness as an ethnic minority that is considered by the majority as uneducated and backward, which turns out to be both a powerful and a challenging position.

The artists’ early paintings of Gedun Choephel and their pictures for *the Train* show establishes them as contemporary Tibetan artists working inside the TAR. Other examples of their works provide further testimony to their pluck. Analysis of these works enhances my argument that contemporary Tibetan art in the TAR has its own particular language while monitoring global art historical discourses. The artists of the GCAG are not a lost or floundering group, but a small number of savvy, sophisticated artists whose accessible work provides insight into their culture and times.

Gade

We Are Artisans for Vacuity

Tibet 2005, handmade paper, ink, 8 in. x 46 in.

(Fig. 4.1 a, b, c, d)

I purchased one of Gade's works on my 2007 trip to Lhasa. It had some of the same elements as his train painting: references to traditional Tibetan artifacts, cartoons, popular culture, iconography, and it also included text. I lived with it for seven years and then decided to find out what it was trying to tell me. The work is based on his love of drawing and shows his creativity with language, besides writing remarkably clear manifestos and commentaries, explaining himself and the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, which have been copiously quoted in this thesis. In this work, he plays the poet making up words that easily move between English, Tibetan, and Chinese without missing a beat. The letters are drawings and signs, and come together to make words and sentences, too. He challenges the viewer to make meaning out of it.

In this 8 in. x 46 in. picture created on hand-made paper, Gade examines the grid, the wood block print, the poster, pop culture, archeology, science, and tradition. He does not propose a linear narrative, but places personal and appropriated images into a vertical and horizontal grid, but not the grid that produces a proportioned painting of a deity. His images are cheeky cross-cultural references from International pop to Western modern, to art history, hieroglyphics, and astrology, Tibetan thangka painting, and Buddhist scripture. The piece mimics a woodblock print and the handmade paper is intentionally stained to look old, an early tactic used by Guild members to invoke "Tibetanness" into their work. That, along with Gade's expressive cartoon-like renderings, made with a sure and spontaneous hand, gives presence and life to a painting that pretends to be a print made from a woodcarving.

The picture is terrific fun—serious fun, and it invites earnest dismantling. The figures seem immediately accessible, while their position in the grid makes for puzzling

juxtapositions. The inescapably arbitrary sorting of images by the viewer calls to mind the process of Chogyam Trungpa's explanation of "orderly chaos." This chaos results in a totality that transcends the notion of "this and that." (Trungpa 1991, viii) Gade's theme ranges from mundane, to philosophical, to religious. In addition to the images, the text is used as reinforcement. Particular references to Japanese and American cartoons and English and American pop music and fashion are chosen for their underground cult status. The use of exclamation points fortifies the comic book convention "to exclaim!" Thick black vertical and horizontal lines divide the sections but do not extend horizontally across the top or bottom of the picture. This gives the impression that the picture could be a fragment of a larger piece that continues at the top and at the bottom. The picture looks like a long vertical chart or logbook divided into six sections that are subdivided into more sections.

The top text looks Tibetan, but is unreadable as it is actually no script at all. The next lines in English: "We Are Artisans for Vacuity" begs the question: "Why 'artisans' and not 'artists'?" Is "artist" too elitist? "Artisan" seems more relevant to the images represented. An artisan is a craftsperson, a worker, and a maker of something practical. There is also an implied question in "vacuity," the dictionary definition of which includes a lack of ideas, emptiness, empty space, a meaningless state, or thing. In Buddhist terms, vacuity, or empty space, implies "potential" and "possibility." The opening statement thus includes several levels of ambiguity. Gade follows this statement with a short five-line dialogue in Chinese characters, which is a narrative conversation between a man and a woman. I think it is important that it is not between two men, and not between two women, which would change the meaning.

The man speaks first:

Male: I'm going to hurt you
 Female: AH!
 Male: Forget it
 Female: Do not hurt me
 Male: Let me

There is a sixth line that says, "To Celebi," as if addressing a person named *Celebi*. *Celebi* is a character from *Pokémon*, a Japanese animated series that is probably the most popular video game in Japan and also around the whole world. *Celebi* is a green fairy-like creature, known as the guardian of the forest. It wanders through time, visiting various undisturbed old-growth forests during peaceful times, leaving behind flourishing grass and trees. It often leaves behind an egg that it brought from the future. *Celebi's* continuing existence signifies a good future. Following the disturbing fragmentary conversation between the man and the woman, the viewer is left with another question, "Will this dialogue end well?"

The images around the Chinese text reinforce the brutal sentiment of the dialogue: ornamented animals sacrificing and eating humans, animals eating other animals. However, a good future may prevail in the face of good humor. Gade evokes a most intriguing drawing. The drawing is of the famous 20th century art landmark, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, the porcelain urinal he signed "R. Mutt" after its manufacturer. Duchamp submitted the piece for the French exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in 1917, and the committee rejected it even though the rules stated that all works would be accepted from artists who paid the fee. The piece acknowledges *Dada*, the anti-rational, anti-art cultural movement, that sprang up in response to artists' antipathy toward WWI along with all authoritarian rules, including those of the art world. Gade includes the R. Mutt signature and his own name. He is including himself, a century later in this pantheon of avant-gardists, in spite of his disavowal of avant-gardism quoted above.

The next section shows an open hand with astrological signs. The trope of palmistry, with its roots in Indian astrology that plays out in the text, relates to both the "personal" and the "public" depending on the interpretation. When read like a poem, stories unfold from the names of the figures on the palm, which lead into a text in English:

sun	fish (Pisces)	a cat	an embracing
moon	crabs (Cancer)	invented text	couple (Gemini)
stars	lion (Leo)		

(in English)

Spirit cooking

I don't mind if you forget me because
you never forget me. Ine[ve]r forg[e]t you

(in Tibetan)

grain

treasury, courage, pride

permit

to rise, to dance,

remain dwell,

central valley of Tibet

in the future

be transformed into

the fifth

The fifth, referred to in the last line, could denote the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1642 when all the 13 administrative districts of Tibet enjoyed political stability, Buddhism flourished and the Tibetan people enjoyed “peace and freedom.”

(in Tibetan)

“Shinwa revolution received a clear electric message from Lhasa”

Shinwa is a South Korean Boy Band who was under contract 1988-2003 with a company called “Good Entertainment.” Each of the members pursued their own solo careers under individual companies.

A small red signature block seal with a Tibetan name “stamped” above, rests next to the palm.

The next section includes pop cartoon images flanked in Chinese text:

(in Chinese)
“All are coming together to chat—having a happy conversation!”

(Images)
Garfield--fat cynical orange cat
Jack Skelington from Disney’s film *Nightmare Before Christmas*
newborn cutting its umbilical cord
corpse
BAPE (Bathing Ape Clothing Company)—Kanye West wore their clothes
puppet parts in a jar
man wearing visual devise for seeing tangentially
angry child by Yoshitomo Nara
Happy Astro Boy
angry singer from *Gorillaz Band*

The bottom section shows black and white footprints, each with four toes; the soles adorned with Egyptian looking hieroglyphics, esoteric charms, and dream symbols:

fishes	seashells	geometric	tools	seated
snakes	vases grains	symbols	elephant	figures
grazing deer	moons stars		birds	sword harp
trees				

This rich universe of signs, symbols, and seductive references allows the viewer to come to his/her own determinations of its meaning. Whether reading from bottom to top, top to bottom, or circuitously, there are pastoral, rural, urban, playful, and mystical scenes of narratives that include the abuse of power, the political and psychological plays of hope and fear. As Gade tells his story, he is happy to dip into any and every source for inspiration. He especially likes using contradictory elements that confound easy analysis. He has made a 21st century woodblock in the manner of a cartoon that invites interpretation by anyone. Cartoons, although universal, are as often as not thought to be fleeting, easily and quickly drawn and disposed of, along with their sometimes-ironic commentary. Like newspaper

stories, they are here today and gone tomorrow. Gade the trickster ironically inserts the “cartoon” with its sparse hand-written texts into a “woodblock print.” He is producing an object that has the possibility of becoming a priceless, timeless thing; he is fooling us into valuing its contents, which makes it harder to just toss out, like yesterdays newspaper. His borrowing from both the past and present using cross-cultural references have brought some unexpected confusion, a confusion he experienced first hand when he was invited for a month artist residency in Scotland in 2003. While there, he made a series of paintings under the name “Group Photo” showing the head of the Buddha surrounded by a halo of different figures and signs, including Ronald McDonald, Mickey Mouse, Red Guards and a Beijing opera singer alongside traditional Tibetan symbols. When gallery visitors saw the painting, they commented that they were “impressed” that the artist was “against fast food.” Gade became confused by this response since he was a fan of fast food and McDonald’s hamburgers and didn’t mean his painting to be a critique at all. Since that time, he has embraced the complexity of cultural difference without giving up his love for hamburgers. (Sheehy and Vanzo 2010, 167) The picture is more than a graphic; it is a universe of questions left unanswered.

Gade’s commentary consistently references global pop culture and modernist history, alongside allusions to traditional Tibetan culture and history. He has traveled extensively and his paintings are sold worldwide. He is a professor in the art department at Tibet University. The University administration controls his passport. And apparently his work appears cryptic enough to elude censorship by authorities. As far as I know, he is not hiding work or withholding work he considers controversial, but I don’t know

that. Artists are notorious for creating work not meant to be seen by the public. Other work is meant to be shown, but as discussed previously, the place and time matter.

Artisans for Vacuity has not been exhibited in the TAR, or anywhere else for that matter. Gade has camouflaged the imagery enough that censors inside the TAR would probably not pick up its political commentary. When Gonkar Gyatso saw it hanging in my living room in 2007 he said, “Oh, that’s new. I’ve never seen that before.” His remark not only reminded me that I had a picture that would eventually need exposure, but the casualness of his remark gave me the impression that the Tibetan artists in the diaspora, at least Gyatso, were regularly in touch with what the artists inside the TAR were doing.

Nortse

Board Game

Tibet 2005, handmade paper, ink, silk fabric, 17 in. x 26 in.

(Fig. 4.2)

One work I know was not shown in the TAR is Guild artist Nortse’s piece *Board Game*, which I acquired in 2006. Nortse’s position, as previously discussed, has been to state his personal experience through his art while acknowledging his relationship and commitment to the society he lives in. (Nortse 2008, 7) From the time I met him in 2006 until the present, he has expressed his commitment to experimenting with materials and evolving themes. His friend Nyandak told me that whenever Nortse makes work that he feels may be considered questionable by the authorities, he immediately goes on line and emails everyone he knows around the world just to say “Hi” and make causal contact. That way if anything happens to him, if he gets “lost,” or

is “disappeared,” there is a record of him in communication outside of the PRC. When I saw him and Nyandak in Los Angeles on their way to the Santa Fe for the opening of the Train exhibition, he showed me some work he had brought with him. *Board Game* was one of the pieces.

When Nortse unfurled *Board Game* on the floor in my living room, he confessed he would not be able to display it in the TAR. The picture was an elegant piece of bricolage that appealed to my appreciation of order and games and tapped into a utopian longing for justice in an unjust world. Like Gade’s piece, it is made with a grid, this time a colorful checkerboard. The combination of painting/sculpture includes twenty used Chinese checker pieces, ten blue, ten red, embedded on a white silk Tibetan offering scarf—a *kata* that has been crumpled into a ball and placed in the center of the checkerboard made of handmade paper, stamped with Tibetan letters, plus (+) signs, a minus (-) sign, and a multiplication (x) sign. The *kata* sits on a painted red square outlined in black. It protrudes off of the flat surface and looks as if it’s floating in an open window. The letters, dropped randomly onto the board, propose that this is a game of chance: “is,” “isn’t,” and “*na*,” which could mean “if” or “ill,” and “*mi*,” which could be the negative particle, or “man/human.” More letters say “health,” “does not exist,” “dispel/the absence of,” “exists/live being/all that exists.” There is nothing explicit in the translation, except for the words “Tibet” and “Tibetan people.”

The artist describes the work as, “China is playing checkers with Tibet.”² The outcome is uncertain. Nortse explained he wanted the picture to have a frame without framing the center box, creating a gap in the picture to reveal the naked *kata*, an expression of the lack of protection the Tibetan people are feeling from the onslaught of Chinese.

Leaving the central box unframed and creating a bordering transparent box around it would seal the checkerboard and Tibetan letters, leaving the *kata* to become dusty and vulnerable and Chinese checkers also exposed to the “atmosphere.” Using the crumpled Tibetan offering scarf and checker pieces supports the artist’s intention to both play with transforming a two-dimensional picture into a three-dimensional object, while pursuing his narrative of Tibet being played like a game of checkers. Nortse’s feeling that he would never be able to show *Board Game* in Tibet because the Chinese would not appreciate the metaphor, or take lightly his critical commentary on the colonization of Tibet, has not been tested. The framed piece resides in my living room in Los Angeles where guests respond to it viscerally, enjoying the materials, color, handmade paper, but they are at a loss to its meaning without some explanation.

Nortse’s method in using materials is not unlike Robert Rauschenberg’s “combines,” which attach all kinds of ordinary found things onto a canvas producing layers of meaning to the pieces, including political statements. If Nortse reveals any reticence in his political statement it is because, as Gade remarks, the “cultural pulse of Tibet is very different.” Nortse, like the other Tibetan artists, is used to anticipating what the authorities in his own country might do at any give time. In *Board Game* he felt the message was not camouflaged enough; however someone outside of the PRC might not be able to read the picture at all. Though Tibetan artists bury their political narratives out of sight, camouflage in one place is not necessarily camouflage in another. Needing to hide, or voluntarily hiding, depends on the circumstances, and in the case of *Board Game* the politics was too strong for Nortse to ignore. Instead of jeopardizing his life in Lhasa he decided to smuggle the picture out of Tibet so that it might have a chance for exposure. It occurred to me that Nortse might have

been emphasizing the controversial aspect of the picture to make it more appealing to me. Nevertheless, part of the ongoing struggle within the TAR for the artists is their being kept inside the place, though their paintings get out, which in some cases may satisfy them enough. When the art gets out their voices are heard. Nortse expresses that idea in the next painting.

Nortse

Bound (in a Bell Jar)

Tibet 2007, mixed media, 62 in. x 51 in.

Fig. 4.3 a, b, c)

Bound (in a Bell Jar) shows a bell jar sitting on a white table; inside the jar is the image of Nortse from the waist up, bare-chested, with a hint of his pants with his underpants peeking out. His bent arms are clasped in front of him with the elbow to the wrist wrapped in a white *kata*. His wrists are bound but his hands are free and open like a lotus, releasing butterfly-shaped cut-outs made of paper that appear to come from an elementary Tibetan writing primer. The paper shows words written in the printed form of Tibetan text. The neck of the bottle is tied with a red scarf and the jar is sealed with its top. Nortse's use of the bell jar calls to mind Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* in which she writes of her heroine feeling suffocated, as if in a bell jar. (Plath 1971) Artist Mike Kelley picks up on Plath's reference with illustrations and models of *Kandor*, the name of comic book hero Superman's hometown. The Superman comic book designers had Superman's enemy destroy his home planet Krypton. The villain saves Kandor and shrinks it to fit into a bell jar. Poor homeless Superman then gazes longingly at the contents of the jar, remembering what he lost. The real people, Plath and Kelley, both committed suicide. Whether Nortse was familiar with the two

artists, Plath and Kelley, is unknown. In any event, the bell jar metaphor seems to have easily crossed cultures. In Nortse's narrative the Tibetan is sealed in a bell jar with his natural language flitting around him unable to fly freely. He is bound as well. He is not sugarcoating any of it and goes along with the sentiment voiced by Joseph Beuys referred to earlier:

"Show it! Show the wound that we have inflicted upon ourselves during the course of our development...the only way to progress and become aware of it is to show it." (Storr 2012, 243) Beuys is referring to his homeland, Germany, which suffered tremendous losses as a result of its own aggression. The gone Lamaist State may not have been responsible for the loss of the Tibetan culture except perhaps in being slow to bring Tibet into the twentieth century, but the wounds experienced among the Tibetan people are deeply felt and mostly hidden. As "victims," they have internalized prejudicial ideas that Tibet was a feudal, uncultured, uneducated state. Besides a few well-researched books, like historian Melvyn C. Goldstein's two volumes on the *History of Modern Tibet*, written in English, there is little if any discussion of what occurred in Tibet's history from a point of view other than Chinese. As a literate, educated artist, Nortse continuously reads and researches subjects. H.G. Masters, a writer and editor of *Arts Asia Pacific* magazine, who was researching a catalogue essay for Nortse's 2012 show, *Bandaged Landscape*, noticed a book of Joseph Beuys writings translated from German into Chinese lying on a table in his sunroom and he when he asked Nortse about it, Nortse replied, "I am sorry to say that I didn't finish the book because I was too busy making new works. I think Joseph Beuys is a very important figure in contemporary art history, until now no one can be compared with him. I thought this book could help me to gain a more in-depth knowledge of contemporary art." (Masters 2011, 7) Interestingly, Beuys had met the Dalai Lama, and the Dalai Lama was familiar with Beuys's work, which he

described as being about “impermanence.”³ (Wijers 1982, 102)

While Nortse and I pondered the picture *Bound* (In a Bell Jar), he shared with me the following story that provides further insight into his approach when communicating with friends and collectors outside of Tibet. He explained that a few months earlier another visitor from the United States, a friend, supporter, and collector saw the picture just as I was seeing it, hanging in the artist’s home studio. However, unlike myself, the visitor was upset by the lack of optimism in the picture. To right this wrong, he commissioned Nortse to make another picture with the jar unsealed, and suggested Nortse include “blessing cords” in the picture as well—Tibetan Lamas distribute red blessing cords, also called “protection cords” during ritual empowerment and ceremonies and are meant to give the devotee protection from whatever obstacles might befall her. Putting protection cords in the picture would ensure all would go well, and the unsealed jar would allow the Tibetan language to fly freely out. To my surprise, Nortse said he had indeed made the new picture and that the friend/collector was pleased referring to it as the “Butterfly” picture. When I returned to the States, I contacted the owner of this new picture and at my request he generously emailed me an image. (Fig. 4.3 b) In the transformed, “rehabilitated,” “re-educated” picture, Nortse had removed the red tie from the neck of the jar and used it to tie up his wrists that before had been tied with a white *kata*. He put the red protection cords firmly under the bell jar with their ends squiggling out from under the jar as if trying to escape, and he bathed the ascending escaping butterflies flying out of the jar in a halo of light, the kind of glowing light used in medieval and renaissance paintings to illuminate saints, Madonnas, and angels. Although I considered this picture an ironic reformation of the original the collector did not. He felt quite satisfied that the picture was an optimistic expression of what was in store for

Tibet's future.

The changes Nortse made for his American champion of him would have pleased Xi Jinping, President of China and General Secretary of the Communist Party. At a conference on the arts held in Beijing on October 15, 2014, Xi gave a lengthy report on his view of the role of the fine arts in contemporary China saying, among other things, “Fine art works should be like sunshine from blue sky and breeze in spring that will inspire minds, warm hearts, cultivate taste and clean up undesirable work styles.” (Ramzy 2014) Transforming the picture was technically easy for Nortse using his favorite photo lab in Lhasa to make large format prints from computer-generated images. Nortse's attitude follows Andy Warhol's approach toward making reproductions—everything could and should be transformed as needed, making form follow function as directed by the consumer.

Nortse gave me the image he had in his studio, which I named *Bound*. Not made on acid free paper it has faded mercilessly over the six years the picture has been hanging on my living room wall; its steady disappearing act places it squarely in the company of contemporary performance art as well being a reminder of the Buddhist notion of the truth of “impermanence.”(Fig. 4.3 c) However when Nortse saw the picture in my home in 2010 he pointed out that he would need to replace it for me one day.

When considering what is happening to the Tibetan language in the TAR “impermanence” seems less acceptable. Nortse feels deeply about the loss of the Tibetan language and the institutions controls over its use. In Spain in the 1940s, dictator Francisco Franco banned the Catalan language, even forbidding newborns be named anything but Castilian names. Catalan artist Antoni Tàpies continued to live in

Spain during that time making abstract paintings. Nortse, living in the TAR, decided to comment on the situation in Tibet. His installation *30 Letters*, mentioned earlier, poignantly addresses his feelings by sculpting the letters of the Tibetan alphabet in the dirt. (See Fig. 2.15) For Nortse, language is about culture and about communicating. Even with his wrists tied, or stuck in a bell jar, he will figure out how to express himself. This was the case while, in 2010-2011, he was an artist in residence for two months at the 18th Street Arts Center in Santa Monica, California. His desire to communicate was complicated by the fact that he does not speak English. His frustration resulted in a mixed media piece called *Hidden Mantra* that cleverly explores the conundrum of language, communication, and culture.

Hidden Mantra

Santa Monica, California 2010-2011, Mixed media, chili pepper tails, glue, paper, 40 pictures @ 5 in. x 17 in. each.

(Fig. 4.4 a, b, c)

“Writing as particular symbolism is very much human invented, but here I have tried to make some new symbolism while respecting the quality of sign... [of] each food ingredient I have used here.”

(Nortse 2011)

The flow of language cannot be read from outside of language, and language is how we can represent ourselves. Yet language in itself is ephemeral. Ferdinand de Saussure understood the collection of sounds and letters that make up a word do not in themselves have any connection to the thing they signify, and that language is constructed and held together by the rules of its time. (Saussure 1972, 32) *Hidden Mantra* is a layered commentary on language and culture. It was born during the eight weeks Nortse heard only English. He

spent the entire time looking and listening to undecipherable language, unable to read signs, menus, labels, nothing, only able to communicate through a translator.

In partial fulfillment of his obligation to produce a work of art Nortse created *Hidden Mantra*. The piece consists of forty pictograms made of chili pepper tails. He transformed the stems into characters produced by the twists and turns of the tails. No two tails are identical and no two pictograms are alike. Nortse says, “I...basically made up my mind to do something that hasn't anything to do with my usual practice...working with materials I usually don't employ... As cooking is part of my life and the ingredients used for cooking... like tail of pepper *spoke* [Nortse's emphasis] to me when they were nearly thrown away.” Nortse has in the past employed found objects in his work but he considers these tails [tales] as something different. Here he saw an opportunity to transform something that had completed its original function and could now become something beautiful and useful too, while providing him language that had been eluding him.

The pepper tail texts flow with remarkable ease and assurance across the pages like a precocious infant's steady stream of chatter tumbling into the adult conversation. Educator Maria Montessori observed that children deprived of communication or tools will employ anything including breadcrumbs or dust bunnies to form something with their hands. Just so, Nortse, using his hands, sculpted the stems into language. Discreet characters form the series of forty pages on a grid. He has formed a character of each of the forty pages and then hung the pages so as to form a grid. The three dimensional twig figures extrude from the page, creating shadows, which add weight to the renderings. Adding further nuance to the work, each page resembles a *pecha*, a Tibetan stylebook of *sacred* texts and commentaries, made from handmade paper, hand written and/or carved from wood blocks. The pages held

together with wooden end covers are wrapped in cloth and tied with cord. The importance of these scripts is discussed in Chapter Two in the section describing the text in artist Jhamsang's painting honoring Gedun Choephel. Nortse's text, unlike a *pecha*, would have trouble lying flat, one on top of the other, but they hang easily in rows and columns creating the grid, a familiar tactic used in visual explorations by modern and postmodern artists, which has been previously discussed in Chapter Two. Each page may be read independently or in series, as a chain of links, which introduces the possibility of a network of "signs." The title *Hidden Mantra* then suggests a certain reading of the "signs."

Michel Foucault suggests power works through language. (Foucault 1972) In *Hidden Mantra*, Nortse empowers himself by going directly to language, his missing link while living in the United States for eight weeks. He felt lost and so he found a language, inventing it. Mimicking the formal aspects of traditional Tibetan Buddhist texts with his use of *pecha*, he formed characters that look like Chinese and Tibetan letters. Because of the title the viewer must consider the relationship between mantras and the pictures, even though the figures actually mean nothing per se. A *mantra* is a series of sounds that uses syllables, words, or groups of words to produce a "spiritual" transformation by summoning a particular deity through sound vibrations reinforced by repetition. The syllables are strung together in a continuous loop, one sound no more important than the next, with its power produced in continuous reverberation. In the case of *Hidden Mantra* the sound these mysterious characters would produce is unknown, though their figuration tempts the imagination. Nortse has made his series of forty frames to resonate visually, not audibly. Their sound comes from the visual rhythm created by their individual formations and their relationship on the grid. The grid's non-hierarchical egalitarian order invites the eye to peruse the "text"

from side to side, top to bottom, bottom to top, and corner-to-corner. In a Western reading that is from left to right; the final image in the lower right corner has been left blank, reminding me of the blank legend in *Map* (1962) by American artist Jasper Johns. (Fig. 4.5 a) Johns leaves the legend blank to let the viewer question what the map is supposed to be doing. After all, legends tell us that. (Fig. 4.5 b) Nortse's blank page pushes the viewer back into the series, leaving open the possibility of a *hidden* and unavailable meaning to the piece. Might this blank page be waiting for an explanatory text, a place and time reference, the author's signature? Or, does this creation contain further meaning outside the modernist emphasis on the individual and her creations?

"Hidden" in Nortse's title could also refer to Tibetan Buddhist sacred treasure that has been buried and then uncovered. The concealed treasures are called *terma* and are uncovered by *Tertön*, treasure finders, discussed in Chapter Two. Tibetan Buddhist teachers have hidden *terma* in Tibet and India since the beginning of the 8th century. A wealth of objects has been uncovered/discovered over the centuries. The objects are considered auspicious treasures that heal, transform, and even prophesy. According to Tibetologist Francesca Fremantle, "*Termas* are of two main kinds: earth treasures and intention, or mind, treasures." (Fremantle 2001, 19) She continues,

"A teaching concealed as an intention treasure appears directly with the mind of the Tertön in the form of sounds or letters to fulfill the enlightened intention of the earliest teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, [named] Padmakara. Earth treasures include texts, but also sacred images, ritual instruments, and medicinal substances, and are found in many places: temples, monuments, statues, mountains, rocks, trees, lakes, and even the sky. They are not ordinary books that can be read straightaway, but are

usually fragmentary, consisting of only a word or two...encoded in symbolic script, [they]...change mysteriously and often disappear(s) completely once...transcribed. They are the material supports that act as a trigger to help the Tertön reach the subtle level of mind where the secret teaching has been concealed.” (19)

According to Fremantle it is the Tertön who actually composes and writes down the resulting text, and so may be considered its author. Following this explanation it is not difficult to consider Nortse as a Tertön who has uncovered a hidden text. As Nortse himself said, “The tails spoke to him.”

The weathered, shriveled stems in *Hidden Mantra* look like bone fragments, as if they have been buried and uncovered. They have been placed on hand-made, dark brown paper. Altogether, the fragments look fossilized like the remnants of an archeological find. At the same time the work emanates presence and freshness that comes from evidence of the mind and hand that put it together. It is a testament to human imagination that creates language while respectfully transforming nature’s materials.

Whether Nortse is a Tertön or not, he is commenting on his tradition both reverentially and critically. As a contemporary artist, he is dismantling the conventional understanding of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition by inviting the viewer to examine the human propensity to make meaning for what it is: both an arbitrary exercise and a project made from desire. Using tradition as his palette and transformation as his brush, Nortse’s role as both Tertön and contemporary artist problematizes questions of authority and power.

Destabilizing notions of order and power through resistance subverts the forces of power. If there is no resistance there are no power relations, and there would only be

obedience. Power relations are obliged to change with the resistance. Nortse's *play* evoking *pecha, mantra, terma and Tertön* is a tactic of resistance. He is a political artist but not a protest artist. In *Hidden Mantra* he asks us to appreciate the beauty of this invention, inspired by the pepper tails. And the work is informed by the constraints he has experienced as an individual visitor in the United States, not knowing the language and being new to the culture, as well as being a permanent resident in the Tibetan Autonomous Region TAR under the watchful control of the People's Republic of China PRC. As already demonstrated, Nortse has learned flexibility in his approach to communicating with his audience, which is evident in this piece that is accessible yet out of reach, inviting though enigmatic. Only with close scrutiny is the material even recognizable. The viewer is challenged to make meaning, even as it betrays the skillful hand that made it. Just as Nortse likes to cook, to make beautiful and delicious nourishing food from what is available, by his ordinary approach he has managed to go beyond the apparatus of the Tibetan Buddhist traditional state, and Chinese Communist state. He has cut through the hierarchical systems that flow top down to engage with the patterns of power established within the social body by embracing yet commenting on his subject.

The control of power worldwide has become much more subtle in the past two centuries in that power is no longer insured by right but technique, not by law but by normalization, and not by punishment but by control. "Right" and "wrong" have been supplanted with "normal" and "pathological." (Foucault 1972, 197) Nortse, the contemporary artist, is allowed to normalize an invented language while referring to a precious commodity of traditional Tibetan Buddhist culture, which recognizes human imagination as more than the act of an individual, but rather sees it in the context of

humankind's capacity to communicate outside conventionally accepted notions of time and space. Nortse's dual role of Tertön and contemporary artist provokes and teases the viewer. Though only through the title does he suggest the former. There are those who recognize and appreciate the ongoing transformation of the Tibetan culture through its contemporary art. However, there are those inside and outside the TAR who feel any appropriation and transformation of the traditional culture is a sacrilege that furthers the demise of "pure" traditional Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism.

There is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives. Nortse knows that traditional culture resonates both inside and outside of Tibet. He refers to the culture to rethink the forces in human history that drives culture's creativity and invention. *Hidden Mantra* is a reminder that people come into existence through language and that language is problematic. Analysis of language drives endless consideration of binary oppositions so that one is not "free" to think anything outside the rules of one's language. A tactic to dislodge the binary is to freeze time and look at a single moment. Nortse produced forty single moments about language. Intended as pictures of names, each image folds into it and becomes both picture and name. California artist Robert Irwin speaks to the problem posed by language. In the following quote by Irwin, used as the title of his biography by Lawrence Weschler, Irwin describes how sight privileges language in the process of perceiving. Irwin says, "Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees." (Weschler 1982) Without that initial unfettered moment of seeing, or for that matter hearing, tasting, touching, or smelling, there is no naming. Tibetan Buddhist philosophy questions perception and addresses states of mind that go beyond the binary oppositions. Practices are employed to tease out moments or gaps between languages. One such technique is the recitation of

mantras that produce glimpses of perception outside of the rules of language. Artists question habitual thinking and rules, and they embellish and invent. Nortse has chosen to focus on language and his desire to communicate, both personally and culturally. He shows us both constraints and possibilities using the important tactic *play* to transform and reverse the system, which quietly orders us about.

There were a few pictures that did not make it into the group of forty pictograms. Nortse invited me to pick one to keep. In the process I asked him to pick the one he thought most interesting and he chose one that had almost no flourishes or embellishments. It was remarkably simple while fulfilling whatever meaning it needed to impart. (See Fig. 4.4 c) He was unconcerned that it would live separate from the forty other pictures. The rest of the unused pictures were discarded. Fabio Rossi, of Rossi and Rossi Gallery acquired the group of pictures.

Tsering Nyandak

Cornered Between Meditation and Non-meditation, Aka cornered in non-meditation

Santa Monica, California 2011, Installation, mixed media. Dismantled at close of exhibition. (Fig. 4.6)

Tsering Nyandak, along with Nortse, was in residency at 18th Street Art Center in Santa Monica in 2010-2011. Nyandak is fluent in English. His installation was all about impermanence and his curiosity about Tibetan Buddhism and meditation. He told an audience the piece would be destroyed after the exhibition, that he had no intention of keeping the piece once he made it.⁴

He did not make it to last determining it would be destroyed after the exhibition as a further demonstration of the Buddhist philosophy of impermanence. The piece hinged on

Nyandak's long interest in meditation and Buddhist philosophy. As mentioned in Chapter One, Nyandak had been reading Chogyam Trungpa's books on Buddhist philosophy. He found insights about what Trungpa called "spiritual materialism" particularly interesting. Seven years after painting the poignant picture of Gedun Choephel, and five years after painting the ironic Train picture with the boys "pissing on the tracks," Nyandak created his impermanent installation. When asked to write something about the piece for the wall text he submitted a statement using the lowercase "i" instead of the conventional "I." Since his English is impeccable it was clear he meant it to be that way.

"...with this work titled as 'cornered in non meditation,' i worked with feeling and habit as always to grasp or discard the concepts of solidity and overpowering presence of things that i conceived in my life.

For instance, *redness* about monastic, about communistic, *redness* of danger zone i projected around myself and so on...they are always dangling in the house i called as self.

... i tend to believe that meditation opposed to non-meditation is something that is without these heavy *redness* quality to it...so here i am trying to evoke a feeling of being cornered in the inability to be in meditation rather than saying out loud what meditation is." (Nyandak 2011)

The installation is a study in how to produce the experience of "meditation" with objects existing in three-dimensional space. The installation is made up of psychic structures composed of oppositions that yet transcend those oppositions in what Jacques Lacan calls the "real," that which is outside language. (Lacan 1977, ix) Nyandak writes, "i work(ed) with feeling and habit as always to grasp or discard the concepts of solidity..."

The installation is made in the corner of a whitewashed room with a painted dark green floor. Facing the corner, the adjacent walls display a cascade of dark red paper shards

of different sizes. Loosely taped to the wall at eye level, the papers trip across one wall, traverse the corner and move to the adjacent wall expressing an unruly splash of *red*. The papers' bar code stickers have not been removed reminding the viewer they are "ready-mades." Only the artist's rips and pencil marks record an attempt to transform the paper into a performative gesture born from the artist's desire to go beyond his habit "to grasp or discard."

The artist says *red* is, "about monastic, about communistic," the institutions that formed and informed him since his birth in Lhasa in 1974, and which he perceives as "danger zones i projected around myself..." Nyandak has hung these red [read] papers loosely, making them susceptible to breezes and changing airflows in the room, showing their flimsiness. The fragmented papers wrap the space from wall to corner to wall and touch the ground as well, with two papers lying on the ground where the walls converge. Small change, pennies, nickels and dimes are scattered at the base. It's a set, a set-up for the viewer to be at the precipice of the scene. Stage right is the overlapping red papers with decorative, delicate colored sketches resembling fabric remnants, or Christmas paper with glowing candle and ribbons. On the opposite side the marks deteriorate into smears of grease, bits of jam and butter, smudges and scratches beside what appears to be a peering face. The center scene, a focal point, has a small violet rectangle of a picture visible through a cut in the red paper. It is a computer print-out of a photograph of a painting by the artist. The painting includes a shadowy figure suspended in space. A string tacked across the lower portion of the canvas produces another shadow on the painting, and seems to say, "I'm holding on by a thread." The picture is a window, an invitation to the viewer to pass through the image through the corner of the one point perspective—or more precisely pass through

the perspective of being cornered!

Here is the fissure that allows Nyandak to explore outside the set of differentiated signifiers. He has taken the step of expressing his confusion saying, “trying to evoke feeling of being cornered in the inability to be in meditation rather than saying out loud what meditation is.” Shut-upped and trapped because the “real” is the impossible because it is impossible to imagine and impossible to integrate into the symbolic order. That is what accounts for the traumatic quality of the work; it resists symbolization absolutely. Here, again Nyandak’s work evokes the Tibetan Buddhist concept of the two truths, as did his painting of Gedun Choephel discussed in Chapter Two. First, there is the existence of absolute and relative truth; second, these two truths are inseparable. The idea could refer to Lacan’s notion of the “real,” which is always in its place, undifferentiated, speechless, and ignorant of what might exile it from there. It is the ground of Nyandak’s explorations. He touched on the notion in how to paint Gedun Choephel, but this time he is inviting the viewer to participate in the feelings of the two truths by holding us accountable as we stand in the corner, engulfed in “red.” It is a moment of indeterminacy created from a presence that embraces the past, delicately assembled with bits and pieces, which feel as vulnerable as they could possibly be. The viewer may stand in the corner, feeling vulnerable, confused, confounded, bewildered, or walk away. In preparation for assembling this work, Nyandak did some sketches including one titled *Bøx* that was exhibited in the show.

Bøx (Process Drawing)

Santa Monica, California 2011, Mixed media on paper, 19 ½ in. x 25 ½ in.

(Fig. 4.7)

“Freedom is generally meditation and bringing a myth to satisfy
desire...we would be famous...money...you think you can
handle...” (Nyandak 2011)

The small collage Nyandak called *Box* was a study made prior to the work that found its way in the corner installation. It hung on the gallery wall outside the room that held *cornered in non-meditation*. This central figure that ended up in *cornered in non-meditation* could be exchanged with *Box*, which has the same ephemeral violent tone; though being tacked onto “hand-made” paper the artist bought at the art store gives the drawing paper a poignantly deceptive smoothness as well as a sense of boundary and containment. The drawing inundates the viewer with its subjectivity, teasing and cajoling her into reading its meaning. Looking from top to bottom, boxy shapes balance acrobatically. Sticks taped to the paper represent a three dimensional box. The box contains sketchy references to clouds and fire. The limbs of a lone figure, encircled by string and a red lotus flower, stands on a wounded bird. Splotches of red paint splatter its head, dripping down its body.

A dashed black vertical line shaded with white runs squarely down the center of the page to the bottom. Another line, at less than a 45-degree angle from the vertical line impales the figure and the bird. A third line made of words climbs in from the edge of the left side of the paper. These words say, “Freedom is generally meditation and bringing a myth to satisfy desire...we would be famous...money...you think you can handle...” The fragmented line does not reach the center, the vanishing point as if the subject knows that to want to “not desire” has something in itself irrefutable. The three lines coming from completely different angles point toward the one-point perspective. The pastel bands of color that fill the page contain the overly prescribed figures. And the bar code, firmly stuck

on the corner of the page, reminds the viewer that the paper is a ready-made, yet everything about the picture looks like it is going to come apart, fall off, but not the bar code, with its identifying data declaring its value to the cashier at the check out counter.

The pieces reference meditation either in the title or directly on the picture itself. Interestingly, unlike other artists in the Guild, Nyandak rarely appropriates traditional Tibetan Buddhist iconography in his art, which makes the text reference to meditation intriguing. Meditation is a practice central to Tibetan Buddhism, whose institutions in the TAR have been notoriously dismantled for almost half a century before Nyandak was born. However, Tibetan Buddhism remains synonymous with Tibet and the Tibetan people. Nyandak's engagement with meditation teases out questions like: What role does meditation play in his art and his art practice? How is it relevant to his work? How does his interest in meditation relate to contemporary Tibetan society?

Nyandak's *Box* is a locked box of secrets covered in a gauzy wash of pink and blue pastels. The splinters and drops of red only begin to express its gist. Nyandak was careful to call the work a process drawing. What is evident is the acknowledgment in the text of the struggle with ordinary craving ("myth to satisfy...fame, money...") and the attempt to rise above it indicated by, "...you can handle..." and the enigmatic trailing off of the thought into the pastel picture with its broken limbs and red drops. Nyandak taped the drawing onto a piece of rough handmade paper that looks like a bandage; another reference to wounding, a common subject in Nyandak's art. Dimension, lightly expressed in the picture's shadings and diminishing lines portends to the depth of exploration awaiting this artist. When the show was over I removed the picture from the wall. It was fragile and the little sticks, precariously tipped onto the paper, fell. I confess saving the pieces and the paper, which remain as *Box*, a

process drawing made for a departed installation.

Tourist

Lhasa 2013, Acrylic on linen, 39 ½ in. x 39 ½ in.

(Fig. 4.8)

Nyandak is a translator for Guild members when visitors who do not speak Tibetan want to speak with the artists. Visitors and the artists have come to depend on him to facilitate communication. It is a role that requires sensitivity to people's "meaning," "intention," and "sentiment." Working to translate people's ideas has heightened his awareness of the ways of the traveler and the tourist. His painting *Tourist* resonates with his decades of experiences in his role as translator. He included the painting in his 2013 one-man show, *In the Land of No Heroes*, at Rossi and Rossi Gallery in London. The show's title brings to mind the acts of self-immolations performed by 133 Tibetans in the past five years.⁵ In May 2012, just months before Nyandak's show in London, two young Tibetan men attempted self-immolation at the entrance of the Jokhang Temple, in the Center of Lhasa, a short distance from both Nyandak's mother's home and the Guild's Gallery on the Barkhor. What happened to the Tibetans is unknown, as they were removed from the site with no further information as to their whereabouts. The title of Nyandak's show suggests he was thinking about this and the debates surrounding self-immolation and heroism. Since Nyandak intended this work for London, he was free to say what he felt that he could not express in Lhasa. However, the controversial title places Nyandak in a precarious position between a CPC that appreciates any disavowal of the act of self-immolation, and the Tibetan community, some of whom see these as acts of heroism. However, recognizing Nyandak's interest in Tibetan Buddhism, art, life, and politics, I see his title as far more complicated. As

an artist he engages with complexity as previously noted in his picture of Gedun Choephel and in his comedic Train picture. Nyandak says about his own work:

“I don’t rely too much on exploring ideas for making art—
It can be something as simple as emptying your constipated bowel.
Sometimes I feel art is a sort of locker where you hide
your stuff inside, but also let other people look in.
Most of the time others end up discovering more in what you hide.
(Nyandak 2008)

The painting *Tourist* was used as the image announcing the London show.

My immediate response to the picture was, “Am I a ‘tourist.’” I have tried not to be a tourist while looking at the contemporary artists in Tibet. However, it is hard to imagine being anything but when faced with the myriad layers of history and context operating around the “idea” of Tibet, and the rigor and tenacity required to get to the place even with twenty-first century know-how at my disposal. Nyandak’s painting provides a poignant snapshot of the conundrum facing anyone considering visiting Tibet, its culture and landscape. The appeal of the painting is in its beauty—the color, forms, and execution of the landscape, mountains. The tiny tourist wearing his backpack looks so vulnerable, holding his binoculars trained over a precipice. He is standing on a mountain of prayer flags, or is it scraps of monks’ robes and clothing? There is a red crate many times larger than the man, sitting on the mountain with him. It is made with planks of wood nailed together and sits on piles of cloth. Is the crate filled with what’s left of Tibetan culture, the artifacts or what? There is a deep blue waterway running between, and separating, one landmass from what is on the other side. And then there are four thinly painted, dripping yellow arrows brushed onto the canvas, all pointing in the same direction down at a 25 degree angle to something below. We can’t see it

and the Tourist is looking for it too. Are the arrows instructions from the other side of the cliff, coming from the travel agent, the teacher, the family member, the friend—“Don’t miss that!” “Be sure to go there.”? Meanwhile, the fantastic landscape and the social political realities of the time surround the tourist. The arrows are so loud one feels the necessity to follow their directive, and figure out what they mean. But as Nyandak suggests, they are thinly painted transparent ephemeral signs, short lived, leaving only drippings behind where the tourist stands on the cliff covered in tattered and strewn fabric covering the rock like a costume, intently looking down over the ledge, a phantasmagoria of cloud formations hanging in the sky. The hallucinatory scene reinforces the scale Nyandak prefers—the singular figure isolated, alone in a landscape that at any moment could turn catastrophic. The moment is frozen. No matter where one looks, there is nowhere to go except further into the picture, trapped inside this narrative. As vast and varied as the imagery is, it feels claustrophobic because the “beyond” in the picture seems unlimited, and that is terrifying. There is no sign as to what is beyond the horizon, and the very black sky is reminiscent of pictures taken of deep outer space.

Being with this image for a while is enough to make one want to get back to the city with its marketable goods, its commerce, politics and family dynamics; the stuff of everyday life with people mixing together, especially as it is experienced in China, which reminds me of the first time Nyandak and Nortse passed through Los Angeles. As we drove through downtown toward the beach they asked me, “Where are all the people?” In that instant I remembered the noisy crowded streets of urban China, including Lhasa. For the first time, I felt Los Angeles spatially, all of my senses alerted to its qualities, especially compared to the streets of China. Nyandak’s interactions with tourists have been urban. He is not a tour

guide, so that his decision to place this fellow in a desolate landscape seems a metaphor for how isolated the tourist actually is. Even his translating skills are useless here. What he needs most are other people!

Nyandak was unable to attend the opening or any part of the show because the PRC wouldn't release his passport that would allow him to leave Tibet. The Gallery produced an exhibition brochure for the show that includes twelve pictures and a short blurb about the work by Tenzing Rigdol that describes Nyandak's poignant style.⁶ Nyandak reported there were no sales from the show. However it should be noted that many of his paintings are in collections worldwide.

Keltse

Pet

Lhasa 2004, mixed media on canvas, 47 in. x 59 in.

(Fig 4.9)

Guild artist Keltse drew a seemingly simple domestic narrative about the Train coming to Lhasa, a wife standing above her fallen down drunken husband inside their home. I had seen another of his paintings in the catalogue of the 2005 *Visions of Tibet: A brief survey of Contemporary Painting* produced in London. I remembered the painting of the lounging naked lady covered in cats. When I visited Keltse in Lhasa in 2009, I was interested in seeing his latest work that utilized his graphic design skills that used photographs and large format prints to produce mural size pictures. I also asked him if he was interested in selling anything. I was astonished when he said he was selling *Pet*, the title of the painting in the catalogue. It had already been sold to someone in London, who sent it back saying he changed his mind. Keltse unrolled the picture and I was able to see it in person. I

subsequently acquired it and hand-carried it to Los Angeles because it was bigger than the allotted Post Office requirements for shipping. It got lost in the Beijing airport, but was eventually retrieved. Now it hangs over my bed, unframed tacked to the wall with pushpins.

Pet is the decorative painting of a naked Tibetan woman.⁷ The lady is lying on a rug that is suggested by the strips of patterning resembling a carpet edge. The lady is covered in cats, which are in varying states of self-absorption, as is the wont of cats. There is a picture window, birds, potted plants, a cup of steaming tea, and lots of squiggly lines over the beautiful transparent blue wash that covers the canvas. The color compliments the delicate pink skin of the naked lady. The lady's gaze is off toward the window, past the head of the cat that sits on her back, eyeing her with his tongue slightly hanging out between sharp incisors. When Keltse unfolded the picture I realized it was not only painted but also covered in "glitter," and I thought that was probably why the Londoner didn't want it. But I did. At some point, I learned from artist Nyandak, my trusted translator and informant that the picture was really about a "cat house," a house of prostitution and the lady was a prostitute. This added a new dimension to the characterization of the cats that represent the clients, and the lady's longing attitude as she looks out the window to the bird flying outside. After discovering her occupation, the image of the woman, with her big rump, big head, delicate feet and beautifully plaited and decorated hair, reminded me of an incident while walking on the main plaza into the Barkhor and Jokhang Temple in Lhasa. At the time, I noticed a very tall Tibetan woman, elegantly coifed and dressed in a dark suit, walking with others in the plaza. My Tibetan guide pointed out that she was a "high end" prostitute, which he explained was apparent because she was too well off and too clean to be a normal Tibetan woman. Before this incident, it had not occurred to me that one of the ways to earn

a living in a place swarming with tourists and guides would be prostitution. I had forgotten my experience in a Lhasa hotel that served members of the CPC where I had gone because I was told they had a nice spa where I could get a steam, shower and massage. I was apparently the only guest and was attended to by a young Chinese woman who accompanied me, fully clothed, into the steam room and shower rooms, reading a newspaper while I “relaxed.” I had requested a massage but was told to dress and was then taken into a bedroom, with sheets askew and ashtrays filled with cigarette butts, at which point I begged to be excused, realizing there had been some confusion about my request. I later learned of other up-and-above-board massage parlors in Lhasa that employed both Tibetan and Chinese workers, where I had very pleasant experiences.

Pet, with its insight into human character, social circumstances and the glory of paint and glitter hangs above the head of my bed. The painting is as unapologetic and as decorative as any *Odalisque* by Henri Matisse, except it is covered in glitter and I don’t think Matisse ever did that.

Over forty works of art by more than twenty-five artists living in the TAR have been discussed in this study with the hope that the ideas brought forward will facilitate further analysis of contemporary Tibetan art, both inside and outside of the TAR. Presenting accounts of confusions in cross-cultural exchanges and the influence of changing political ideologies on the production of these works, alongside attention to the aesthetic decisions made by the artists, provides pathways toward those ends. Presently, the climate inside the PRC regarding the production of culture has turned more repressive. The State-run Xiahua

News Agency and the *New York Times* reported on the recent symposium on the arts held in Beijing.⁸ (Ramzy 2014) The news reports suggest President Xi's talking points were reminiscent of Mao Tse Tung's famous talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art in 1943, in which Mao reminded the gathered "comrades" of the importance of looking to the "people" when making art, and the necessity of putting the ideals of socialism into the art. Xi Jinping's remarks seem similarly focused, sometimes addressing aesthetics, sometimes speaking to the ideology he believes to be correct. In Austin Ramzy's *New York Times* article, "Xi Jinping Calls for Artists to Spread 'Chinese Values'" he reported that the President of China spoke to an assembled delegation of prominent actors, dancers, and writers.⁹ The assembled group does not seem to include painters, sculptors or filmmakers, though I am assuming the broad category of artists also includes them. Xi does make a point of suggesting Chinese artists should, "learn from [all] outstanding art worldwide" so that Chinese art will further develop, which he says, "[can only happen] when we make foreign things serve China, and bring Chinese and Western arts together via through understanding." (Ramzy 2014) Further excerpts from Xi's speech were reported on the *Xinhua News* website in which I noted their emphasis on the "art market," and social and political ideology. Xi says,

"[Artists] should not pursue commercial success at the expense of producing work with artistic and moral value. [Art exists] in order to serve the people and socialism and to present socialist values."

"Art works should not be slaves of the market and should not bear the stench of money."

"Popularity should not necessitate vulgarity and hope should not entail covetousness."

“Socialist culture and art is, in essence, the culture and art of the people...a requirement of the CPC.”

“The creation of art can fly with the wings of imagination, but make sure art workers tread on solid earth.”

“Life-like works should be created so as to tell people in a covert but influential way what should be praised and what should be denied.”

“Artworks should promote patriotism as the main theme and foster correct viewpoints of history, nationality, and culture as well as strengthen pride in being Chinese.”

“Pursuit of the true, the good, and the beautiful is the mission of artists as the best works of art touch people, baptize their souls and enable them to find beauty in nature, life and their minds.” This can “lead people to live a life abiding by the code of morality.”

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-10/16/c_133719

He urged CPC committees to ‘fully implement Party’s art policy,’ and ‘select eligible cadres who have both ability and political integrity, and work well with art workers. He called for the CPC to use “historical people-oriented and artistic” whose points of views focus on art criticism, so as to lead people to tell the truth and follow the code of morality. These are ground rules for implementing censorship. Xi’s concluding remarks would make artists anywhere shudder in that they are political directives that are at odds with the making of art. As previously quoted Thomas Crow says, “Politics is, by definition, concerned with convincing, persuading, and winning. It overshadows [art that is] more thoughtful, complicated productions whose outcome may not be known.” (Crow 1999)

Tibet is far away, but the long arm of censorship will certainly find its way there. On the other hand, these policies are already in place and the Tibetans, as well as the

contemporary Chinese artists, are aware of the boundaries considered respectable when scrutinized by authorities. Chinese artists such as Ai Weiwei confront State authority directly and suffer the consequences but, to some degree, are protected by their fame and being Han Chinese. Those less famous take other routes, among them the Chinese artists in the 1980s; wishing to pursue “abstraction” as a form, they secretly showed their work in apartments. (Ikegami 2012, 184)

An important component of President Xi’s speech was his focus on commercialism and the art market, which has been very good to the contemporary Chinese artists. The art of the GCAC also has had its share of commercial success, though not on the level of the Chinese artists, but significant enough considering they are a disparaged minority in China. It is clear by the President's speech that the CPC cares about China’s standing as a cultural leader in the contemporary global art market. As linguist, philosopher and political activist, Noam Chomsky, suggests, corporations control markets, not governments. (Chomsky 2014) Since China is the corporation controlling its industries, it considers art in its stable of commodities. As long as the Chinese government can take credit for bringing Tibet into the 21st century, demonstrated by the existence of a thriving contemporary art movement in the TAR, the artists are safe. But they must be careful not to appear to be stirring any controversy that could be interpreted as acts to destabilize Tibet’s subjugation by China. Currently, everyone inside and outside of the TAR is seriously debating the effect of the acts of self-immolations, so little is understood as to how it may impact the community of contemporary Tibetan artists within the PRC. However, the situation has proven particularly confusing for the leaders of the PRC because, while the Tibetans are killing themselves and

not anyone else, these acts bring attention to the enormity of frustration existing inside the TAR, which suggests the TAR may not be so stable.

Discussions that polarize the situation in Tibet are the result of fantastical narratives assumed and perpetrated over the years, exacerbated by repressive measures by the government of the PRC toward Tibet. Meantime, life continues inside Tibet and manifests exquisitely in the artists work. After Harris's suggestion to look at what the artists are showing us, I observed that the artists' work is even broader and more comprehensive than what was expected and requires continuous vigilance when pursuing any analysis of it.

During Nyandak and Nortse's eight-week residency in Santa Monica, California, they rode bicycles, spent time at the beach, visited art schools and artists studios, rode buses and visited museums and galleries, and roamed the city of Los Angeles. They went to San Francisco and to New York City. At times Nortse expressed feeling "free" in L.A.; at other times they both felt anxious to return home. We all agreed that whenever one leaves home to some place new there is a feeling of exhilaration for a time, but it inevitably passes and one is left with the same problems and concerns that exist at home. While in New York City, the Trace Foundation organized the artists' participation on a panel discussion called *Art Lhasa Now*. An account of the panel meeting was written by New York based Tibetan artist, Tenzin Rigdol, and published in the *Trace Foundation Newsletter* Website. Rigdol reported that at the end of the panel discussion, speaking with gathered guests, Nyandak said, "Tibetan art whether it comes from inside or outside of China is not about being globalized; it's about local artists, about inviting monks, nuns, teachers, businessmen, and local pilgrims in Lhasa to engage with artists and their work." (Rigdol 2011) An interesting remark from an artist whose poetic and sometimes ironic and cryptic pictures do not depict ordinary life in Lhasa.

However, his statement explains the continuing presence of the Gedun Choephel Artists Gallery on the Barkhor. The commitment to communicating with the local community in Tibet is foremost in the minds of the Guild members. As Bhutanese lama Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche said to me several years earlier, “The biggest challenge for the Tibetan artists is not in communicating with people and artists worldwide but in finding a way to communicate with other Tibetans whom he considers “provincial.” (Khyentse 2008) It is a problem that can only be addressed by the artists themselves, and as Nyandak indicates it is what concerns him.

Gonkar Gyatso, one of the few Tibetan artists known internationally but who has not lived in Tibet for twenty-two years now, says his ultimate goal is to have a solo show in China, or even Lhasa. In an interview published in the *New York Times* in October 2014, Gyatso says said, “I really want to show what I’ve done to my hometown.” (Lau 2014) While Gyatso dreams of returning to Lhasa, the artists in Tibet maintain their Gallery on the Barkhor hoping to engage local Tibetans in discussions about life and art. When Li Xianting created the *Scorching Sun of Tibet* show in Beijing several artists from the diaspora were invited to participate, including Gonkar Gyatso. Some of the artists were not born in Tibet yet their identification with Tibet is foremost in their communications with the world. Being invited into that show reinforced their sense of belonging to the Tibetan world. The Chinese artists in the show felt the positive links of their overlapping cultures help create a more successful world where distinction is not adversarial. The Tibetan artists from the TAR participating in group shows assume the steadying balanced role of maintaining an open atmosphere where everyone is invited to participate, while they continue struggling to find ways to engage with local Tibetans at home.

When Chogyam Trungpa wrote his first book after leaving Tibet, he called it *Born in Tibet*. It was not about Tibetan Buddhism but about the “place” Tibet. The ties with the place are about as strong as I have ever encountered. Trungpa never went back to Tibet. Gonkar Gyatso wants to go back to Tibet though his international stature as a Tibetan artist has soared. The Tibetan artists inside Tibet have not expressed an interest in leaving. Their role as artists transcends the ties, yet informs their actions. The conundrum brings the discussion back to Tibetan Buddhism’s two truths: the first truth, these particular people are artists and are Tibetan; the second, these two things are inseparable.

The artists of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild have expressed their ideas individually about their art and art practices. American conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner sums it up well when he says,

“Art is about showing people that the values of their life have changed. That is what each generation of artists does. My job is to determine what the hell is going on around us.”

“If you can enhance the quality of life, that enhanced quality will pass on to the next generation.” (Weiner 1990)

I believe this sentiment expresses the view of the artists of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild.

Epilogue Notes

¹The New Leipzig School represents an exemplary case of how political systems influence art practices. See article “The New Leipzig School” by Arthur Lubow in the *New York Times* Magazine January 8, 2006. Online at

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/08/magazine/08leipzig.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

² Nortse discussed his feelings with the author about the painting in conversation in Los Angeles in 2006 when I decided to acquire the picture.

³According to writer Louwrien Wijers, friends of both Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys, they were both interested in meeting the Dalai Lama, which Beuys eventually did. Wijers was instrumental in organizing a symposium on the meeting of *Art, Science and Spirituality* held at the Stieglitz museum in Amsterdam. Both Warhol and Beuys died before the conference commenced and Wijers invited Robert Rauschenberg to take Beuys place on the panel held in 1990. Louwrien Wijers' web site provides access to DVDs of the symposium. She also provides interesting quotes by the artists, scientists, and economists who were part of the discussions. www.louwrienwijers.nl

⁴ In New York City on January 11, 2011 the Trace Foundation organized a panel discussion about contemporary Tibetan Art. Both Nortse and Nyandak were on the panel. Nyandak told the audience about his latest installation at 18th Street Art Center in Santa Monica titled *Cornered Between Meditation and Non-meditation*, saying the installation would be destroyed after the exhibition, a further demonstration of the Buddhist philosophy of impermanence.

⁵ The statistics come from the International Campaign for Tibet website <http://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/>

⁶The exhibition brochure for *In the Land of No Heroes* can be viewed at <http://www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/exhibitions/the-land-of-no-heroes/tsering-nyandak-the-land-of-no-heroes-2613>

⁷ During a causal walk with a group of artists in Lhasa in 2008, I learned that the elaborate hairdo and the size and shape of the woman's head suggest her ethnicity. When the conversation turned to joking around, it led to revelations of cliché's and prejudices that Tibetans have internalized about their self worth. It is common to joke about the size and shape of ones head, square and big being the least attractive, and the color of ones skin, the lighter the better. I was not able to determine the sources of these stereotypes but the group agreed on them.

⁸ The article by Austin Ramzy was on the International *New York Times* website:

<http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/16/xi-jinping-calls>

The article refers to the article “Xinhua Insight: China's Xi points way for arts” as the original source of the information posted on the *Xinhua News* website

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-10/16/c_133719

⁹ Beijing based *New York Times* journalist, Austin Ramzy, was expelled from China in January 2014 for allegedly not applying for the proper residency status while waiting for his journalist status to be renewed. He now resides in Taiwan. The controversy surrounding his being expelled concerned his reporting on the Chinese Government corruption scandals being held at the time.

Figure 4.1 a



a. We Are Artisans for Vacuity

Gade

Lhasa, 2005, handmade paper, ink, 8 in. x 46 in.

Collection, Deborah Cohen

Figure 4.1 b, c, d



Figure 4.2



Board Game (Chinese Checkers)

Nortse

Lhasa, 2005, handmade paper, ink, silk kata, Chinese checkers

17 in. x 26 in.

Collection Deborah Cohen

Figure 4.3 a, b, c



a. *Bound (in A Bell Jar)*
Nortse
Lhasa, 2007
Photograph on canvas, 28 in. x 34 in.
Collection Deborah Cohen



b. *Butterfly*
Nortse
Lhasa, 2007
Photograph on canvas, 28 in. x 34 in.
Private collection



c. *Bound (in a Bell Jar)*
Fading picture on hanging scroll, 29 in. x 70 in.
Collection, Deborah Cohen

Figure 4.4 a b, c



a.

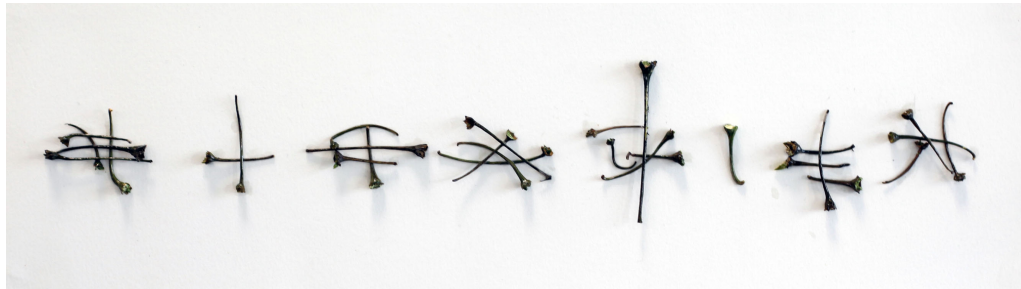
Hidden Mantra

Nortse

18th Street Arts Center, Santa Monica, California 2010-2011

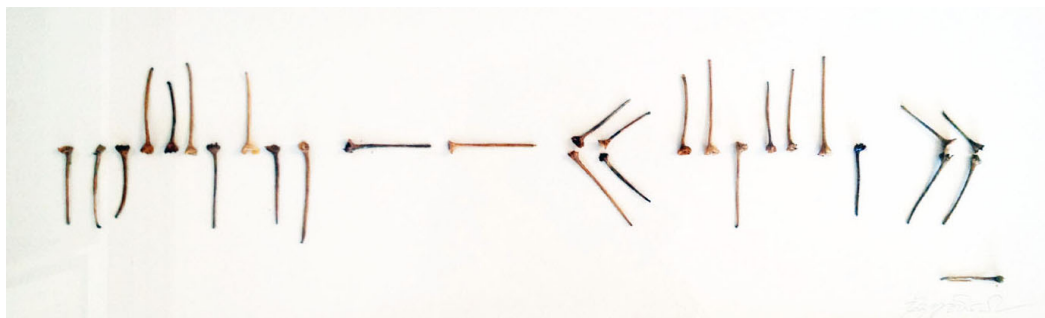
Mixed media pepper stems glued onto paper, 5 1/4 in. x 17 1/4 in. each

By permission of the Artist, Photograph by Deborah Cohen



b.

Hidden Mantra detail



c.

Hidden Mantra with signature

Mixed media, pepper stems glued onto paper, 5 1/4 in. x 17 1/4 in.

Collection, Deborah Cohen

Figure 4.5 a



a.
Jasper Johns
1961. Encaustic collage on canvas, 60 in. x 93 in.
Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles
Photograph by Deborah Cohen

MAP



b. *MAP* (detail)
Nortse & Nyandak in front of Jasper Johns *Map*
MOCA Los Angeles, 2006
Photograph by Peter Alan Roberts

Figure 4.6



Cornered Between Meditation and Non-Meditation

Tsering Nyandak
18th Street Arts Center, Santa Monica, California 2010-2011. Installation
Paper, collage, colored chalk, acrylic paint
Discarded after showing

Figure 4.7



Box

Tsering Nyandak
18th Street Arts Center Santa Monica, California 2010-2011, process drawing
Mixed media, 19 ½ in. x 25 ½ in.
Collection, Deborah Cohen

Figure 4.8



Tourist

Tsering Nyandak
Lhasa, 2013, Acrylic on linen, 39 ½ in. x 39 ½ in.
By permission of the Artist

Figure 4.9



Pet

Keltse
Lhasa, 2004
Mixed media on canvas, 47 in. x 59 in.
Collection, Deborah Cohen

Biographies of Selected Artists*

Ana Sang

Ana Sang was born in Lhasa in 1962. He lives and works in Lhasa. As a child he studied to be a ballet dancer and later decided to become a fine artist. In 1988 he graduated from Tibet University where he won prizes for his work shown at the Tibet Contemporary Art Exhibition. He is employed as a set and costume designer for the Tibetan Song and Dance Troupe. He has participated in various exhibitions internationally and locally. He has been a member of the Gedun Choephel Artist Guild since 2005. He describes his work as an exploration of Tibetan spirituality; he tries to find common characteristics between ancient and traditional Tibetan art and Western avant-garde art.

Benpa Chungdak aka Benchung

Born in Lhasa, Tibet in 1971, Benchung lives and works in Lhasa. He was an exchange student at Tianjin Academy of Arts in China between 1989 and 1992. He went on to graduate with a B.A. in Fine Arts from Tibet University in 1992. From 1996-1997 he went on to study at the Central Academy of Fine Art and Crafts in Beijing. In 2001 he received a grant from the Trace Foundation to participate in their International Exchange Program in New York. In 2007 he received an MA in Visual Arts from Oslo National Academy of Arts. He has had a solo exhibition in 2009 in London and was part of the *Four Contemporary Masters* at PW Contemporary Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Benchung is married and resides with his family in Lhasa.

Dedron

Born in Lhasa in 1976 into an aristocratic Tibetan family, her Father encouraged her to become a painter, which at first she resisted. Dedron graduated from the Art Department of the Tibet University (Lhasa) in 1999. She is a member artist of China Minority Art Association and of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild since 2003. Although her work is based on traditional Tibetan art, it is not a stylistic reproduction of that tradition. Dedron has created her own pictorial language in which ornamentation, design, and color are essential characteristics. She particularly loves Lhasa and the memories it holds. She is a teacher of blind children, which she says helps her appreciate the “feel” of things. She is married to fellow artist Tsering Namgyal and they have son.

Gade

Gade was born in 1971 in Lhasa and is a founding member of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. His Father is Han Chinese and his mother is Tibetan. He has written several manifestos for the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. He participated in artist in residencies including Snug Harbor in New York in 2002, and in 2003 at the Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Art Centre in Scotland. After studying Chinese painting and art history in

Beijing, he was taken into the Theory of History Department of the Central Academy of Art as a student assistant. He is now a teacher in the Art Department of Tibet University. Gade has become known for his “cartoon thangkhas” whose biting humor express his concerns about the state of Tibet. He says drawing is what makes him happy. His ideas stem from that process of improvisation that also inspires his multimedia and performance work. His latest work uses colorful Tibetan Buddhist prayer beads sewn onto Yak Wool. Each image relates to the current social, political, and economic conditions inside of Tibet. His piece *QR Code* transforms the prayer beads into the binary modules that produce the QR code. Scanning the code with a mobile app takes you to the Rossi and Rossi website. His piece *My Fingerprint* that also uses prayer beads sewn onto Yak Wool addresses the notion of the “body” and the “human spirit.” Besides his work being shown in Europe and the United States, it has been shown in Beijing, Hong Kong, Japan, Sydney, Estonia, New Zealand, Kuala Lumpur, and Macao.

Gonkar Gyatso

Gonkar Gyatso was born in Lhasa in 1961 to Tibetan parents who were Communist ideologues. He was forbidden to learn about Tibetan culture or religion. He studied Fine Art in Beijing and in London. He is founder of the Sweet Tea House, the first gallery in Europe devoted to showcasing contemporary Tibetan art. Before leaving Tibet in 1992, he participated with early debates with Tibetan artists in Lhasa, setting the tone for the eventual creation of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. Gyatso was the recipient of the Leverhulme Fellowship in 2003 and became “Artist in Residence” at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. He has participated in the 53rd Venice Biennial (Italy), the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane (Australia) and the 17th Sydney Biennale (Australia). His work is shown internationally and held in public and private collections. He has studios in London and New York. He says he wishes someday to have a show of his work in China, and in Lhasa, his hometown. In November 2014 he posted his 5th image for *My Identity*, which he explains took him years to compose. He finally made the “performance” in his sister’s house in Lhasa. The image is posted on Gyatso’s Website.

Jangyung

Born in Ningxia province in 1972 of Chinese parents Jangyung began painting and writing poetry in 1989 as a member of the student art union in high school. In 1992 he started his studies at the Art Department of Ningxia University. From 1996 to 2000 he lived in Beijing as an independent artist and in 2000 he moved to Tibet, where he co-founded the Gendun Choephel Artists Guild in 2003. Jangyung is intrigued by the clash of ancient tradition and modern industrialism of Tibet. He mourns the loss of old values and faiths, and his main inspiration is the symbiosis of the Tibet of his fantasy and the real contemporary Tibet. In 2011 he left Lhasa. He is married to artist Zhang ping. They have a son.

Jigme Trinley

Jigme Trinley was born in 1958 in Lhasa, Tibet. After graduating from the department of art, Tibet University in 1981, he undertook studies at the Department of Ethnic Arts, Central Institute of Fine Arts. He is Secretary General for the Tibetan Artists Association a member of the Chinese Artist Association and a council Member of the China oil Painting society. He sometimes shows his work with members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. He is the older brother of Guild member Shelka.

Jhamsang

Jhamsang was born in Lhasa in 1971. He is an art teacher and member of the Gedun Choephel Guild since 2003. In 1987, he became an apprentice of the master thangka painter Tenpa Rapten who encouraged him to paint in his own style as a contemporary artist. His expression of current Tibet is formed through assimilating and juxtaposing traditional techniques with new images as a way of questioning the issues of past and present, tradition and innovation, history and change. He took a government position as interviewer of monks so that he could surreptitiously find out about the history and practice thangka painting from inside the monastery. His work is shown internationally. Jhamsang is married and has a daughter. He lives and works in Lhasa.

Keltse

Born in Lhasa in 1971, Keltse is Art Editor of Tibet Publication Institute. In 1987, he enrolled at the department of stage design at the Shanghai Academy of Drama and in 1991 he started working for the Tibetan Song and Dance Troupe. He has participated in various exhibitions in Beijing and had a solo exhibition in Sydney. He has been a member of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild since 2005.

Kesang Lamdark

Born in Dharamsala, India, in 1963 he grew up in Switzerland where he apprenticed and worked as an interior architect. He studied art at Parsons The New School for Design in New York, and earned an MA in Visual Art at Columbia University in New York City. Lamdark states that wherever he lived, he always felt like an outsider. His search for an appropriate cultural space ultimately turned inwards, and he came to understand and reconnect with his heritage while living in the West. He says that by embracing his displaced, multicultural upbringing, he has discovered a wide-ranging personal energy. His multimedia work with light and projections are shown internationally. His works are in various private collections in Europe and the USA as well as public collections in Australia, the UK and the USA. He lives and works in Switzerland.

Nortse

Nortse was born in Lhasa in 1963. Between 1984 and 1991 he studied at the Art Department of Tibet University in Lhasa, and the Art Academies of Guangzhou and Tainjing. He has been a member of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild since 2005. He has worked in the film and television industry, has had retail shops selling “antiques” and furniture. He utilizes all of his skills in multimedia pieces that reflect his interest in the social and political changes inside Tibet. He was an artist in residence at 18th Street Arts Center in Santa Monica California in 2010-2011. His work has shown internationally in London, New York, Vermont, Colorado, Santa Monica California, Kathmandu, Tel Aviv, Estonia, Italy, Germany, Beijing, and Hong Kong, in both group and one-man shows. His current work revisits his 2008 self-portraiture in which he decorated himself to express his feelings about his circumstances; now he photographs his teenage son as the dressed up model in a sculptural performance of current events. He is married and has a son attending college. He lives and works in Lhasa.

Penpa

Born in Lhasa in 1974, Penpa is a founding member of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. In 2001, he curated the first Children’s Art Exhibition in Tuilong County, Lhasa. Encountering many different art styles and trends made it a challenge for Penpa to find the individual style he has embraced. Using himself as a model, he has been able to be an expressive subject for his paintings that are influenced by his social surroundings and the changing realities of the everyday life. He is married and has a son. He lives and works in Lhasa.

Ping Zhang

Ping was born in the mountainous area of Lingling City, Hunan Province in 1977 of Chinese parents. In 1995 she finished her studies and shortly thereafter moved to Beijing to work as a painter. In 2000, Ping worked in Tibet as a writer and painter. She calls Tibet her “psychic hometown.” In 2003, she created a Female Art Exhibition in Tibet. She is interested in exploring the feminine sensibility of women as children and objects. She left Lhasa in 2011 to live in Beijing. In 2014 she published a book called *Ten Years in Tibet*. She is married to artist Jangyung and they have a son. She now lives in Beijing with her husband and son.

Shelka

In 1981, Shelka enrolled in the Art Department of Tibet University and in 1985 he started working as Art Editor at the Tibet Teaching Material Publishing House. In 2000 his work “Mandala” was nominated as outstanding work in an exhibition held for the 25th Anniversary of Tibet University. After further studies at the Central Art Academy in Beijing, Shelka started working at the Tibet Exhibition Institute. He is currently a member of the Tibet Art Association and the Tibet Folk Art Institution. He has been a member of the Gedun

Choephel Artists Guild since 2005. He states that one of the biggest influences on his work was seeing Robert Rauschenberg “improvise” while making art. It is the practice he most admires in the process of making paintings. He is the younger brother of artist Jigme Trinley, and his wife is the artist Tsewang Tashi’s sister. He lives and works in Lhasa.

Somani

Somani was born in 1971 in Tibet. In 1994, he graduated from Tibet University Fine Art Department. Somani has most recently exhibited in the First Beijing Ping Zhong Tibet Oil painting exhibition in 2009. Somani’s oil paintings juxtapose iconic Western figures like President Obama with a traditional Tibetan color palette and technique—playing with themes of reincarnation and materialism. He has been a member of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild since 2009.

Tashi Phuntsok

Born in Lhasa in 1977, he graduated from the Central National University Art Institute in 2003. Tashi later went on to be a teacher. In 2003, Tashi began working as a teacher in Lhasa Number Three Primary School.

Tenzin Jigme

Tenzin Jigme was born in 1968 in Lhasa and studied at the Art Department of Tibet University from 1991 to 1994. In 1995, he participated in an exhibition for the 20th anniversary of the Tibet University and received a “Distinctive Work” award. In his works, Tenzin Jigme says he like to use opposite concepts such as, “reality” versus “fantasy,” “materialism” versus “spiritualism,” “existence versus extinction,” while combining traditional culture with modern life. Tenzin Jigme has been a member of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild since 2003.

Tenzing Rigdol

Tenzing Rigdol was born in Kathmandu, Nepal. He has a diploma in traditional thangka painting and also studied sand painting and butter sculpture in Kathmandu and India. In 2005, he attained a BA in Art History and a BFA in Painting/Drawing at the University of Colorado at Denver. Tenzing Rigdol’s art has been exhibited in numerous venues in the United States, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, and China. In 2008 he was awarded the Rubin Himalayan Artist Fellowship at the Vermont Studio Center. He now lives and works in New York City. His work ranges from painting, sculpture, drawing, and collage, to digital, video-installation, performance art, and site-specific pieces. He has been widely exhibited internationally and his artworks are included in museums as well as public and private collections worldwide. He has also published three collections of poetry, “R—The Frozen Ink” (2008), “Anatomy of Nights” (2011) and “Butterfly’s Wings” (2011), printed by Tibet Writes. He lives and works in New York.

Tserang Dhundrup

After graduating from the Fine Art department of the Northwest Minorities College in Lanzhou in 1987, Tserang Dhundrup studied at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. His artworks were included in major national exhibitions in Lhasa, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong. In 2001 and 2002, he became “Artist in Residence” first at Banff Center for the Arts in Canada and then at the Sun Harbor Cultural Center in New York. Dhundrup acknowledges past traditions, and uses these influences to express his own, ongoing personal search in a pictorial language unaffected by convention. He works as a set designer and painter for the Tibetan Song and Dance Troupe. He is married and has a son. He lives and works in Lhasa.

Tsering Dorje

Tsering Dorje was born in 1958 in Lhasa. He grew up during China’s period of the Cultural Revolution. He graduated from the choreographic arts department at the Shanghai Academy of Performing Arts and undertook further studies at the oil painting department of Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. His works have won numerous awards and have been exhibited both in China and abroad. His earliest and strongest influences were in seeing French impressionist paintings in a show that came to Beijing in 1985. Tsering Dorje is currently a member of the Chinese Arts Association and Vice President of the Painters’ Association of Tibet. He worked as the senior designer for the Tibetan Song and Dance Troupe until his retirement in 2009. In his retirement he enjoys painting the landscape. He is a supporter of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild providing encouragement for their explorations.

Tsering Namgyal

Tsering Namgyal was born in Sog County, Nagchu Prefecture in 1976. In 1999 he graduated from the Art Department of Tibet University and in the same year, his work “Dream” was nominated at the National Exhibition of Minority Regions of China in Beijing. He is currently an art teacher at the Lhasa First Elementary School. He and his wife Dedron share a modern studio they designed and had built on the roof of their existing house in Lhasa. He is interested in Mastiff dogs, indigenous to Tibet. He and Dedron have a son.

Tsering Nyandak

Tsering Nyandak was born in Lhasa in 1974. When he was ten years old his Mother sent him to the children’s school in Dharamsala, India for traditional Tibetan schooling, hoping he would eventually immigrate to the United States, where her sister lived. Her sister was married to social anthropologist and Tibet scholar, Melvyn C. Goldstein. Nyandak stayed in India from 1985 to 1993 before returning to Lhasa. He was never able to get the permission to immigrate to the United States. In 1999, mutual friends in Lhasa arranged for him to study art under Tsewang Tashi a lecturer in the fine arts department at Tibet University.

Though Nyandak was never officially a student at the school, he interacted with the other students and attended lectures. He has acted as the liaison and translators for all who interact with the Guild. He was an artist in resident at 18th Street Arts center in Santa Monica, California in 2010-2011. He has had one man shows and participated in group shows internationally. He is a founding member of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. He lives and works in Lhasa.

Tsewang Tashi

Tsewang Tashi was born in Lhasa in 1963. He is a founding member of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. In 1984, he graduated from the Fine Arts Department of the Central University for National Minorities in Beijing. He also completed a Master's degree in Art from the National College of Art and Design in Norway and is currently Associate Professor at the Arts Department of Tibet University. His works have been exhibited in international museums and galleries, and he has published papers pertaining to Tibetan art education and painting. Tashi avoids incorporating certain elements in his work that would perpetuate the myth of Tibet as Shangri-La and believes that contemporary art cannot be created when contemporary life is ignored. Tashi is married and has a daughter. He lives and works in Lhasa.

Wangshiming

Wangshiming was born in 1968 in Chunglai, Sichuan County. In 1988, he enrolled at the Art Department of PLA Academy in Beijing. In 1992 he left the PLA Academy and settled in Tibet as an independent artist, and in 2003 he joined the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. In 2004 he participated in the group exhibition in London at the Sweet Tea Gallery, and in *The Lhasa Train* exhibit in Santa Fe. In his art, Wangshiming says he aims to depict genuine life and the imprints life makes on his mind. Landscapes are his preferred subject, because of their sense of beauty and realness.

Yak Tseten

Yak Tseten was born in 1968 in Tuilong, Lhasa. He enrolled at the Art Department of Tibet University in 1980. In 1985, he became Director Stage Designer at the Institute of Tibetan Opera. He is a member of Gedun Choephel Artists Guild and has been actively involved in the exhibition design of provincial exhibitions, as well as the interior design of restaurants and nightclubs in Lhasa. He has named himself after the yak, which he considers will one day be the only completely authentic lasting Tibetan presence inside Tibet. His work is sold everywhere in Lhasa, including tourist shops and restaurants at the foot of the Potala Palace. He identifies with the power and stubbornness of the animal and so paints it in every manner of color and abstraction he can. He makes his pictures on handmade paper that can easily be rolled up and just as easily framed. He also has collaborated with other Guild artists like Nyandak to produce multi media pictures which are depictions of performative acts.

Zhungde

Zhungde was born in Lhasa in 1969 of Han Chinese parents. From 1985 to 1988, he studied under Chinese artist Chao Yung, who currently resides in the U.S. In 1988, Zungde opened the Lhasa Artist Guild and, in 2003, he joined the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. During his childhood fragmented memories and strange dreams caused Zhungde to start making art, which made him feel calm again. He says he paints to pursue a simple life, examine his own heart, and pacify his uneasy emotions.

* These biographical sketches do not necessarily reflect recent circumstances of the artists, as the latest news is not always available from Tibet.

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