

[Back to regular view](#) • [Print this page](#)

Dalai Lama tribute uneven, but brilliant at its best

(<http://www.suntimes.com/entertainment/galleries/155953,WKP-News-hawk01.article>)

December 1, 2006

BY MARGARET HAWKINS Galleries

Any group show in which Richard Avedon, Bill Viola, Laurie Anderson, Chuck Close, Jenny Holzer, Anish Kapoor and Christo contribute work inspired by the Dalai Lama and his vision of world peace seems like it would have to be a winner. How could it be anything but?

And as a collaborative project around an ideal, it is. The intention of the exhibit, now on view at the Loyola University Museum of Art, is impeccable. Here is a theme show of work donated by 88 like-minded artists from 30 countries all considering the idea that it is possible to better the world through art. All of the work, in a variety of media from video to painting, installation to photography, will later be auctioned to raise money for the Dalai Lama Foundation and the Committee of 100 for Tibet. The show is divided into 10 sections that explore aspects of this enormous subject, including one devoted to portraits of the Dalai Lama, another featuring images of and about Tibet, and several that address Buddhist principles such as Unity, Impermanence and Compassion. Quotes from the Dalai Lama are posted throughout the museum to further illuminate the ideas that inspired the artists.

That nearly 100 artists, some of them well known and highly successful, are willing to participate in such a venture is truly wonderful and opposes the current trend toward art that is intensely focused on the self, or if not on the personal self, then on minute formal considerations irrelevant to almost everyone else who looks at it. This show is the opposite; it is generous in spirit and inclusive in subject.

The only trouble is there is far too much work in this show to make it a really satisfying viewing experience. Despite LUMA's spacious two-story exhibition space, the show ends up being crowded and even hard to see. This is a case where less would have been more, especially since the work is of uneven quality and much of it is not nearly as good as some of it. Could only select works have been shown but all of them included in the catalog and the auction? That way the mission would have been served but the show would have been spared.

That said, there is no point in dwelling on the not so good work because there is so much here of interest. By far the most exciting piece, tucked away upstairs if anything so large can be said to be tucked, is Lewis de Soto's "Paranirvana" a 26-foot inflatable reclining Buddha on which the artist has imposed his own self-portrait. This work was shown at the NIU gallery a few years ago as a single work installation and that setting allowed us to see it better than we do here. Still it is a knockout, visually and conceptually. As a portrayal of the dying Buddha, it is a perfect metaphor in which its form is its subject, making us think of the cycle of life and death, and of air and breath as the common substance we all share. When this Buddha is unplugged air flows out and it simply deflates; its shape disappears, Buddha with de Soto's face dies and the air that once filled it becomes part of us.

Laurie Anderson's video installation is as weird and inspired as we would expect, featuring a cave-like space in which video of her and her Jack Russell terrier is superimposed on small clay figures while audio of Anderson riffing on existential matters drones pleasantly in the background. Anderson's essential playfulness is well suited to the Buddhist mindset.

Richard Avedon's photo "His Holiness, the Dalai Lama" is memorable as much for its simplicity as for its insight into the world leader. Here the Dalai Lama stands among a group of young monks; he appears simple, both of them and yet apart, luminous somehow and large and deeply alive. Positioned nearby is Chuck Close's very different photographic portrait. Here he appears to be a contemporary man, wearing glasses and a crooked smile; he looks direct, affable and businesslike, ready to negotiate if necessary.

Jenny Holzer, though, may have the last word. Her little marble footstool, engraved with one of her characteristic, mystifying truisms, is in the very back of the last gallery on the first floor. Modest as its position is, the stool's carved words sum up the message of the show: "It is in your self interest to find a way to be very tender."

Margaret Hawkins is a local free-lance writer.

'THE MISSING PEACE: ARTISTS CONSIDER THE DALAI LAMA'

- Through Jan. 10
- Loyola University Museum of Art, 820 N. Michigan
- (312) 915-7600

© Copyright 2006 Sun-Times News Group | [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy](#)