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The Dalai Lama's many faces

Tibet's spiritual leader inspires artists in new UCLA exhibit

July 20, 2006



Who is the Dalai Lama?

It's a question with a variety of answers. To some, he's Avalokitesvara, an enlightened being of compassion. To some he's the head of the Tibetan people, whose land has been occupied by China since 1959. And still for others he's a man named Tenzin Gyatso, whose mission is to spread peace and the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism.

But those answers merely scratch the surface. "The Missing Peace" is a collection of responses by 88 artists from 25 countries, each given the task of considering the Dalai Lama. The international traveling exhibition, organized by the Dalai Lama Foundation and the Committee of 100 for Tibet, has begun its journey at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History in Los Angeles.

On Sept. 13, three days after the show closes, the Dalai Lama will give a talk titled "Compassion: The Source of Happiness" at Gibson Amphitheatre in Universal City.

Randy Rosenberg, who curated the UCLA exhibit, wanted the show to touch on the Dalai Lama's many facets.

"I organized the exhibition into several themes that form a kind of spiral," Rosenberg said. "The initial themes are literal and have to do with the Dalai Lama as a spiritual leader, as an icon for peace, as a man. The spiral moves out to the bigger concept of Tibet, and then you move to the more abstract ideals that he embodies, like the concept of impermanence."

The initial offering is Bill Viola's "A Blessing," a video shot last year in India of the Dalai Lama delivering a blessing to visitors. Part of its translation reads "As long as space endures/ And for as long as living beings remain/ Until then may I too abide/ To dispel the misery of the world."

Various portraits fill the first gallery, the most unusual being Sylvie Fleury's "Dalai Lama's Shoes." The artist asked for a personal item of the Tibetan leader, which she captured using a technique called Kirlian photography. It creates a halo effect on the object that some people believe is a person's life force or aura.

When told about the image of his glowing shoes, the often-lighthearted Dalai Lama remarked that the energy seen in the photograph might be from his cobbler who had resoled the footwear.

Many of the artists are not well known by the mainstream public, though the second gallery, which explores Tibet, has a clear exception. America's most famous Buddhist, actor Richard Gere, has offered a photo he took of a yogi named Neljorpa.

There are several ruminations on the Buddha, but it's Lewis de Soto's "Paranirvana" that dominates this section.

The artist built a 25-foot inflatable nylon and cloth figure of the Buddha at the moment of his physical death, on which he superimposed his own face. His work poses the question, "How will I face the moment of my own death?"

Sand mandalas are a traditional Tibetan art form. Beautiful and intricate patterns of sand are painstakingly crafted by monks, only to be destroyed soon after completion—a symbol of the transitory nature of existence.

Ryuichi Sakamoto, who was asked to create a sound piece, enhanced his work, "Sonic Mandala," by placing 13 speakers underneath a canvas filled with sand. As his music is emitted, the sound waves form ever-changing shapes.

Performance artist Laurie Anderson's piece, "From the Air," is a tiny video projection of Anderson seated next to her dog. The images are projected onto clay figures, which create a holographic-like image. Anderson relates a story of how the threat of vultures from the sky changed the way her dog perceived danger, just as Americans were altered after the attack from above on 9/11.

Reincarnation is a major component of Buddhist beliefs, and artist Salustiano, working in deep red acrylic paint, based his image of a young girl on what the next incarnation of the Dalai Lama, which would be considered the 15th, might look like.

Perhaps the most impressive piece is the last. "Impermanence: The Time of Man," by David and Hi-Jin Hodge, is a video installation incorporating 120 interviews about impermanence, each displayed on video iPods. The interviews, at times, are running simultaneously, creating a cacophony that can be deciphered partially by standing directly in front of a single iPod. At other points in the program, a single interview is projected on each iPod, so one voice stands alone.

"The Missing Peace" is a rarity in exhibitions because the artists have donated all of the work, which will be auctioned during its international tour to raise funds, in part, for efforts to help bring about world peace.

Each artist may have provided a different answer for who the Dalai Lama is, but by using their skills to help the world gain enlightenment and peace, they spoke in a unified voice.

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