

World leaders should see the Frost Art Museum's latest exhibits

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Lewis deSoto's *Paranirvana* (1999)

Details:

"The Missing Peace: Artists Consider the Dalai Lama" and "Lacuna in Testimony":

Through January 10.

"En Vista": Through December 6. Frost Art Museum, 10975 SW 17th St., Miami; 305-348-2890;

thefrost.fiu.edu Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday noon to 5 p.m.

Subject(s):

[Frost Art Museum](#), [Miami local art](#), [Dalai Lama](#), [Barack Obama](#)

October was a strange month. It began with Barack Obama shunning the Dalai Lama in order to keep hardliners in Communist China mollified. Just a few days later, the president unexpectedly joined the Tibetan Buddhist as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate while drawing fire from both the right and left.

One wonders what either man was thinking when, by October's end, the Pentagon announced the United States had suffered the greatest number of American casualties in a single month since the beginning of the eight-year war in Afghanistan. Things seem to be turning for the worse on the martial front for Obama, who is facing demands to send more troops in hopes of changing the course of the increasingly unpopular and growing war.

Those are some of the issues that might come to mind at the Frost Art Museum, where a timely show happened to open when our prez was dissing the Dalai Lama and the Nobel Committee members might have had visions of Obama's Pax Americana dancing in their heads.

"The Missing Peace: Artists Consider the Dalai Lama" corrals the works of more than 80 artists whose photos, videos, installations, paintings, sculptures, and tapestries honor the global spiritual leader and Buddhist who has devoted his life to demonstrating the path to peace.

The sprawling exhibit offers a provocative and varied collection of takes on the Tibetan holy man, the principles of Buddhism, and the value of all sentient life, by the likes of Chuck Close, Laurie Anderson, Bill Viola, Anish Kapoor, Jenny Holzer, Marina Abramovic, and many other top-tier names.

The show opens with a sound and video installation by filmmakers David Hodge and Hi-Jin Hodge. In *Impermanence: The Time of Man*, they used 16 speakers and a 16-channel video on iPods to explore the temporal nature of life. For their eye-catching piece, the duo interviewed 120 people to gather their thoughts on the fleeting nature of life, who we are as human beings, and how people coexist in the world today.

Standing in front of the crowd of talking heads that appear on the tiny, business card-sized screens, viewers might become confused by the overlapping voices drowning out each other's opinions. At first, the crowing cacophony is reminiscent of a raucous City of Miami commission meeting, until the voices reach a crescendo and almost sound like prayerful chants. The piece

evokes the sense of people coming together to celebrate the universal aspirations that bind us in a common humanity, rather than the seemingly inexorable differences that separate us.

Another installation that twangs a similar chord is Marina Abramovic's continuous video loop titled *At the Waterfall*. Between 2000 and 2003, the artist collected 120 video portraits of monks and nuns, representing five Tibetan Buddhist traditions, during prayer. Her videos are projected simultaneously in a grid on a large wall, with the overlapping devotions melodiously flowing together as if to form a cascading babel or a roaring waterfall.

One of the most impressive works on display is Lewis deSoto's bus-size inflatable Buddha, which appears to be fashioned from distressed denim. The piece, *Paranirvana*, examines how Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, continued walking the earth after attaining enlightenment in order to teach others how to achieve salvation. The holy man preached his last sermon at the age of 80 before dying and entering nirvana. After the artist lost his father, he superimposed his own visage on the inflatable sculpture to question how he would face the moment of his own death.

Across from deSoto's whopper, Andra Samelson's *Bamiyan: A Continuum* offers a stinging commentary on fundamentalist Taliban thugs' destruction of the colossal Buddhas in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. Blasted apart in 2001 in a savage act of censorship, the statues were considered the largest of their kind.

By combining 108 indigo blue Buddhas in a repeating pattern in ink and acrylic on rice paper and wood panel, Samelson delivers a message that beauty and culture are transcendent through the possibility of replication.

Long-Bin Chen explores the relationship between Buddhism and DNA using a helix-like stack of Manhattan phone books he regards as the cultural refuse of an information society. His *World Buddha Head Project* depicts the faces of the Buddha, an animal, and a human carved into the tower of Yellow Pages, blending into each other to remark how all sentient beings share the same life spark.

Many of the works are traditional portraits of the Dalai Lama, including a black-and-white snap by the late fashion shutterbug Richard Avedon.

Among the most compelling of these is Bill Viola's video, situated at the entrance of the show, which captures the holy man delivering a prayer. Viola and his family visited the spiritual leader in Dharamsala, India, in 2005. In the brief video, the Dalai Lama offers a prayer and pauses a moment to cough before continuing his serene benediction. The scene feels like the man is personally greeting each and every person attending the show.

One of Viola's more visceral works, *Bodies of Light*, is tucked into an alcove near the rear of the museum gallery. In it, male and female torsos appear on opposite video screens that shimmer with electronic snow. Suddenly, glowing orbs pop up and float over the bodies' chakras, or internal points of spiritual energy. Figures begin to dissolve while bone and sinew appear, creating the odd impression of watching a Discovery Channel episode about alien abduction and weird experiments.

The Frost also has on view a pair of other shows that deal with impermanence and the human

condition.

"En Vista" is a new exhibit by husband and wife photographers Eduardo de Valle and Mirta Gomez. The conceptual team traveled to the bone orchards of the Yucatan to photograph the transformation of human remains in Mexico's rural cemeteries.

Their probing examination features 18 lavish C-prints that are gorgeously lit and make the subject matter palatable. In these backwoods graveyards, bodies are typically not embalmed before burial and are allowed to rot naturally for several years before being unearthed, bundled in rags, and deposited in makeshift ossuaries where they remain in plain sight for all to view.

One of the searing pictures shows a skull caked with crusty, soiled hair swathed in what appears to be a diaper. Another shot reveals a grinning mandible peeking through a crease in a rumpled bed sheet. Two pictures of what appear to be sun-kissed strips of parchment turn out to be beef jerky-like shreds of human skin.

The exhibit is enhanced by a 15-minute documentary-style video of the couple's hair-raising journey to Mexico's flimsy funerary grounds.

India's Navjot Altaf delves deeper into the human condition in her brain-blistering video installation, *Lacuna in Testimony*. She explores the burning questions of civil, social, and political strife and seeks to expose the injustice and cruelty that have plagued her homeland.

Her piece is inspired by the Hindu-Muslim riots that took place on an unprecedented scale in the state of Gujarat, India, in 2002. She interviewed victims of the riots housed in relief camps and documented their harrowing tales. Her three video projections unfold in a fragmented fashion, opening with a scene of the Arabian Sea sweeping across the three screens. Upon the waves breaking on the shore, a grid of windows appears, revealing the riot survivors relating their stories juxtaposed against scenes of war and the collapse of the Twin Towers.

Beneath those images, the artist has placed 72 mirrors that refract the terror developing above. As the images slowly disappear, the sea turns blood red and the sounds of children chanting nursery rhymes rend the air.

It's a chilling reminder that we live during troubled times in a world where peace and the value of life are transitory at best. And like many of the other mournful works at the Frost, it's a convincing argument why those with the power to make life-and-death decisions across our planet can benefit from seeing this kind of show.