

# Contemporary Art

Worcester Art Museum

## Lewis deSoto *Paranirvana (self-portrait)*





Photo: Stephen Briggs

*Paranirvana (self-portrait)*, 1999, painted nylon, electric fan, 25 x 7 x 6 feet, installation at the Worcester Art Museum. Courtesy the artist and Bill Maynes Gallery, New York.

## *Paranirvana (self-portrait)*

September 1 – November 18, 2001

In his recent sculpture, *Paranirvana (self-portrait)*, Lewis deSoto portrays himself as the Buddha at the moment of death and supreme consciousness. Monumental yet empty, this 25-foot-long inflated cloth figure was inspired by a well-known reclining Buddha at the Gal Vihara in Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka. The majestic and imposing 12th century figure, one of four colossal stone carvings, extends nearly 42 feet and has been characterized as “the most remarkable Buddha in Sinhalese sculpture.”<sup>1</sup> The image of the *Paranirvana* commemorates the physical death of the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, who lived and taught in India in the 6th century B.C. and at the age of 35 reached Enlightenment, after which he was recognized as the Buddha, or “fully enlightened one.” At the age of 80, he went to Kusinagara where he preached his final sermon. It is told that as he lay in pain dying, he continued to give compassionate lessons on the nature of consciousness and the structure of *samsara* (the cycle of life, death, suffering, and rebirth). And with his death, “the physical elements of which his human body was composed, disintegrated into the transcendental condition known as *parinirvana*, the

‘ultimate extinction,’ defined as the final extinction of all worldly aspiration and craving.”<sup>2</sup>

Fluent in both ancient Buddhist tradition and contemporary media, deSoto remains faithful in his sculpture to the *parinirvana* pose that is a constant in Buddhist iconography—the Buddha is always depicted lying on his right side, his head resting on the palm of his hand, and his left arm outstretched. But while the ancient stone Buddha exists in a perpetually solid state, the “life” of deSoto’s inflatable sculpture is, like the human body, dependent on air (produced in this case by an internal electrical fan). At the end of the day when the fan is unplugged, the sculpture simply yet effectively deflates (a symbolic “extinction”). “Breathing” to the faint hum of the fan’s motor, deSoto’s *Paranirvana* visually embraces one of the Buddha’s most essential teachings: “Whatever is of the nature of arising, all that is of the nature of cessation.”<sup>3</sup>

While Sakyamuni is the historical Buddha—evidence exists that he actually lived—ancient images of the Buddha were not physical likenesses of Sakyamuni but vehicles for communicating ideas of Buddhahood

transcendence. By replacing the peaceful countenance of the Gal Vihara Buddha's face with his own bearded image, deSoto not only makes an immediate and indelible link between the past and present but also comments on what he describes as the "Buddha nature in all of us." With this poetic and profound gesture, deSoto conceptually positions the conventional specificity of self-portraiture in Western culture within the context and spirit of a central Buddhist teaching—that there is no such entity as a "self" and what we recognize as an individual is merely "a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies."<sup>4</sup>

*"In Western culture, we are asked to consider the soul an irreducible entity that passes from this life to another—the simple dissolution of biological matter. Buddhism, alternatively, describes anatman, or 'no-soul,' a condition in which who we are is what we do, and what we do is woven into the fabric of all events."<sup>5</sup>* — Lewis deSoto

DeSoto brings to his work a strong interest in archaeology, anthropology, and world religions. His undergraduate education included religious studies with an emphasis in Japanese and Chinese Buddhism, before he went on to pursue a graduate degree in studio arts. Today, when the realm of the sacred is not a common concern in contemporary art, deSoto's aesthetic inquiries into our common aspirations (past and present) toward the divine distinguish him among his peers. Over the past decade, the depth of his art's subject—the unchanging nature of human existence—has been explored through an equally broad range of treatments, media, and environments, with the frequent incorporation of mechanical and audio components and oftentimes collaboration with engineers, technicians, and musicians. DeSoto's aesthetic process might be described as a kind of meditative materialism—where spiritual revelation is experienced not as antithetical to the concrete or physical but rather of and through it. His adeptness at transforming the commonplace—objects from the contemporary material world including furniture, a record player, a piano, a row boat, and an automobile engine as well as raw

materials such as coal and ice—into a contemplative and multisensorial experience of the infinite, locates his practice somewhere between the shamanistic "social sculpture" of Joseph Beuys and the theatrical hybridizations of sculptor/director Robert Wilson.



View of the Gal Vihara Parinirvana rock carving at Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka, 12th century A.D.

In much of his work, deSoto tends to mine both the inherent expressive possibilities and deficiencies of late 20th century technology. In *Parinirvana*, its ancient iconography and simple fan-inflated mechanization masks the sculpture's otherwise high-tech background. Based on a photo-reproduction of the stone original, the work was constructed from a clay model (about two feet long) that was then scaled to its final form using computer technology. DeSoto used Adobe Photoshop software to replace

the Buddha's face with a photographic image of his own. Under his supervision, commercial balloon fabricators in San Diego manufactured the inflatable form. Facial details, "snail-shell" curls of hair, and the linear folds of a monastic robe were painted with an airbrush, echoing the stylized treatment of the original stone carving.

DeSoto's art frequently directs our attention to an experience of change and the passage of time. *Parinirvana* was occasioned by the death of his father and followed a series of works conceived and presented within the context of a "recumbent" state. These works—including *Recumbent (Entropy)*, a suit of medieval metal armor dispersed across the floor and *Recumbent (under grass)*, a shroud of silk covering a figure of wooden blocks (fashioned from wood left in his father's workshop)—explored conditions of absence and loss through hidden contours and hollow masses. Although the scale of *Parinirvana* initially seems, like the subject of death, daunting and overpowering, its fragile materiality and empty interior ultimately underscore a sense of insubstantiality and impermanence. By claiming the figure of the dying Buddha as his own, deSoto repositions the subject



Photo: Stephen Biggs

## About the Artist

Born in 1954, Lewis deSoto lives in Napa, California and maintains a studio in New York City. He is a Professor of Art at San Francisco State University. He received a BA in Studio Art (with extended coursework in Religious Studies) in 1978 from the University of California, Riverside, and a MFA in 1981 from Claremont Graduate School in Claremont, California. Over the past two decades, his work has been exhibited in museums and galleries throughout the United States as well as in England, Italy, Mexico, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden. He has received numerous commissions for public projects and was the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship.

He is represented in New York by Bill Maynes Gallery.

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in our time and space. DeSoto invites us to experience this colossal human not only from afar but intimately and in the round and, as we do so, to contemplate with him our place in the universe and how we will face the moment of our own physical death.

Susan L. Stoops  
*Curator of Contemporary Art*

### Notes:

1. David L. Snellgrove, *The Image of the Buddha* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1978), 298.
2. *Ibid.*, 9.
3. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 31.
4. *Ibid.*, 20.
5. Lewis deSoto quoted in *Lewis deSoto: Recital* (Cambridge: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1998), 2.