Kora: A Meditation on Pilgrimage

Nov 1 2014
Jan 4 2015

Nortse, (b. Lhasa, 1963), Group Photo, 2007, Chromogenic color print, 30” x 32”. The Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection.

A pilgrim, a tourist guide, and a superhero—Nortse's Group Photo explores three distinct archetypes of contemporary Tibetan culture. The identities of each figure have been superseded by the masks they wear. Communicating a stifling of the senses, images of bandaging are recurrent in the artist's work. The maxim "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" comes to mind as the humorous composition and overt pop culture references speak to the artist's interpretation of the modernization of culture in contemporary Tibet.

The left figure emphasizes the materiality of religious practice. A scroll of traditional Buddhist pecha covers his eyes. Wearing an opulent, traditional silk brocade vest and semi-precious stone necklaces, he holds a shiny new prayer wheel. The central figure assumes the iconography of a Chinese tour guide, his traditional Tibetan shirt is covered by a blazer and red tie. He wears the hat of a tour guide, and holds an antiquated mobile phone to his ear. Chinese newspaper ads cover his mouth. The figure on the right embodies Ultraman, the protagonist of a Japanese television series popular amongst Tibetan children. Wearing a mask and holding a remote control, he is afforded agency only through the beloved character and the medium of television.
Kora: A Meditation on Pilgrimage

Nov 1 2014
Jan 4 2015

In the Tibetan Buddhist and Bön traditions, a kora is a type of pilgrimage made through repeatedly walking and meditating around a sacred site or temple, the word itself meaning circumambulation or revolution. As a counterpoint to Anonymous: Contemporary Tibetan Art, the artists featured in Kora: A Meditation on Pilgrimage examine pilgrimage in its broadest possible context, with many creating site specific works for the Panorama’s unique environment.

Footprints of an imaginary devotee encircle the entire space, connecting works that explore different ideas of veneration. Each artist occupies a wall, suggestive of stages on the journey. The architecture of the Panorama and its ramp structure make it impossible to complete a conventional circumambulation. It is a discontinuous or uncompleted kora surrounding the three-dimensional depiction of the city of New York. In The Last Supper by Tulku Jamyang, there is an obvious link to this idea of a ruptured circle: the calendar of rituals, performed by Dalai Lamas in Tibet since the 16th century, cannot for the foreseeable future be performed there.

As exiles, each of the artists live in multi-cultural cities, where exposure to other ideas and cultures is a daily experience that can feel like sensory overload. Outside of Buddhist culture, the speed of modern life and ideas of self-expression and identity are everywhere, and have become a currency in their own right within the global art market. The works collectively imply a mourning for Tibet experienced by those in exile, or an acceptance and tentative embrace of multi-culturalism. Kora: A Meditation on Pilgrimage can also be seen as an attempt to encircle the city in a different philosophy, pointing the viewer toward a life of selflessness and contemplation. Visually, many of the pieces in Kora show traits of the attention to detail and technique of Thangka—traditional Tibetan painting, though the ideas behind some suggest a break with religious tradition, an incomplete pilgrimage or rupture of the path to enlightenment.

Cover: Chungpo Tsering, (b. Tingri, 1963), Selfie, 2014, Charcoal on paper, 42” x 36”. Courtesy of the artist.

**Chungpo Tsering**

In Chungpo’s witty drawings, levity underlies the serious issues represented. Rendered in charcoal, their tall portrait format is reminiscent of the religious paintings of saints in traditional Western art. In *Untitled*, we see a person with a bouquet for a head holding a fire extinguisher. An allusion to immolation, also inferred in *When the air is thin*, the fire extinguisher of the former and the head of the latter (literally a bunch of burnt matches), have similarities with saints holding symbols of their martyrdom. They are ultimately about struggle, and the infantilization of the population through colonialism. The tender rendering of form, silk and flowers adds an element of subtlety to a subject that is difficult to discuss, let alone depict.

**Tulku Jamyang**

Jamyang developed the unusual technique of burning holes in paper to create his multilayered pieces. The partially hidden underlayers of his work often contain text or symbols, and are usually brightly colored. The making of the work is itself symbolic—he burns the paper with incense sticks, often used to aid meditative practice.  

*The Last Supper* depicts a metaphorical meal with the Dalai Lama—head of Tibetan Buddhism. Jamyang appropriates Leonardo Da Vinci’s painting and presents a fictional dinner where all of the Lamas were gathered, prior to his holiness’s flight into India in 1959. Since then, Lamas and Tibetans have scattered across the globe. Collectively, they share a common prayer to be together once again. In *The Last Supper*, Jamyang represents the four religious schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Nyingma, Sakya, Geluk and Kagyu) and the Bön school (signified by the robe with blue stripes).
Anonymous

In Footprints, viewers are presented with what appears to be a dilemma. A person walks in circles around a dimly lit room evocative of an institutional cell or an interrogation chamber. The subject could be held there as a prisoner, or be there of their own volition. They continually spin a prayer wheel, a practice usually repeated during circumambulation. As koras are traditionally completed outside, an indoor setting increases the feeling of desperation and confinement. At almost two hours long, it is redolent of endurance-based performance art. The circumambulation of the devotee around this tiny space becomes increasingly labored throughout the duration of the piece.

Tashi Norbu

Norbu’s painting Clock-wise & Counter Clock-wise, addresses the idea of pilgrimage as being a lifelong quest. He references the Wheel of Life by depicting the three poisons of man. In traditional Tibetan paintings, a hog, a bird, and a snake are seen nose to tail in a circle, attempting to eat each other. In Norbu’s contemporary version, images ranging from Disney characters to kitsch objects are used to reinterpret these traditional symbols: the warthog represents ignorance; a drinking bird ornament, continually bobbing its head to drink, represents desire; and the snake represents hatred. The snake’s grip on the warthog’s leg illustrates that ignorance and hatred go hand in hand.

Tenzing Rigdol

In a practice Rigdol describes as the removing and the replacing of traditions with contemporary concerns, he collages a multitude of images with systematic precision. The prominent depiction of landscape in traditional Tibetan art, for instance, is discarded in favor of pages written in Uchen, a formal font used in all Tibetan scripture. Traditional rules prescribing style of adornment, painting method and religious portrayal, are abandoned in favor of the reduction of representation to outlined form. The negative space within this line makes way for Rigdol’s array of images and complex assemblages. The rendering of these images is astonishingly deft; silk, paper and photographs are seamlessly appliquéd in a technique reminiscent of the sewing of Thangkas—traditional Tibetan paintings—into silk wall hangings.
A pilgrim, a tourist guide, and a superhero—Nortse's Group Photo explores three distinct archetypes of contemporary Tibetan culture. The identities of each figure have been superseded by the masks they wear. Communicating a stifling of the senses, images of bandaging are recurrent in the artist's work. The maxim “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” comes to mind as the humorous composition and overt pop culture references speak to the artist’s interpretation of the modernization of culture in contemporary Tibet.

The left figure emphasizes the materiality of religious practice. A scroll of traditional Buddhist pecha covers his eyes. Wearing an opulent, traditional silk brocade vest and semi-precious stone necklaces, he holds a shiny new prayer wheel. The central figure assumes the iconography of a Chinese tour guide, his traditional Tibetan shirt is covered by a blazer and red tie. He wears the hat of a tour guide, and holds an antiquated mobile phone to his ear. Chinese newspaper ads cover his mouth. The figure on the right embodies Ultraman, the protagonist of a Japanese television series popular amongst Tibetan children. Wearing a mask and holding a remote control, he is afforded agency only through the beloved character and the medium of television.
Kora: A Meditation on Pilgrimage is supported by the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation. Additional funding provided by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.

Nortse, (b. Lhasa, 1963), Group Photo, 2007, Chromogenic color print, 30” x 32”. The Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection.

Nortse
A pilgrim, a tourist guide, and a superhero—Nortse's Group Photo explores three distinct archetypes of contemporary Tibetan culture. The identities of each figure have been superseded by the masks they wear. Communicating a stifling of the senses, images of bandaging are recurrent in the artist's work. The maxim "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" comes to mind as the humorous composition and overt pop culture references speak to the artist's interpretation of the modernization of culture in contemporary Tibet.

The left figure emphasizes the materiality of religious practice. A scroll of traditional Buddhist pecha covers his eyes. Wearing an opulent, traditional silk brocade vest and semi-precious stone necklaces, he holds a shiny new prayer wheel. The central figure assumes the iconography of a Chinese tour guide, his traditional Tibetan shirt is covered by a blazer and red tie. He wears the hat of a tour guide, and holds an antiquated mobile phone to his ear. Chinese newspaper ads cover his mouth. The figure on the right embodies Ultraman, the protagonist of a Japanese television series popular amongst Tibetan children. Wearing a mask and holding a remote control, he is afforded agency only through the beloved character and the medium of television.