

## Buddhism and Contemporary Sculpture

# The Manifestation of Awareness

by Anne Barclay Morgan

Continuing into 2005, art institutions on the East and West Coasts and in between are offering exhibitions, performances, readings, and panel discussions that explore the relationship between Buddhism and art in the United States. The magnitude alone of this undertaking is extraordinary—with 51 historical and contemporary art exhibitions, some touring, some with site-specific installations.

In the New York metropolitan area, 20 institutions, in an unprecedented collaboration, formed The Buddhism Project: Art, Buddhism, and Contemporary Culture, complete with a Web site <[www.buddhismproject.org](http://www.buddhismproject.org)> and brochure. The Buddhism Project spawned 15 art exhibitions extending into 2004. Launched in October 1999, the West Coast consortium *Awake: Art, Buddhism, and the Dimensions of Consciousness* was originally part of The Buddhism Project and is composed of

**Hirokazu Kosaka, untitled field of cracked clay, from the exhibition "From the Verandah: Art, Buddhism, Presence," UCLA Fowler Museum, 2003–04.**

50 art professionals, including curators, museum directors, and artists. Focused on investigating "the common ground between the creative mind, the perceiving mind, and the meditative mind," this five-year project began with two years of quarterly meetings at the Green Gulch Farm Zen Center near San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> Artists, writers, and healing professionals presented white papers at each meeting, which are available on the consortium's Web site <[www.artandbuddhism.org](http://www.artandbuddhism.org)>. The resulting 21 contemporary and 16 historical art exhibitions manifested ideas about how to engage the public more effectively. Two books forthcoming from the University of California Press will summarize the ongoing research. *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, edited by Jacquelynn Bass and Mary Jane Jacob (fall 2004) includes expanded versions of the white papers and other essays, as well as artist interviews. *Smile of the Buddha: Influence in Western Art from Monet to the Present* by Jacquelynn Bass (2005) will examine those influences in the artwork of 20 artists.

Exhibitions of devotional Buddhist

art provided a necessary frame of reference to investigate recent artistic expression. Two examples, "The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and "Discovering Buddhist Art" at the Seattle Asian Art Museum, allowed viewers to become more familiar with the iconography of traditional statues and paintings intended for teaching and devotion. Museums also used their collections to juxtapose historical Eastern art with Western works that encourage meditative reflection, as in "The Garden" at the Berkeley Art Museum.

"The Invisible Thread: Buddhist Spirit in Contemporary Art," at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island, framed 39 works made since 1980 with historical works, a devotional Nepalese Buddha from 2002, and pieces by modern artists inspired by Buddhist thought such as John Cage and Isamu Noguchi. Giving the best survey of directions in Buddhist-inspired contemporary art, this insightful exhibition and catalogue amply substantiated





Left and below: Long-bin Chen, *World Buddha Project—New York 2003*. Phone books and wood. Shown in "The Invisible Thread," Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, 2003–04.



the variety of aesthetics and media, as well as the breadth of the issues addressed by recent works. The artists are either practicing Buddhists or acknowledge a link to Buddhism, its symbolism, philosophy, or spirit.

Traditional Buddhist sculptures made of wood or stone have been replaced by myriad works using all variety of media. These contemporary expressions are not intended to replicate or replace the power of historical sculptures; instead, they manifest an often personal and culturally specific relevance and a thread that ties the work to Buddhist thought. One of the best examples of a contemporary and personal version of a traditional Buddha figure was Lewis deSoto's *Paranirvana (Self-Portrait)* (2003). This 25-foot reclining figure, an adaptation of the colossal stone dying Buddha at Gal

Vihara in Sri Lanka, is made of cloth with airbrushed markings resembling the original stylized stone drapery folds, yet with deSoto's face. Re-inflated every morning by fan, the sculpture reflected the cycle of death and rebirth, as well as conscious and unconscious states. In Long-bin Chen's *World Buddha Project—New York 2003*, New York City phone books were stacked and carved into four giant Buddha heads oriented to the four directions. The sculpture suggested the communality of all the city's inhabitants and embodied a compassionate gesture for their well-being.

Other works evoked specific Buddhist practices. In Therese Lahaie's kinetic *Diptych II* (2001), shadows cast by moving glass panels symbolized an awareness of breathing, inspired by her meditation practice. Andrew Ginzel's site-specific installation *Hyphen* (2003) adroitly made a transition from one set of gallery spaces to another. As viewers walked through a corridor of orange flags as in a state of self-reflection and potential transformation, their images gradually became superimposed on a blue Buddha. Shu-Min Lin's *Chant* (2001) shrewdly depicted four people struggling with different distractions during meditation, with four images simultaneously projected on a 20-sided box. In *The Wheel Turns* (2003) at the

Newhouse, Arlene Shechet responded to the sailor's wheel on the ceiling of this former home for retired seamen by placing a wheel of Buddhist texts and Japanese poetry on the floor, which viewers erased over time by walking on it. Knots in transparent ropes of crystal on the walls gradually dissolved, reflecting the illusionary nature of the bonds of existence. Unexpected materials, or ordinary materials used in a surprising manner, were a frequent theme, another Buddhist tool to help focus our awareness on the moment. Tom Friedman's dexterous construction *Cup and Straws* (1997) considers a serious topic—the interconnectedness of all things—yet conveys it with lightness. Focus on process rather than on an unchanging, stable form is another expression of Buddhist thought. For Dove Bradshaw in *Negative Ion II* (1996–2003), the chance operation of water dripping onto a mound of salt created subtle, ever-changing form. William Anastasi poured one gallon of glossy enamel onto the wall in a sculptural calligraphy, which the air then slowly hardened.

Other devotional forms also provided inspiration. Departing from the traditional mandala of Tibetan Buddhism, which is composed of colored grains of sand, Chrysanthe Stathacos placed roses on a circular mirror along with other personal objects in *Rose Mandala* (2003). Near the entrance to the Berkeley Art Museum, Sanford Biggers's *Poteau Mirtan* (2002) formed a mandala on the floor and ceiling. Its dance floor designs were embellished with mirrors angled to create an infinite column of selves for the viewer standing in the mandala's center. He also conflated the axis mundi of Haitian voodoo with the mandala, since both function as portals, thereby synthesizing personal and cultural influences. Arlene Shechet incorporated another Buddhist form, the stupa, into her installation *Building* (2003) at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle. Her process of creating the work was meditative and revelatory: the casting seams remained.



Perhaps the most moving examples of Buddhist belief put into contemporary art practice were Montien Boonma's installations, shown at the Asia Society in New York. The Thai artist died of brain cancer in August 2000. Incorporating traditional medicinal herbs in installations such as *House of Hope* (1996–97), he created a sacred space for meditation with thousands of suspended medicinal herbal balls resembling prayer beads. The sincerity and devotional nature of his work resonated through his imaginative combination of traditional materials such as herbs and contemporary materials such as steel. His intention of reflecting both "possibilities and acceptance" manifested with quiet strength.<sup>2</sup>

Traditional Buddhism brings a reverence for all life, and therefore for nature. As Zen evolved in Japan, so did ikebana, the practice of flower arranging. In "Perfection/Impermanence: Contemporary Ikebana" at Wave Hill in the Bronx, New York, six Japanese artists made large indoor and outdoor site-conceived environmental installations. Ryusaku Matsuda's *From Roses—three sisters in a house surrendering to the passage of time* embodied impermanence, the crushed powder of its red roses slowly fading.

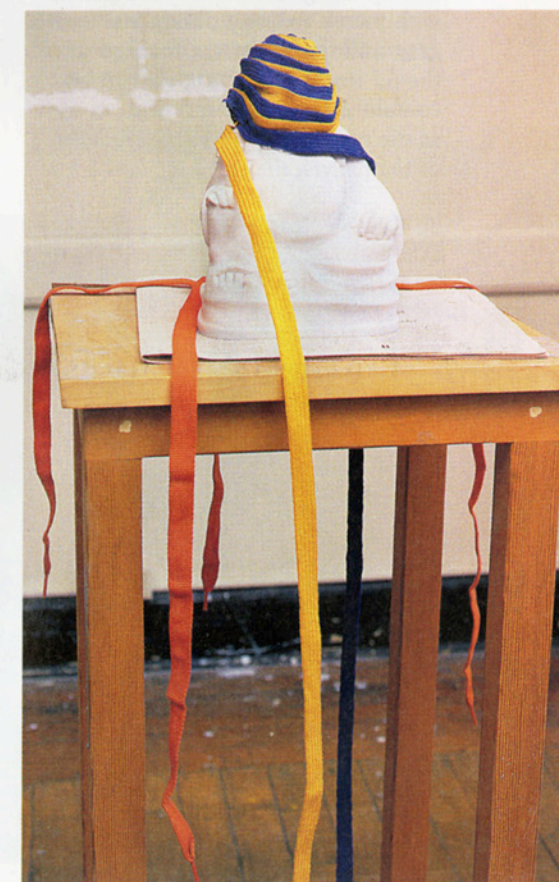
Similarities between works influenced by Zen and works influenced by the Sublime, which both regard a direct, often sudden experience of nature as the ultimate source of artistic creation,

were striking in "Serene Beauty: Intersections between the Sublime and Zen" at the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning. Jennifer Prichard's amassing of tiny porcelain wall sculptures in *Floating* (2003) reflected a regenerative power in nature, whereas Ming Fay's organic forms created a contemplative space in *Butterfly Qian* (2003).

Just as the practice of meditation has become synonymous with stress relief, so have representations of the Buddha been appropriated by the advertising and entertainment industries. The Bronx Museum's exhibition "Commodification of Buddhism" included artworks by 12 artists that reflected and critiqued this consumption. Rudolf Stingel's rubber Buddha in *Untitled* (1994) holds consumer objects such as a mixer, paintbrush, and scissors, completely at odds with the Buddhist focus on simplicity or the immaterial. Yoko Inoue's dense multi-media installation *Liquidation*, at five miles in Brooklyn, critiqued the commercialization of Mizuko Jizo, guardian of unborn children, which became a profitable business for some Buddhist temples after the legalization of abortion.

Above: Arlene Shechet, *Still Time: Decoys*, 1993–95. Hydrocal, acrylic paint, and found stools, view of work installed in "The Invisible Thread." Right: Sanford Biggers, *untitled*, 2001. Resin and shoe laces, 11 x 8 x 5 in. From "AIR" at the Headlands Center for the Arts.

Conceptual and installation artist David Ireland is one of numerous artists influenced by Zen thought, as evidenced in the major retrospective "The Art of David Ireland: The Way Things Are" organized by the Oakland Museum of California. His often enigmatic works reflect a desire to escape from ideologies, maintaining the beginner's mind. Ireland has used his creativity for "expanding and intensifying human awareness—revealing the art of being in the world."<sup>3</sup> Fellow Bay-area artists Tom Marioni, a major influence on Ireland, and Paul Kos were also the subjects of recent retrospectives. "Everything Matters: Paul Kos" amply depicted another expression of Zen, humor, often found in the nonsensical Zen question or koan. For "Tom Marioni: Golden Rectangle" at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, Marioni created a new work, *The Temple of Geometry*, composed of a series of white cubes that functioned as a gateway between contemplative space and a space for social interaction.







Nuances of Zen thought found expression in Helen Mirra's installation *65 instants* at the Berkeley Art Museum. In selecting, hand-sawing, and finishing reclaimed wood pallets with muted tones of dark green and gray milk paint, Mirra focused on the 65 instants that are said to be contained in a single moment, as well as the essential nature of the source of the pallets, the tree.

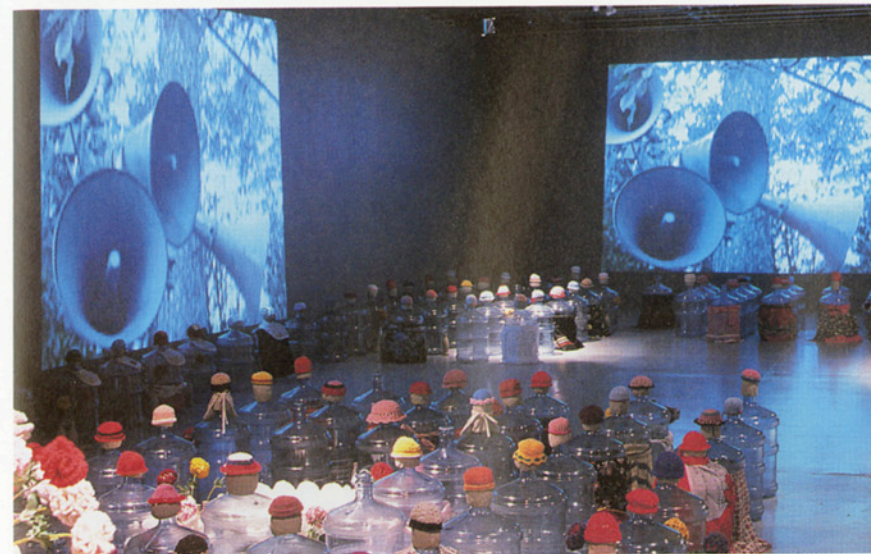
An invitation to experience and contemplate art, space, and self was eloquently merged with form in the collaborative exhibition "From the Verandah: Art, Buddhism, Presence" at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History in Los Angeles. "Verandah," the Sanskrit word for a meeting place, refers to a space between experiences. A rectangular antechamber gave visitors the opportunity to slip off their



shoes, as well as to absorb words placed on the blackened walls and read related materials. Suspended semi-transparent white cloth acted as a transition into the main room, which was blackened by charcoal and water, symbolizing the co-existence of fire and water. In the large gallery space, a wide, wooden platform surrounded two sunken rectangular areas, like a Japanese Zen temple's rock garden where, instead of looking out at rocks and raked sand, the gaze turns inward toward the middle or center. One rectangle contained the white marble *Rice House* by Wolfgang Laib; the other, the cracked clay of artist Hirokazu Kosaka, who is also a Buddhist priest and master Zen archer. The installation was completed by the ambient sound of snow falling from tree branches, a white sound to counterbalance the carbon walls, composed by Yuval Ron. In addition to Hirokazu Kosaka, other collaborators were architect Michael Rotondi; Marla Berns, Director of the Fowler Museum; Betsy Quick, Director of Education; Linda Drake, Director of Education at the Indianapolis Museum; and choreographer Joe Goode. This collaboration resulted in a seamless work of lingering beauty and unfolding perceptions that embodied the simplicity of Zen principles.

At the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, Kim Sooja created meditation spaces of a different nature. She added carpet woven with names of two centuries of local African Americans to four rooms of a former rice plantation. In *Planted Names* (2002), histories were reactivated and bound with the space, in a reverence for ancestors. In *A Lighthouse Woman*, on Morris Island, South Carolina, she made an abandoned lighthouse breathe as it shifted color in time with the rhythms of each breath.

**Above:** Ryusaku Matsuda, *From Roses—three sisters in a house surrendering to the passage of time*, 2003. Powdered rose petals, velvet, rice paper figures, and pedestals, installation view of work in "Perfection/Impermanence," at Wave Hill.  
**Left:** Rudolf Stingel, *Untitled*, 1994. Pigmented polyurethane rubber, work shown in "Commodification of Buddhism," Bronx Museum.



**Left:** Yoko Inoue, *Liquidation*, 2003. Two video projections, plastic water bottles, ceramics, unfired clay, yarn, toys, and hand-inscribed garments, view of installation at five miles.  
**Below:** Paul Kos, *Tower of Babel*, 1989. 20 channel video installation, 288 x 216 x 288 in.

One generalization from the exhibitions of both East and West Coast consortiums is that Zen-influenced art may be more muted in color, more restrained in form, often referring to space within the work or an essence of formlessness. Art influenced by other forms of Buddhism can be more colorful, even dazzling, complex, and vivid.

As inclusive as both East and West Coast consortiums are, many other works that include, reflect, even honor Buddhist principles abound. A rigorous example is Marina Abramovic's recent installation and performance *The House with the Ocean View* (2002), a 12-day, silent, fasting retreat in open rooms in the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York. Abramovic focused her awareness on walking, sitting, standing, and lying down and only drank water, in what is known as *vipassana* meditation practice.<sup>4</sup> Judy Pfaff's installation *Neither Here nor There* (2003) at Ameringer & Yohe Fine Art included symbols and motifs that resembled Indonesian or Tibetan stupas and a Tibetan sand mandala. Jim Campbell's Buddha statue helps to illuminate the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle (one can never observe an object in its purest form) in *Shadow (For Heisenberg)* (1993–94).

These exhibitions prove that Buddhist perspectives remain a vital and palpable influence in contemporary art practice. Recent works by Western and Eastern artists may reference traditional Buddhist art, yet they incorporate personal and contemporary cultural artifacts. Eastern artists use Western approaches to art-making, though one could claim that the intention of the work, say harmony and well-being, is more directly stated, with greater boldness and with unapologetic links to Buddhism.

Overall, contemporary works capture the essence of Buddhist thought rather than its dogma. While a devotional statue may have many layers of significance for the practitioner, based on details of body position, gestures, and attributes, recent work eschews those specific teachings for an open-ended inquiry, a more personal and possibly more inclusive expression. All materials and all forms, from abstract to representational forms to formlessness, the latter being Buddhist realms in and of themselves, are relevant. Content and strategies may include humor, the nature of the self, meditation or reflection, direct experience or awareness of the present, focus on process, transience or imper-

manence, collaboration, and the unity of all existence.

These exhibitions demonstrate the pervasive and persuasive threads of Buddhist influence in contemporary art-making, as well as how exhibition strategies that promote a cultivation of awareness can further the viewer's experience of art. Buddhism has become a convincing frame of reference to discuss the spiritual in art, partly due to the secularization of Buddhist symbols and practices such as meditation. These threads will continue to inspire a multitude of fresh, creative approaches to art, far removed from the familiar and deadening practice of cynicism and defeat, stressing that all human beings seek one thing: happiness.

*Anne Barclay Morgan is a writer living in Florida, and a contributing editor for Sculpture.*



BOTTOM: BEN BLACKWELL

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Awake: Art, Buddhism, and the Dimensions of Consciousness. Project Summary, <www.artandbuddhism.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Montien Boonma, label for *Drawing for House of Hope*, from the exhibition "Montien Boonma: Temple of the Mind," Asia Society, New York, February 4–May 11, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Tsujimoto, "Being in the World," in *The Art of David Ireland: The Way Things Are* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> See Thomas McEvilley, "Performing the Present Tense," *Art in America* April 2003: 114–17, 153.