

Making Emptiness Visible: Sonam Dolma and Contemporary Tibetan Abstraction

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Abstract

As a recent phenomena, contemporary Tibetan art is about to localize itself within the academic discourse of global art and the art market. After a short introduction into the peculiarities of modern Tibetan art against the background of tradition, this paper introduces the work of Tibetan artist and Swiss resident Sonam Dolma. Contrary to most of her fellow painters, Dolma works abstractly and has clear conceptions of her role as an “ethnic painter”, the influence of Buddhist concepts on her work, and her position within the “local or global art context.”

“Form is Emptiness, Emptiness is form.” (*Prajñā-pāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra*, “Heart Sūtra”<sup>1</sup>)

Core themes in current discussions on global art involve issues about ethnicity, origin, appropriation, type and place of academic training, and global versus local; roughly speaking, they focus on the area of tension and the possibility of an “indigenous” art history or production in the face of the globally dominant Western canon.<sup>2</sup> Academically, the field is not undisputed. Larger institutions or associations, such as the International Committee of the History of Arts, have only devoted themselves actively to the topic for a short time. In the last few years, native academics or artistic and cultural institutions in the relevant regions of the world have increasingly been taking part in this discourse, as to a lesser extent have the artists themselves.

Before I present the Tibetan artist Sonam Dolma (or Sonam Dolma Brauen) in this article, and position her within the coordinates of this discourse - using information primarily taken from an interview I recently conducted with the artist - I must first of all explain some key data about modern and contemporary Tibetan art, in order to clarify the current situation of the very recent phenomena of contemporary Tibetan art, particularly Tibetan abstract art, within a global context. Some of the issues I will consider in this context concern the above mentioned global art topics: Is it possible for art to be global? Is art by Tibetans “Tibetan”? How does the diaspora effect the expression of identity in art (a particularly urgent question in the case of Tibet)? What is the relationship between traditional religious and secular modern art in Tibet? What about indigenous and Western perceptions and expectations of Tibetan art? Can a Tibetan artist work abstractly or must “the tradition” be visible?

In view of the popularity of Tibet in the West, and of Tibetan Buddhism in particular, it is hardly surprising that Tibetan culture, including its art production, should be equated with Buddhist culture; that is to say a culture shaped by religion. Indeed, the power of Buddhism as a shaping and identity-establishing

element in Tibet is enormous historically, and it continues to have an effect to this day as a fervent and active religion for the Tibetan community in exile in India or scattered across the world. Amongst Tibetans themselves, cultural conservatism predominates, which is in part understandable in view of the threatened nature of Tibetan culture, but is also possibly anti-progressive. This, however, misleads the West about the fact that Tibetan society nowadays is multifaceted, and that part of it is secular and has long been grappling with “modernism”.

However, the history of modern Tibetan art begins rather hesitantly with the pioneer of the modern age in Tibet, Gedun Choephel (dge 'dun chos 'phel, 1903/5-1951), who died tragically, having been imprisoned in Lhasa for two years on account of his unconventional attitudes and disregarded by his compatriots. As a progressive intellectual, political propagandist, reformer, individualist, monk and the first modern scholar and artist, he is still today counted as a spiritual father by many Tibetan artists, not only within Tibet.<sup>3</sup> The Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild - Tibet's best known art institution - is named after this pioneer. The guild was founded in Lhasa in 2003 by eleven artists - both Tibetan and Han Chinese - and serves to this day as a platform for exhibitions and networking for the small contemporary artists' scene in Lhasa, and to promote Tibetan art globally.

It was not until the late 1980s that Tibetan artists confronted Western modernism on a larger scale and an institutional level, which is late in comparison to other Asian countries. After the Cultural Revolution, young Tibetans, moulded by socialist propaganda and its visual culture, began studies at art academies in China. There they came into contact with traditional Chinese art and Western modernism, but followed a training based on Western models, principally copying European masters of the nineteenth century. In addition, many artists of this generation had training in traditional thangka (scroll) painting and were relatively strongly located in their traditional, religiously shaped, cultural field.

In the last few years, some Tibetan artists have had the opportunity to study in Europe and the USA and to establish their lives there, including Tenzin Rigdol, who lives in New York, and Gonkar Gyatso in London, while others have continued their education for only a limited time as an artist in residence, such as Pema Rinzin in New York. It is mainly these cosmopolitan and privileged artists who find entry into international contemporary art or the Western art market. However, the members of the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild exhibit both in Lhasa as well as in Beijing and abroad and are supported by patrons of contemporary Tibetan art. Besides a few private collectors, these include at the institutional level Rossi & Rossi and Gyatso's gallery The Sweet Tea House, both in London and in the USA; the Rubin Museum in New York; the Peaceful Wind Gallery in Santa Fe and the Mechak Center for Contemporary Tibetan Art in Colorado.

As we have seen, politics, internationalization and globalization led to a multitude of changes and challenges for Tibetan artists whether in Tibet or in exile, which mainly center on the question of tradition and

modernity. Globalization presents Tibetan artists and non-Tibetan migrants with stereotypes, particularly of the Western public, but also of the Tibetan community. Depending on the individual biography of the artist, common issues arising are a sense of ambivalence, of a loss of bearings, of being torn between two worlds. Gade, co-founder of the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild, who was born in 1971 and resides in Lhasa, articulated this tension between his own situation and the Western public's expectations about Tibet as the "untouched Roof of the World" and Tibetans as "noble savage":

My generation has grown up with thangka painting, martial arts, Hollywood movies, Mickey Mouse, Charlie Chaplin, rock 'n' roll and McDonalds. We still don't know where the spiritual homeland is – New York, Beijing, or Lhasa. We wear jeans and T-shirts and when we drink a Budweiser it is only occasionally that we talk about 'Buddhahood'.<sup>4</sup>

When examining the production of contemporary Tibetan artists, it is striking that, with regards to content, they are strongly rooted in traditional Tibetan subject-matter and symbolism. Most work representationally, with the exceptions of Palden Weinreb educated at Skidmore College in New York, where he also lives, and Sonam Dolma. Weinreb's drawings and lithographs are abstract and strongly minimalist.<sup>5</sup> Here we are directly confronted with the core issues of global art history and more specifically the question: Should a Tibetan artist work abstractly or must "the tradition" be visible?

Sonam Dolma was born in 1953 and escaped from Tibet to exile in India when she was six. There she grew up in the most basic circumstances and worked on road construction; she was only able to go to school belatedly. When in 1973 she eventually emigrated to Switzerland, to join her Swiss husband, she completed courses at art schools in Bern and trained in art therapy. She has a clear opinion on the issue of global art:

Art is global. In my opinion, art should not be restricted to a particular people or region. On the other hand, I quite understand that many artists willingly adopt the label 'Tibetan artist'. Tibet and the Tibetans are popular in the West - everything Tibetan is considered valuable, good and interesting. It also presents economic advantages. The chances of the few Tibetans on the global art market would be limited, in view of the great competition from other artists. But the 'Tibetan art niche' creates attention and raises their visibility.<sup>6</sup>

Dolma works abstractly. She personally feels restricted by the long tradition of Tibetan art and its strict iconometric and iconographic precepts and, unlike many colleagues of her generation, has received no training in traditional painting. She follows the subjective approach of the modern autonomous individual artist: her art production springs from her inner self, an expression of the freedom of her subjective being, a concept first realized in Tibet by Gedun Choephel.



*White Collar 1*, March 2009, acrylic, 36×28 cms © Sonam Dolma.  
*Untitled*, September 2010, acrylic, 143×106.5 cms © Sonam Dolma.



Unlike many other contemporary artists with a particular ethnic background, who want to be shown in art museums and not in an ethnological setting, the venue of an exhibition is of no concern to her. In 2008 she moved to New York (where she lived until recently), and here the confrontation with the “power of capital” and the workaholics of the metropolis led to a degree of representation in her work. In her *White Collar* series, she hinted at faces for the first time; however they immediately disappear again: power and success are pure illusions of the mind. In a later phase she also worked with amphora-like shapes. She is fascinated by their symbolism and ambivalence: on the one hand they are everyday, mass-produced necessities for the transport of liquids in ancient times, on the other they can be lavishly decorated as valuable art objects, and in the fragility of their material composition they hint at transience and decay. In both works the motivation is to explore the Buddhist concept of Emptiness as expressed in the Heart Sūtra, explaining that “Form is not one thing, and emptiness another; emptiness is not one thing, and form another. The very form is emptiness, the very emptiness is form.”<sup>7</sup> In harmony with this seemingly paradoxical essence of Mahāyāna Buddhism compressed in the Sūtra she sees emptiness symbolized in the amphora:

For me, an amphora is something like a symbol for Emptiness, but also at the same time for form. Really, abstract painting is the best example for Emptiness. One can see and describe many things in it, but at the same time there is nothing of the sort there. What we see is projected by us, it is our own thoughts. Everyone sees something different in the same picture.<sup>8</sup>

Western modernists have also explored parallels between abstraction and Buddhism since the 1950s. Buddhist concepts such as Emptiness, transience or the changeability of all existence have been taken up by Western artists in color field painting and in Abstract Expressionism. Dolma's primary artistic model, Mark Rothko, is an important representative of both art movements, and his multi-layered and blurry monochrome color application seem to hint at a spiritual dimension to the work. Subtle coloration also links the two artists' works, and in a current New York group show Dolma's work is displayed alongside Rothko.<sup>9</sup> Buddhist ideas have been or are being taken up by artists including Merce Cunningham, John Cage and, in Germany, Wolfgang Laib.<sup>10</sup> Dolma's work was recently on show at the famous Haeinsa Temple in South Korea as part of Haein Art Project 2011, a platform for a dialogue between Buddhism and contemporary art, which also included pieces by Bill Viola, Atta Kim and Xu Bing, all of whom refer to Buddhism.<sup>11</sup>

However, Dolma also seems to cling to very traditional and certainly premodern religious conventions when, according to her own statement, she would never depict a Buddha, as she regards deviation from the strictly predetermined traditional canon of Tibetan art production and depiction an offence. Indeed, this practice seems to present no problem for her colleagues, who depict traditional themes and symbols in a mostly modern rendering, as in the mandala paintings of Tenzin Rigdol with Mickey Mouse as the central image, which, according to traditional ideas, could be considered blasphemous. In this contrast a central issue of global art appears: the content of Dolma's art reveals a metaphysical dimension that is actually traditional, although the form is modern.

Reference to the traditional art of Tibet - in defiance of many appeals from global art theory - is emphasized time and again in reception. Thus the three most recent exhibitions all have references in their titles to transformation and tradition: *Tibetan Horizon: Revisit the Tradition*, Brussels; *Beyond the Mandala - Contemporary Art from Tibet*, Mumbai; *Tradition Transformed. Tibetan Artists Respond*, New York. This is typical of an often conflict-ridden relationship in global art between spiritual tradition and modern form. Dolma takes up traditions of modern art that are not shaped directly by religion, but are universally-spiritually shaped as regards content. Thus, in the tradition of Barnett Newman and Rothko, she reproduces the conflict between the New Metaphysics of American post-war art and secular Pop Art, whose empty symbols are more frequently represented by her Tibetan colleagues.

Ethnic Tibetan or folklore elements are only rarely depicted in Dolma's paintings: as she informed me, this is lamented by potential collectors, who have explicitly requested the incorporation of ethnic elements. Many of these influential patrons and dealers collect traditional and contemporary Tibetan art and stress their interest in the "recognition value" of classical Tibetan elements. However, her installations and three-dimensional works, which she has been making since 2009, display clearer references. Contemporary Tibetan artists have been very cautious about using installations, sculpture or new media. Dolma, however, sees great potential in these formats, which are only just beginning to dawn on young Tibetans, through growing



Sonam Dolma in her studio in New York. In the foreground, the work *Red Carpet*, October 2009, plaster (c. 420 tsa tsa), wood, diam. 244 cms; in the centre, *My Father's Death*; behind, *Tower of Babel*, plaster, wood, H: 95 cms, diam.: 46 cms © Sonam Dolma.



*Self*, May 2009, acrylic, 41×41 cms © Sonam Dolma.

*My Father's Death*, 2010, 49 cast-off monk's robes from Lhasa, plaster, 100×100×45 cms) © Sonam Dolma.



access to the art market, experience and training abroad, and prosperity. Her installations *Red Carpet* and *Tower of Babel* come to grips with power structures, speaking of greed, hate and blindness, the three fundamental evils in Buddhism, which she abhors and which influence her artistically. The painting *Self* is also probably to be understood as blindness or illusion in relation to the Emptiness of the person, or the non-existence of an "I". In *My Father's Death*, Dolma explores the death of her father, a Buddhist monk. She stacks 49 cast-off monk's robes in a square, in the center of which are nine tsa-tsa, votive offerings in the form of miniature stūpa mounds. From her parents' brass model, one of the few possessions that accompanied them on their escape, she made a mould for further additional plaster casts, which she also used in *Red Carpet*.

She herself is not only one of the few Tibetan artists who work in three dimensions, she is also the only woman of her generation who is artistically active. At present, there are only two, much younger, female artists active in the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild: Dedron and Zhang Ping. Sonam Dolma's art is global and independent of nationality or gender; she does not feel that she is specifically a woman and a woman artist - which is also a Buddhist way of thinking - though she does recognize gender imbalance in the art world and society in general. In the context of her traditional socialization, she has long understood herself simply as a housewife,

and it was only through the encouragement of her husband that she found the courage to produce art. In this respect too Dolma is truly modern: she is fully aware of her native culture, her race and her gender and does not disown them, but she does not fix her artistic identity upon them; instead she locates herself in a Western modern universalism.

Translated from the German by Martin Willson with amendments by the author

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Sonam Dolma's work is currently on view in "Routes: Personal Stories of Tibet" at the Portsmouth Museum of Art, USA, 28 September - 30 December 2011.

#### Notes

- 1 Conze, *The Large Sutra on perfect Wisdom with the divisions of the Abhisamayālañkāra*, 61.
- 2 Compare e.g. Harris, *Globalization and Contemporary Art*.
- 3 On Choephel's with regards to content and style modern and bold artwork compare e.g. Höfer, *Gedun Choephel – Patre of Tibetan Modernism*.
- 4 Rossi & Rossi, *Visions from Tibet - A brief survey of contemporary painting*, 17.
- 5 He has been recently shown with Kesang Lamdark at Hanart Square, Hong Kong: Generation Exile - Exploring New Tibetan Identities (<http://www.hanart.com/>).
- 6 Sonam Dolma in conversation with the author 4/2011.
- 7 Conze, *The Large Sutra on perfect Wisdom with the divisions of the Abhisamayālañkāra*, 61.
- 8 Sonam Dolma in conversation with the author 4/2011.
- 9 "The Value of Water: Sustaining a Green Planet", Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York: 23 September 2011 - 25 March 2012, <http://www.stjohndivine.org/VOW.html>
- 10 See Baas, Jacquelynn & Mary Jane Jacob, *Buddha mind in contemporary art*; Jacob, Mary Jane & Martin Brauen, *Grain of emptiness. Buddhist-inspired contemporary art*; Kellerer, Christian, *Der Sprung ins Leere. Objet trouvé, Surrealismus, Zen*.
- 11 Haein Art Project 2011, Haeinsa Temple, South Korea: 23 September - 6 November 2011, <http://haeinart.org>. For a review of the exhibition see: [http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/kultur/kunst\\_architektur/schmelzender\\_buddha\\_1.12825275.html](http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/kultur/kunst_architektur/schmelzender_buddha_1.12825275.html).

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