

ART REVIEW; Finding Surprises as They Are Turned Up by the Karma Wheel

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Published: November 7, 2003

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/07/arts/art-review-finding-surprises-as-they-are-turned-up-by-the-karma-wheel.html?pagewanted=all>

"Everyone Gets Lighter" is the good-news message on a billboard across the street from the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor on Staten Island. The words, by the New York poet **John Giorno**, introduce a show titled "The Invisible Thread: Buddhist Spirit in Contemporary Art." And after a visit, you may indeed feel a little more buoyant than usual.

To be honest, I'm surprised at how well this exhibition turned out, given the fact that it came together on a wing and a prayer. It is one of the best things I have seen at Snug Harbor's Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art.

Conceived as the centerpiece of a yearlong multi-institutional series of events called "The Buddhism Project," which began last winter, the show had high ambitions. But cash was tight (apparently there still isn't enough loose change to print a catalog). Loans were hard to nail down. And last-minute changes in personnel rocked an already tipsy boat. (One of the curators, Olivia Georgia, director of the Newhouse Center, left for the Bronx Museum of the Arts.)

But as any Buddhist knows, change is life's only certainty, and a spin of the karma wheel can bring unlooked-for blessings. So it was here. When loans fell through, better ones materialized: how much more interesting it is, for example, to see Agnes Martin's only video, the 1976 "Gabriel," in place of unobtainable paintings that would have presented her in a familiar mode.

A roster of nearly 50 artists that looked unpromisingly eclectic on paper turns out to be a beguilingly unobvious mix. And almost all the work is seen to advantage in the Newhouse Center's oddball Main Hall exhibition space, once a dormitory for the retired seamen for whom Snug Harbor was built in the 19th century.

With so many wild cards in play, it makes sense that the show's shape is free-form. Neither a systematic survey nor a closely argued thematic essay, it is fueled by the "Buddhist Spirit" of the title, whatever that may be. While some of the artists are practicing Buddhists, as their work reflects, others come from somewhere else entirely. But everyone arrives at more or less the same place, a place where the incidence of negativity is low, the harmony level high. In short, however the spirit is defined, it's communal and contagious.

And at least one of its sources takes traditional form in a Himalayan-style brass sculpture of the Buddha himself. Borrowed from the Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art on Staten Island, it is set, bright as a lamp, at the start of the show.

The figure, seated on a celestial lotus throne but touching the earth with one hand, is a classical embodiment of the dharma, or the way, a path to salvation that lies in an immersive but unpossessive identification with every aspect of the natural world. The Buddhist sutra known as the Scripture of Inconceivable Liberation envisions this interactive connection in the marvelous image of the Diamond Net of Indra, an infinite field of faceted gems, each gaining its radiance from the light of the others.

On a less exalted plane, there's also some modern historical grounding in a gallery devoted to a group of artists who did much to nurture the Buddhist spirit in postwar American culture. The Zen-masterish composer John Cage is one of them, represented by written notations for a chance-generated score. (He is honored elsewhere in a charming video piece by Nam June Paik.)

Another is Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk deeply involved in Asian spirituality. Three of his calligraphic pieces are here, as is a painting of rocks by Morris Graves and a gorgeous little sea-and-shore photograph by Minor White. Two floor-hugging bronze Noguchi sculptures clinch an effect of raked-garden sparseness.

Calligraphy, a touchstone of the Zen aesthetic, had a significant influence on Abstract Expressionism and continues to be a reference point for gestural painting. Louise Fishman's somber "Lifting, Moving, Placing" offers evidence, with its inverted stepped pyramid of vermilion strokes emerging from a gray-blue storm. So does Tattfoo Tan's "United We Stand," with its ribbons of blood red twisting across a landscape of mountains and exploding stars traced in gold on a dark ground and visible only close up.

Perceptual ambush, another Zen staple, animates a fountainlike piece by Tom Friedman. Made from a single clear plastic cup and dozens of linked drinking straws, it's some kind of masterpiece of idiot savant virtuosity. Nearby, pixilated, Zen-inflected Fluxus lives on in Yoko Ono's "Wish Tree," which invites viewers to tie handwritten personal requests to a potted ficus.

A ritual-intensive, icon-centered Buddhism is a model for other work: altarlike pieces by Top Changtrakul and Hoang Van-Bui, for example, and mandala-inspired installations by Arlene Schechet and Chrysanne Stathacos. Alex Grey's painting, "Universal Mind Lattice," with its glowing emblem of neural circuitry set in a Christian altarpiece format, exemplifies hybrid, interfaith "American Buddhism" that some historians of religion see as the way of the future.

If it proves to be so, it is a Buddhism that will necessarily encompass a political dimension, a degree of social awareness and critical self-reflection that complicates the meditative, soft-grained, interiorized Buddhism that predominates in this show.

Like every religion, institutional Buddhism has a dark side. Zen was a militant samurai religion, teaching warriors how to kill and be killed with unflappable self-composure; in Japan today, Zen temples accept lucrative contracts to provide obedience training for corporate employees. And in the United States, where the word compassionate, which carries specific ethical meanings in a Buddhist context, has been jingoistically linked to the word conservatism, Buddhism may need to rethink its self-presentation.

But changes are already under way. Maybe it means something that the show's single overtly political piece, Adelle Lutz's "Burkha/Womb Project," addresses the issue of international violence with an image from Islamic culture; and that one of the largest figurative pieces on view, a walk-in sculpture of the Buddha's head by Long-bin Chen, is composed of hundreds of New York City telephone directories, as if an entire polyethnic, spiritually diverse population were united under his protection.

Such art may hold the seeds of the Buddhist "planetary culture" envisioned by the poet Gary Snyder as an antidote to a now global Western culture, "economically dependent on a fantastic system of stimulation of greed which cannot be fulfilled."

As the Buddha himself implied, however, the personal and the political are inseparable. The only model for an ethical life he had to offer was his own stripped-down life, and he encouraged others to imitate it so they, too, might become Buddhas -- awakened beings -- in a process of self-transformation that, almost accidentally, generated universal beneficence. Something like this idea is suggested in a huge, air-filled fabric sculpture by Lewis deSoto, which depicts the reclining Buddha simultaneously dying and entering the energy stream of nirvana. The image is based on a revered stone image in Sri Lanka, but its face is a self-portrait of Mr. deSoto.

The piece, which looks as if it could drift up out of the gallery like a dirigible, is given plenty of breathing space. So is other work installed in the small rooms off the Main Hall on two levels, a layout vaguely corresponding to that found in the very early Buddhist cave monasteries in India, with their courtyards surrounded by monks' cells and chapels, all carved from rock.

The show's organizers -- Robyn Brentano and Lilly Wei, independent curators; the writer Roger Lipsey; and Ms. Georgia -- have supplied wall texts that often clarify individual artists' connection to Buddhism but too seldom address the specific work at hand, which occasionally needs some decoding. But this oversight is a minor flaw, as is the quotient of less than riveting contributions that almost inevitably comes with large-scale curatorial collaborations.

What matters in the end is a gathered atmosphere, in this case stimulating and pacific. It tends to stay with you after you have left the show, like the scent of incense on clothing, and charges the outside air. I caught the ferry back at dusk, when Lower Manhattan was beginning to generate its own corporate jewel-net of light. During the trip, a sea-going street preacher paced back and forth through the cabin, exhorting us, his captive audience, to turn our attention to a certain path-marking spiritual leader of a non-Buddhist persuasion. "He is the way in no way!" the evangelist suddenly shouted. Several of us -- readers, dozers, daydreamers -- levitated in alarm in our seats; then at least one of us smiled at a pure Zen moment, American-style.

"The Invisible Thread: Buddhist Spirit in Contemporary Art" is at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, 1000 Richmond Terrace, Livingston, Staten Island, (718) 448-2500, through Feb. 29.

Photos: Large detail from Minor White's "Untitled (No. 5 From Song Without Words)." (Photos by Minor White Archive, Princeton University Art Museum, <http://www.princeton.edu/~artmuseum/>); Lewis deSoto's "Paranirvana (self-

portrait)" in "The Invisible Thread: Buddhist Spirit in Contemporary Art" on Staten Island. (Photo by Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art)