

gonkar gyatso  
three realms

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## Gonkar Gyatso: “[A] product of occupied-Tibet”<sup>1</sup>

Maura Reilly

“Just as the identity of my motherland, Tibet, cannot be separated from religion and politics, I think my own sensibility has been shaped by the undeniable bond between the two.”

—Gonkar Gyatso, 2009<sup>2</sup>

Over the past two decades, Gonkar Gyatso has gained international acclaim for his multimedia works that reflect his personal quest for a contemporary Tibetan aesthetic language. Born in Lhasa, Tibet, in 1961, Gyatso has lived away from his home for most of his life, migrating in 1980 to Beijing, in 1992 to Dharamsala (India), in 1996 to London, and then in 2009 to New York. His work reflects a concern with exilic topics as varied as cultural loss, locational identity, intercultural translation, cultural essentialism, displacement, the transport of memories, and assimilation. Like other contemporary Tibetan artists of his generation, such as Gade and Tenzing Rigdol, Gyatso often serves up an irreverent mix of spirituality and pop culture. However, for him, the Buddha figure and the iconometric structures of traditional *thangka* painting are the primary indicators of his Tibetan identity. In his hands, these centuries-old signifiers of Tibet are used to dramatic and subversive effects; they allow him to express himself through an iconography and a formal language that traditionally have been associated with Tibetan art. But his is mimicry with a difference, particularly since 2004, when he began to collage pop stickers and logos onto his Buddha figures, as well as to insert cartoonlike “speech bubbles” with random, poignant, or auspicious messages. Over time, he has developed a highly sophisticated visual vocabulary that, while typically encrypted to deflect any unwanted politicised readings, has most recently become unambiguously political.

As a child, Gyatso grew up in the new secular and Communist society created by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which has occupied Tibet since 1950. “Everything in

our home was Chinese and the entire family strictly adhered to party guidelines.”<sup>3</sup> He was, he has said, inculcated to have a Chinese Socialist intellect within his Tibetan body. “I was enthusiastic about what I was learning in school, and believed everything I was taught.”<sup>4</sup> As a son of Red Army employees, he attended a government-run school where his reverence for Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution’s heroes was indoctrinated, and, like millions of others in the PRC, learned the contents of Mao’s Red Book by rote as a child. While he spoke Tibetan at home with his family, at school he learned almost nothing about Tibetan history and culture; all of his major subjects were taught in Chinese.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, according to Tibet scholar Clare Harris, he was

trained to despise the Dalai Lama and the religious system he embodied. With an extensive background in party propaganda, Gyatso had little difficulty in adopting the Communist view that religion was a wasteful, oppressive system that had led to the iniquities of “feudalism” in pre-1959 Tibet.<sup>6</sup>

Revered sites in Lhasa, such as the Jokhang Temple and the former residence of the Dalai Lama, the Potala Palace, were closed, as were all temples and monasteries throughout Tibet. The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) was for Gyatso and his generation simply part of the sociopolitical milieu in which they were raised—and they unquestioningly accepted the Communist ideology being propagated.

However, everything began to change for the artist in 1980, when he won a place to study traditional Chinese ink-and-brush

painting at the Central Institute for Minorities in Beijing. The courses he took strictly taught the skills of traditional painting; no experimental or avant-garde classes were offered. Under these stringent conditions, Gyatso soon realised that there was no opportunity for individual expression. In traditional Tibetan art, such as Chinese ink-and-brush painting, as well as in Maoist ideology, the “assertion of individualism . . . [is] outlawed.”<sup>7</sup> Despite these strictures, the experience of living in Beijing afforded Gyatso access to numerous bookshops, where for the first time he encountered reproductions of Western modern art, as well as galleries and museums (e.g., the National Gallery and the Beijing Agricultural Center), and where he was exposed to traveling exhibitions of “late Impressionist art, Cubism, and European classical painting.”<sup>8</sup> He remembers being particularly drawn to the work of Jean-François Millet, Vincent van Gogh, and Georgia O’Keeffe. These adventures in the “official” spaces of the Beijing art world revealed to him a world *beyond* China, and examples of artistic visions free from oppression. “All these Western ideas flowing into China were the fruit of free societies with free markets, freedom of expression, and concepts of democracy,” Gyatso explains.<sup>9</sup> “It was all in opposition to everything I had learned so far . . . I began to think a little more for myself and question what was going on around me.”<sup>10</sup> As Harris explains, Gyatso’s experiences in Beijing “proved critical to his re-engagement with Tibet on his return in 1985,”<sup>11</sup> when he continued his training in the Fine Art Department at Lhasa University.

However, when Gyatso returned to Lhasa, he found it had changed dramatically. As a

result of the liberalisation policies enacted in the late 1970s by Deng Xiaoping, the then-leader of the Chinese Communist Party, religious practices were reviving, Buddhist monasteries reopening, and Tibetans (including Gyatso's grandmother) reciting mantras again.<sup>12</sup> In short, the relaxation policies were starting to foster an atmosphere in which Tibetans began to push for greater acknowledgment of their distinctiveness in sociopolitical and artistic spheres.<sup>13</sup> It was in this milieu that in 1985 Gyatso and his university colleagues founded the Sweet Tea House Artists' Association, which was the first collective for contemporary art and ideas in Lhasa.<sup>14</sup> Its members were young Tibetan artists motivated by a "growing sense of the need to reinstate their Tibetanness,"<sup>15</sup> and to construct a new visual vocabulary specific to Tibetan contemporary art. In an effort to differentiate their practice from the official styles of Socialist Realism and techniques such as traditional Chinese ink-and-brush painting, the Sweet Tea artists' exhibited works were initially all anti-realist in style.

During his first years back in Lhasa, Gyatso produced conventional abstract landscapes and architectural studies in watercolour. As he says, "It was my way of reexamining or reunderstanding the place that I called home."<sup>16</sup> Unlike the other artists, however, he was uninterested in auspicious or culturally significant areas (such as Changthang or Lhamo Lhatso), preferring instead to paint "landscapes we all knew and had access to"; he explains, "I painted things outside my window or that I could visit in the countryside." As a result, his paintings at the time were often untitled or had simply descriptive titles, such as *Mountain on the Other Side of River*

(1985), *Sky and Wall* (1985), and *Highland* (1986). Significantly, as Harris has noted, "The only specifically 'Tibetan' feature in these early landscape studies was the inclusion of the artist's signature in U-chen script."<sup>17</sup>

Following his landscape and architecture period, Gyatso became more interested in learning traditional painting that reflected his Tibetan heritage,<sup>18</sup> and he turned to Buddhist iconography for the first time. *Buddha and the White Lotus* (1987) is an early example of one of these works; inspired by the Analytic Cubism of Pablo Picasso (and with a dash of Salvador Dalí), Gyatso's Buddha figure is perspectively distorted and almost indecipherable. His formal experimentations with the Buddha image continued through the late 1980s—a period that coincided with widespread political unrest. From 1987 until 1989, a series of large pro-independence demonstrations occurred mainly in the Tibetan areas of the PRC, in which monks, nuns, and laypeople took to the streets. The most memorable demonstration took place in May 1989, on the thirtieth anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising, which had seen great military force and protestor deaths. One month later, in June 1989, several hundred unarmed civilians were shot dead in Tiananmen Square in Beijing by the Chinese army after a seven-week-long peaceful protest in which (mostly) students refused to move until their demands for democratic reform were met.

While Gyatso explains that he never participated in the uprisings ("It was kind of new to me; I felt really confused and disillusioned at that time"<sup>19</sup>), his political inclinations were beginning to shift. It was around this time that Gyatso heard tape-

recorded speeches (circulating illegally) by the exiled fourteenth Dalai Lama who gave a different account of Tibetan history to the one Gyatso had previously heard. He claims that this confluence of events compelled him to explore the Buddha image more emphatically, and from 1987 to 1989 produced a series of paintings in response to his newly awakened conscience. In *Red Buddha* (1989), as in each of the paintings, the icon is rendered in blood-red paint on cotton cloth, and appears as an abstract apparition hovering in the centre of the composition.

This difficult period also inspired in Gyatso a desire to obtain a more thorough understanding of Tibetan Buddhism, about which he claimed to have only "a layman's grasp."<sup>20</sup> As he says, "This was the real impetus for moving to Dharamsala,"<sup>21</sup> the Tibetan capital-in-exile located at the foothills of the Himalayas. This settlement was founded in 1959 when the Dalai Lama was forced to flee Tibet and established a government-in-exile there. Today, several thousand Tibetan exiles have settled in the area, where they have built monasteries, temples, schools, and a library.<sup>22</sup> It was here in Dharamsala (or "Little Lhasa," as it is often called) that Gyatso sought to connect with Tibetan culture more fully. And so, for the first time in his life, he began to study Buddhism seriously, taking up courses in Dharma and Tibetology at the prestigious Library of Tibetan Works and Archive, established by the Dalai Lama in 1970. It was at the library that he first met monk painter Master Sangay Yeshe, under whose tutelage he studied *thangka* from 1993 to 1996, which proved to be a life-altering experience.



*The Tibet Question (Red Buddha)*, 1989  
mixed media on cotton cloth  
120 x 85 cm  
Image: Clare Harris, courtesy the artist



The artist with *Iconometric Buddha*, 1992  
Image: Clare Harris, courtesy the artist



*Medicine Buddha*, 1996  
mixed media on cloth and silk  
dimensions variable (scroll)

*Thangka* is a form of sacred painting that can be traced back to the death of the Shakyamuni Buddha (ca.563–483BC), who founded Buddhism. Like the Dalai Lama, *thangka* is believed to function as a manifestation of the divine, and as such has become one of the primary signifiers of Tibetan identity. This ancient painting tradition originally became popular among travelling monks because the scrolls were easily rolled and transported from monastery to monastery, where they served as important teaching tools, depicting the life of the Buddha, various influential lamas, and other deities and bodhisattvas. Thus, the *thangka* is not simply a decoration, but a religious object and a medium for expressing Buddhist ideals. When a person commissions a *thangka*, a lama is usually consulted to advise him or her on which deity should be painted to give the greatest assistance to that person. For instance, a painting may be commissioned to bring about good health, prosperity, or long life; to aid in the recovery of a sick person; to protect a person through vulnerable periods in his or her life; or to help in the rebirth of someone who has recently died. Thus, there are many different forms a *thangka* may take, depending on what the patron wishes for—from peaceful, wrathful, or meditative deities to bodhisattvas, Buddhas, and dharma protectors. The production of a *thangka* is done in several stages over an extended period of time, and involves illustration, painting, repainting, mounting,

and then consecration. As with the majority of Buddhist art, its composition is highly geometric—constructed using an iconometric grid. Arms, legs, eyes, nostrils, ears, and various ritual implements are all laid out on a systematic grid of angles and intersecting lines, which, in the initial sketching phase, are numbered. This methodical process requires a deep understanding of Buddhist symbolism. Because the art is explicitly religious, all symbols and allusions must adhere to strict guidelines laid out in ancient Buddhist scripture. A *thangka* painter cannot veer from these religious strictures; any deviations are unacceptable.

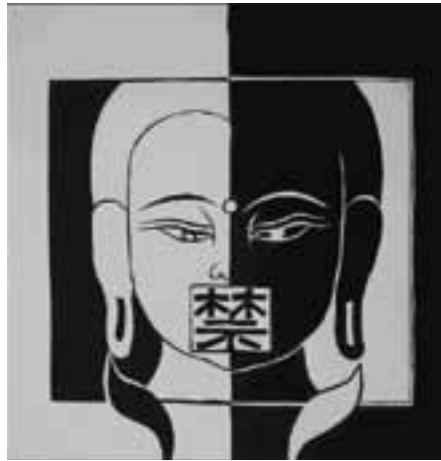
Gyatso's traditional *thangka* training took all of these proscribed considerations into account—and under Yeshi's watchful eye, he was soon drawing Buddhist deities, with all their complex iconographic elements, and mastering the iconometric grid systems that underpin them. Unfortunately, only one of Gyatso's *thangkas* from this period has survived. Marking the end of his *thangka* training, this final project was completed under Yeshi's tutelage. After working on it full time for three months, Gyatso completed it in 1996. The image depicts Bhaiṣajyaguru, or the Medicine Buddha, who, it is believed, can eliminate all the suffering and affliction of sentient beings. He is usually depicted seated, as he is in Gyatso's rendering, wearing the three robes of a Buddhist monk, and holding a lapis-coloured jar of medicine nectar in his left hand. Within this important early

work, the artist demonstrates his mastery of the proportional grid, colour arrangement, and composition, all rendered in the Menri style preferred by contemporary Tibetans in Dharamsala.

However, despite his proficiency in the ancient technique, Gyatso quickly realised that he “was more interested in iconometry, than in *thangka* painting itself,”<sup>23</sup> and began to experiment on his own at the same time that he was undergoing his traditional training. *Iconometric Buddha* (1992) is exemplary of this new direction, and also of his desire to assert his individuality. Harris describes how, at this time, Gyatso was performing “a kind of archaeology on the substructures and [making] them overt components of his Buddha depictions.”<sup>24</sup> In doing so, she continues, he observed “the aesthetic codes of Tibetan art and expos[ed] its visual techniques to scrutiny. In his work, the iconometric grid functions as a signifier of traditionalism beneath which the Buddha appears somehow fixed and imprisoned.”<sup>25</sup> Gyatso's emphasis on these linear structures, which Harris argues is informed by “his ambivalent position as both insider and outsider to this cultural vocabulary,”<sup>26</sup> is critical to understanding his practice—then and now. From this point onwards, Gyatso has continued to (almost) obsessively adhere to *thangka* iconometrics; like most “strategies of resistance,” the artist emphasises their presence, as if the gridded lines themselves were another important signifier of his Tibetanness.



*Untitled*, 1997  
acrylic, ink and collage on board



*Banned*, 1999  
screenprint edition on paper  
76 x 57 cm

In 1996, Gyatso was accepted into the graduate program at the Chelsea School of Art and Design in London. Upon arriving in the modern metropolis, he felt overwhelmed not only by the size of the city, but by the sheer volume of viewable Western art masterpieces. Previously, his only access to such works was via catalogues; in Beijing and Lhasa he had looked at reproductions of modern art, and had seen a bare few firsthand, but his knowledge was limited. In London, however, he was able to access original works, and for the first time saw pieces by Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Amedeo Modigliani, James Whistler, Norman Rockwell, and Edward Hopper. With his newfound experience, Gyatso “began to feel freer.”<sup>27</sup> This exposure impacted his continued experimentations with the Buddha; he began to dissect its figure (*Untitled*, 1997), to splice it (as in his 1997 homage to Lucio Fontana), and to urbanise it by adding the colourful lights of London’s Soho (*Soho Buddha*, 1997). In a less playful experiment, titled *Banned* (1999), Gyatso presents the iconic figure with the Chinese word “banned” stuck like a muzzle over its mouth. (This was to be the first of many images in which the Buddha functions as an unambiguous political symbol.)

In the late 1990s, the London art scene was dominated by a group of artists known as the Young British Artists, or YBAs, whose raucous, scatological, and oftentimes risqué works had helped skyrocket the group to international art stardom, most spectacularly around the

exhibition, *Sensation*, which premiered at the Royal Academy of Art in 1997, and featured Charles Saatchi’s contemporary art collection. As Gyatso explains: “After seeing the Saatchi exhibition, and getting over the culture shock of it, I had an epiphany. It changed my view of how art should be, what it could be. I left the Buddha aside for a while and began doing experimental work.”<sup>28</sup> The subsequent series of works, which uses Western-style men’s shirts, is one example of Gyatso’s new direction, and demonstrates a new interest in conceptual art. In *Shirt #12* (2000), the hanging shirt has three open collars down the front in order to accommodate deities with multiple heads, while another with multiple sleeves is designed for a deity with six arms. Yet, despite his admission that he had given up the Buddha image, Gyatso’s cultural references clearly remained, and in a humorous way.

Reflecting upon those early years in London, the artist explains that he no longer felt that he was making work

to suit the needs and desires of a cause. I was finally making work that I was interested in; and there was a wider sense of what was accepted as art. It was while I was in London that I was finally able to resolve my “identity” issue.<sup>29</sup>

A series of four photographic self-portraits titled *My Identity*, produced in 2003, encapsulates this newfound sense of self.

Each image sees Gyatso depicted in an identical pose during four different moments in Tibetan—and his own—history: before the arrival of the Han Chinese in Tibet (prior to 1950); during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76); during his exile in Dharamsala (1992–96); and, finally, after his arrival in London in 1996. In each instance, he is shown as an artist, seated, cross-legged in a meditative Buddhist pose, and staring blankly out at the viewer. He sits alongside an easel painting, with his “tools” beside him. (Incidentally, and poignantly, the four paintings on display were all produced by Gyatso specifically for the *My Identity* series.)

The starting point for this important series was a black-and-white portrait photograph—taken by C. Suydam Cutting of the thirteenth Dalai Lama’s senior *thangka* painter, Tsering—which the artist found reproduced on the cover of a 1984 book titled *Tibetan Thangka Painting*. The portrait, taken in Lhasa in 1937, shows Tsering dressed as an aristocrat, posing in front of a *thangka* that represents the incarnation of the Buddha of Wisdom, Manjusri. Tsering’s pigment bowls and brushes for his *thangka* painting are placed on a low table beside him.

In his first reinterpretation of the 1937 original, Gyatso performs the role of Tsering; however, he has replaced the Manjusri image with the classic Shakyamuni Buddha favoured by Tibetans in exile. He dons an aristocratic robe, and sits within a plush interior decorated with silk curtains, exquisite furniture, and a



My Identity: 1 (Tibetan Robe), 2003  
 My Identity: 2 (Painter in Communist China), 2003  
 My Identity: 3 (Refugee Artist), 2003  
 My Identity: 4 (London studio), 2003  
 digital photographs  
 56.6 x 70.6 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist and Haunch of Venison, London

bonsai tree. In short, he has created an image of a quintessential Tibetan *thangka* painter—which is, of course, an invention of his imagination; as a contemporary Tibetan, such a vision can only be an invented memory or an aspiration. “I have never personally experienced this”, he explains.<sup>30</sup>

In the second image from the *My Identity* series, Gyatso performs the role of a uniformed Red Guard painter in Tibet under Chinese rule. Here, the Shakyamuni Buddha shown in the previous image is replaced with a portrait of a smiling Mao. The artist says that this image represents his experience as a youth during the Cultural Revolution. Evoking the practices of Communist propaganda, Gyatso is surrounded by Maoist icons and

paraphernalia; a bust of Mao stands on a pile of Little Red Books, and a painter’s bucket bears the face of the Great Helmsman and a loyal cadre. The room is decorated with cheap Formica furniture and the walls are covered with newspaper, as was often the case in Chinese homes at that time—a sign of the party’s rejection of bourgeois values.

The next self-portrait depicts Gyatso as an artist-in-exile, living in a refugee camp in Dharamsala, surrounded by fragile walls of corrugated iron, and dreaming of an independent Tibet ruled by the Dalai Lama. He paints an image of the Potala Palace, the residence of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa, above which a portrait of the spiritual leader floats like the rising sun. He has painted a large

stone slab in the middle of the composition, which represents one of two monuments razed in the ninth century (he depicts the one in Lhasa; the other was in the Chinese city of Chang’an). The slab bears the words of a peace treaty between the two countries, and emphasises the equality and fraternity of the two peoples. The Indian nation within which Dharamsala is located is suggested only by the reused *Bangla* box in the foreground. Instead of the Formica sideboard and Mao bust, a photograph of the Dalai Lama rests on a big red suitcase (bearing a logo of the banned Tibetan flag), its colour recalling that of Tibetan monks’ robes.

In contrast, the fourth image in the *My Identity* series shows a punky-haired





*The Religion Question - 5, 2004*  
India ink and pencil on treated paper  
26 x 26 cm



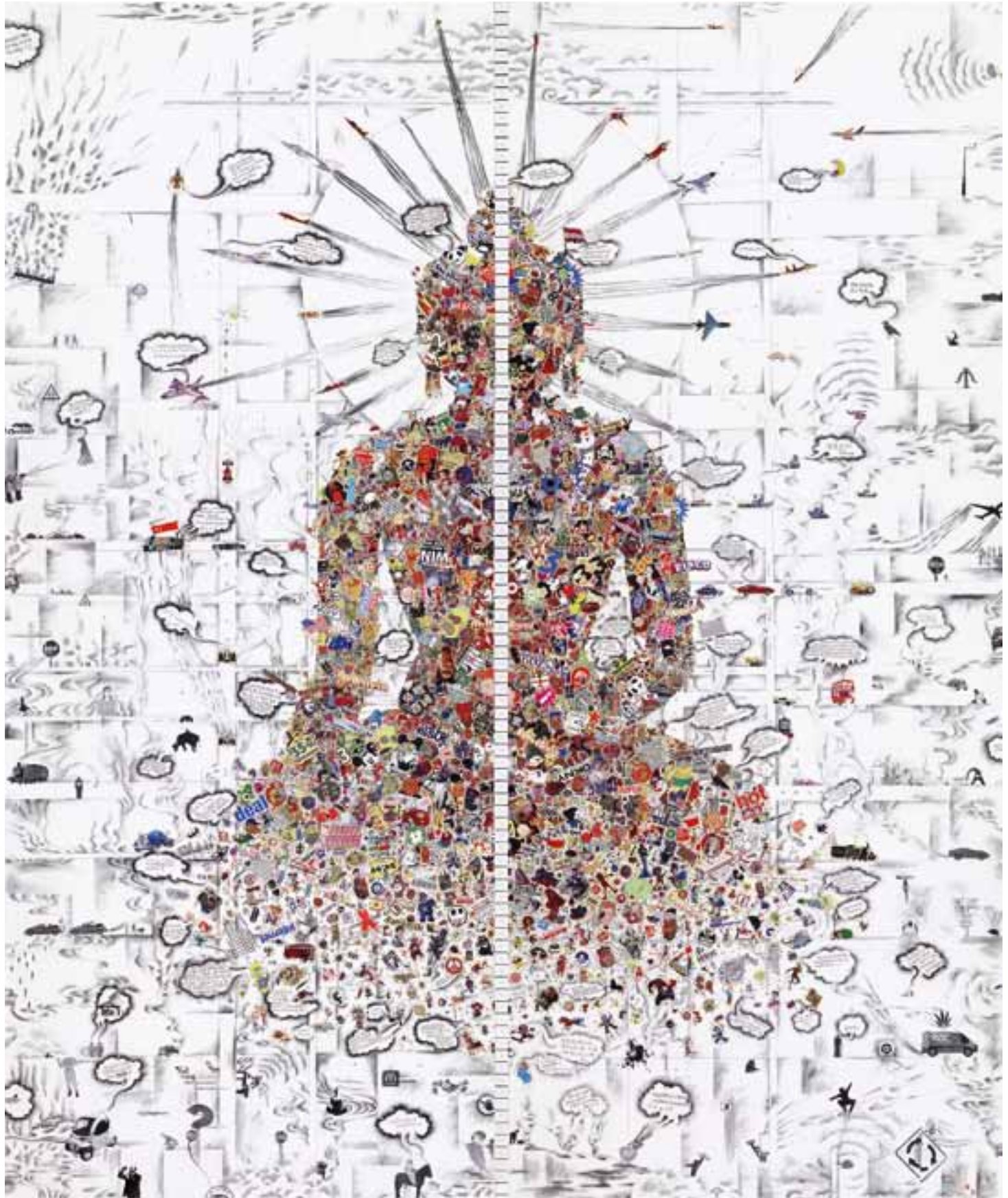
*Pokemon Buddha, 2004*  
pencil and Pokemon stickers on  
treated paper  
24 x 18 cm

contemporary artist in “the West”: The bare white space of the room recalls the minimalist white cube of a gallery space. (Gyatso says that he always associates the West with whiteness because of the bareness of its contemporary architecture and the general cleanliness of things.<sup>31</sup>) Instead of the red suitcase with the Dalai Lama portrait, a vase of bright red flowers and some fashion magazines rest atop a cheap, IKEA-like table. This stark, anesthetised image stands in radical contrast to the warm colours and plush decorative qualities of the first. Moreover, this time the frame contains a colourful allusion to a mandala floating on an ocean of fire—but updated with neon colours and computer-graphic swirls.

This final image best represents the “new Gyatso”: a Tibetan-in-exile living in London, one of the most cosmopolitan world cities. He explains that it depicts a picture that is “much more myself”<sup>32</sup>; whereas in the earlier images he functions as a servant—producing images for a political cause and at the request of others (e.g., Mao and the Dalai Lama)—in this image, he serves himself only, and can begin producing work as a more powerfully asserted, activated subject. Nevertheless, in all four photographs, the same little black case or “toolbox” is present: it is the only consistent object that the artist has been able to keep with him throughout his exile. His status as an artist is also unchanging, as is his cultural identity, which is indicated

by the word “Tibet” tattooed in black ink on his upper arm.

With a better grasp on his identity, Gyatso’s self-confidence soared. In 2003, he opened a London incarnation of the Sweet Tea House, at which mostly Tibetan contemporary artists exhibit their work to this day—free from the oppressive gaze experienced in Tibet. (The inaugural show presented the work of Lhasa-based artist, Gade, who had studied under Gyatso’s tutelage in Tibet.) By 2004, Gyatso’s practice took two radical turns, both of which allowed him to further camouflage his politics—at least to Western audiences. The first involved a highly innovative use of language-as-form, as is visible in the series, *The Religion Question* (2004–5), in which



*Buddha Sakyamuni Dissected*, 2010  
mixed media, collage, pencil and India  
ink over silkscreen  
280 x 230 cm  
Private Collection, New Zealand



*Buddha Sakyamuni Dissected*  
(detail), 2010  
mixed media, collage, pencil and  
India ink over silkscreen  
280 x 230 cm  
Private Collection, New Zealand



*Disney Plus 3*, 2005  
pencil and stickers on treated paper  
40 x 29 cm

random quotations from the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* concerning subjects such as the Communist view of religion and ideas about how to combat bourgeois ideals (all rendered in Chinese characters) coalesce into the form of the Buddha and flutter in its vicinity like random thoughts.

The second major development involved collage, which he began using in a playful way, with works such as *Pokémon Buddha* and the *Disney Plus* series (both of 2004). In the latter, he combines his Buddha imagery with pop icons and superheroes such as Mickey Mouse and Spider-Man, while in the former, he builds up the Buddha figure using Pokémon stickers. This comments on the way that Asian cultures (particularly Japanese and Buddhist) have been embraced by global

consumers. Gyatso states that he initially began working with collaged stickers and cut paper in an effort to make his work “more global” and “more accessible for people that don’t know about Tibet”.<sup>33</sup> This momentous decision was also influenced by his young daughter’s fascination with stickers, which she would bring home from school. He was attracted to the images’ colours and textures as well as their accessibility.<sup>34</sup>

In a 2005 interview, Gyatso was asked about the then-new collage works, to which he replied:

With these pieces, I made them on my kitchen table, with the television going and my daughter talking to friends on the phone. . . . The Buddha image had become

too heavy, but I still needed to explore what I could do with it. . . . Because of my upbringing, I never got to fully understand the religious implications behind drawing the Buddha . . . So I figured, I would take what I know of Buddhism, and compare it with what I know about Western culture—the many interpretations Buddhism has gone through depending on fashion and trends.<sup>35</sup>

A talented bricoleur, Gyatso began collecting stickers from all over the world that he could then apply to the Buddha image. His iconography includes cartoon characters (e.g., Mickey Mouse, Tinker Bell, Powerpuff Girls, Snow White), cult figures (e.g., Che Guevara, Osama bin Laden), politicians (e.g., Barack



*Tibetan Idol 11*, 2006  
stickers, photographs, India ink and pencil on treated paper  
47 x 35 cm



*Tibetan Idol 13*, 2006  
India ink and pencil on treated paper  
50 x 35 cm



*Tibetan Idol 6*, 2006  
stickers, India ink and pencil on treated paper  
47 x 35 cm

Obama, Hamid Karzai), and anonymous pornographic stars, along with innumerable trademark logos for well-known capitalist giants and/or luxury brands, such as Louis Vuitton, McDonald's, KFC, IKEA, Tiffany & Co., Marks & Spencer, etc. This crazy cast of characters spouts deep and meaningful words of wisdom in handwritten thought balloons, rendered in multiple languages. A self-proclaimed "media junkie", Gyatso culls the texts from newspaper clippings, comics, radio, TV, and online articles, as well as Mao's Little Red Book. In these works, it is important to note that the artist also began to incorporate a nonsensical language of his own making, which is a combination of Tibetan and Chinese characters. This technique of using hybridised text, word play, and encrypted visual codes—as is visible in *Buddha Dissected* (2010), for instance—also allows him to further camouflage the often already ambiguous political sentiments. It also demonstrates his desire to be "part of the conversation in China"; to find a "shared platform". Ultimately, his creation of this highly innovative, Chinese/Tibetan language is, as he says, "a positive contribution along the path to the possibility that we will find a way to communicate".<sup>36</sup>

The *Tibetan Idol* series (2005) combines both of these new formal developments to dramatic effect. Each of its sixteen works is comprised of a silhouetted image of the Buddha's head with collaged visual and

textual elements. Taking his title from the TV series, *American Idol*, Gyatso aimed to demonstrate that Tibetans are as diverse/irreducible as Americans, and to explore the multifarious interpretations of Tibetan Buddhism: "When people think of 'Tibet', especially in China and in the West, it is common to picture the lost country as an idealised 'exotic' place,"<sup>37</sup> and there is also a perception that all Tibetans are similar to the Dalai Lama, and are therefore all peace-loving, religious, and nonmaterialistic. When, in fact, we are a diverse culture with many different attitudes, opinions, cultural backgrounds, religions, languages, and social values.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, unlike the stereotype, not all Tibetans are necessarily Buddhists, pacifists, or vegetarians. Nor do Tibetans necessarily live in Tibet, as evidenced by the many Tibetan diasporic communities. As Gyatso says,

What I want to express through [this series] is that there are many ways of being a Tibetan; I, myself, do not possess one identity, as I was born and educated in China, I spent many years in India, and I finally live and work in the West. A "real Tibetan identity" is impossible to define.<sup>39</sup>

In order to reflect upon this diversity and to de-essentialise Tibetanness, Gyatso's *Tibetan Idol* series includes a Communist Tibetan, a capitalist Tibetan, a religious Tibetan, a

terrorist Tibetan, and so on. For instance, one idol bears the Louis Vuitton logo, another a Tibetan and a Chinese flag, and, another still, a recycle symbol. The Communist Tibetan is presented as a Buddha with the party symbol, behind which is written a long text in Chinese. Sourced from the Internet, it tells the story of an old Tibetan woman who, every day for thirty years, raised the Communist flag at dawn and then lowered it at sunset. In another, the artist culled text and archival photographs from a Chinese publication, *100 Years of Tibet*, which depicts Tibet as a part of China. The struggle between the two countries is avoided in the text, and is instead presented as a mutually beneficial and joyous union, as the artist makes clear in his use of the yin and yang symbol, and the "happy"-coloured balloons (and musical notes) that float from the Buddha's head.

However, *Tibetan Idol 6* is perhaps the most disturbing, both visually and textually. In it, the Buddha's head (formally built up using Chinese characters) dons the mask of a suicide bomber as well as a red headband made up of bright red hearts. The text is culled from an article by a young Tibetan living in Dharamsala, who asks the Dalai Lama, "Where is the magic for future Tibet?" and vows to not take off his red headband until there is freedom for Tibet. As another sign of the young Tibetan's extreme stance, Gyatso transformed the Buddha's halo into a recently ignited bomb.



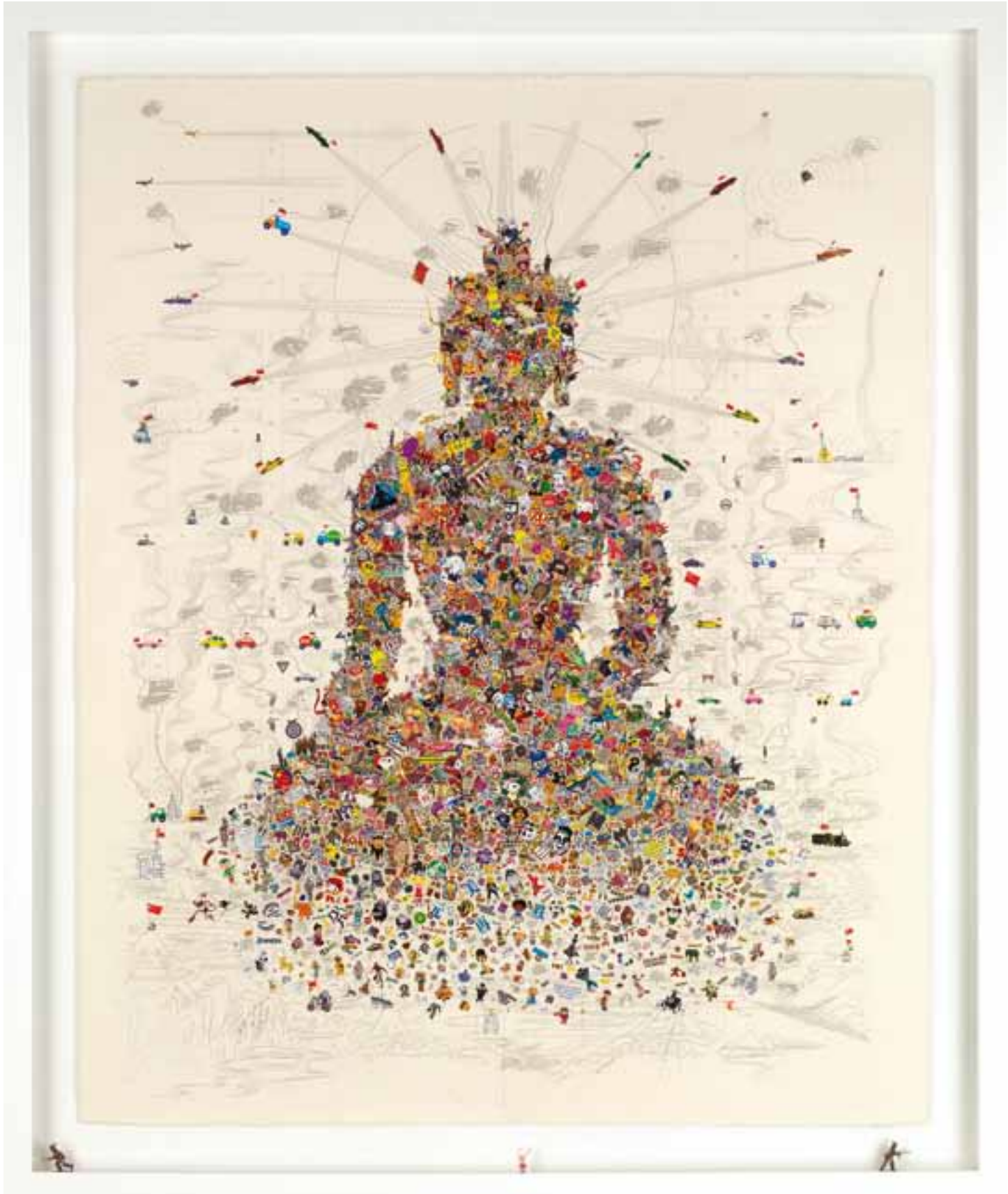
*Panda Politics*, 2006  
stickers and India ink on treated paper  
70 x 50 cm

In both their form and content, Gyatso's more recent works vacillate between being playful and political; sometimes they are a combination of both. At first glance, *Panda Politics* (2006) is a seemingly innocent portrayal of the Buddha filled with repeated imagery of a smiling panda bear face, and topped with a big-eared panda halo. Yet, when read by a Chinese speaker, or translated for the Western viewer, the text behind the figure relays a different (more troubling) story. In 2005, the Chinese government offered Taiwan a gift of two pandas—an act of diplomacy often employed by the PRC in recognition of mutual friendship. However, the offer posed a problem since the Taiwanese seek independence from (not unification with) the PRC. The Taiwanese were further outraged when China insisted that a transfer from Mainland China to Taiwan was a domestic transfer, thus not recognising Taiwan as separate nation. In the end, the gift was seen as a “trick” rather than a sign of goodwill.

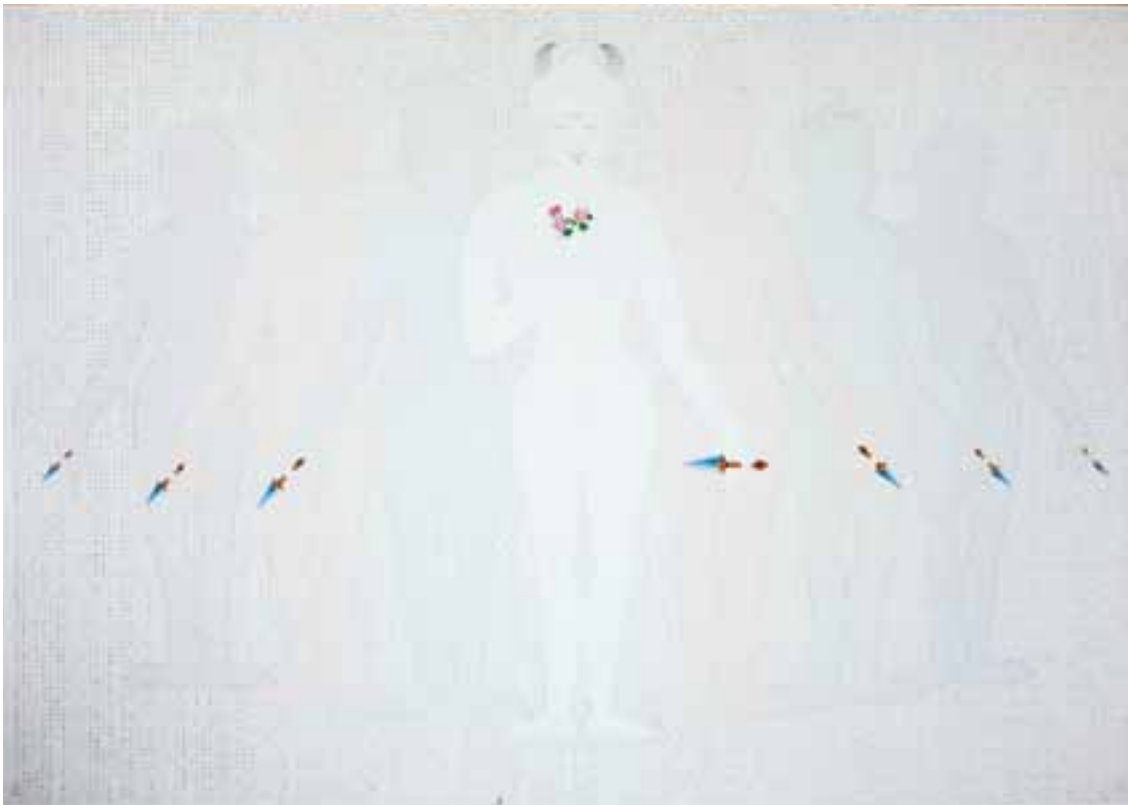
Gyatso uses similarly encrypted visual codes in *Angel* (2007), a large-scale collage that presents the now-iconic image of an Abu Ghraib prisoner rendered in brand logo stickers and superimposed over a multi-faced and armed Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, the Buddhist deity of compassion. The central figure holds a long strand made up of colourful roses and skulls, symbolising both a Buddhist rosary and also the electrified wire used to torture inmates at the notorious prison in Iraq from 2005 to 2006. Beside the deity are images of women in burkas, soldiers with guns, terrorists with hostages; also scattered about are cuttings from newspaper headlines and advertisements with disjunctive phrases, such as “Mattel recalls 1.9 m potentially dangerous Chinese-made toys”, “Cuban salsa”, “Amnesty international”, “Support Tibet not terror”, “Israeli government and the West Bank wall”, and “Imagine there is war and nobody shows up?”; but, perhaps most facetiously, “Always look on the bright side

of life!”, which is strategically placed in bold letters below the figure. When asked recently about the strange combination of iconic images of violence mixed with compassion and disjointed sentences, the artist explained that he “wanted the image to be playful, beautiful; not dark and bleeding.”<sup>40</sup> Yet, this seemingly dismissive statement belies the obvious political content represented, likening this strategy to a form of self-censorship.

Having been “trained” from an early age to repress his opinions, Gyatso finds it challenging to represent overt political statements—hence the various modes of camouflage that function to deflect politicised readings. When the work is meant to be exhibited in China, it becomes even more daunting, “especially knowing that we are not allowed to show any politically sensitive imagery ... I don't want the authorities to censor me”, he recently explained.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, when asked to make a work for the Shanghai Art Fair in 2008, he produced one of his more



*One World Many Dreams*, 2008  
stickers, papercut and pencil on treated paper  
153 x 125 cm  
Private Collection, Hong Kong



*Spring 2008, 2009*  
pencil, ink and stickers on paper  
154 x 220 cm

encrypted images, *One World Many Dreams* (2008). Its title is an obvious pun on the 2008 Beijing Olympics slogan, “One World, One Dream”, which had been marketed worldwide by the Chinese, and was meant to signify unity across linguistic, racial, and religious barriers. The composition is littered with Chinese flags, proudly displayed cars and trucks, and smiling figures, as a nod to the government that, at the time, had “instructed everyone to fly the national flag during the Olympics” as a sign of solidarity. However, in what has become a characteristic feature of Gyatso’s work, the artist inserts a sly political statement into this composition. The speech bubbles to which have been present in his work since 2004 and often make exclamatory and, at times, defamatory declarations, are speechless; the sticker-figures have been censored, silenced—their words crossed out.

That same year, 2008, was a particularly troubling one for Tibetan peoples worldwide. To commemorate the fifty-year anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising, thousands of mostly Buddhist monks and nuns launched a peaceful pro-independence demonstration in Lhasa, which later spread throughout Tibet, and eventually descended into rioting, burning, and looting. The most shocking occurrence was the violence directed at Han and Hui Chinese civilians by Tibetans participating in the unrest, which resulted in approximately eighteen deaths.<sup>42</sup> It was a deeply embarrassing moment for many Tibetans, especially those who try to uphold the myth of Tibet as a population of pacifists. For his part, Gyatso had a more complicated and nuanced reaction, one that inspired him to produce a work in direct response to it. (This is particularly relevant given that

in earlier instances of political unrest in the PRC, notably in 1987–89, Gyatso was neither inclined to become involved as an activist nor to produce a work in response.) *Spring 2008* (2009) depicts seven horned female deities in faint silhouette, each of whom wields a ritual implement (called a *vajra*) symbolising thunderbolts; the central figure holds a lotus bud, which represents peace, while simultaneously extending her tongue—a Tibetan sign of respect. The combined iconography “highlights a demonstration of ferocity” that stands in stark contrast to the Western image of the perpetually gentle, nonviolent Tibetan. Of the work, Gyatso says, “I wanted to explore the irony of being a ‘non-violent’ culture and the kind of backlash that it can have when we choose to defend ourselves with our fists.”<sup>43</sup> Gyatso also sought to emphasise that not all Tibetans



*Time to Change the Formula?* from *108 Burning Questions*, 2010–2011  
stickers, collage, India ink and pencil on treated paper in 108 custom made frames with text insertions  
27 x 25 cm



*Are We Still Friends?* from *108 Burning Questions*, 2010–2011  
stickers, collage, India ink and pencil on treated paper in 108 custom made frames with text insertions  
27 x 25 cm



*What Does Democracy Look Like?* from *108 Burning Questions*, 2010–2011  
stickers, collage, India ink and pencil on treated paper in 108 custom made frames with text insertions  
27 x 25 cm

are peaceful, Buddha-loving vegetarians, in much the same way that all Muslims are not terrorists, Americans capitalists, Chinese Communists, and so on. This important work continues on from his 2006 *Tibetan Idol* series in de-essentialising stereotypical cultural assumptions.

Gyatso has continually stated that his lived experiences in London, and later New York, have greatly affected his understanding of intercultural differences:

[Since moving to London] I am much more aware of the different cultures coexisting. In exile, it's a question of your own existence, which leads you to think about your own identity. . . . London is a city where you can meet people from all over the world. I think as an artist I would like to make my scope much wider—addressing wider issues: migration, identity, and this cultural displacement. It's quite interesting, you get involved with artists from different backgrounds, then you look at your own community and

realise there is a connection between all of them; all are facing common concerns or fears.<sup>44</sup>

Gyatso's newly expressed desire to address issues *other than* Tibetan ones is best exemplified by *108 Burning Questions* (2011), a series of collages that is arguably his most unambiguously political to date. While the politics embedded in the earlier works were veiled or encrypted, in this new series of works, the artist's political stance is revealed. Each of the 108 collages—an auspicious number in Buddhism—is a meditation on a contemporary social or political issue about which Gyatso feels strongly. In each of the boxes he has posed a “burning question,” which he transcribes on the inner frames.

On a formal level, the latest series represents a major departure from his previous work. While the technique of collage still predominates, Gyatso has eliminated the Buddha image, and has replaced it with another signifier of Tibetan Buddhism, the Protective Ring of Fire, which is centrally

placed in each image. This ring functions in each work as a framing mechanism within which he places a contemporary image (usually a figure or icon), and around which he collages related (not unrelated, as in previous works) imagery and quotations.

The series itself examines topics as varied as poverty (“Why do some have so little and others so much?”), oil (“How low can you go?”), in vitro fertilisation (“Which egg has the highest IQ?”), marriage, celebrity culture, hip-hop (“Time to change the formula?”), vegetarianism, animal rights (“Aren't fish meat too?”), war, peace, gay rights (“Is this the business of church and state?”), unemployment, homelessness, housing crises, and museum admission fees, among others. Many of the works critique capitalism, and, in particular, its American manifestation—self-indulgence, greed, the Wall Street bailout—as well as the Global Financial Crisis, etc.

There are also several musings on the subject of democracy. In *Are We Still Friends?*, Lady Liberty smashes through the Protective





*China's Tibet?! from 108 Burning Questions, 2010–2011*  
stickers, collage, India ink and pencil  
on treated paper in 108 custom made  
frames with text insertions  
27 x 25 cm



*Who's Cooking It? from 108 Burning Questions, 2010–2011*  
stickers, collage, India ink and pencil  
on treated paper in 108 custom made  
frames with text insertions  
27 x 25 cm



*Where Is He? from 108 Burning Questions, 2010–2011*  
stickers, collage, India ink and pencil  
on treated paper in 108 custom made  
frames with text insertions  
27 x 25 cm

All images of *108 Burning Questions* can be found on page 44 of this publication

Ring of Fire, surrounded by war imagery (soldiers with guns) and couples arguing. A Taliban fighter holds a sign that reads “Freedom: Go to hell”; while a wine-toasting hand exclaims, “War: Good for few, bad for most.” In another, entitled, *What Does Democracy Look Like?*, smiling veiled Muslim women and men are surrounded by the names of countries involved in the recent Arab Spring uprisings, including Egypt, Iraq, Palestine, Tunisia, Sudan, Algeria, Libya, Yemen, Jordan, and Bahrain.

Some of the more potent works in the series, perhaps not surprisingly, address current Sino-Tibetan relations. In the one titled *China's Tibet?!!*, Gyatso has placed the words for “Tibet” and “China” in Chinese characters, within the Protective Ring of Fire at the centre (both are rendered in Chinese characters; however, the word “Tibet” is much larger). On the outer edges, Mao salutes and declares, “Liberation”; a somber Dalai Lama asks, “Is everyone really happy?!”; and anonymous smiling faces exclaim, “We are happy here!”, “Blissful”, and “Happy”—in both English and Chinese.

In another, *Who's Cooking It?*, Gyatso rails against the art market in China. In the top banner, written in Chinese, the artist asks, “With one spring auction after another, who's been stealing the limelight??” Below, a famous image by contemporary Chinese artist Fang Lijun is featured within the Protective Ring of Fire, while all around him is a halo of banners declaring, in Chinese, “Prize” or “Award”. (When asked about his recurring fascination with Fang, the artist states that, for him, Fang's work is “a kind of icon for contemporary Chinese art”<sup>45</sup>.) Also featured are numerous well-known paintings by modern and contemporary Chinese artists—Wang Guangyi, Liu Ye, Yue Minjun, Ai Xuan, Luo Zhongli, Lin Fengmian, Wu Guangzhong, Pan Yuliang—each of which carries a thought bubble with its respective auction price.

One of the most harrowing images in the series is *Where Is He?*. It depicts the highest-ranking lama after the Dalai Lama—the six-year-old Panchen Lama who disappeared in 1996 after being taken into “protective custody” by the Chinese

authorities. He was never seen again. A crowd asks, “Has anyone seen him?” Meanwhile, little toy figurines float through the composition with question-mark thought bubbles. Tibetans believe that the Chinese are threatened by the power of the Dalai Lama's possible successor, and have imprisoned him indefinitely—an idea alluded to by Gyatso, who has placed the boy's face behind vertical red bars. With this work, as with others in the series, he reminds us that the political situation between China and Tibet is still tenuous, and that there are still “burning” issues.

As recently as 4 November 2011, a Buddhist nun in China's western Sichuan Province (the predominantly ethnic Tibetan area) self-immolated, bringing the number of Tibetan clergy who have set themselves on fire since March 2011 to eleven. As she was burning to death, the nun shouted “Long live the Dalai Lama” and “Let the Dalai Lama return to Tibet.” In a hauntingly similar response to the disappearance of the Panchen Lama in 1996, China's state-owned Xinhua news agency paraphrased

a local official as saying the initial police investigation showed that the case “was masterminded and instigated by the Dalai Lama clique, which had plotted a chain of self-immolations in the past months”.<sup>46</sup> News of atrocities such as this one in the PRC is relayed on an almost daily basis. And while human rights violations continue, the censorship of “unofficial” sentiment is also rampant, as is clear with the recent unwarranted imprisonment of contemporary Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei, which caused an international uproar. Self-censorship occurs frequently as well. Indeed, as recently as 2007, Gyatso himself decided not to include the third image from his *My Identity* series in an exhibition held in Beijing called *Lhasa: New Art from Tibet*; he feared the depiction of the Dalai Lama would prove incendiary.<sup>47</sup>

The PRC is also notorious for presenting a distorted national history to suit the party’s needs. A 2007 government-organised exhibition at the Cultural Palace of Nationalities in Beijing on the history of Tibet is a case in point. The show, enthusiastically covered in the Chinese news media, was presented in two thematic parts. The first, called “The History of Tibet and Feudal Serfdom in Old Tibet”, consisted mostly of old photographic images of peasants maimed and crippled at the hands of Tibetan lords and Buddhist lamas. The second, “New Tibet Changing with Each Passing Day”, was, as critic Holland Cotter described it, a full-color travelogue account of the country under Chinese rule, an idyll of progress and cheer. The whole business was a classic exercise in propaganda, so blatant as to verge on kitsch. And it felt familiar. There are similar shows on Tibet and China in the

West, in only slightly more nuanced form, with the good guys and bad guys switching roles.<sup>48</sup>

While all of this is disheartening, Gyatso maintains a more global view:

After many years living in London, I’ve realised that we have lots of problems in this world. The Tibetan problem is not the only problem. It is just part of problem. In comparison with refugees from other countries that I’ve met, Tibetans are lucky. We have people who speak for us, and support us, like the Dalai Lama; whereas people from Muslim countries, for instance, have no support.<sup>49</sup>

He is also cautiously optimistic about the future of Tibet. When asked if he believes that Tibet will ever be autonomous or independent, he answers: “I believe one day Tibet will be independent; we are a unique culture that demands a unique governing structure and set of moral codes. However, I don’t feel that day is near.” Nevertheless, he is currently seeking a visa that will allow him to live part time in Beijing and Lhasa, while still maintaining residence in London. It is indeed an exciting time for him, and one that will inevitably impact his practice. And for those of us who are self-declared “Gyatso groupies”, we will wait impatiently for what will inevitably be a new, perhaps increasingly political, direction.

**Maura Reily**