

Filling the Void

Andy Cohen

It was a decade ago. Fabio Rossi told me I have to meet his artist friend Kesang Lamdark. I called Lamdark and arranged to meet him in a pub in London where he was drinking with his friend Sam the Wild Nomad. After a few whiskeys, we decided we'd all go to Tibet to make a documentary on the contemporary art scene and Lamdark's father's monastery. It happened just like that, our ideas and energies exploding faster than we could talk.

Sam was also a filmmaker who was working at the Tibet House in London. We downed our third whiskey and hoofed it through the rain up to the Tibet House where Sam showed me a short film he'd made about the nomadic life of a young shepherd girl. The photography was stunning as was the story. On the spot, he became our cameraman and fixer. As it turns out, Sam was also fluent in three or four Tibetan dialects, and was a connected underground figure who served us well smuggling in the camera equipment and gaining access to the dissident community.

That night we ate at Sam's favourite hole-in-the-wall Chinese joint in Chinatown. On the wall near our table hung the official portrait of Mao Zedong. Lamdark and Sam stood up and gave Mao the Nazi salute and the erect middle finger. A nearby table of young Chinese diners in business suits took offense and yelled that Westerners are all indoctrinated and were ignorant of Chinese history; they implied we should show respect to Mao. Lamdark and Sam started laughing. Sam was a large, strapping man, half Tibetan, half Scottish; he rose and stood in the young Chinese businessman's face. With his deep resonating voice Sam said: "We're Tibetan, you should learn your history and stop kissing Mao's ass and stop the occupation." The stunned young Chinese businessman had no comeback for that and sat down.

I was pretty ignorant about Tibetan history in those days and was trying to understand the bad blood between these guys; and why a Westernised Chinese businessman in London would be so protective of Mao. We parted outside the restaurant, agreeing we'd set out on our journey once Sam secured visas through his connections at the Tibet House.

Two months later we were all traveling the back-bruising, rocky roads of Eastern Tibet in 4 x 4s. Since that night in the London pub, I've made different trips to Tibet with Kesang, Fabio and Sam the Wild Nomad, who sadly has since passed away. A big blow to us, the world, and the film that is still in production. Lamdark and I have become close friends and have hung out on the streets of Zurich, London, Hong Kong and Lhasa, filming, meditating, drinking at clubs and partying 'til dawn. From city sidewalks to mountain monasteries, I've seen how Lamdark is admired by all he meets; he's treated almost like

a rock star. And he has rock star good looks, complete with ponytail and shades. His work and persona have been nurtured by his early life as a Tibetan refugee in India, a formative education with a foster family in Switzerland, and his immersion into New York City's hip-hop street culture and later Tibetan experiences.

Lamdark's art not only challenges Western society's clichéd image of Tibet as a romantic Shangri-La, it also shines a light on China's brutal occupation regime bent on destroying Tibetan culture. His work is a kind of shock therapy, using politically incorrect conceits to shake up and awe viewers. International in scope, his art documents the modern history of Tibet and its recurring cycle of oppression by the Chinese, as well as movements such as Black Lives Matter, Hong Kong freedom protests, world-wide refugees and other indigenous cultures suffering similar fates as Tibet's.

Since 1950, the Chinese "Liberation Policy" of sacking and looting Tibetan monasteries, executing and imprisoning its monks and nuns as threats to national security has systematically eroded the country's history and culture. One of the surest ways to destroy a culture is to destroy its language. Mandarin is now the official language in secondary schools. Even street signs in Lhasa are written in Chinese, and many of those written in Tibetan use Chinese font.

This unabated cultural attrition continues at an alarming pace since China's high-speed "Train to Tibet" was completed in 2006. This extensive, modern network of steel – spanning hundreds of miles of Tibetan virgin grasslands and high-altitude permafrost

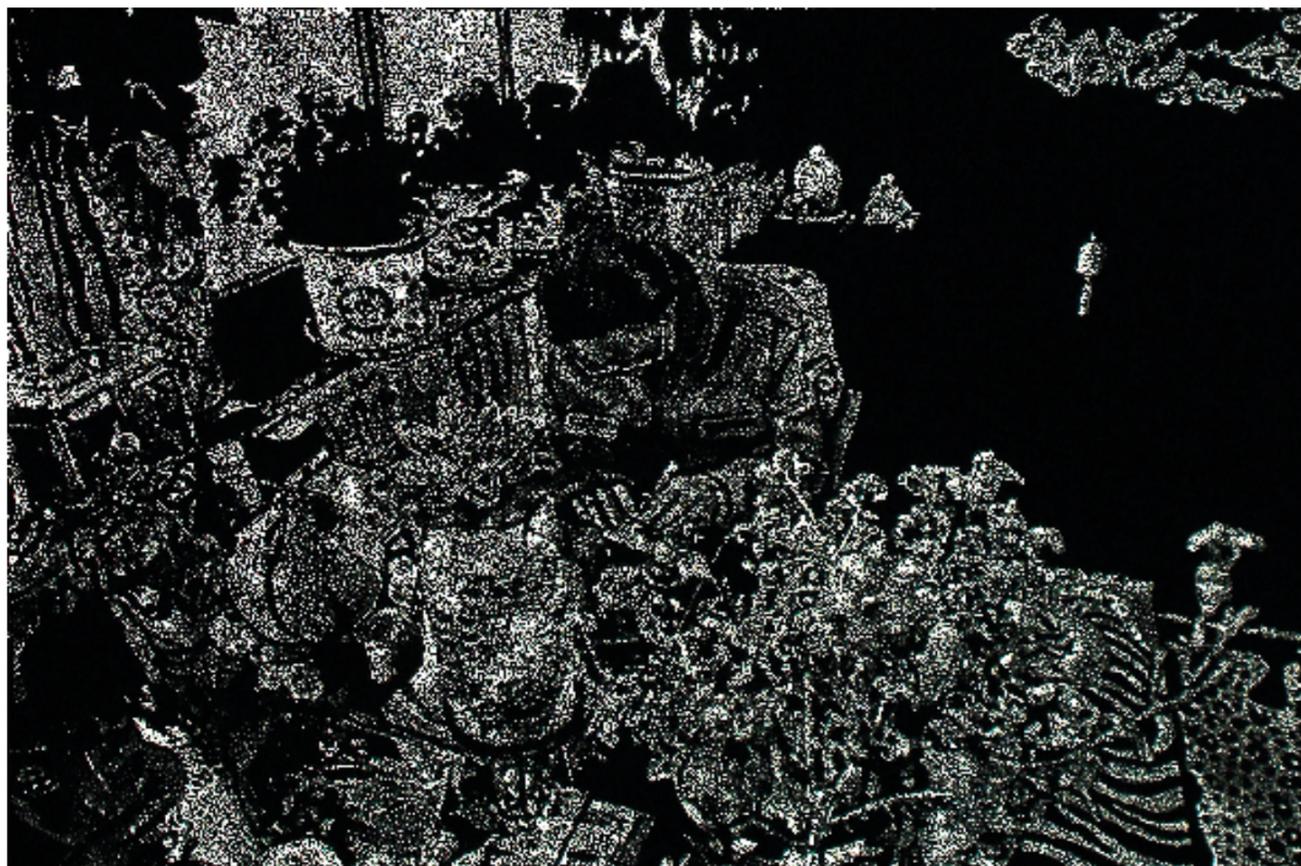


Fig. 1
Lamdark Rimpoche I (detail)
2011
Plexiglas, LED light and wood
50 x 39 x 8 cm (19 3/4 x 15 5/8 x 3 1/8 in.)
cat. 63

– was christened by the Communist Party as “one of the greatest projects in the history of mankind”. Millions of Han Chinese settlers have now rushed in to stake their claims in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), absorbing entire neighbourhoods and local businesses. The indigenous customs are vanishing. All this to exploit the Tibetan plateau's rich supply of energy and mineral resources and establish an industry of what amounts to “spiritual tourism”.

These seismic cultural and economic changes ushered in radical shifts in contemporary Tibetan art. At the dawning of the millennium, new voices heralded in a spiritual pop genre rooted in the real-life everyday struggles of ordinary people living in the TAR. These new styles of art were first seen in the TAR in the avant-garde works of Lhasa-based artists guild Gedun Choephel – named after the famous revolutionary monk and literati who sought freedom not only for Tibet, but for every individual. Courageously – and at great risk – this group of artists broke free from the fetters of centuries-old Tibetan *thangka* classicism – as well as the “red, bright and shiny” dictums of Chinese revolutionary realism – fuelling the ire of both Buddhist traditionalists and the Communist propagandists. By appropriating tropes from each, often mixing traditional pigment techniques and symbols with untraditional subjects, such as Western pop, this new genre reflects the transformation of their spiritual homeland into a kind of Disneyland for spiritual tourists.

Lamdark holds a unique place among these pioneer artists, advancing the genre of spiritual pop with his original hybrid language. His artwork juxtaposes Buddhist's burning their bodies with almost comically ignorant bubble-bathing beauties. *Yab-yum*-practicing deities become bed fellows with porno stars. Spiritual scripture dissolves into pulp fiction in which high holy men mix it up with rock stars and Disney characters. And Mao ends up spinning in the wheel of dharma eternally doomed and taunted by pleasures he cannot have. Some may consider linking these seemingly disparate images sacrilegious, but nothing could be further from the truth. Embracing contradiction, I came to understand, is essential to the dharma dynamo, part and parcel of the basic principles of Buddhism.

When the artist invited me to visit his father's monastery in Kandze, I saw firsthand how integral and organic reincarnation is to the continuation of Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Because his ancestry has been reincarnating for centuries, Lamdark has an endless family history from which he regularly taps for biographical material for his work. In *Lamdark Rimpoche I* (2011, fig. 1, cat. 63) we see Lamdark, Sr. in his monastery receiving room – the walls covered with colourful silk panels depicting landscapes and religious symbolism, a framed image of oracle Dorje Draken on a table, and a pair of parakeets trilling in a cage by the window overlooking the snowy mountains – outside of which lines of townspeople await to bestow offerings of fruit and incense due to his status as a living deity. Lamdark, Sr. is a six-time reincarnated lama, also known as a *Rinpoche*. His oldest son, the artist's brother, is a newly reincarnated lama who literally sat all day long, for months on end, sending prayers into the world “like radio waves”, he would say. When the artist's older brother died prematurely from diabetes, he was reincarnated into the body of a baby boy. Now a teenager, his reincarnated brother has been trained since infancy in the ways of the Buddhist sutra at their father's monastery.

The young, future lama is very fortunate that today the “recognition” tradition continues and he can exercise the hard-fought freedom to learn at Kandze monastery. Like most

monasteries and temples throughout Tibet, it had been looted, then shuttered by the Chinese for three decades. When the People's Liberation Army invaded in 1950, Lamdark, Sr. was forced to flee his monastery because *Rinpoches* were among the first to be imprisoned or executed due to the fact they wielded the power and allegiance to lead local resistance.

A renegade *Rinpoche*, Lamdark, Sr. endured the harsh elements in the Kham mountain range where he laid down his monk's robe, picked up a firearm, and joined the Tibetan freedom fighter group called Four Rivers, Six Ranges (Chushi Gangdruk). When the situation in Lhasa grew dire, in 1957, he braved the dangerous, 4500 meter Kham mountain passes, eventually finding asylum in a refugee camp down in Darjeeling, India. There he met and fell in love with a beautiful girl from Bhutan. Luckily for them, when Lamdark, Sr. joined the resistance, he also forsook the monk's vow of celibacy. The couple married and in 1959 moved to Dharamsala, India – new home to the Dalai Lama and 80,000 other Tibetan refugees – where Kesang Lamdark was born in exile in 1963.

That same year, the Swiss-based Red Cross, active in Dharamsala, helped influence the Swiss government to raise their Tibetan refugee quota to 1,000. The Lamdark family were among those granted entry to the country. Kesang Lamdark was just six months old. After a few years trying to make ends meet in this foreign land, Lamdark, Sr. explained he had no means in those days and wanted his son to have a good education and upbringing. When his young wife became stricken with tuberculosis, he brought his son to Zurich to be raised by foster parents. The Grieder family, along with their four biological children (a fifth would come a year later), opened their Swiss home and arms to Kesang Lamdark and provided a loving upbringing and education, for which Lamdark, Sr. says he is very grateful.

Lamdark's "Swiss" father was Peter Grieder, owner of the eponymous department stores. Grieder was a Tibetophile active with the Red Cross and closely monitoring the Tibetan refugee situation in India. Articulate, with a deep voice, Grieder was full of love and knowledge for Tibetan Buddhism. He told me that in 1960, Switzerland was the first Western country to open its doors to a small number of Tibetan refugees, the first of non-European descent in the country's history. Recalling Switzerland's blood-soaked record of refusing World War II refugees, I asked the reason why they now accepted Tibetans. Grieder said that the Swiss offered asylum to Tibetans because "they were kindred mountain people living in the Himalayas, similar to the way the Swiss lived in the Alps".

The Grieder house on the outskirts of Zurich was filled with Tibetan art. In the yard, colourful prayer flags strung across the trees flapped above the garden hedges grown in the form of a mandala, a water fountain in the centre, surrounded by bronze Tara sculptures. Ironically, Lamdark says it was from his Swiss father of department store fame, not his *Rinpoche* father of monastery fame, from whom he received his Buddhist education.

Grieder became acquainted with the Dalai Lama through his work as curator of the Tibetan Monastic Institute in Rikon, Switzerland. Their relationship deepened when his High Holiness stayed three weeks at the Grieder holiday home in the Engadin. Grieder had many stories of his High Holiness, but the one that sticks in my mind most is when his H.H. and Grieder took a tele cabin down from the mountains. The lift operator said



Fig. 2
The Grieders
2019
Mixed media on photographic print

he'd come back for them as that lift was full of garbage to bring down, and it wasn't fit to take his H.H., who smiled and said if it was fit to take the trash he helped create during his stay, it was fit for him, too.

The Dalai Lama even wrote the introduction to Peter Grieder's book titled *Tibet: Between Heaven and Earth*. The Grieders raised six kids in this house, and Kesang was just as much their child as their biological children. In Lamdark's artwork *The Grieders* (2019, fig. 2), we can see reflections of the artist's foster family. The work consists of a black and white photo of the nine-year-old Lamdark with the Grieder family, over which he painted a colourful chain link fence. Even though the artist is included in the family (as can be seen in his warm acceptance in the family portrait), there is also a sense of separateness, represented by the fence and the title.

With one foot in the East and the other in the West, Lamdark grew up alienated and not fully integrated into the Swiss mainstream. This outsider status, enhanced by his physical difference with schoolmates, was difficult for him to deal with as a youngster and adolescent, the artist admits. Nonetheless, this separateness helped him to build inner strength and gain impetus to break with traditional guidelines. He had difficulty

reading and writing Western languages, he says, and found expression in drawing, which his primary school encouraged – he even came in second place in a drawing contest when he was nine years old.

As a youngster, Lamdark watched Asterix and Obelix, a cartoon TV series about a village of Gauls resisting the Roman occupation in 50 BC. He made associations between the Roman and Chinese invasions, also finding similarities between the protagonists' gaining super powers by drinking a magical potion, as had Tibetan deities and devils pictured on the walls of the Grieder home. He sublimated both his cultural heritages, imbuing his early images with fantastical dream-like characters and classical Tibetan forms. This association of Western pop with the Tibetan spiritual world would be a recurring theme and defining characteristic throughout his mature work.

After graduating high school, having indulged in the “sex, drugs and rock 'n roll culture” common to most Western teenagers, Lamdark honed his drawing skills drafting blueprints at an architect's office for almost a decade. Precision line drawing and the workaday routine became monotonous. The inner calling to art simmered for years. By the time he was twenty-one, he suffered a facial paralysis which no Western medicine could diagnose nor cure. While it lasted, his facial deformity further intensified his feelings of alienation and drove him still closer to art.

By the age of twenty-eight, he put down his architect tools, left Switzerland and enrolled at New York City's Parsons School of design to begin his artistic career in earnest. Parsons, he said, opened his eyes to conceptual art and the readymade. He proudly tells me that one of his heroes of the readymade, artist Ai Weiwei, also did a spell at Parsons. Lamdark took to the streets of New York like a duck to the waters of Central Park and immersed himself in the hip-hop and club scenes. His resources still scarce, he tirelessly scavenged the streets of Manhattan, sorting through discarded everyday items, finding objects such as doorknobs, light fixtures, old TVs or restaurant mirrors suitable for his artwork. As for supplemental materials, he says, he stole them from Pearl Paints, a popular art supply shop on Canal Street where it was a tradition for graffiti artists to “rip-off” their spray cans and wide-tipped markers.

Later enrolling for an MFA at Columbia University, the artist dove deeper into contemporary art and theory. For over a thousand years, most traditional Tibetan art was made by anonymous artists for temples and spiritual purposes, much like Christian cathedral art. However, unlike those anonymous artists, Lamdark chose to explore the notion of identity and individuality in his works. Born in India, a refugee from Tibet, raised in Zurich, now studying in New York, he asked himself: “Who am I?” His answer came through his work *Fingerprint* (1997, cat. 13), on which the artist placed his unmistakable, ever-faithful stamp of identity – a gigantic image of his own fingerprint, surrounded by regular-sized finger prints, all pressed on thin transparent foil and preserved by tape. The reference is obviously the booking process at police stations, as well as the omnipresent chops the Chinese use to stamp all commercial and legal documents, including those of arrest.

In works from his Columbia period, like *Door Knob* (1996, cat. 12), we see one of the artist's early combines of East and West: a found doorknob (the Western readymade) with its round shape (the Eastern mandala) he connected to the hood of a disco light (he considers himself a child of disco) with a plasticine shaft. In this kinetic sculpture, the

doorknob continually turns like prayer wheel. Squeezed into the plasticine connection is the artist's handprint, again giving a personal touch, this time to the connector turning the motor. The doorknob is all about touching, the artist explained. His disco-dharma-doorknob opens new, liberating perspectives into reality, depicting the spiritual element in the most mundane objects.

Lamdark recycled almost everything he found. Scrapped old bar objects, empty beer cans and bottles were used throughout his work, even to this day. In *Seat Masks* (2018, cat. 193–196), he utilized the backs of thrown-away chairs from Club Zukunft, his favourite nightclub in Zurich. One night, sitting and drinking vodka shots at the club's bar upstairs, the artist told me he considers seats to be important artefacts in the biography of a place, so he reupholstered the backs, memorializing them with melted plastic. These colourful tombstone-shaped works pay homage to stories like these told in bars, drunken stories, forgotten stories, all the ephemeral moments of seated transients, kissing, fucking, falling over drunk and drugged in the lost neon nights.

In *Deng Disco* (1997, cat. 14), the artist makes another memorial, this time to the Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping who died that same year. Deng's deity-like blue hand protrudes from his Plexiglas coffin, holding up a sacrificial offering to China's economic progress: an empty Coke can. It was under Deng's highly touted reforms that Coca Cola was first introduced to China in 1978. When Deng died, all strata of society – factory and office workers, military and farmers – had to kowtow daily to his portrait in mourning. Not so in Tibet. That's because as Secretary-general Under Mao, Deng was directly responsible for implementing the dictator's anti-rightist campaigns which included the invasion of Tibet in 1950 and destruction of its monasteries in the early 1960s. In Lamdark's mock funeral, Deng's plastic coffin is draped outside with the red flag of China, while inside lay the Tibetan flag, lit up with a flashing strobe: the eternal light and pulsating heart of a Tibet that refuses to die, regardless of China's continued policy of destruction and hoisting of its red flag on Tibetan soil.

China's stranglehold on Tibet was tightened during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) when Mao commanded his eager young Red Guards to break with the past and destroy the “four olds”. This paramilitary youth movement dutifully indulged their leader's whims, destroying temples and ancient holy artefacts and killing hundreds of thousands of Tibetans: 92,000 were murdered or committed suicide due to “struggle sessions”; 173,000 died in prison or labour re-education camps, according to journalist Thomas Laird's figures in his book *The Story of Tibet*. Devotion to anyone other than Mao further incited the Red Guards to continue to desecrate the national identity of Tibet's ancient culture. Prayer – considered backward, old, and anti-revolutionary by the Red Guards – became a Tibetan act of political defiance.

During the Cultural Revolution, Lamdark, Sr. says his mother had undergone public torture sessions. As a result, both his mother and father were traumatized and became mentally disabled. Lamdark, Sr. wasn't permitted to return to Tibet until his mother was on her deathbed. She died just seven days after his arrival.

After her death, Lamdark, Sr. returned to Switzerland to work as a liaison between exiles in Switzerland and those who remained in Tibet. This work brought him in contact with the Panchen Lama, who had been released after serving fourteen years in jail a result of being denounced during the Cultural Revolution. The two lamas grew close, and Lamdark,

Sr. offered his services to the Panchen Lama as bodyguard in Tibet. In Lamdark's work *Lamdark, Panchen, Carter* (2011, cat. 90) we see a documentary work, with an image of his young father as bodyguard, escorting the Panchen Lama and US President Jimmy Carter during an official visit.

As a student/artist in New York, Lamdark witnessed the ongoing independence struggle waged by Tibetan hunger strike activists in front of the United Nations building. He was struck by the polar opposite dietary practices he was living amongst – American junk food society and Tibetan hunger strikers. Out of this dichotomy came the work *Karma* (1997, cat. 17), with its giant Kentucky Fried Chicken and popcorn buckets atop a Plexiglas box in which sits an illuminated Tibetan figure on a hunger strike. Lamdark said his eyes started opening up to the absurd connections and contradictions between the two cultures.

The consciousness of mind over matter would continue to preoccupy the artist and his work. Exposed to the hip-hop drug culture in New York, he began to explore mystical states induced through substance use and meditation. The deities, devils and colourful forms of Tibetan Buddhist art are inherently psychedelic and surreal, lending themselves perfectly to the spiritual visions and altered states that began to animate much of the artist's life and art. In his work, *High Again* (1997, cat. 15), he employs a playful homonym with the work's title: High Again (sounds like Heineken). In this work, anthropomorphic empty Heineken beer bottles dance in a rave-like trance around an altar on which rests a six-pack carton holding light bulbs in place of beer, bathed in a blue light glow, with multicoloured cotton balls floating in a fish net stocking.

The artist combined the five works discussed above – *Door Knob, Fingerprint, Deng Disco, Karma* and *High Again* – into an ecstatic installation that induced transcendent atmospheres typical of the artist's New York period. Engulfed in streams of blue and yellow lights to create a club-like ambience, the installation calls to mind the flashing coloured lights and meditative trances of nuns I witnessed in his father's monastery. The artist claims that he knows how to live with drugs the way many people live with

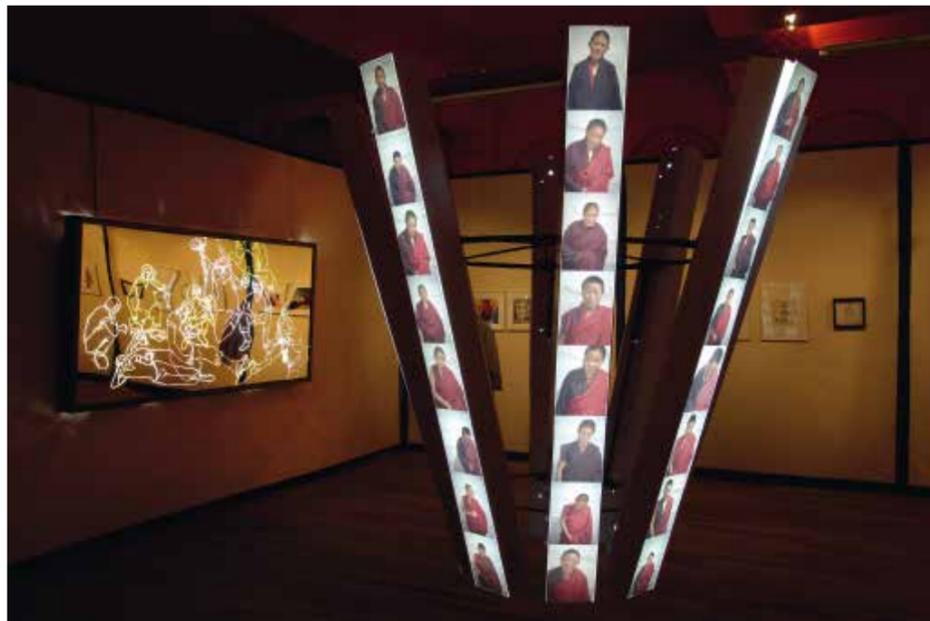


Fig. 3
108 Nuns
2006
Steel, lightings and photographs
Approx. 300 x 250 x 250 cm
(118'½ x 98½ x 98½ in.)
As shown at *Tibet and 14 Dalai Lamas*,
World Museum, Rotterdam, 2006

Fig. 4-5
Snow Lion Meets Future
2006
2 photographic prints, 2 beer cans
Photos: 40 x 50 cm
(15¾ x 19¾ in.) each
Cans: 19 x 7 x 7 cm
(7½ x 2¾ x 2¾ in.) each



alcohol – perhaps the way Asterix and Obelix benefited from drinking the magic potion and Tibetan deities sipped the nectars of immortality. The works certainly raise questions of transcendence reached through ingesting chemicals: organic or an artificial short cut in turning the dharma wheel?

At monasteries in Tibet I turned many a prayer wheel with the Lamdark family. Lamdark, Sr. explained that each turn of the wheel was like reciting the prayers written on them. According to family lore, Lamdark, Sr. was a descendant of the mythical King Gesar of Ling, eponymous hero of Tibet's great literary epic, who was sent from the heavens to fight evil. Eventually exiled from his land, he lived a wild, adventurous life, honing his skills as a warrior horseman. Gesar eventually became king of the Ling nation and with his combat and magical powers, protected his kingdom against all invaders.

Like his legendary ancestor, Lamdark, Sr. suffered his own long exile. And then, with the political pressures easing somewhat under Deng's more tolerant policies in the 1980's, he also finally returned home to Kandze. In *Superheroes* (2018, cat. 208) Lamdark updates these warrior-leaders to Marvel comic figures in mythological frays with Odysseus and Tibetan deities. "Modern superheroes remind me somehow of all the gods and goddesses in Tibet, who are like superheroes for me," Lamdark says. Like Ling who established his kingdom, Lamdark, Sr. upon his return, re-established his spiritual kingdom: the monastery. With *108 Nuns* (2006, fig. 3) the artist pays homage with a photo installation to those 108 pioneer nuns who took up residency with Lamdark, Sr. Traveling through the villages of Kandze with Lamdark, we'd often stop at local shops and bars. We'd see wall posters of his pony-tailed father, dressed in a funky mix of Khampa and cowboy fashion, wearing large bead necklaces of coral and amber, rings of turquoise and silver and a cowboy hat. He seemed as much sex symbol as spiritual leader. The young girl at the store blushed when I asked what he represented for her. His father embraced the American cowboy persona Lamdark says, because he really likes the style and horses. And more importantly, because the US dared stand up to China like Lamdark, Sr. did. This unlikely combination of American cowboy image and Tibetan *Rinpoche* is precisely the type of dichotomy that fuels his son's artwork. The ability to accept opposites and find kindred spirits, a la *Sitting Bull Ling Gesar* (2014, cat. 180). Here the artist combines the struggles of Native Americans with those of Native Tibetans. The legendary Sitting Bull, who physically resembles the artist's father, is a great horseman and resistance leader against US occupying forces. American settlers of the nineteenth century cited the building of the railroad – like the Chinese do today – as justification to requisition vast tracts of sacred land from the natives.

Snow Lion Meets Future (2006, fig. 4–5) was created the same year that China's \$4.2 billion "Train to Tibet" began its lucrative operations. Like an amusement park attraction, it was promoted as the highest railway on earth. The artist uses empty beer cans – now almost a signature of his art – to comment on this fast track to globalization. Affixed to a window, his cans depict images of the celestial snow lion, symbol of glacial mountains, who's natural habitat is compromised by the tracks on which the steel wheels of trains speed in tourism, fast food culture, karaoke bars, prostitution and gambling. Tibet's mountain remoteness, which had once preserved its distinct culture for millennia, is now an open and accessible tourist attraction.

The new generation's pivot away from tradition inspires Lamdark to contemporize centuries-old mandala artistic forms to reflect a new state of mind. In Sanskrit, the

word "mandala" means "circle". Traditionally, the mandala was a beautiful and rigorously crafted circular diagram of the cosmos – populated by Buddhas, demons, spirits, animals and symbols – into which one enters meditatively. The outer circle represents the material world, and the next ring the purer, more enlightened realm of bodhisattvas. In the heart resides the main deity. They are a kind of spiritual roadmap to the internal realm of pure consciousness. By using images from pop culture in place of traditional deities and symbols, Lamdark chronicles the invasion of Chinese culture, now inspired more by Consumerism than Communism.

In *Mao Muschi Mandala (Mao Pussy Mandala)* (2011), we see how ideology has taken the central role Tibetan religion previously occupied. In the heart of the mandala, instead of a deity, Lamdark installs four (four is a homonym for death in Chinese) paramount leaders – Mao, Deng, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin – all superimposed on a skull. And in place of the usual outer garland of sacred tantric figures, he places explicit pornographic figures masturbating their *Muschi* (German for "pussy"). Communists, like those in the Chinese restaurant in London, may take offence, but the artist's intentions are to comment on China's commodification of the sacred for use as economic and ideological currency. For Lamdark, these four dictators represent the pornography of power and death; their ideology fuels the exploitation of flesh and indoctrination of minds that feeds on itself endlessly. The Party's perverted policies are unleashed in vicious cycles that unsuccessfully try to put a cog in the wheel of the dharma. And far from the eternal life of deities to which they aspire, the artist positions these demagogues dead centre in the skull of mortality.

Taking it full circle, Lamdark associates the mandala shape with the round bottom of a beer can where he perforates the bottom with a needle. Lamdark told me he first got the idea to perforate cans on his travels in Jamaica, where he watched locals punch holes in them to make pipes for smoking crack-cocaine. In *Can in Blue Hand* (2007, fig. 3, p. 21), the artist reprises a theme of *Deng Disco*, using a beer can (instead of Coke) which a pair of blue deity-like hands proffer like a religious offering. Lamdark's readymade ceramic hands found on Manhattan's 14th Street, are here painted blue, and in the empty space between the fingertips, a can of Sapporo beer. An image of a big-breasted, naked woman masturbating is perforated into the bottom that can be seen by looking through the drink hole. On the base of the installation, where the palms of the hands meet, rests a deflated rubber breast, the liquid drained out. The breast, flattened like a punctured bicycle tire, signifies the empty loneliness of imported beer and masturbatory behaviours.

"In Tibet, you can find all kinds of alcohol in a bar, except for barley wine" goes the lyrics of a popular rock song. Beer wasn't produced in Tibet until the late 1980s under Deng's liberal economic reforms. It became more available in 1988 when the Chinese established the Lhasa Brewery Company. Ever since, alcoholism has become a growing problem for the young and disenfranchised on the Tibetan plateau, even way out in the middle of the grasslands. *Skull* (2006, cat. 24) and *Demon* (2006, cat. 23) depict skull and crossbones and a Tibetan devil punched in the bottoms, a graphic emphasis of the demonic nightmares and deaths brought into the country with alcohol. Another tragic image is the installation *Drunk Driving in Lhasa* (2017, cat. 191), with beer cans attached to a cracked car windshield. *Lhasa Beer Boxes* (2018, cat. 199), a readymade consisting of two empty beer cartons on which Lamdark paints a link fence, alludes to the separation of family and society, as well as the self-

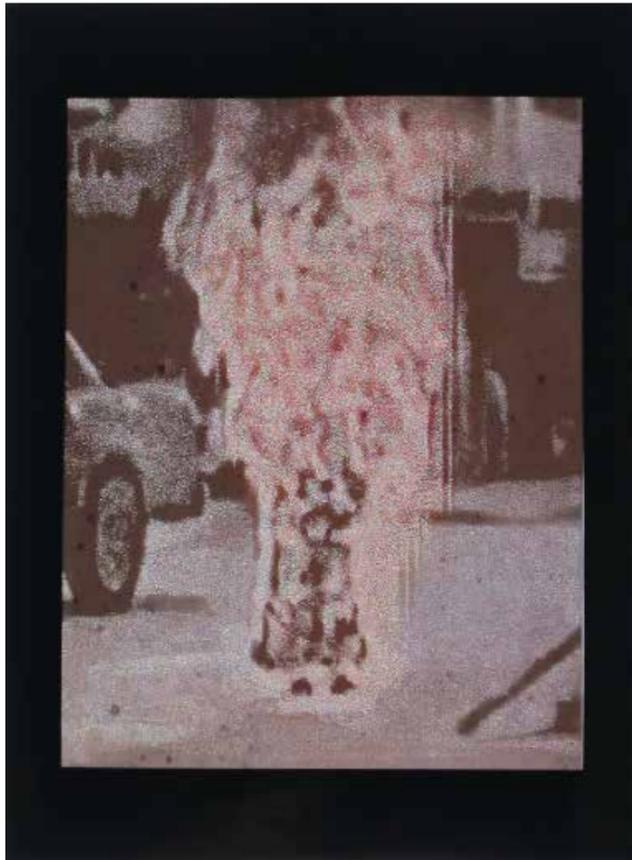
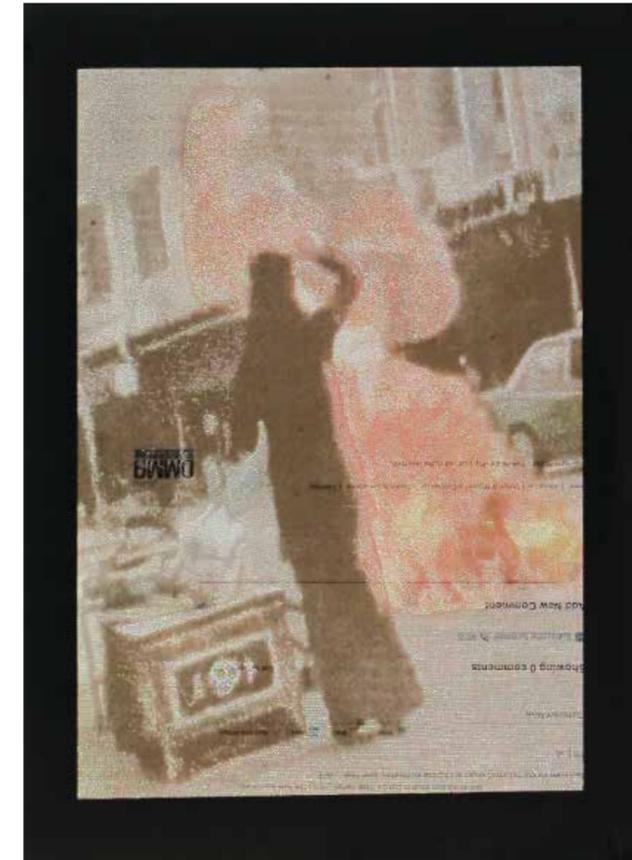


Fig. 6
 Untitled (Palden Choetso 5)
 2015
 Laserjet prints and lightboxes
 29.7 x 21 cm (11¼ x 8¼ in.)

Fig. 7
 Untitled (Palden Choetso 2)
 2015
 Laserjet prints and lightboxes
 29.7 x 21 cm (11¼ x 8¼ in.)

Fig. 8
 Untitled (Palden Choetso 1)
 2015
 Laserjet prints and lightboxes
 29.7 x 21 cm (11¼ x 8¼ in.)



imprisonment related to alcohol addiction. The boxes and cans call forth a variation of Warhol's Brillo Boxes and Soup Cans and further comment on the tin can invasion that consumes Tibet, as it did in 1960s' US.

His large format mandala "lightboxes" (120 cm) can be seen as magnified variations of the beer can bottoms. Instead of thin needles punching cans, he gently hammers small nails into the large round Plexiglas mirrors, creating micro-pointillist images. When you step into the building in Zurich where Lamdark lives, you can tell which is Lamdark's studio because out in the corridor you hear the rhythmic *tak tak tak* of hammer tapping nail . . . like the beat of the heart, the drumbeat of meditation, or as the artist says: "Similar to the sounds of monks making sand mandalas. I'm making a light mandala, releasing with my needles light to go through."

He installs a box with LED lights inside a wooden frame. Plugged in, the images light up like stars in the night.

In Lamdark's night lights, sexual images twinkle like constellations in the sky. These contemporary mandalas explore the bipolar nature of Tibetan and Western attitudes towards sex. In Tibetan Buddhist tradition, humankind originated from the union of Shiva and Shakti, through an open practice of experienced *yab-yum* customs. In Western tradition, Adam and Eve were the progenitors – in their story shame was involved, resulting in the hiding of their nakedness with fig leaves. These views are reinforced in the art imagery of both cultures: in the Western canon, nudity was hidden for over a thousand years, whereas in the Tibetan, the unclothed body – even engaged in sex – was exalted in statues and *thangkas* for over a thousand years.

We find Lamdark's classic combination of contrasting forms in lightboxes *O Mandala Tantra* (2009, cat. 47) and *Pussy Mandala* (2016), which explicitly intertwine the tantric with the pornographic. Fetishized and commercialized sex, like the import of Western alcohol, further adds to the erosion of the sacred. In classic religious art, sexual union is a metaphor for the achievement of tantric meditation. By combing porno with tantra, the artist highlights the extreme differences between cultural attitudes, as well as the similarities. There is a voyeuristic pleasure common to viewers of sexual images in both traditional Tibetan art as well as in pornography. The end goal is also similar for the subjects/actors of each: the orgasm. As Lamdark says: "The opposite of death is having sex. Humans are most alive when having sex."

The year 2008 was a turning point for the artist. As well as beginning his lightbox series, in 2008 the artist also produced his now iconic *Pink Tara* (2008, cat. 39). Lamdark appropriated the form of Pink Tara from the traditional bronze sculpture that stood in the garden of the Grieder home he grew up in. Lamdark's pink incarnation has become a symbol of the disintegration of the Tibetan heartland. His deity is made of two contrasting mediums: the kitschy pink plastic of industrial consumer products and chicken wire, the material of peasant farmers' fences and coops. Plastic, the environmentally unsustainable, non-biodegradable material of globalization, is nevertheless able to reduce the "mother of liberation", to a state of decomposition. Pink Tara was one of the star attractions in the 2010 Scorching Sun exhibit in Beijing's Songzhuang Art Center curated by Li Xianting, Gade, Haitao Zhang, and Lei Fang. "Western countries say 'Free Tibet!'" Li told me at the time of the exhibit, "but once the culture has been destroyed, what good is freedom?"

The year 2008 also proved to be one of tremendous upheaval in the TAR. A usually peaceful, annual event in Lhasa – one that commemorates the 1959 failed Tibetan armed uprising against Chinese occupation that resulted in the Dalai Lama fleeing Tibet – turned violent. Chinese security forces used excessive and lethal force against monks protesting in the Street. Over 200 people were killed according to the Tibetan government-in-exile. This incident is referred to by many involved as the “Tibetan Tiananmen Square”. The protests spread like wildfire throughout monasteries and villages in the TAR as well as abroad, while the Chinese denied journalists access to the field, censoring all news outlets.

Lamdark makes visible these historically destructive meltdowns that occupation had on the local people of the TAR in *Chair of Dialogue* (2014, cat. 162). With a heat gun and gas mask to protect himself from toxic fumes, the artist melts yellow plastic (the colour of imperial power) over a jean jacket (the clothes of the ordinary person) with the sleeves cuffed behind the back of the chair. The chair is a symbol for dialogue, because when you sit, you talk with someone, you communicate, the artist says. However, this chair is that of a sadist engaged in an uneven dialogue between the tortured and the torturer. Hanging overhead is a large barrel from Eni, a symbol of gas and oil companies who destroy the environment with drilling and spilling. Punched into the bottom of the barrel is the image of a Tibetan monk’s head pressed on the floor by a Chinese policeman’s foot during the 2008 uprising.

This image eerily calls to mind the video of the prostrate, handcuffed African American George Floyd pleading “I can’t breathe” as his life is squeezed out of him by the knee of a sadistic white policeman pinning his neck to the gutter. Unlike in the US, it is forbidden to protest against police brutality in Tibet, and images of police beating and killing unarmed Tibetans are never seen on TV.

The State-controlled media continues to censor all references to the 2008 Tibetan uprising and subsequent crackdown, as well as footage of Buddhists self-immolating in protest. Records of these violent deaths come through Tibetan activists’ videos smuggled out for the world to see. Lamdark appropriates one such censored image--smuggled out by Students for a Free Tibet – and uses it in *Untitled (Palden Choetso 1–5)* (2015, fig. 6–8). This series of lightboxes depict heart-wrenching video stills of a nun self-immolating in the middle of the street while a passer-by throws a white prayer shawl (*khata*) on her burning body. Upon lighting themselves on fire, many self-immolators shout out cries for the Dalai Lama to return to Tibet, and freedom for Tibet, which speech is forbidden in the TAR.

The long arm of China’s censorship even reaches across the world to Switzerland, the so-called “land of human rights”. In 2010, Lamdark documents the fifty-year anniversary of Switzerland’s opening its doors to Tibetan refugees. The Dalai Lama was allowed to enter the country, but the top Swiss officials, not wanting to upset Swiss-China relations, refused to meet with his His Holiness. Swiss officials gave an official statement claiming they were all “on vacation”. Of this, in his typical and humorous mix of the spiritual with the pop, Lamdark offers us *10 April Münsterhof 2010* (2011, cat. 85), with seven blind-folded images of the MAD Magazine character Alfred E. Neumann – American icon of stupidity – representing the seven members of the Swiss Federal council.

If the Swiss refused to honour the Dalai Lama with a reception deserving of this world recognized freedom fighter cum spiritual leader, Lamdark would take it upon himself to properly celebrate. In *H.H. 14th Mandala* (2010), the artist pays tribute to his HH in his

own unique way – by throwing a rave. He invites “special guest stars” to this expression – magicians and dancing girls mixed with classical images of cranes, clouds and traditional landscape. In the centre of this mandala, Lamdark depicts celestial waters dropping in the shape of a champagne flute with tantric figures floating around in bubbles. Buddha can choose to be born again or unite with the ocean, Lamdark seems to be saying. Donald Duck is on the bottom, sitting on a pile of gold coins and throwing them up in the air. Mid-level we see President Obama – he cannot be placed above the level of the Dalai Lama out of respect. A genie coming out of a bottle; as well as King Gesar on his horse. There’s also music in the house, represented by the image of Bob Marley. And of course, myriad portraits of the smiling Dalai Lama, as he enjoys the party with a Buddha *tangka* above his head and his finger pointing to Potala Palace, his never-to-return-to home floating away in a giant bubble of unknown fate: will there be a 15th Dalai Lama?

For his part, Lamdark, Sr. is the sixth reincarnation and can only hope that his lineage continues, and that the recognition of a seventh will carry on the tradition. According to Lamdark, Sr., nowadays with the influx of the moneyed class, many Lamas tend to recognize children of the rich people in order to gain patrons. He has no faith in them. He believes in exceptional and precious Lamas, like the Panchen Lama, who know how to recognize reincarnation. In his monastery, Lamdark, Sr. ruminates on how he lived in Switzerland for twenty-two years and missed Tibet. Now, back in Tibet, he says he longs to visit Switzerland again.

Lamdark went back to his old childhood house on the outskirts of Zurich to live with his aging Swiss father Peter Grieder. When Grieder eventually took sick, the living room was turned into a hospice where Lamdark became his caregiver. It was Lamdark, his adopted son, who nursed him and cleaned him and readied him for his next journey. Obviously, death is viewed differently in Tibet than in the West. And Lamdark portrays the imagery of death throughout his work. There are skulls, self-immolations, car wrecks, police murders and massacres as well as devils and demons. But there are also heavenly images and those of reincarnation and mystical love.

When I went back to visit Lamdark at the Grieder house in 2013, it was up for sale. Peter Grieder had passed away. The garden was overgrown and the prayer flags were frayed and sooty. I commented that Lamdark must be so sad to lose his Swiss father. It was actually a happy experience, he says. “It was Peter Grieder’s wish to die. He couldn’t walk or hear anymore. In the end, he was just lying in bed. And I was able to give him his wish.” And so, with the purest heart, a Tibetan son helps his Swiss father move on to the next phase of the *samsara*.