

Left

WU YULU

Wu Yulu's Robot Factory

2010

Metal, electronics, wood, silicone, cobalt blue pigment, sand, secondhand materials, dimensions variable.

Photo by Justin Jin.

Collection of Cai Guo-Qiang.

Courtesy Cai Studio, New York.

Below

ZHUOQUAN LIU AND NORTSE

Dialogue

2009

From a series of photographs.

Courtesy Songzhuang Art

Center, Beijing.

BEIJING
SONGZHUANG ART CENTER

Scorching Sun of Tibet

For those who cling to dusty clichés of imaginary Tibet, the primitive, spiritual Shangri-La of Western invention, or to the conceptual Tibet of an aged, orthodox government-in-exile that will one day return to rule, neither shade nor sunscreen will provide shelter from the searing rays of “Scorching Sun of Tibet.” Selected by Li Xianting, Gade, Haitao Zhang and Lei Fang, the show’s 50 artists break the fetters of centuries-old Buddhist *thangka* art tradition as well as Chinese cultural control—the imposition of Revolutionary Realism, the curtailment of religion and language—to reflect both daily life in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the more recent invasion of Western pop-consumerism.

At the entrance to the exhibit, visitors could turn Gade’s sculptural *Prayer Wheel* (2010)—each clockwise rotation of the wheel is equal to chanting the scriptures written on it. But on these wheels the ancient Tibetan Buddhist prayers have been replaced with Chinese political slogans from Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. As the artist explained to *ArtAsiaPacific*, “these quotations have become our ‘daily ritual’ or even our ‘bible.’ Questioning is not permitted. What you can do is keep chanting, just keep rotating the prayer wheel.”

Gade is one of the pioneers of an art movement one might call Spiritual Pop, a satirical style employed by many of his contemporaries. In *108 New Classics* (2009), what appear to be ancient handmade Pecha scriptures commonly found in Tibet’s temples are actually parodies. Spider Man, the Hulk and Mickey Mouse sit in the lotus position, surrounded by computer-printed news reports, jokes, movie quotes and text messages that are scripted not in Tibetan but in a popular

Chinese font resembling Tibetan characters. This same typeface, the artist points out, is commonly used in product packaging, bar signs and Tibetan tourist advertisements.

Nortse, another trailblazer of new Tibetan art, further explored this motif of image and language replacement in his installation *30 Letters* (2010), a mass grave of the Tibetan alphabet, lit by butter lamps on the gallery floor. The enlarged letters were made of rusted iron and laid on dirt within individual wire-frame coffins. Though rust never sleeps, the letters, worn and weathered yet iron-willed like the Tibetan people, will endure the current hegemony of the Chinese language.

In *Dialogue* (2009), a collaborative photo-performance work with Zhuoquan Liu, Nortse offers the possibility of rebirth. The Tibetan and Chinese artists stare at each other while sitting and standing in piercingly clean Tibetan bodies of water, and the beatific and poetic mood of their wordless *Dialogue* offers hope that the Han Chinese and the local Tibetans can work and live together with open communication, all while respecting the natural environment.

Building upon the theme of natural and cultural erosion was *Arak Stupa* (2010), one of the show’s largest installations, in which brothers Yak Tseten and TseKal replicated the form of the ubiquitous Buddhist reliquary with thousands of empty bottles of Lhasa Beer. The work illustrates how spirituality and prayer are being replaced with alcohol, and how many cultural changes begin with imported food and beverages.

Tsewang Tashi’s *Shangri-La No. 4* (2008) deals with China’s anthropological distortion in ascribing Tibetans the status of ethnic minorities. The artist depicts street life as it actually is in today’s Lhasa by re-creating and repurposing a 1980s genre painting by Chinese artist Chen Danqing, famous for his earthy depictions of such minorities. In Tashi’s staged photo, a local “beer girl” replaces Chen’s traditionally dressed “ethnic” woman. Gaudily clad in a shiny, silver miniskirt, she smiles flirtatiously in front of a conventionally depicted herdsman wrapped in animal pelts. Noting the need to reclaim Tibetan depictions in art, Gade confirmed to *AAP* that “The task of describing ‘Tibetan art’ has always been done by artists in mainland China, and we have always been absent from it.”

Reflecting a Tibet that is both secular and religious, both in touch with ancient history and engaged with today’s corporate capitalism, these contemporary artists synthesize their experiences to create art with new voices that preserve old ones, so as not to lose their culture’s language and spiritual soul.

ANDREW COHEN

