

Strategies of Global Communication – Contemporary Tibetan Art and the West

Regina Höfer

Contemporary Tibetan art holds a very special position and is a very recent phenomenon. The circumstances and preconditions for the genesis of Tibetan modernism are quite unique. Due to the conservatism of its civilization - similar to the late Middle-Ages in the West - and its virtually total isolation from any modern international influences, traditional Tibetan art could survive almost intact until the second half of the 20th century. The reason for this is inevitably related to the very particular history of cultural and hence artistic phases of modernisation and the geographic and historical peculiarities and adjustments of an isolated country like Tibet which characterize all non-Western cultures. On the other hand, Tibetan civilization barely escaped destruction by the brutal and traumatic advances of Western modernities hostile to tradition, for example by Chinese socialist realism, which as a trivial late expression of 19th century Art Engagé, in itself already encompasses concepts of Western modernity. In addition, the Tibetan situation is quite uniquely merged between the global players of India and China and Western reception. Even compared to artistic developments in Asia itself, Tibetan contemporary art is recent and thus in a transitional state. This is all the more astonishing in the light of the incredible popularity of Tibetan culture in general. But this fascination is closely connected to a romantic view of authentic nativeness, which makes modern and contemporary art unimaginable. It is this context which makes Tibetan contemporary art a precedent of current discourses on globalised world art and highlights the reciprocal modern artistic influences between Asia and the West which enable cross-cultural artistic exchange.

Besides outlining the genesis and history of modern Tibetan art, this paper analyzes the modern and international visual language Tibetan artists have developed during the last years trying to locate contemporary Tibetan art in the global or world art discussion.¹

The dilemma and genesis of modern Tibetan art is well illustrated by the biography of its precursor. Gendun Choephel (*dge 'dun chos 'phel*, 1903-1951) is regarded as the lone fighter and pioneer of modern Tibetan art and modern thought in Tibet in general. He was an enlightened and progressive intellectual and monk, a 'man of the world' at the same time, pursuing his talents in art, literature, history, politics and religion. The interesting and even today provocative aspect of Choephel for those Western audiences or Tibetans idealizing their

native country and its peaceful and ever-smiling people is that he did not blame the Chinese for every misfortune, but saw many of the country's problems rooted in outdated and sometimes redundant traditions and the inability and refusal to modernize. He was sometimes persecuted and even imprisoned in 1947 for his views and was disliked by his own people, especially the Tibetan administration and the ultraorthodox traditionalists.² He himself expresses the dilemma in a poem written in English: 'All that is old is proclaimed as the work of gods, All that is new conjured by the devil, ... This is the tradition of the land of the Dharma [i.e. Tibet].' (TSERING 2006).

The balancing act of a progressive thinker, cosmopolitan and artist like Choephel much ahead of his time, between modernity and tradition, is an attribute still valid for contemporary art in Tibet today. It is also in this respect that Choephel serves as a leading figure highly admired by the Tibetan bohème even today. The Lhasa-based Gedun Choephel Artists' Association, founded in 2003, is also named after him. The gallery's entrance situation in the Barkhor Old Town (*bar skor*) of Lhasa illustrates the circumstances, showing the traditionally crafted wooden doorway giving view into the exhibition room with Tsewang Tashi's painting (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: The Entrance situation of the gallery of the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild with Tsewang Tashi's painting 'Untitled 1' in the background. Oil on canvas, 2003, 180 x 145 cm. © Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild



Fig. 2: Line drawing by Gendun Choephel from his sketchbook of 1938 during his travels through Tibet (Collection Gustav Roth). After STODDARD (1986): pl. 33

¹ This paper is based on HÖFER 2009: 88-98.

² I was told about indignant, disbelieving and even aggressive reactions by an audience confronted with these demythologizing aspects of Tibetan society or history during the impressive film about Choephel 'Angry Monk - Reflections on Tibet' by Luc Schaedler, Switzerland 2005, www.angrymonkthefilm.ch

Unfortunately not much of Choephel's artwork remains, the most important being a sketchbook from 1938 in possession of the German indologist Gustav Roth, various material in the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives Dharamsala and the Tibetan Pema Byams Collection holding 27 ink and charcoal sketches and watercolours, which mainly illustrate his travel observations.³ Originally trained in traditional Tibetan Thangka painting, during his vast travels in colonial India he absorbed different approaches to art and Asian and Indian modernism, as for example at a meeting with Rabindranath Tagore in the 1930s. Not enough both first and second hand material has survived to define Choephel's modernist artistic style; he seems not to have produced a completed mature life-work nor has he stuck to one specific style. It seems most appropriate to attest experiments of form and style to him, as might be witnessed in his reduced line drawings (**Fig. 2**). To earn his living, he still painted much prized commissioned traditional Thangkas or interior decoration.

The scope and limitations of modern Tibetan artists still today have their roots in a country where art was traditionally linked to religion in the broadest sense, in which art in the modern sense of the word as *l'art pour l'art* did not exist – a situation not unlike the Middle Ages in the West. This is a tradition where innovation and personal creativity play a minor role, where art training is based on century-old texts and the highest aspiration is to produce a perfect reproduction of an already perfect image that befits a god.

One anecdote, amusing in a way, but bitter and grotesque at the same time, illustrates the problem: In the year 1938 Choephel was frantically busy writing scholarly articles and conducting discussions to convince his fellow Tibetans, especially the clergy, that the earth was round, not flat as claimed by Buddhist cosmology.

However, although Choephel had a few followers, during his lifetime he remained an individual, isolated case and did not found an era of modern art in Tibet.⁴

This was only achieved after the invasion in 1951 by the People's Republic of China, naturally encompassing the special Chinese idiom of propagandistic modernity, which itself already digested and transferred Western concepts of 19th century art in its interpretation by socialist realist art. After 1959, the Chinese either banned traditional Tibetan painting or at least repressed it as a religious and aristocratic underground activity. Instead Tibetan artists were forced to support Maoist propaganda as did their Chinese counterparts. Initially China judged Tibetans according to Maoist thought as a backward and oppressed people, whose liberation and civilisation was celebrated by socialist realist propaganda art.⁵ One example is Chinese Pan Shixun's poster entitled 'Serf's Daughter goes to University' from 1973 showing

³ Latse library newsletter Fall 2004, <http://www.latse.org/newsletter/2004vol2num1/NewsletterNo2Web.pdf>

prosperous Tibetan nomads happily bidding farewell - especially the proud father - to a local girl mounted on a white horse about to leave for university in the city (**Fig. 3**). As can be readily witnessed even today, ideological, mass reproduced depictions similar to this still dominate many public areas, billboards or tea stalls in Tibet and China. From the political perspective, it is clear that Tibetans were on the whole forcefully introduced to modern art and culture. To a certain degree the conservatism of a large part of Tibetan society facing the destruction of their cultural identity and the desperate clinging to tradition especially in Indian exile is on the one hand understandable and perhaps even necessary for survival, on the other it might anticipate new developments and creative progression.

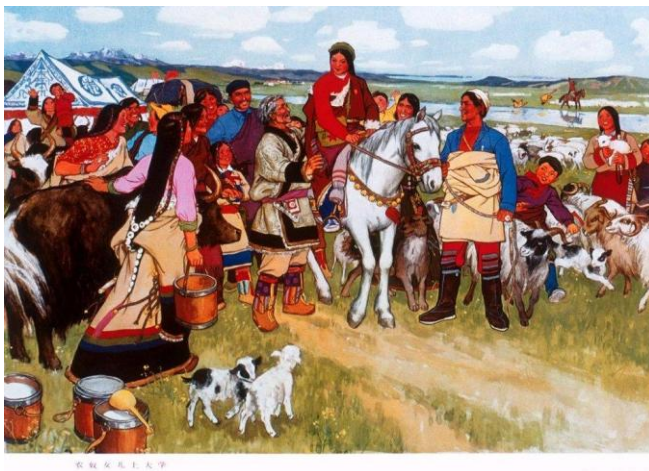


Fig. 3: Pan Shixun: Serf's Daughter goes to University, 1973, Tianjin. <http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/pubs/minzu/>



Fig. 4: Zang Changgu: Two Lambs, 1954. After HARRIS (1999): pl. 62

A second feature in the perception of Tibet by the Chinese, especially Chinese artists, is obvious from the 1980s on and corresponds to some extent to Western esoteric views of the 'Dalai Lama groupies': The everlasting, untouched 'Roof of the World' as projection and fantasy of exotics and noble 'savageness'. This resembles very much a historic artistic tradition detectable in many cultures from literature to the performing arts. It suffices here to mention the French Orientalist painting tradition of artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme, Frederick Goodall in England or other 19th century painters like Delacroix or Victorian Orientalists,

⁴ On Choephel compare f.ex. STODDARD 1986, KARMAY 1979, LOPEZ 2006 or HESSEL 2000.

through to representatives of the avant-garde like Renoir or Matisse with their love of oriental motifs, decoration or settings. These artists chose the fascinating, often female ‘other’ for their projections, as did civilization-weary artists like Gauguin or still ‘Brücke Movement’-artists fascinated by the rural life of simple peasants or the exotic paradises of the South Seas.

Nowadays in particular this allure of back to the roots simplicity and nature for an urbanized intellectual upper-class, alienated from its basic instincts, has become an element of lifestyle for sectors of Chinese high society or Chinese artists. Precursor of this more modern variation of the theme and more traditionally following Chinese brush and ink style painting traditions is Zang Changgus romantic ‘Two Lambs’ (**Fig. 4**) that combines a gentle nature setting and animals symbolising the lustful and brutish with the eroticization of the exotic Tibetan woman, facing a similar fate as other national minorities. However, some Han-Chinese artists also show a respectful and serious interest in the religious, cultural and artistic traditions of Tibet. Han-Chinese artist Jangyung (also Jiang Yong/Yung), for example, lives as a member of the Gedun Choephel Artists’ Association (sometimes also called ‘Guild’) in Lhasa and is widely accepted by his native Tibetan artist friends.⁶ Using an ironic approach in his series of ‘Tibetan Barbies’ (**Fig. 5**) he seems to ridicule the afore-mentioned trend and mock the naïve appreciation of Tibetan kitsch and staged Tibetan tourist folklore events endowed with plastic jewellery, fake costumes and unauthentic female models popular with so many both Westerners and Chinese (**Fig. 6**).



Fig. 5: Jangyung: Tibetan Barbies, oil on canvas, c. 2005. Photo R. Höfer 2006



Fig. 6: ‘Tibetan Barbie girls say "Hi" to world’: PR campaign by the official Chinese news agency Xinhua to launch its limited edition of Tibetan Barbie girls for sale in China and Europe, also on display at Lhasa Airport, March 2009. Photo http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-03/04/content_10942819.htm

⁵ For Chinese propaganda posters see LANDSBERGER 1995 or the author’s online-resources <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/>

⁶ In fact the question might be raised in this context whether Tibetan art need be accomplished by a native Tibetan to be determined as Tibetan. This seems not to be true at least with traditional Tibetan art done by living foreign artists. Non-Tibetan painters like the British Robert Beer (HÖFER 2007: 392) or the Japanese Kenji Babasaki (HÖFER 2007: 5) working in traditional style and trained by Tibetan teachers are easily accepted and highly cherished among Tibetans. With contemporary global art losing traditional subjects and techniques, the ethnic and thus authentic background seems to become more important.

Several Han-Chinese came to live on the 'Roof of the World' in the 1980s. Some stayed on, gaining influence on Chinese and Tibetan cultural life and the development of Tibetan modern art like Han Shuli, who has lived in Lhasa since 1973 and besides many other important functions in Chinese and Tibetan art associations, is President of the Tibet Artists Association. Many of his colleagues train Tibetan students at Lhasa University.

Indeed in the politically relatively relaxed phase after the Cultural Revolution in the 1980s, young Tibetans too like other minorities were sent to study art in mainland China, predominantly in Beijing, where they were educated in Chinese and Western traditions both in theory and practice. Under these circumstances students also became acquainted with modern or probably even post-modern art. This generation of Tibetans was often already fully adapted, sinicised and barely in contact with their native roots and traditions. Religious symbolism, for example, was not fully understood by a generation lacking the traditional multi-layered and complicated lengthy artistic training of the old Thangka painters. One typical example is Gade's (dg'a bde) biography: Born in 1971 in Lhasa, he attended the prestigious Central Fine Art Academy in Beijing and studied Chinese painting, art history and theory, which he regarded as "less restrictive than Tibetan painting" (GADE 2005: 16). Only later did he turn to Tibetan tradition with a modern approach. The result of his struggle can be witnessed in his work inspired by the classical Thangka-format 'The Hulk' (**Fig. 7**). Only at second glance does the subtle difference in content between a traditional painting and Gades work become apparent. The artist successfully transfers the problems of high and low art as a main discussion of Western art of the 60s and 70s from an internal perspective of multiple cultures facing globalisation. In my opinion he is masterly in transforming the spirit and innermost symbolism of the wrathful (*krodha*) deity-concept with its classic iconographic attributes of depiction like the skull-necklace, protruding eyes and bared teeth to a modern visual language. By tying in with well-known narratives of popular culture, like Superman, Spiderman or the green comic-monster 'Hulk' he succeeds in revealing archetypal prototypes on a truly global level. According to the Marvel Comic success (first appearance in 1962), the fictional superhero Hulk was created by a scientist as the alter-ego symbolizing the emotional, wrathful and raging aspects he could not deal with or incorporate in real life. This is precisely the main aim of meditation and one of the possible functions of a religious painting like a traditional Thangka: It is a visual means of providing access to complex rituals resulting in the visualisation of the practitioner as the god depicted in its centre and assuming its powers, usually those one lacks by nature. By enhancing the archetypal energies of the main protagonist of the painting with wild animals, distorted demonic creatures and different

scenes of cruelty or erotic nature, Gade is inspired by similar traditional props or settings like the Eight Great Cemeteries (*aṣṭamahāśmāśāna*) an element of a Maṇḍala or bloody Chöd (*gcod*)-, Yogini- or skeleton-symbolism and thus perfectly grasps and playfully mocks the morbid and fleeting symbolism of Tibetan art and thought, elements which often remain misunderstood by Western audiences as bloodthirsty and aggressive.



Fig. 7: Gade: The Hulk (part of Diamond Series), mixed media on canvas, 2008, 147 x 117 cm. © Rossi & Rossi Gallery

As a reaction to the above mentioned Chinese art infiltration and as a reflection of their questioning of their double Tibetan-Chinese identities, ‘The Sweet Teahouse Artists’ Association’, the first independent Tibetan Artist Association was not founded until 1985.⁷ Its

⁷ Gallery owner and contemporary artist Gonkar Gyatso pays homage to this movement by naming his London gallery ‘The Sweet Teahouse’, <http://www.sweetteahouse.co.uk/>

aim was to distance itself from Chinese influences in form and content, but at the same time examine its own traditional Tibetan background critically. The focus on the more secular aspects of Tibetan culture resulted, for example, in landscape and architecture subjects, religious topics were executed in a modern style only. The secular themes were and still are often accomplished with recourse to Western styles, mainly classic modern art. Some members of the Lhasa-based Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild follow these tendencies, which seem to me a little clumsy and old-fashioned - one would not term it contemporary art though painted in 2004 - like Wang Shimings quite sentimental Van Gogh-style painting of a Tibetan village (**Fig. 8**).

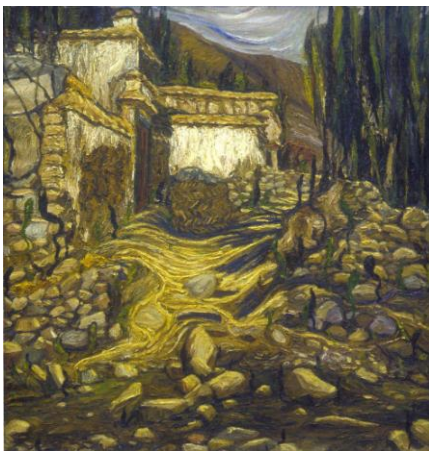


Fig. 8: Wang Shiming: Forgotten Village,
oil on canvas, 2004, 120 x 106 cm.
© Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild

As we have seen by now, in the light of the political situation of Tibet and the exile communities established not only in India, but all over the world, modern and contemporary Tibetan art gained ground in different parts of the world under different circumstances, leading to a variety of approaches. Contemporary Tibetan artists work in the Tibetan capital, in London, New York, Germany, in Switzerland, in India. Tibetan art is on the whole not yet globalised, but no longer traditional. There are exceptions like a few Diaspora artists such as Gonkar Gyatso (*gong dkar rgya mtsho*) living in London,⁸ who has been widely exhibited throughout Europe and the USA and recently shown, for example, at Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Vienna or at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie exhibition 'Thermocline of Art' in Karlsruhe. Not surprisingly, the high quality work of Gyatso is successful by illustrating exactly the visibility of tradition in the broadest sense filled at the same time with new content both regarding technique and subject. His work 'Angel' (**Fig. 9**)

⁸ Biographical data and assessment in HÖFER 2010: 407, or <http://www.sweetteahouse.co.uk/>, or ROSSI & ROSSI 2006.

for example shows a traditional outlined sketch of the iconographic grid of the Buddhist deity of compassion, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, in his multi-faced and 100-armed form, symbolising endless compassion. By giving one of the most basic and important groups of the Buddhist pantheon, the Bodhisattva, the ‘Western’ name ‘Angel’, in Christian thought a creature providing protection similar to the Buddhist god, he helps build bridges and intuitive comprehension of the meaning for those unfamiliar with Buddhism. As in many of his works, the artist uses different stickers of popular culture, for example miniature Japanese ‘Pokemon’-stickers of fantasy creatures, to create his main image, which seems to emanate as one of Avalokiteśvaras embodiments. In this case he cites directly the horrible Guantanamo Abu Ghraib-prison photographs burned deeply into our visual mind, raising and thus bringing the question of compassion and non-violence up to date with modern visual and political codes.

It is this ongoing process of transition still faintly visible in Gyatsos work which provides ideal conditions for the study of the different influences varying from Indian to Chinese to Western and the formation of a society and its relationship to art between tradition, modernity and globalisation. With most of the so-called established modern art traditions, for example in Asia, it is already too late. For this study a profound understanding not only of the spheres of cultural influence shaping diaspora and native Tibetan artists is indispensable, aspects only a specialist in South Asian art, culture and religion can provide on the basis of Western History of Art. What makes modern, contemporary or globalised ‘ethnic’ art interesting, fruitful and exciting, is from my point of view the rooting in tradition, the struggle between old and new, the middle-aged mind against or in between a secular identity, similar to the century-long striving of Western medieval art. In my opinion a trend towards individuality is discernible not only in art; at least a significant part of the Western art audience is bored by all the stereotypes, repetitions and endless reproductions of the ‘Blue Canvas’ No. 1000. Global art, like all art at all times, has humankind as its theme, addressing basic human topics like love, power and so on including their sub-categories. Not even universally shared values - if any exist - are rewarding. The important driving force is interest and curiosity, the question of how the ‘other’ culture or individual deals with or expresses these basic archetypes. This could be one reason for the interest in non-Western contemporary art. Differences and nuances make this art interesting. On the other hand, the so-called equality and globality of contemporary art without ethnic or geographic borders is, although called for by many artists and shared by the art world on the whole, rarely practised in reality.

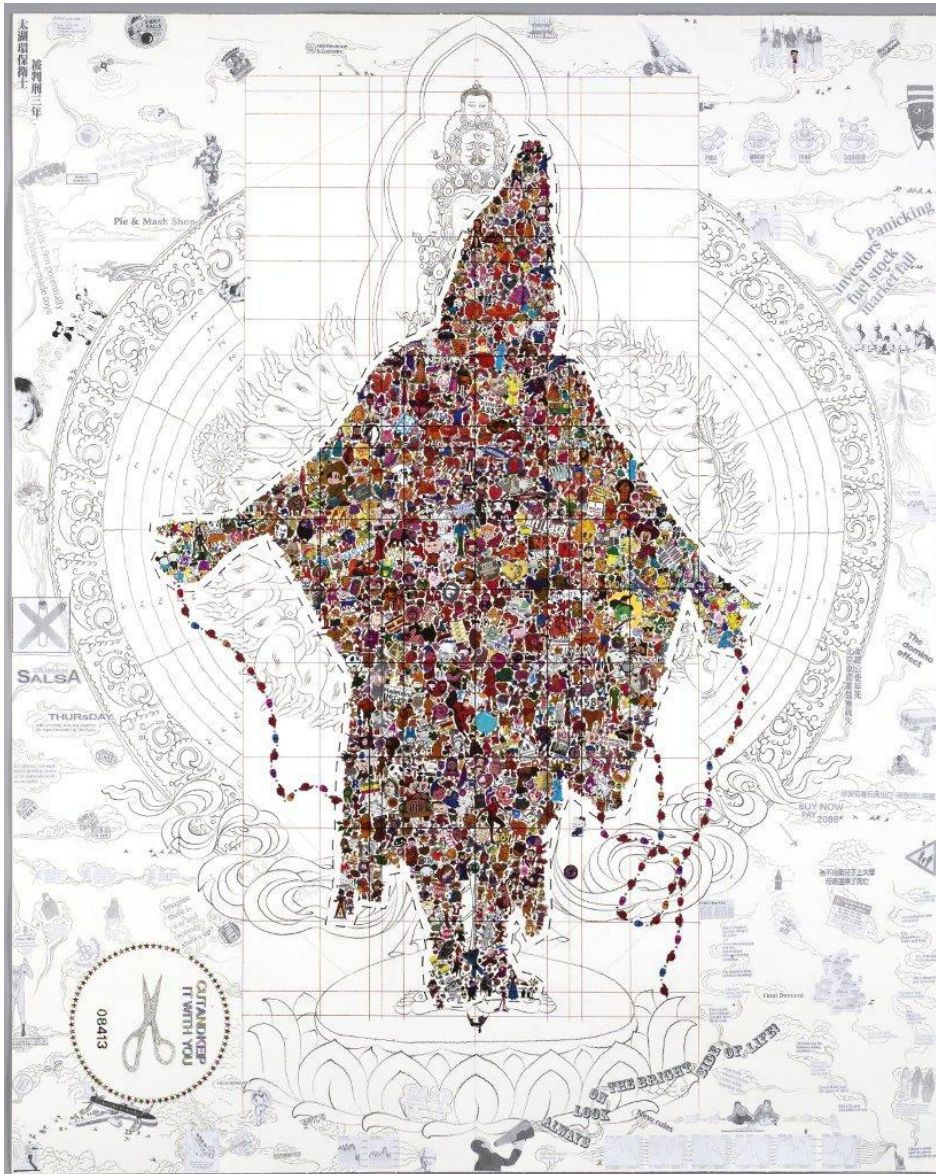


Fig. 9: Gonkar Gyatso: Angel, stickers and pencil on treated paper, 2007, 152.4 x 121.9 cm. © Rossi & Rossi Gallery

Kesang Lamdark,⁹ for example, was described at Art Dubai 2009 by his gallery as ethnic Tibetan with the additional information ‘born in Dharamsala and raised in Switzerland’. The same is even the case with short exhibition-text labels, for example ‘Gongkar Gyatso, London, ethnic Tibetan’ or ‘formerly Tibet’. This concession to the natural curiosity of people is understandable, but proves that the age-old human instinct of judging, classifying and labelling will not even change for the sake of post-modern art theorizers. Many, if not most contemporary ethnic artists might prefer to be identified as ‘post-ethnic’, wishing to be seen in the context of global art.¹⁰ But often they are caught in the post-colonial

⁹ Homepage of the artist: www.lamdard.com

¹⁰ Compare BELTING, Hans: www.globalartmuseum.de/site/conf_lecture1

eye of the Western art lover in many cases still watching out for authenticity and the exotic ‘other’, labelling them ‘Tibetan’ or ‘Buddhist’. In this sense contemporary non-European art even today mirrors the Western art audience and its preconceptions, still and inevitably valid after years of endless discussions on the deconstruction of ethnicity, gender, post-colonialism and postmodernism. However, this might well be true even for Indian or Chinese lovers of contemporary Tibetan art, with especially the Chinese heavily engaging in the exoticism emanating from the myth of the eternally untouched ‘Roof of the World’.

But what about Tibetan art which is not perceivable as Tibetan at the first or even second glance? This might be the case with the autodidact painter Sonam Dolma Brauen living and working in Switzerland. Her work is completely abstract and thus does not resort to any visible native symbolism, though she states that she regards abstract art as illusionary apparitions of the Buddhist philosophical concept of Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) (HÖFER 2008: 408).

The next stage of Tibetan contemporary art is just emerging. Lamdark is one of the very few artists working three-dimensionally or using photography (**Fig. 10**). Similar to the evolution of Western art, it progresses from painting to sculpture and more realistic and abstract media like photography, installation and multimedia. Whether the focus on painting stems from the Tibetan tradition itself or from the age-old hegemony of painting and calligraphy in Chinese art, remains yet unanswered.

One paradox remains: The effort to judge non-European art from outside a Eurocentric perspective can easily lead to romanticism, to becoming a sublimated Eurocentric strategy. Global art history prohibits the classical distinctions between autochthonous localities and the idea of an ahistoric authenticity, which is nothing more than a Western projection. Instead, the development of new perspectives is called for: Non-Western traditions must like their European sources of modernity be permanently and critically questioned.



Fig. 10: Kesang Lamdark: Fishbird, plastic and chicken wire, 2008, 47 x 47 x 20 cm.
© Rossi & Rossi Gallery

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