

Art without ego: Sand paintings of Bhutan

BY ED BOWERS

“THE Dragon’s Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan” at the Asian Art museum is hot. The art was created out of an ancient, nontheistic spiritual path labeled under the huge umbrella of Vajrayana Buddhism, or Tantra. It’s alchemical in nature and aims to transform base desires and emotions into wisdom, compassion and bliss. The exhibition will be at the Asian Art Museum at 200 Larkin St. until May 10.

Those are the facts. Now I have to do some translating to make it understandable in the context of the Tenderloin, where it has flown and roosted.

This art exhibit includes 150 paintings, sculptures, textiles and two monks from a Bhutanese monastery who do sand paintings on the floor. Outside the museum are crack addicts, hustlers, politicians, law students and whores.

The monks pray daily over these sacred artifacts, which are considered not objects but living symbols in the minds of those who have created them. They’re time bombs ready to explode in the minds of all sentient beings, invitations to jump into the void, the space between thoughts, a no-man’s land familiar to every drug-addled crack addict in this district. Anyone trying to escape from his mind by killing his fear of life with chemical death is afraid of the void. Anyone who thinks that the “normal” way of thinking is going to solve anything is even more deluded.

All life is suffering; that’s what the Buddha said. Life is based on desire, and so is death.

The “Sacred Arts of Bhutan” represents an atomic power located deep inside the human mind that is you. You can blow yourself up, or you can transform yourself. You can create or you can destroy. This exhibit is a symbolic representation of this situation.

Michele Dilworth, the museum’s PR manager, kindly allowed me to interview the two Buddhist monks, Neten Dorji and Gyem Dorji, whose specialty is creating sand paintings of mandalas, abstract maps of inner space and evolution. The monks have no attachment to their designs of tiny, hand-placed grains of colored sand that are destroyed soon after they’re created — here today, gone tomorrow — tossed into the river of time and space to be eaten by fish, rather like many Tenderloin residents dying in lonely hotel rooms.

The purpose of these sand paintings is to do good in the moment, then go the way of all things, into the void where they continue to do good in a billion invisible subtle ways with no trendy art lovers in San Francisco staring at them and pretending to be hip. They are the spiritual economy and ecology of an art without ego.

Neten Dorji, who has a passable command of English, once spent three years in a cave alone meditating.

Most people forced to sit in a room alone for three days with no entertainment devices would go insane, their dispositions turning bitter, their minds becoming desperate and mean.

But Neten Dorji is the sweetest guy I ever interviewed.

I started out by asking him how long it takes to create the intricate sand painting.

“Three and a half hours a day, six days a week for a month or two or three,” he answered.

“And then?” I asked.

“They’re put on an altar and meditated on for from seven to 16 days,” he said.

That’s a better showing than most Western art gets. Nobody’s fooling me. Hipsters speed-read a book to say they’ve read it, art lovers look at a Picasso for five seconds, then go out for coffee and brag about what they’ve “seen” to win friends and influence people.

“And then, after they’re meditated on?” I asked.

“They’re slowly thrown in a river,” Neten Dorji answered.

He told me the mandalas represent “the Palace of the World” and that the original sand painters were the Buddha and Padmasambhava, a yogi who came to Tibet, defeated evil demons, and turned a vicious bunch of barbarians into peaceful Buddhists so they could be slaughtered by Chinese communists in the 20th century. Plus, Padmasambhava

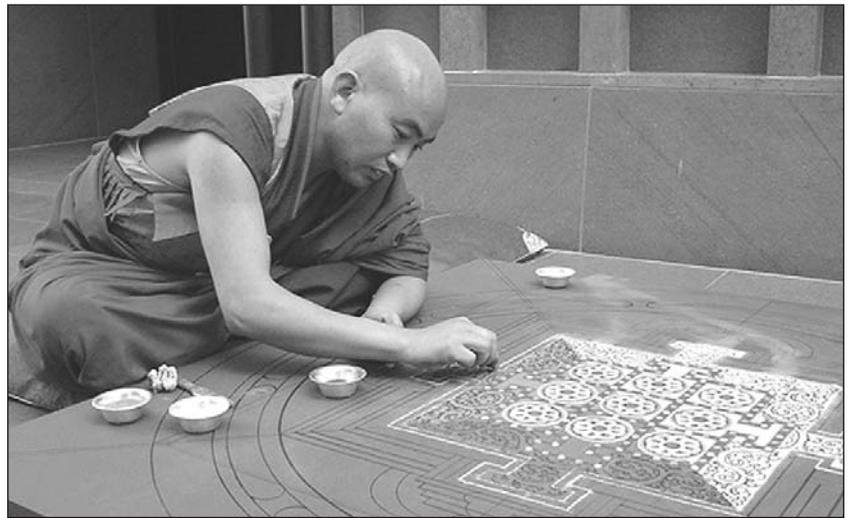


PHOTO COURTESY ASIAN ART MUSEUM

Grain by grain, Bhutanese monk Gyem Dorji painstakingly creates a mandala from colored sand at the Asian Art Museum.

liked to drink wine, so he’s all right with me.

And the Buddha thought all life was suffering, so I guess he created sand paintings to give suffering humans something creative to do besides inflict pain on one another.

“Does creating these sand paintings alter your mind?” I asked.

“They are all a form of the mind.”

I do see beauty in ugliness, but these monks are beyond me. They see something I don’t see, which is what real artists do. The function of art, like science, is to discover new visions that might heal or liberate people, give them maps and ways to go beyond.

I wondered if the sand painters feel sad having their beautiful artifacts, so carefully and scrupulously constructed, disappear into the river.

Neten Dorji smiled.

He is a genuinely happy human. I’m not used to being around people like that and I felt disoriented. Anyone who can sit alone in a cave for three years knows something the rest of us don’t.

“No, I don’t feel sad,” he said. “The fish eat the paintings and the crocodiles and crabs and other things eat them and those creatures get benefit. Due to their karma of eating the sand, they slowly evolve into spiritual beings.”

In evolution, I think he was telling me, slow is best and eating is good, and I agree with him.

Because I’m an aficionado of inner space, I asked Neten Dorji if he experienced or perceived any alternative reality while creating the sand paintings. He blew me off.

“Nobody can talk about that to anyone but someone who meditates, does the practice, and is trained to do it,” he said. “It is not for show off.”

“So you don’t want to brag about your spiritual accomplishments?”

“No,” he said, and smiled again.

I did, too. Every murderous religious nut, guru, politician and well-meaning powerful idiot in the world should learn to shut up and sit alone in a cave and smile.

Neten Dorji’s colleague, Gyem Dorji, spoke little English, but he gave me a nice handshake, more spiritual than walking on water, the warmest, most sincere handshake I’ve ever received.

These two artists have much to teach the Western world: Their art projects originate from something deep within the mind, and they are confident that out of the inevitable destruction of their beautiful creations, something beautiful will be left behind. They don’t take credit for their art and don’t want to be famous. Fame embarrasses them.

Neten and Gyem are the real works of art, examples of how doing art can transform consciousness.

They meticulously take tiny granules of sand between their finger tips to create a solid, yet transient, representation of the Universe of Inner Space — The Big Mind — and create a map out of this tedious and rather boring realm of human suffering and pain.

I could think of worse things to do with my time. I know it doesn’t sound practical, but if everything was reduced to practicality, we would only be insects.

We have to slow down in this society and go beyond fame and fortune, or even the belief that if we obey and listen to the little famous minds with

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—JONATHAN NEWMAN

City, Pink Diamonds agree on new rules

THE city’s efforts to squelch the noise and violence at Pink Diamonds took a decisive turn March 24 when Judge Peter Busch approved an agreement between the city attorney’s office and Damone Smith, operator of the self-styled “gentleman’s club” at 220 Jones St. Under the terms of the agreement, any entertainment at the site must meet the following standards:

- Club operators must prominently display notices at the entrance and exits urging patrons to be quiet, peaceful and orderly, to not litter, loiter, vomit or urinate in public, nor drive while drunk.
- Employees must be posted at the entrance and exits 30 minutes before opening and past closing to ensure that patrons respect the quiet and cleanliness of the neighborhood.
- Employees must walk a 100-foot radius from 220 Jones sometime between 30 minutes after closing and 6 a.m. and pick up any trash, clean up any vomit, urine or “similar substance.” Graffiti must be removed within 48 hours.
- There must be a toilet outside for patrons waiting to enter.
- Ventilation inside must be adequate so that windows are not left open with the noise blaring.
- Receptacles for litter and cigarette butts must be at or near the entrance when the building is open.
- Club operators must make every effort to prevent loitering on the sidewalk during club hours, including using security to disperse crowds and to report loiterers to the police.
- The club must employ a licensed and bonded guard company to provide security from opening time until the last patron has left; at least one guard for every 50 customers as well as one guard outside to enforce orderly behavior. The guards must not allow anyone in the building carrying a weapon.
- By April 8, club operators must install a video

camera to record the activities of all who are outside. Video recordings must be kept for at least three months in case the city attorney or police ask to inspect them.

- Club operators must provide a cell phone number “to all interested neighbors” that will be answered by a manager or other responsible person who has authority to adjust club noise volume and respond to complaints.

- A monthly log of all complaints must be maintained, noting time the complaint was received and how it was handled. This log must be available to the city attorney and SFPD on demand.

- Club operators must prepare a monthly report explaining how all complaints in the log were handled and show that report to any neighbor within 100 feet who asks.

- A representative of the club operators must attend the monthly TL Police Station community meeting to hear issues concerning 220 Jones, and must provide anyone at the meeting a copy of the monthly log report.

- A copy of the court-ordered operating procedures must be available at 220 Jones during business hours for public viewing.

Violation of these court orders is considered contempt of court, carrying a penalty of up to \$2,500 for each violation. The court orders remain in effect for one year but can be extended for an additional year if the court finds a violation has occurred.

Pink Diamonds attorney Terence Hallinan commented on the new rules for his clients: “They have no objection to doing all they can to maintain the neighborhood’s peace and quiet. It’s hard to do business in that neighborhood. It’s hard to control what goes on in the street.” ■