Asia Art Archive in America
A Conversation with Tsherin Sherpa

By Jane DeBevoise, February 22, 2011.

Tsherin Sherpa, *Spirit*, 26×39 cm, 2009.
Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi NY

JD : In September last year, we had the wonderful opportunity to meet you here at AAA-A, to hear about your work and recent exhibitions. We would be delighted to hear more about each work and about your new pieces too.

TS : Yes, I would be delighted to run through some of my works, which I have been assembled in more or less chronological order.

This first work is a painting called "Rigsum Gonpo" – it's a traditional work of a subject matter popular in Tibet – the three figures are considered the three primary protectors, or the three qualities that Buddhist practitioners require in order to attain enlightenment. They are: the Buddha of Compassion, in white, and the one to his right with the sword is Manjushri, the Buddha of Wisdom. The third on his [the Buddha of Compassion's] left with the blue fierce-looking face is Vajrapani, the deity of strength of mind, or Concentration. This work was commissioned by the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco for their Himalayan collection. I think I completed the work in 2007, and it was one of the last, formal, traditional paintings I made, and a more intricate one at that. I have done one or two smaller traditional works since then, but nothing like that piece.

The first contemporary work I made was "The Butterfly Effect/Chaos Theory", inspired by the recent financial crunch. It left me quite surprised, especially when trying to understand financial greed and how it impacted the general population. This whole scenario was very similar to what I had studied about Buddhist philosophy; about interdependence, reality, cause and effect, and how everything is intertwined, and how an action may have an impact on something else even if unintended. So, the blue figure represents the corporate giant, or how I envisioned him. I was also trying to understand the terms 'the butterfly effect' and 'chaos theory' and wanted to integrate them into the painting as well. On his body I have drawn a corporate chart, and written words with Tibetan letters. These terms

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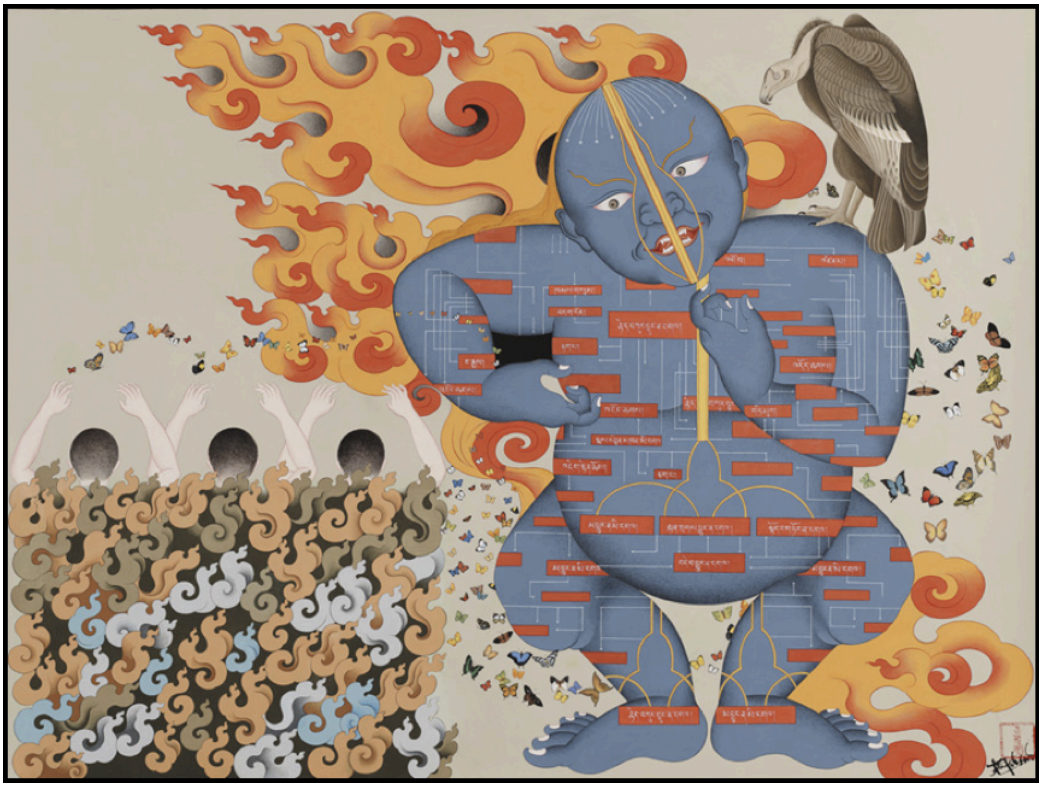
in Buddhism often recall the eight worldly dharma, also known as the eight worldly concerns. They are: wanting to be famous and not wanting to be not famous (Laughter), thoughts like that.

Tsherin Sherpa, *Rigsum Gonpo,* 18×36 cm, 2008. Courtesy of the artist and Asian Art Museum SF



Tsherin Sherpa, *The Butterfly Effect/Chaos Theory,* 22.5×28 cm, 2008. Courtesy of the artist

I grew up in Kathmandu, in a place called Boudhnath, which has a special Buddhist stupa [Boudhanath Stupa] and which is also a sacred Buddhist site. I was born in Boudhnath, and whilst growing up, a familiar view from my window consisted of a series of Buddhist prayer flags, hanging near my window. Now, from the window of my home in Oakland, California, I see lots of billboards. So – I was very fascinated about how these symbols play a role in our lives. Before that, I did a little work designing marketing posters for Jamba Juice, and was fascinated by how the advertising world functions – how they

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try to make an impact on their consumers by advertising with certain phrases and in a certain way. I wanted to combine that all together, and so this painting came about. All the letters in the background are painted with gold; they are made to look like they are in Tibetan, but they are all in English – with advertising phrases, like 'buy one get one free', 'weight loss made simple', 'food for your busy lifestyle', things like that. I was also fascinated by how different forms of advertising were simultaneously occurring. It was quite new to me when I first came to America. I was drawing everything from my experiences from billboards, radios, and the television...

Tsherin Sherpa, *Modern Prayer Flag #1,* 22.5×28 cm, 2009. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi NY

Again, using Buddhist images, I painted "Derivative". I'm always intrigued by Buddhist images; I think it's because I spent most of my life painting them and lately I've been thinking about them – I'm very interested in examining the impact these images have on a Buddhist practitioner, a non-practitioner...or just to the general public. What type of role does the Buddha play in one's life? For me, working as a traditional thangka artist for so many years, painting these images constantly, it was very intriguing for me to reflect on these images and try to understand why I even paint them. I was trying to imagine what it must have been like during the time of the Buddha, or maybe a little bit later – did painting begin out of sheer devotion, or something else? Were these early painters actually trying to use this image to preach or inspire? Now, hundreds of years later, in our time, I'm making these images to pay my rent! (Laughter) It is ironic how over time, the image has become more of a commodity as opposed to what it may have been to the first painters. Its purpose has transformed. So, I decided to paint a stock sign superimposed on the image of a Buddha. I was inspired to do that too, because of the stock market crashes.

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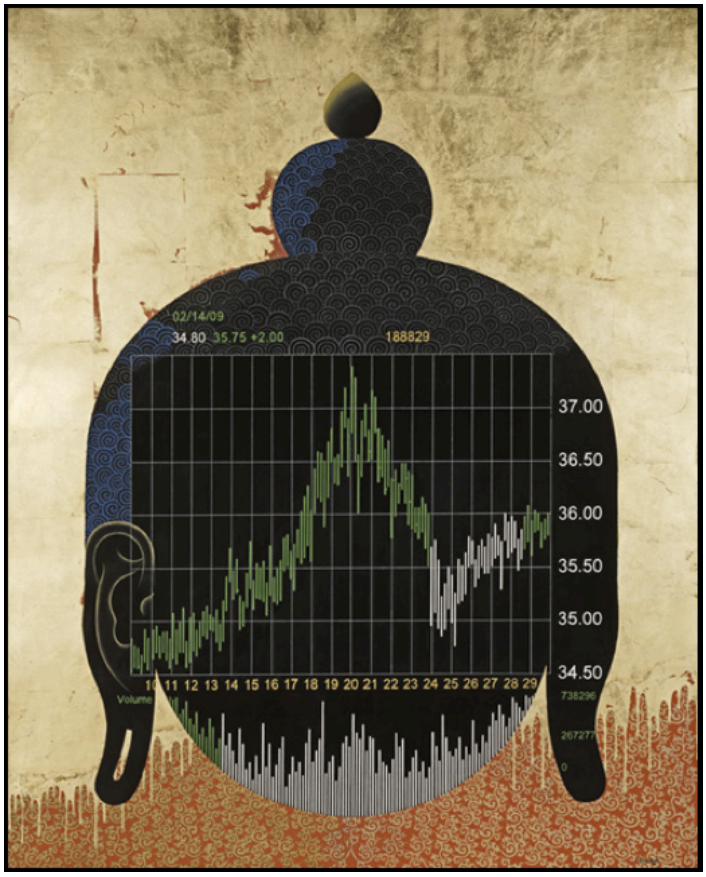

Tsherin Sherpa, *Derivative,* 23×32.5 cm, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi NY

I'm often working with deities, and this time [in "Preservation Project #1"] with the limbs of deities. I made this painting as I was reflecting on Tibetan society. When I was growing up, I used to think that everything needed to be preserved in a specific way...we talk a lot of about preservation. But I don't know how we are preserving things without understanding the essence of our traditions. Now, we are in a globalized world where we have to interact with different people, different cultures, languages, all kinds of things, and some of the functions of these traditions, I feel, should have or would have transformed by now. If one were to understand the essence of a tradition and its role in society, then the method or ritualizing of the tradition is made less important and the essential vision is made more important, that is, tradition's overall contribution to society and humankind.

I was noticing and understanding that, maybe at times, we are preserving the ritual aspect of tradition more than we are its essence. For me, growing up, these Buddhist images functioned as the ultimate representations of the enlightened and compassionate mind. For example, for the image we saw earlier – the Buddha of Compassion – in my mind, Compassion is actually a white-colored figure with four arms holding a lotus rosary; we have computed it to be the ultimate Compassion. I always give this example because if I were to see the image of the Buddha of Compassion lying in the road, and right next to it is a homeless man, because of the conditioning I have had to the Buddha image, I would probably be inclined to pick up the image of the Buddha of Compassion for my altar and may neglect the man sitting beside the image. I think, ultimately, the idea of the image is to evoke the compassionate quality in a person to allow Compassion to narrate itself through one's being. Therefore, it looks like the whole mechanism is not functioning properly. That's why I was interested in the kinds of Buddhist preservation, in and outside of Tibet. I was trying to express the irony through this painting.

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Tsherin Sherpa, *Preservation Project #1,* 33×43 cm, 2009. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi NY

In California, being Tibetan often means being depicted as a 'Shangri-la being' – people think we are all pristine and pure... Sometimes I come across people who think everyone from Tibet is enlightened. That puts a lot of pressure on someone like me, because I feel that I am as ordinary as anybody else. This piece [Things That Pop In My Head] tries to show that, with pop icons 'popping' in my head and is a self-portrait of sorts. (Laughter)

This one follows a similar trajectory, but instead, I'm also talking a little bit about my role as a traditional Tibetan artist gradually moving into the contemporary art world. The figure is wearing spotted underwear, which actually was inspired by Damien Hirst's Spot Paintings. It is a comment on Tibetan artists migrating and becoming contemporary artists. It speaks to the perception people have of me and other Tibetans, as well as self-imaging that perception unto oneself. Sometimes, if we don't function according to peoples' imaginations or expectations, then we are perceived to be corrupt in some way; feeling like we are not good enough, or something like that. There are times when, out of fear, my family, Tibetan friends and I sometimes feel the need to maintain that perception and expectation of others and function in the order they perceive. It's very sad, and it's not genuine.

In many paintings in traditional Tibetan art, we often see these [spirits]. Examples include the Spirit of the Mountain, the Spirit of Water, the Spirit of a (specific) Valley... we have a ritual where we build a temple for a particular spirit, and make beverage offerings or prayers for the spirit, so that it may protect us from obstacles and we stay unharmed...it's very common to see images of these spirits in our culture. When I was growing up, my grandmother [on my father's side] used to tell me several stories about spirits. Tibetans can be quite superstitious you know – and her stories fascinated me. I always wondered what happened to these spirits when many of the families left their

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villages to go in exile– If they followed the people how they functioned in this world, and how they would assimilate into different, non-local atmospheres. This piece is a photo-collage, where the body is my own body, and within that body, there are several images of Tibetan people from all over the world, over which I painted on. The piece is about the collective mental phenomena; a spirit of a group of people, such as spirit followers. I am primarily imagining the spirit as one who tries to assimilate into our contemporary world, but there is no defined path to understanding the spirit either.

Tsherin Sherpa, *Things That Pop In My Head,* 30×40 cm, 2009.
Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi NY

JD : Can you talk a little about your technique?

TS : "Spirit" is based on a photo-mosaic of tiny little photographs of Tibetan people on top of which I used gold leaf and paint. The photo section is computer manipulated. Computer technology and digital manipulation really interest me so this was a chance for me to experiment.

It seems I am continuing my investigation and dialogue with the notion of Shangri-la being attacked and disrupted. We have this tradition of painting deities in different colors, where color symbolizes different attributes – here, I wanted to give the deities visual presence – the colors used are not specific to deities and their symbolic colors; instead, I've used color to represent a collective of deities and attributes. The 'bombs' falling on the deities' hands represent everyday things, familiar items, clipart, and the sort. I was fascinated by the word 'boom', which can mean both 'growth' and 'destruction'.

JD : These works have a strong graphic quality, but are also visually rich, almost luxuriant, through the use of gold leaf. Can you talk about your stylistic sources?

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TS : Three marketing posters is the extent of my graphic design work. But, I grew up reading many comics, and was always interested in the comic book drawings. Thangka painting may have influenced my use of color, and I almost always paint in this manner. Gold leaf is not part of traditional Tibetan painting – but we do use gold dust. Gold leafing was a process I taught myself in the last couple of years. I like fire hydrants and fire trucks, and found their gold leafed sections rather interesting. A friend taught me a few things about commercial signage and gold leafing, so I took some tips from him and learned how to use it in my paintings. Japanese works of art may have inspired me too. I used to visit the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco a lot; they have a collection of Japanese gold leafed screens; old European church paintings use gold leaf too. We do have a Tibetan tradition of painting called 'gold thangka painting', where the base of a painting is painted with gold dust; we turn the dust into a paste, and paint the background in gold before applying other paint on top. Since I work with deity images and gold is always associated with the holy, I thought it would be interesting to experiment with gold leaf. There is also something commercial about gold leaf today, the way it is used on, even signs and fire hydrants, which makes the effect a little cheesy too.

Tsherin Sherpa, *Oh My Goodness*, 30×40 cm, 2009. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi NY

JD : I must say, I've never seen a gold fire hydrant.

TS : Oh no, not the hydrant itself but the hydrant's signage, and fire trucks have a strip of gold on their facades as well – if you look at my next painting, Untitled, the swirling design above the skull – those were direct copies of fire hydrant strips – my friend taught me how to use velvet to twist the gold leaf to create a shimmering effect. Fire hydrants are mostly red, but there are certain areas that have gold strips, swirled in. Cable cars in California also have gold leafed patterns on them too.

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JD : You've definitely observed something I have not seen with my own eyes – I'll be looking more closely at fire hydrants now.

TS : Gold leafing is a bit like thangka painting too, it [thangka painting] used to be a sacred act, and now it has become relatively commercial, done often to attract tourists. Many thangka paintings in Nepal or India are made for decoration, or as souvenirs for tourists. It's interesting to see how thangka painting has transformed – I think the gold leafing in my painting is done in part to reflect the thin line between sacredness and commercialism.

Tsherin Sherpa, *Untitled, 30×37 cm,* 2010. Courtesy of the artist, Rossi & Rossi NY and the Rubin Museum of Art NY

This piece was exhibited at the Rubin Museum of Art. We were told to create a piece specifically for Traditions Transformed [June 11 – October 18, 2010]. A lot of people thought the work was inspired by Murakami. It may be true, but as far as I am concerned, it was not consciously influence by Murakami's work. The exhibit the Rubin held prior to Traditions Transformed, Remember That You Will Die [March 19 – August 9 2010] may also have affected me. But, as an artist, I look around to observe my environment, and I interact with different people, so these information and these interactions are a part of me, or at some point, become a part of me, and so in a way, all things are possibly influences for my work.

JD : Is there a reason the figures are in gas masks?

TS : At the time, I was listening to the radio, which is often running in the background when I paint. Maybe I'm now more aware of world events, but the news we receive through the radio is often quite upsetting – there is so much chaos today. It's like two deities in conflict, going into battle.

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JD: The next piece went to the exhibition in Beijing [Scorching Sun of Tibet, Songzhuang Art Center, September 10 – October 10 2010], right?

TS : Yes. This piece is about my experiences and interactions with Tibetan friends here in the West – new-generation Tibetans and Tibetans who don't speak Tibetan, or Tibetans who moved to the US at a young age. This work is also inspired by what I learned from the news that nowadays the monks in monasteries are also taught English. There is something ironic about it all when compared to Buddhist philosophy; becoming a monk or a celibate is about detaching yourself from society, now, to survive as a monk, one also needs to learn English to better assimilate into society. It's a strange phenomenon. Preservation Project #1 is similar too; as time passes, some of the methods need to be changed for the survival of tradition. Here, two spirits are trying to learn English – thus the ABC building blocks on the floor. The butterflies signify the transformation that is taking place.

Tsherin Sherpa, *Two Spirits*, 26×43 cm, 2010. Courtesy of the artist, Rossi & Rossi NY and the Songzhuang Art Center Beijing

I grew up in Nepal, and I had to learn about the Nepalese-way; when I went to school, there were only three Tibetans studying in a school of over 2000 students. I had to learn how to assimilate myself into Nepalese culture. When I went to India, I had to be like an Indian, to blend in. And so in Taiwan, and also in America...I'm constantly transforming myself for the place in which I spend time. I think Tibetans are quite good at it because we come from a nomadic tradition. We are constantly assimilating ourselves into new environments, and are taught to be able to do so.

JD : You have mentioned Nepalese was your mother tongue and you later learned Tibetan. In what language do you feel most comfortable conversing?

TS : Tibetan and Nepalese, equally. It's funny – I was born into a Tibetan family, culturally, gastronomically, ritually, yet, I went to a Nepalese school and as a child, transformed into what was around me. When I turned twelve, I began studying Buddhist philosophy, but I wasn't fluent in Tibetan at the time. Now I am fluent.

This [unfinished] work is part of a more cohesive project called Project 108. Twelve artists were chosen to partake; six artists are Tibetan, and the other six are international

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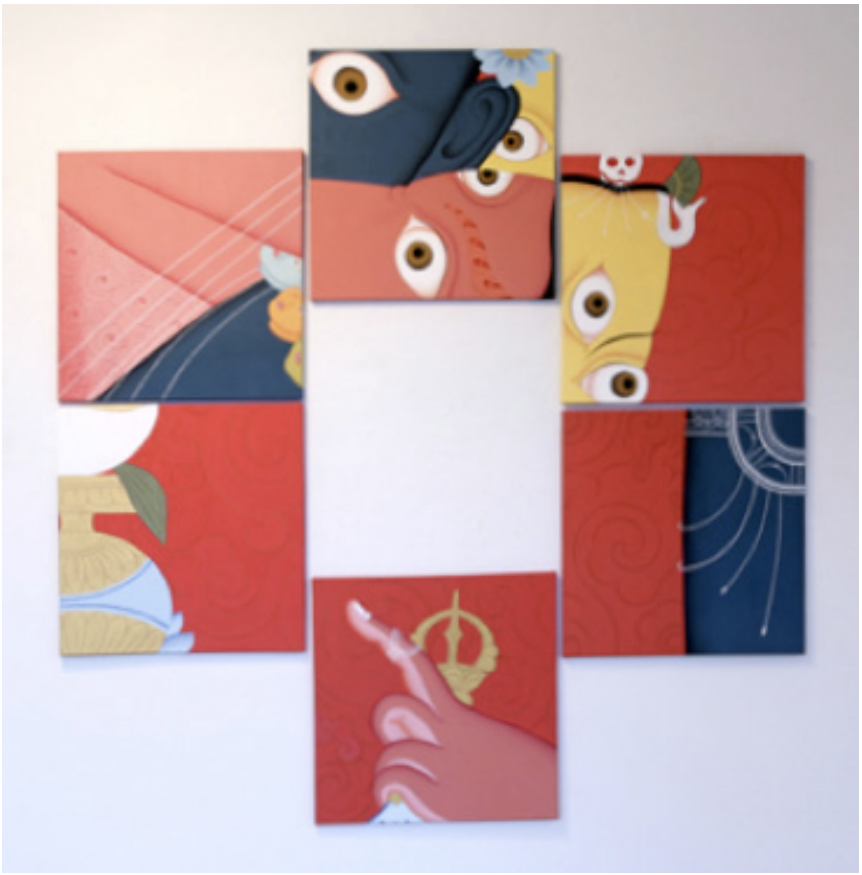
artists. I proposed to take an image of a deity and fragment it into 108 pieces. 108 is significant for me because it's the number of prayer beads that a Buddhist practitioner carries – so each fragment would represent a single prayer bead. I started working on this piece in Vermont; here are 6 of a potential 108 fragments.



Tsherin Sherpa, *Project 108,* size variable, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and City Gallery Wellington NZ

JD : Who organized the project?

TS : It's a project commissioned by a collector in New Zealand. The collector also organized another project involving international artists entitled Roundabout [September 25 2010 – January 16 2011], which was exhibited at City Gallery Wellington.

This next piece was first made as a provocation to myself. Most of the time, it's as though I am trying to convey a social message in my work, but really, a lot of what I paint is for myself – or I'd like to think so, at least a little. I was saying previously that we [Tibetan Buddhists] are so attached to images of deities and to the Buddha...so with charcoal, I stenciled the head of the Buddha on each piece of toilet paper – I unrolled the toilet paper, and then rolled it back together and installed it onto the wall. It's about the sacred versus the profane – sometimes we try to categorize the good and the bad, the holy and the unholy. But part of being a Buddhist practitioner is to go beyond stages of duality. If there is no non-duality, then we are stuck in modes of duality. Also, we have been told not to pray when on the toilet because it's considered an unholy space, so there is already a stigma attached that I try to confront. This piece was a practice for myself, and something a little more experimental. I made this piece in Vermont too.

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Tsherin Sherpa, *Untitled*, size variable, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Vermont Studio Center VT

JD : Why were you in Vermont?

TS : I was doing a residency at the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson, Vermont, an opportunity I received through a Rubin Fellowship for Himalayan Artists – it was a two-month residency between February and March 2010. There were about eighty artists and writers in total, and the studio spaces were quite big. It was a great opportunity for me to interact with different people of diverse backgrounds. My artist-neighbor was an artist from Shanghai; he didn't speak English so I acted as his translator for most of the residency. It was good practice for me, and my Mandarin speaking skills. (Laughter)

JD : It looks like the works you made in Vermont were quite experimental, a new direction compared to your previous works.

TS : Yes, although I was trained as a painter, I was always fascinated by installation and sculpture, and still am. This residency provided me with an opportunity to try my hand at both. It was the first time I saw so many artists and writers in one place, in a secluded space, for a two-month period. During the residency, we had this slideshow program every evening – there seemed to be a 'mine is better than yours' mentality. It was a little unusual for me – I wanted to counter my own ego. So, I collected these bits and pieces of garbage from my residency mates and described the work as one that could not have been put together without everyone's generosity. I wanted to engage the giver and the maker, in this particular environment. I was also trying to show some kind of significance in the making of an environment through the collective creativity of artists. And again, it speaks along the lines of the profane versus the sacred – I often come back to this dichotomy.

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Tsherin Sherpa, *Self-portrait*, size variable, 2010. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and Vermont Studio Center VT

JD : What were the reactions of your colleagues to you picking up their garbage?

TS : Oh, they liked the idea, because I shared it with them before I started collecting. I didn't give them a full explanation, but I did tell them I wanted to make something out of their garbage. I drew an image of a Buddha's hand in exchange for their garbage. And documented the process by taking photos. I was going to display the images alongside the installation, but changed my mind last minute.

It was a nice exchange. It was Buddhist too – like the monk, begging for food and offering prayers in return for the food. A similar idea, I suppose. The process inspired me to do a performance piece sometime in the future.

This next work is newer, and consists of a swirling deity. I wanted to play with the deity's image, and made this diptych – it was more an exercise of manipulating the deity's image to create another fragment of sorts – I painted this one for the art fair in Singapore [ART Stage Singapore, January 12-16, 2011].

This next piece was created for Mumbai but was also exhibited in Singapore. HeVajra is an important deity, which combines male and female attributes to represent Wisdom and Compassion. Here, I haven't focused on the symbolism of the deity but more on the use of fragment – some are close-ups of deity fragments and others are zoomed out.

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Tsherin Sherpa, *The Protector,* 2 panels, 18×24 cm each, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi NY

This next piece was created for Mumbai but was also exhibited in Singapore. HeVajra is an important deity, which combines male and female attributes to represent Wisdom and Compassion. Here, I haven't focused on the symbolism of the deity but more on the use of fragment – some are close-ups of deity fragments and others are zoomed out.

Tsherin Sherpa, *Twelve Views of Kye Dor [HeVajra],* 12 panels, 20×20 cm each, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi NY

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JD : Are these separate panels to be shown together?

TS : Yes. I wanted them to be displayed together, as a grid, in a specific order. Each panel is approximately twenty by twenty inches.

JD : This next work is quite spunky!

Tsherin Sherpa, *Staying Alive [Too Sexy To Die],* 36×48 cm, 2011.
Courtesy of the artist

TS : Yes, it's my newest work, about me, trained as a traditional artist and moving into the contemporary art world. Again, with Damien Hirst's Spots in the figure's underwear, and butterflies to his left...

I have this ongoing experiment with myself as well as with my audience – I grew up seeing these deity images and have been conditioned to seeing and recognizing them. It's like someone with a 'scary-looking dog'; if conditioned to it, it probably doesn't look so scary, but to someone seeing it for the first time, it is quite scary. This work is sort of alarming but also playful. The idea of scariness is something of interest to me. It's a mix between Damien Hirst and traditional Tibetan skulls. This is the first piece I've made on wood panel too. I wanted to work on a smoother surface – I usually work on muslin with hide glues and chalk powder to make the muslin more like paper...I wanted not to work on paper-like material but on something smoother. I like working with wood.

JD : There are a few questions about your practice that came up at the end of our previous discussion. To quote one: it appears that you are still authentically seeking the spirituality of experience that traditional Tibetan painting represents. In that you haven't found away to arrive at a painting practice that is both engaged with the world

and retains that spirituality, because the images have become bankrupt and because they are too repeated. The outside world has nothing to do with that except for the cacophony of experience. Would you say that your practice is a search for return to the spiritual fulfillment of traditional painting, in some sort of unique personal way?

TS : What I am really trying to understand is how I can reach this in the most general sense – when I was painting some of these pieces, I was also physically doing some practices; about half an hour I would read prayers, and for another half hour I would meditate; and then I would go to the grocery store where I would get angry at a guy who took my parking spot – and I would have completely forgotten about what I was doing in the morning; not even the slightest essence of it. So what I'm probably trying to do is bring everyday life experiences into my practice and painting, mix it with spirituality. I am trying to generate a spiritual aspect unto every moment – can I see this person with a more compassionate nature? I was just explaining recently that it is easy for me to feel so much reverence for the image of the Buddha. If there is a homeless man next to the image, I'm not sure I could generate a compassionate nature for both, simultaneously. So that's the challenge I'm facing – and I feel like that is the search.

JD : There was another question to you about iconography; how is the icon represented? For example, with Jasper Johns' work of a flag or bulls-eye, whether painted or not, it is the thing itself – you can't deny the flag-ness of a painted flag whether it be stacked or not. Likewise a Buddha, if it's painted or not, it is a Buddha. What do you think about the notion of an icon?

TS : The whole idea behind these images – a red Buddha holding a vase for example – its whole definition is that in the beginning, a student is lead through, or rather, needs some image to hold on to, for study purposes. At some point you need to go beyond the image, to experience it. So the image becomes irrelevant. When a practitioner reaches a certain level, all those reference points need to be destroyed. That's the whole idea behind the Tibetan images. So to appoint these very important images – teachers will say different things about the same image depending on where you are – maybe a teacher will say, 'you have to practice this Buddha, without this you are doomed'. Maybe this image won't mean anything the day after and you can just burn it without feeling bad. I'm not saying I'm reaching a higher-level or something like that, but it just doesn't do anything to me at all, so I'm trying to understand the essence and reason behind me painting these images. The whole notion of these images is to put them in their altars and sit right across from them, to visualize them. What should happen is that they become something like rainbow light and dissolve into you so that you can generate its quality, like compassion or subdued anger, or something like that.

So, there is a very unique way of understanding these images. What is happening to these images for me is like what you were saying; a flag is a flag, a Buddha is a Buddha. A shape is a shape and a form is a form. So my reference point of Buddha is stuck in this image. I need to go beyond it. And the whole idea, in my view, of the Buddhist view, is that it's not really about worshipping some hero; it's about you becoming the hero. So if it is an outside entity which you are devoting yourself to, I don't know, that outside entity would be like me waiting for my green card from the US consulate, where I do not have control over the situation. (Laughter)

JD : A final question posed had to do with the reaction of your work by more traditionally minded Tibetans to the deconstruction of these religious images. Does the reaction differ from the reaction garnered by American Buddhists?

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TS : That is an interesting question. So far, I don't know – I went to some Tibetan teachers' monasteries in California, and took with me the Rubin Foundation catalogue to see if I could attain a reaction from them – I think because they were in California, they were fine with it. (Laughter) They would say 'wow, it's nice to see this is what people are doing in a contemporary setting'. But I don't know – I'm going to Nepal soon, so I will be able to see how they react there. In terms of American students, in California at least, there are lots of, well, hippies (Laughter), and they have this very soft spot for some of these Tibetan things and can't let go...some of them are very critical and some see things in a different light.

JD : Tsherin, you have spent so much time with us. We are honored and delighted and wish you all the best during your upcoming trip to Nepal. We look forward to staying in touch. Thank you very much.