

Appropriate Buddha

[With Lee Henderson. “Appropriate Buddha.” *BlackFlash*. #25.1, 2007. 34-45.]

“Blueprint for a New Gravity,” a production still from a video installation of the same name, features a clay Buddha dissolving in water. Fine air bubbles escape and rise from the body, and a front section has broken away. In the video, the grey form softens then slumps and collapses into a mound of settled particles and swirls of diffusing dust. Both are *memento mori* pictures—we come from clay; we return to clay.

Regina artist Lee Henderson chooses to still the moment of collapse. A few minutes earlier, the figure is more definably a Buddha, and the air bubbles give the illusion of breath and life. A few minutes later and we would be looking at uninspiring settling sediment. He selects the interstitial moment when the figure still triggers anthropomorphic projections but is beyond recovery. If you reached into the water to save it, the clay would crumble in your hands.

Representations of Jesus’ corpse always have him look more asleep than deceased. A desiccated Savior would be a threat to the resurrection dogma. The display of his pristine flesh reminds believers that their souls will join him whole. Some fundamentalists believe that the elect will go to heaven bodily. Most believe the soul separates from the clay to join God. In any case, there is an anxiety in cultures engaged in or descended from the Christian tradition about dead bodies. We like to get them out of sight as soon as possible. More importantly, we prefer them displayed intact (open casket) and showing no sign of death other than stillness. Great pains are taken to present dead bodies made-up to look asleep before they are burned or buried. A corrupted body would surely have us wonder about the state of the vacated subject’s soul and anxious about the fate of our own.

A decade ago, “What would Jesus do?” was a popular slogan for many who see Jesus as the paragon of humanity. I wonder what Jesus would say about his representation by a work related to Henderson’s: Andres Serrano’s “Piss Christ,” that photo of a plastic crucifix in a bottle of urine. It’s hard to say. The Jesus of the biblical record never cracks a smile let alone laughs.

David Garneau:

How do you think Buddhists would respond to “Blueprint for a New Gravity”?

Lee Henderson:

The attitude towards death in Buddhism is not the same as in Christianity and attitudes towards the Buddha as a figure/character/deity are also different. But it’s a fine comparison for the sake of argument, especially since I think my recent work is about the encounter between Buddhism and Christendom (but not Christianity).

The Buddha is revered as a great teacher. To act derisively or with a lack of respect towards any great teacher would be sinful. This is where the mischief of the Zen school comes into play. During my time at a Zen monastery in Korea, I was told that the Buddha image is to be treated as the Buddha. Every Buddha is your teacher, whether it's a golden sculpture in the Zen Hall or a cartoon on a calendar in the office. And yet, Zen rhetoric is full of examples of monks and masters destroying, breaking, defacing, or otherwise disrespecting images of the Buddha. Mumon, a crucial Zen Master, refers to the Buddha as "Yellow-faced Gotama," accusing him of selling dog flesh (ignorance) advertised as sheep's head (enlightenment) ¹. We are told stories of monks burning wooden Buddhas to fend off winter cold ². A similar example is found in a precocious young student of Master Hakuin--when her father saw her sitting on a Buddha, he chastised her. She replied that she therefore had nowhere to sit, since the Buddha is all-pervasive ³. Master Rinzai instructed that if we meet the Buddha, we should kill the Buddha ⁴.

These examples are teaching tools, works of literary art. There was no wave of iconoclasm in Buddhism comparable to that seen in Christian history, but there really didn't need to be; the issues were worked out through metaphors instead of literal destruction—"kill the Buddha" is a provocative statement, and not all that dissimilar from "Piss Christ."

¹ Shibayama Roshi, Zenkei. *The Gateless Barrier: Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*. Berkeley, California: Shambhala. 2000.

Yellow-faced Gotama is certainly outrageous. He turns the noble into the lowly, and sells dog-flesh advertised as sheep's head. ⁶³

² Kapleau Roshi, Philip. *The Three Pillars of Zen*. New York: Anchor Books. 1980. p.222.

³ Tanahashi, Kazuaki and Tensho David Schneider (eds.). *Essential Zen*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994.

There were several monks in residence with Hakuin at Shoin-ji. One of the first persons to join the community was a sixteen-year-old girl named Satsu. She was awakened soon after studying with Hakuin. One day she was sitting zazen on a box when her father approached and asked, "What do you think you're doing? Buddha's image is in that box." She replied, "If there is any place where Buddha does not exist, I ask you to take me there." Her father was shocked. On another occasion a monk asked her, "What is the meaning of breaking the white rock within the rubbish heap?" She immediately threw down and shattered the tea bowl she was holding. ¹⁵

⁴ Schloegl, Irmgard. *The Zen Teaching of Rinzai [The Record of Rinzai]: translated from the Chinese Lin-chi Lu by Irmgard Schloegl*. Berkeley, California: Shambhala, 1976.

Followers of the Way, if you wish to see this Dharma clearly, do not let yourselves be deceived. Whether you turn to the outside or to the inside, whatever you encounter, kill it. If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha; if you meet the patriarchs, kill the patriarchs; if you meet Arhats, kill Arhats; if you meet your parents, kill your parents; if you meet your relatives, kill your relatives; then for the first time you will see clearly. ²⁸

While I made "Blueprint for a New Gravity" as a sincere investigation of how we image and understand disappearance and mortality, I also wanted to insert a bit of—perhaps Zen inspired—mischief: if Buddha tells us that all things are impermanent, what happens when we make the Buddha impermanent? This is a bit glib, but I think it speaks also to your admission that were one to try to "save" the porcelain Buddha from dissolving, it would only accelerate the process. If it's all passing phenomena anyhow, what can you possibly be holding on to?

David Garneau: You are comfortable with mortality. Without bravado or arrogance, you once explained to me that you do not fear death and consider an after-life delusional. As a result, you seem to find the necrophobia of others curious, a phenomena that attracts your dispassionate interest. It is not that you are insensitive, just surprised at people's efforts to anaesthetize themselves to the obvious and the inevitable. How does this perspective inform these photographs?

Lee Henderson:

I don't think my comfort with mortality leads to proselytization. I make and exhibit work as a way of saying, "here are some things which concern me. Maybe they concern you, too." While I am concerned that people suffer because of necrophobia, I'm no better off; I suffer from being unable to understand it or relate to it.

I want works of art to shake me. I want to walk away with an understanding I didn't have before. I want the artwork of other people to teach me something about how that artist sees the world, how I see it, or—best of all—both. Artists and viewers teach each other. Artists cast images and ideas into a void, and, like sonar, they are only visible to us if we see them reflected in other people.

These images are less a personal meditation on mortality than they are about cultural shifting and adaptation, and whether those are seen as forms of cultural death. We are suspicious, in post-enlightenment Christendom, of any level of engagement with religion or belief that pushes at the edges of the rational. We are also suspicious of practices which do not fit within our traditions. We therefore put barriers around them, either in an attempt to protect us from their influence, or to protect them from ours. Both are damaging.

It is this suspicion around otherness and identification that I'm exploring in these images. A Bodhisattva covered by a condom is still a Bodhisattva, but we can only see it through a filmy yellow shield. It is the perception, therefore, that is flawed and distorted, while the Bodhisattva statue—and, subsequently, its reverent value to Buddhists—is unchanged. Similarly, a wasp that is connected surgically to a Buddha is still distinct as a wasp. The wasps may come to the Buddha in groups, or individually; the Buddha may appear to be sheltering it, and it may appear to be whispering to the Buddha. It can't escape its wasp nature, no matter how many pins are run through it and no matter how inseparable it may be from that Buddha (or Buddhism). But if its wasp nature is both its zero-point and its complete potential, then its identification with the Buddha can be neither genuine nor insincere, because it does not inhabit a binary universe--there is only "wasp."

David Garneau:

How can your condom covered deities (“Transmission 2 of Kuan-Yin” and “Transmission of Kannon”) be seen as other than disrespectful?

Lee Henderson:

Kuan-Yin and Kannon are two names for the same Bodhisattva (pictured through the two photographs mentioned), who is not a deity in any Judeo-Christian sense. A Bodhisattva is a Buddha who, upon attaining enlightenment, returns to the world and won't accept complete nirvana until all other beings are saved, too. Often, they are said to come back in forms dismissed or persecuted by society: animals, beggars, prostitutes, etc. The Buddhist lesson in this is that even if dogma tells us that something is socially repellent, it can still be a source of understanding.

The covering of a Bodhisattva with a condom may well be seen as disrespectful; that's pretty likely given the vast range of Buddhist practices and beliefs. But what becomes important is *why* it is disrespectful. Are those who perceive this as disrespect clinging to an ideal? Or is disrespect a tactic used to point out something crucial to understanding? We might also ask, "what does this work disrespect?" Is it disrespectful of the figure, the system, or its practitioners, or is it disrespectful of the creation of segregationist binaries? To paraphrase from a question you cited earlier, what would the Buddha do? My guess—and such conjecture may, itself, be disrespectful—is that he would not take a stance of moral indignation but would instead accept what comes while looking for meaning and understanding. In Buddhism, as in Art, the transgression is not important but the reason for that transgression is. We might further ask, "does the transgression serve ignorance, or understanding?"

My photographs image existing tendencies within culture. The condom is a barrier that prevents organisms from moving through it. Blocked from procreation, they will eventually die. Although globalization is a contemporary topic (though not an exclusively contemporary phenomenon), we are also in a period of building walls. These walls can be physical (such as that proposed to keep Mexicans Mexican and Americans American), but more often they are rhetorical, social, or cultural. I was once told that I would never understand Buddhism because I was not Asian; but if we place Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in impermeable, sterile containers, they will eventually die in the same way that spermatozoa and viruses do and it won't matter which they were perceived to be.

David Garneau and Lee Henderson

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