On this October afternoon, hot and humid, I walk from the temple along the crowded dusty streets of Ubud, the artistic hub of Bali. I’ve made several visits to this small, idyllic Indonesian island, but this is the first time I’ve been met by the simple yet profound understanding of the world this dance reveals. Its story encapsulates the worldview of the Balinese: that good and evil will always remain alive and strong.

The last words of the Buddha during his mortal life, according to one tradition, were: “Now I take my leave of you. Everything in existence is transitory. Work hard on your salvation.”

With that he departed. And so, while the Buddha-presence is everywhere, the Buddha has gone. The tension between presence and absence has long been a strong current in Southeast Asian Buddhism, and visitors to the Tarsuhi Thematic Gallery this spring and summer will find contemporary expressions of this tension in eight works by Southeast Asian artists.

Here/Not Here: Buddha Presence in Eight Recent Works brings together recent art by Jakkai Siributr, Sophasop Pich, and Pinaree Sanpitak, three artists who use traditional Buddhist ideas and imagery to comment on contemporary life.

The Buddhist notion of impermanence—the idea that everything is devoid of fixed, identifiable characteristics and is constantly shifting relative to everything else within the universe—is a common theme in these works. The concept seems particularly relevant to the flux of modern living.

Here/Not Here also explores displacement of time and place—between the traditional and the contemporary, and among Asia, the West, and beyond. While the works in the exhibition address specific cultures and personal histories, they also resonate far beyond individual biographies, offering connections (and disconnections) of time and place that characterize the global human condition.

Jakkai Siributr combines traditional textile techniques of his native Thailand with imagery from contemporary pop culture. This fusion of old and new highlights tensions between modernization and spiritual life, the prevailing theme of his work.

In 2010, Jakkai presents the outline of a Buddha image created by a web of stitched mantras in the Pali language written in Thai script, loosely connected with safety pins and ornamented with amulets. The absent Buddha of the outline suggests the Buddha notion of void. Jakkai has said that works such as this also serve as comments on the “sacred state of Buddhism [whose] true principles are quickly disappearing among Thai devotees.” Jakkai’s hand-stitched compositions, whose creation is a form of meditative practice, challenge the viewer to engage
in a similar mindfulness amid the distractions of a commercialized world.

"Recession resonates with several issues in traditional Buddhist art,” observes the Asian Art Museum’s chief curator, Forrest McGill:

For example, are the Buddha’s teachings and his spiritual majesty better represented with images and symbols or better suggested by indirect, non-representational means? Also, since the Buddha has died and passed beyond the realms we inhabit, how do we (if we are Buddhists) cope with his absence? Thai Buddhists “take refuge in the Buddha,” but how do we take refuge in a being who, in the ordinary sense, no longer exists? Are the pious trinkets incorporated into Recession—popular amulets memorializing famous Buddha images and Buddhist monks—of some benefit, or are they part of the detritus of the material world that we must cleared away to see the Buddha clearly?

Collisions of modernization and tradition are also central to Sopheap Pich’s work. Sopheap creates sculptural works from materials—bamboo, rattan, wire reclaimed from shelf casings and defused bombs—that surround his studio in Cambodia. Using traditional Cambodian craft methods he fashions these materials into suggestive forms. Sopheap’s memories of childhood during the Khmer Rouge period, his family’s move to the U.S. as political refugees, and his return to Cambodia in 2002 inspire his artworks. They also connect to political and economic realities of the Cambodian people, such as the rebuilding of the Cambodian psyche after the Khmer Rouge period and the nation’s rapidly developing landscape.

In Buddha 2 (2009), a delicately woven bust of the Buddha in Cambodian style dissolves into strands of rattan that trail loosely on the floor. The negative spaces between strands establish the Buddha image. Does this play of presence and void signal a breakdown of spirituality or its reclamation? Perhaps the answer is both, for, as Sopheap points out, his work plays with opposites and their interconnections: insides and outsides, fragility and monumentality, lightness and strength.

The work of Pinaree Sanpitak explores shifts and overlaps of meaning by incorporating forms that suggest various kinds of vessels—bodies, breasts, stupas, clouds. Historically these forms are associated with notions of generosity and plenty, presence and absence. But Pinaree leaves the meaning of her vessels unfixed, open to interpretive changes over time and

Among cultures, as she explains, “Impermanence is a ‘natural’ state in my work as in life.” The painting Brilliant Blue (2008) includes a vessel resembling a breast or an offering bowl, above which a cloud hovers in an open sky. The painting, a monochromatic blue, creates space for contemplation.

*How/Not How* is the latest in our efforts to bring contemporary Asian art to museum visitors. Interconnections in time and place have always been at the core of the Asian Art Museum’s contemporary art program, which has presented more than twenty exhibitions since the museum’s opening.

During the past year, with support from a James Irvine Foundation grant, the Asian has reexamined its exhibitions since the museum’s opening.

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Museum innovation in the field of Asian contemporary art? What does it mean to present contemporary art amidst a collection of traditional art? How can contemporary art best serve our core audience?

The result of this examination is a reinvigorated commitment to contemporary art in dialogue with our core collection of art, which spans six thousand years. While art of the past can teach us about the present, art of the present can also offer new pathways into art of the past. Old and new don’t neatly follow each other, allowing meanings to shift and move, and new understandings of the interconnections of time and place to remain open. Everything in existence is transitory.

 Alison Harding is contemporary art program associate at the Asian Art Museum.

A museum store serves multiple purposes. It must, of course, generate funds to support the museum’s programs. But for true success it has to transmit this mission, enriching the visitor’s experience and reinforcing the museum’s identity; and—in the case of a major exhibition such as *Balinese Masks: Spirits of an Ancient Drama* (published by Tuttle, the museum’s book distributor)—providing space for contemplation and extending the curatorial content of the show. Having worked with the Balinese community to develop programs for this show, the Asian Art Museum staff feels a special obligation to go beyond tourist stereotypes and give visitors a sense of the real depth and richness of Balinese culture.

So, when the museum’s retail manager, Peri Danton, began planning to find merchandise to accompany the exhibition, he knew he didn’t want items that could easily be obtained elsewhere, that pandered to touristy misconceptions, or that fell short of top quality. In scouting works worthy of supplementing the exhibition, Peri soon found these kinds of items either hard to obtain from importers or available from them only at exorbitant prices. He resolved to travel to Bali to find a better range of high-quality objects than the store would otherwise be able to offer.

With only two weeks available for the trip, he knew he would have to make the best use of his time. To accomplish this he consulted with exhibition curator Natasha Rechle and director of education Deborah Clearwaters, who helped him with introductions to members of the Balinese community in the Bay Area as well as in Bali itself. Lisa Tana, former owner of Desa Arts Gallery and Imports in Oakland, planned Peri’s trip, and Judy Slattum, author of *Balinese Masks: Spirits of an Ancient Drama* (published by Tuttle, the museum’s book distributor) also provided assistance; both Lisa and Judy also worked with him in Bali. (Judy will be pairing with her husband, artist and performer I Made Suryasa, in events at the museum during the run of the Bali exhibition; see the *Calendar for Members* bound into this issue of *Tunang*.)

Peri also talked to Wayne Vitale, composer and former director of tuned percussion ensemble Gamelan Sekar Jaya; Dewa Putu Berata, director of *Cudamani* and visiting artist with Gamelan Sekar Jaya; Larry Tunjuk. Pak Arnawa leads the incoming director of the Gamelan Sekar Jaya ensemble, which will perform at the museum; I Nyoman Sumandhi, renowned master and teacher of shadow puppetry (*wayang kulit*); museum retail manager Peri Danton; I Made Arnaews (Pak Arnaews), composer and performer from Tunjuk, Bali. The photo was taken at the home of Pak Sumandhi in Tunjuk, Bali. Pak Arnaews leads two gamelans there, one of which will perform at the museum.

*How the Balinese Community Helped Us Select Objects for the Museum Store*

**The Retailer’s Tale:**

A Story of a Store

*And gladly would I learn, and gladly teach. . . .*

—Geoffrey Chaucer

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Left to right: Putu Sutati, wife of Pak Sumandhi; Emiko Saraswati Susilo, assistant director of the performing arts ensemble Cudamani and now incoming director of the Gamelan Sekar Jaya ensemble, which will perform at the museum; I Nyoman Sumandhi, renowned master and teacher of shadow puppetry (*wayang kulit*); museum retail manager Peri Danton; I Made Arnaews (Pak Arnaews), composer and performer from Tunjuk, Bali. The photo was taken at the home of Pak Sumandhi in Tunjuk, Bali. Pak Arnaews leads two gamelans there, one of which will perform at the museum.

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