



Cloth, approx. 1875–1925. Bali. Silk and gold leaf. Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.

The size and shape of this textile patterned with gold leaf make it unclear whether it was to be worn or used as decoration. It may have been a chest cloth, tied under the armpits and falling to the knees, worn by a man of princely descent or by a male dancer. A narrow band would have fastened it around the chest, so the precious material and the total pattern would remain visible. Since this large cloth has no attached belt, however, it more likely was hung as a decoration behind the back panel of a shrine or pavilion. In either case, the cloth was probably used in one of the wealthy courts of Bali in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

Still widely produced and used in Bali by people of all castes, cloths of this type continue to be employed as festive attire, garments for dancers, and temple decorations. Real gold is almost never used for the patterns, however, because of its high cost; today's artisans usually silkscreen bronze pigments onto the cloth or apply gold-colored plastic foil.

Life in Balance

By Sharon Frederick

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 with appreciative smiles and shy waves from the Balinese women who fill the sidewalks. It's the first time I've been dressed head to toe in the attire mandatory for women attending a temple ceremony in Bali: a lacy long-sleeved top (*kebaya*), a batik sarong, and an oblong sash (*selendang*).

I've just left what's known as the Grand Ceremony, which is meant to revitalize, realign, and harmonize the local temple and its precincts, the local village, and indeed the world. I've dressed in the appropriate temple clothes, hoping to overcome a bit of my outsider status as well as to show respect for this important ten-day ceremony.

The Balinese calendar is filled with ritual and ceremony; virtually no day passes without them. Often they're intended, as with the Grand Ceremony, to right a world badly out of balance and thus plagued by natural disaster, war, and chaos.

The following day brings a *barong* dance, yet another example of this strong

Balinese belief. Performed not—as it often is—as a tourist attraction, the dance is done as a ritual on temple grounds.

The *barong*, a mythical animal seen as a good spirit, fights the evil witch Rangda. Each has its group of followers. Intense gong music drives both groups into a trancelike state that eventually erupts into violent fits. First one, then another, then another seems seized by an unseen power. Those supporting the *barong* appear driven to grab the nearest dagger (*kris*) and rush to confront Rangda. Her magic is too strong, and it forces them to push the daggers into their own chests. But the *barong's* power prevents the blades from penetrating. The two groups fight to a draw, both the *barong* and the witch remaining alive and strong.

I leave the temple grounds feeling shaken by the power of the dance—and 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 coexist in the world. Our role is to maintain an equilibrium between the two rather than allowing evil to triumph; the Balinese persist in creating good by filling their lives with ritual and ceremony.

Sharon Frederick is a docent and a storyteller at the Asian Art Museum.

Buddha Presence in Eight Recent Works

Here / Not Here

By Allison Harding

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 Tateuchi 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, Sopheap 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 displacements 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 *Recession* (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 Buddhist notion of void. Jakkai has said that works such as this also serve as comments on the “sad 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

Here/Not Here: Buddha Presence in Eight Recent Works was organized by the Asian Art Museum and will be on view April 1 through October 23 in the Tateuchi Thematic Gallery (24), on the second floor.



Recession, 2010, by Jakkai Siributr (Thai, born 1969). Safety pins, thread, and found objects. Anonymous gift to the Asian Art Museum.

Detail of *Recession*,
2010, by Jakkai
Siributr.



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 realm 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



Buddha 2, 2009,
by Sopheap Pich
(Cambodian, born
1971). Rattan, wire,
and dye. On loan from
a private collection.

The Retailer's Tale: A Story of a Store

By Sylvia Castelvechio

And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach. . . .
—Geoffrey Chaucer

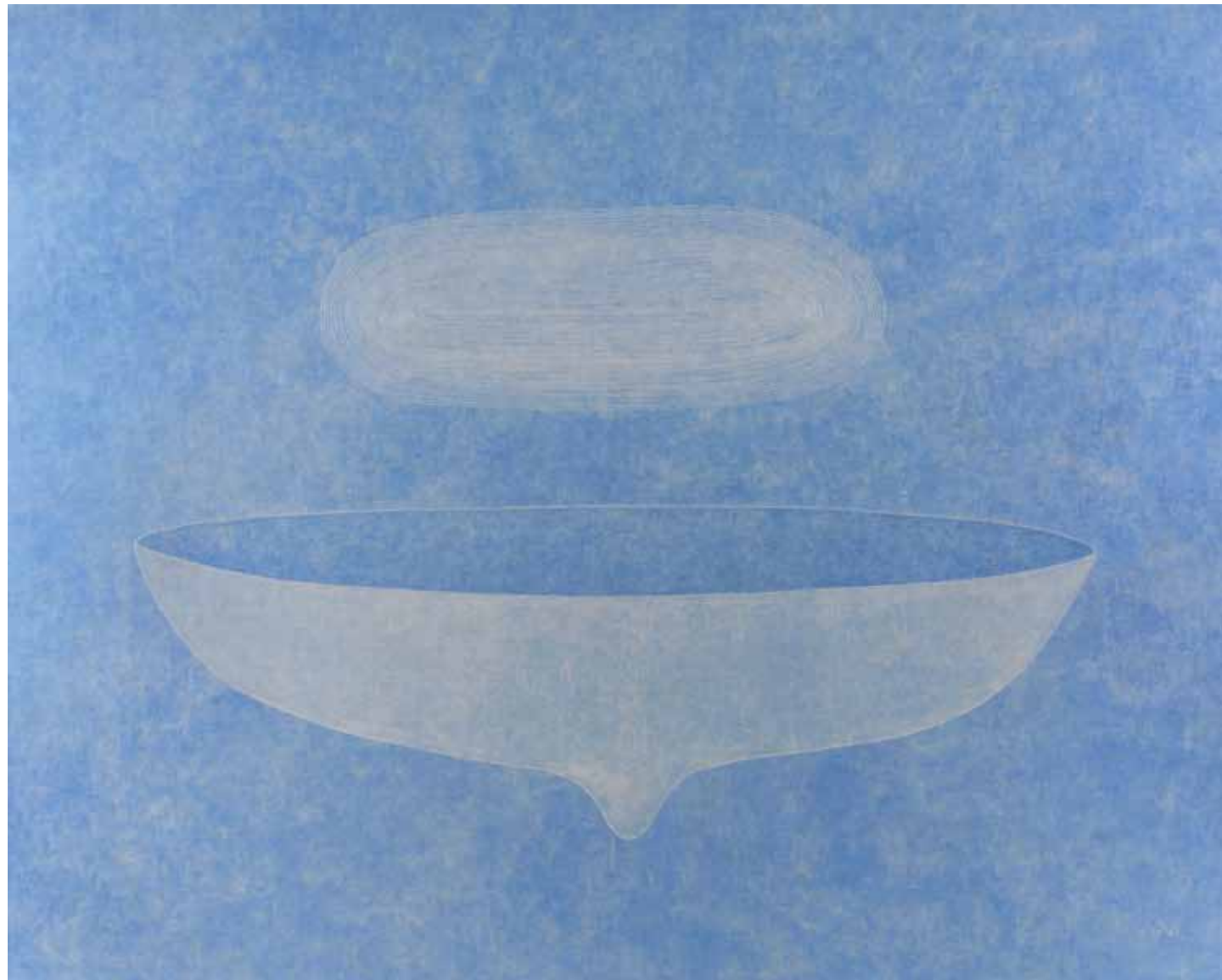
A museum store serves multiple purposes. It must, of course, generate funds to support the museum's programs. But for true success it has to transcend this mission, enriching the visitor's experience and reinforcing the museum's identity, and—in the case of a major exhibition such as *Bali: Art, Ritual, Performance*—complementing 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 touristy 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 tourist's 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 Reichle 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 *Treasures*.)

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



Brilliant Blue, 2008, by Pinaree Sanpitak (Thai, born 1961). Acrylic on canvas. On loan from a private collection.

among cultures. As she explains, "Impermanence is a 'natural' state in my works 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.

Here/Not Here 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 approach to contemporary art exhibitions and education. Our guiding questions have been: How can the museum innovate 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 one another in a static, causal timeline but circle back on 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.

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



Left to right: Putu Sutiati, 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 Arnawa (Pak Arnawa), composer and performer from Tunjuk, Bali. The photo was taken at the home of Pak Sumandhi in Tunjuk. Pak Arnawa leads two gamelans there, one of which will perform at the museum.