

Modern ‘Buddha Presence’ at Asian Art Museum

By: [Janos Gereben](#) | 09/28/11 8:30 PM

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Images commonly associated with Buddhism are of monks, meditation and saffron robes. But works on view in “Here/Not Here: Buddha Presence” at the Asian Art Museum wouldn’t be out of place at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Coinciding with the museum’s recent announcement of a new logo and new direction, eight recent works in the exhibition include contemporary surprises such as Thai artist Jakkai Siributr’s “Recession,” a 2010 sculpture of safety pins, thread and found objects.



Modern art: Jakkai Siributr’s colorful “Hopes and Dreams” is among the contemporary works in “Here/Not Here: Buddha Presence” at the Asian Art Museum. (Courtesy photo)

Loosely pinned letters from the Thai alphabet form an outline of the Buddha, not readily seen at first glimpse. The artist says the absent Buddha of the outline suggests the Buddhist notion of void.

The same artist’s dazzling diptych, called “Hopes and Dreams”— an altarpiece-like work on two panels, hinged like a book — has wild imagery from pop culture, including numbers, animal figures, swirls of colors and shapes. Traditional Thai textile techniques are used in a contemporary, edgy fashion.

Cambodian Sopheap Pich’s 2009 “Buddha 2” is a striking, airy figure of rattan, wire and dye. The artist’s childhood memories reach back to the genocidal Khmer Rouge period. His family moved to the U.S. as refugees; when he returned to Cambodia a decade ago, the experience inspired his works.

The title of the exhibit, which was curated by Allison Harding, assistant curator of contemporary art, comes from the Buddha’s last words during his mortal life: “Now I take my leave of you. Everything in existence is transitory. Work hard on your salvation.”

While his presence permeates lives, the Buddha is gone, and the tension between presence and absence is at the heart of Southeast Asian Buddhism, Harding says.

Items in the show, all recent, deal with contemporary life through the prism of traditional Buddhist ideas and imagery, and a philosophy based on the notion of impermanence.

Pinaree Sanpitak, for example, explores shifts and overlaps of meaning by incorporating forms

that suggest various kinds of vessels: bodies, breasts, stupas (dome-shaped shrines) and clouds.

Historically, the forms are associated with notions of generosity and plenty, presence and absence. But Pinaree leaves the meaning of her vessels open to interpretation. She says, “Impermanence is a natural state in my works as in life.”

Even the recent recession resonates with several issues in traditional Buddhist art. Forrest McGill, the museum’s chief curator, calls attention to the significance and insignificance of “pious trinkets” — popular amulets — populating Jakkai’s work, suggesting “the detritus of the material world that must be cleared away to see the Buddha clearly.”

IF YOU GO

Here/Not Here: Buddha Presence

Where: Asian Art Museum, 200 Larkin St., San Francisco

When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily except closed Mondays and until 9 p.m. Thursdays; closes Oct. 23

Tickets: \$7 to \$12

Contact: (415) 581-3500, www.asianart.org

URL: <http://www.sfexaminer.com/entertainment/2011/09/modern-buddha-presence-asian-art-museum>