

SONAM DOLMA: EXPLORING INNER MOUNTAINS

C.X. Silver Gallery
814 Western Avenue (Route 9)
Brattleboro, Vermont

Through December 14

It was night, and the rocky terrain of mountain forests made them stumble. A small, caramel-colored six-year-old girl walked briskly, hand-in-hand with her father. Her sister, four years old, was gathered in the arms of her frenzied mother, walking close. They covered terrain at a gallop as fast as the woods would allow without detection or injury; in the coming daylight, the family once again would seek the safety of a cave.

In 1959, a rebellion began in Lhasa and swept through Chinese-occupied Tibet in a fury of anti-Communist, anti-Chinese sentiment. The People's Liberation Army had invaded the previously independent state in 1950, and a Seventeen Point Agreement negotiated with the then-15-year-old 14th Dalai Lama, affirming Chinese sovereignty but granting Tibetan autonomy, had crumbled. By 1959, the Dalai Lama and his government had again fled to India, thousands of Tibetans were starving or dead, and distress was a reality for many.

Sonam Dolma, at six years old, fled

through the Himalayas on foot with her family that year. Her sister died in a refugee camp in India due to dirty water and bad food. Her father, a Buddhist monk, died in India soon after from much of the same.

One would think, given Dolma's origins — and a life lived continually in exile in Switzerland with her husband and mother — that her art would reflect overtly political or nationalist themes. Or that, being Tibetan-born, she would follow the traditional artistic mores of strict Buddhist iconography. Rather, Dolma's wall-spanning acrylics and floor-spanning installations tackle

a thoroughly rougher territory: the expanse of cultural folly and the crimes of emotion.

"In Tibet, art is focused on gods — Buddhist monks give you professional training that lasts four or five years, until the monk says you are allowed to paint," Dolma explained, surrounded by the vigorous and abstract greens, blues and ochres of works from her current show, hung that morning, sweeping pieces which imbue the space with an elephantine metaphysical heft. "It's prescribed, it's religious painting; you are not allowed to paint as you want."

"Art should have no nationality, religion, or gender. I paint what emotions come from me, so I can never paint the same way twice."

Though this statement may sound naively prosaic in a western world bombarded with the intricacies of expressionism, it stands as nearly revolutionary when posited against a culture that only recently gained a contemporary art world — an art world that still tugs at the frayed strings of traditional structures. For example, the website for the Gedun Choephel Artist's Guild, a collective of contemporary artists living and working in Tibet, displays work that, though stylistically striking and deviant from the prescriptions of which Dolma speaks, still tend to hover over Tibetan pastoral life and contain elements of the glittering gold and teltale shapes of Buddhist iconography. It's as if many artists' psyches remain partly under a shroud of nationalism, which a continuing history of turbulence exorcises.

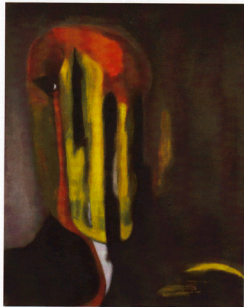
Dolma, on the other hand, emerges as a feminist Mark Rothko, her bold swaths of color and gyrating shapes an invitation to question notions of ambition, masculinity, vocation, social structure, death, and fame.

Take her "White Collar" series: "I used to not paint faces," she said, standing in front of "White Collar 1." "But when I moved to Manhattan [in 2008, for an expected three-year period] because my husband received an appointment curating at the Rubin Museum, suddenly there were faces everywhere. Such rich people, such downtrodden people. People want more and more; everyone is out for themselves, and macholism dominates. Yet power is an illusion — therefore, here is an abstracted illusion."

Dolma talked much about illusion, and with one of Buddhism's primary tenets being that all reality is illusory, one cannot help but consider that perhaps her work remains under the banner of thematic restrictions she abhors, while utilizing expatriate liberties to universalize them.

Her response? "My thinking as related to my heritage may be behind (my assessments) but not absolutely. Painting is purely an exercise of the inner mind."

Clara Rose Thornton



LEFT TO RIGHT: *White Collar 1*, 2009, acrylic.
My Father's Death (installation detail), 2010, used and donated monks robes and plaster (The Yaxa).

