Tradition in Baasanjav's Art: Rethinking Buddhist Iconographies in Contemporary Mongolia

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Abstract

The question of tradition is a key topic in contemporary works of Asian artists. This article focuses on selected artworks by the Mongolian artist Baasanjav Choijiljavin (b. 1977) to analyze how some aspects of traditional Tibetan Buddhist iconography and motifs are appropriated and reused in contemporary art. Baasanjav was trained in the traditional style of Mongolian painting known as Mongol Zurag but has pioneered new trends in Mongolian contemporary art which contribute to the debate first instigated in the study of anthropologist Uradyn Bulag and historian Li Narangoa (2006). Bulag/Narangoa examined the transformation of Mongol culture as "alter/native modernity" in times of "divided urbanism–pastoralism." Baasanjav's sharp criticism of corrupt neoliberalism in Mongolia and the use of Buddhist iconography for political messages was unprecedented in Mongolia in 2009, yet common in the works of contemporary Tibetan artists such as Gonkar Gyatso and Tenzing Rigdol. Baasanjav's works inspired many Mongolian artists to use Buddhist motifs and iconographies in their paintings to point at the Mongolian state's cultural, social and environmental decline. The article discusses how Baasanjav creates new iconographies of Buddhist motifs and figures based on and inspired by his innovative interpretation of traditional motifs, style, and visual idioms for conceptual shift of Mongol Zurag imagery.

In the recent past, several scholars wrote about Mongolia's current issues of political and economic instability, which are affecting the society and culture at large. Li Narangoa calls our attention to the current state of "divided urbanism–pastoralism, in which both the new urban citizenry and the pastoral communities are under the complex rule of a new city-based elite, international institutions and the market."[1] Furthering and transforming Dilip Gaonkar's notion of "alternative modernities," Uradyn Bulag terms the transformation of native Mongol culture "alter/native modernity."[2] How do artists in Mongolia respond to the drastic changes

[1] Li Narangoa and Ole Bruun, "A New Moment in Mongol History: The Rise of the Cosmopolitan City" in Ole Bruun and Li Narangoa, eds., *Mongols From Country to City: Floating Boundaries, Pastoralism and City Life in the Mongol Lands* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2006). See more in Uranchimeg Tsultemin, "Political Ecology in Baatarzorig's Art: Mongolia *Is* in Business" in Rebecca Empson and Hermione Spriggs, eds., *Five Heads (Tavan Tolgoi) Art, Anthropology and Mongol Futurism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 105–119.

[2] By taking on a new interpretation of Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar's "Alternative modernities," Uradyn Bulag offers a different approach especially in the case of Inner and Outer Mongolia, where native cultural values are superseded by new cultural import. As Bulag defines it, "alter/native modernity, that is, not just an alternative Chinese [or Western] modernity but one which hinges on altering the native Mongol cultural and political institutions and properties." See Uradyn Bulag in Li Narangoa

in contemporary Mongolia? How do the artists approach the environmental damage and changes that are happening due to the poor decisions of Mongolia's corrupt government? This article surveys some works by Ch. Baasanjav, commonly known as Baaska (b. 1977) who represents new developments in the style of painting that was named "Mongol Zurag" (literally: Mongolian painting) in the twentieth century.[3]

Specifically, what interests me here is how Baaska uses Buddhist motifs and how his approach reflects on the use of tradition in Mongolian contemporary art. He has been active in the Mongolian art scene since 2005, and since early in his career he has used Buddhist motifs and elements in his works. Consider, as an example, his *Universe* (2008), which follows the composition of Buddhist Bhavacakra (aka "Wheel of Life").

Figure 1. Ch.Baasanjav, Universe, gouache on cotton, 2008. Courtesy of Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

and Ole Bruun, eds., *Mongols from Country to City: Floating Boundaries, Pastoralism and City Life in the Mongol Lands* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2006), Chapter 3. See also Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar ed., *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

[3] See more about Mongol Zurag in Uranchimeg Tsultemin, "Mongol Zurag: Nyam-Osoryn Tsultem (1923–2001) and Traditional-style Painting in Mongolia" in *Orientations*, 48, no. 2 (March–April 2017), Hong Kong: 135–142. About Mongol Zurag Society, see Uranchimeg Tsultemin, *Mongolin orchin uyeiin dursleh urlagiin Eh Survalj, barimt bichguud* [Primary Documents of Mongolian Art Associations] (Ulaanbaatar: BCI Publishing, 2018).

Trained by the Mongol Zurag artist Ts. Narmandakh, Baaska was inspired to explore experimentation with references to the Mongol past without limiting his work to the ubiquitous images of Mongol warriors of nine hundred years ago. Narmandakh emphasized learning about the richness of Mongol traditional culture and nomadic heritage and history, all of which was heavily suppressed and largely limited prior to 1990. The teacher's aim through such education was to implicitly urge the artist to creatively think of the well-informed vision of "Mongolian-ness," of what it really means to be a Mongol (and a Mongolian) in the contemporary era.

Baaska's approach to rethinking the Buddhist teachings in a novel way gave birth to new iconographies and possibilities to interpret Buddhist motifs in relation to the modern concerns of troubled politics in contemporary Mongolia. In his first solo exhibition in 2006, Baaska exhibited large-scale works that show refined drawing and composite narratives reminiscent of B. Sharav's (1869–1939) paintings in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Figure 2. Ch.Baasanjav, 13th Century, guoache on cotton, 2006.
Courtesy of the artist.

In *Daily Events* and *Airag Feast,* Sharav builds the narrative with a composition of vignettes and scenes, such as felt-making, moving a *ger* (*yurt*), worship of mountains, making *airag* (aka *kumis*), which appear as separate at first glance, yet all are interconnected at close inspection. Baaska's large composition echoed this approach and consisted of numerous scenes pertaining to the imperial history of the thirteenth–fourteenth century Mongols. According to the artist, his aim is to understand what "tradition" is for the contemporary artist today and how to appropriate the knowledge and the tradition of Mongol Zurag, which was abandoned during the socialist regime due to the Soviet discouragement and, in some cases, taboo placed on the studies of the past.

Figure 3. B.Sharav, Daily Events, colors on cotton. early 20th c. Courtesy of Zanabazar Museum of Fine Art, Ulaanbaatar.

Examples of Buddha Images in Contemporary Tibetan Works

The use of Buddha images and motifs in contemporary art is nothing new, as they appear even in the art of Western artists throughout the twentieth century, including Asian-American artists, such as Nam June Paik (1932–2006). In this century, Buddha images have become a common part of contemporary artworks by Tibetan artists in particular.

Gonkar Gyatso's *Red Buddha* or *Pokemon Buddha,* for instance, follows the basic shape of a seated Buddha image to target questions about Western commodification, whereas his *Angel* superimposes the shape of an Iraqi detainee tortured by US army soldiers at Abu Ghraib against the iconometrical grid of the proportions of Avalokiteśvara. In the latter case, Gyatso juxtaposes the system of knowledge presented by the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara, vis-à-vis the widely circulated image of the bleeding Iraqi detainee that visually testifies to the failure of the American dream and its rhetoric of democracy. Gyatso uses the form of the Buddha in these images to speak to the ills of humanity, where the West—the US in particular—takes the lead in shaping politics, culture, and economy. His countrymen, other contemporary Tibetan artists, often use Buddhist forms and motifs in a similar vein.

Figure 4. Gonkar Gyatso, Angel, 2007.
Stickers and pencil on treated paper 152 x 121.5cm
The Kenneth and Yasuko Myer Collection of Contemporary Asian Art.
Purchased 2008 with funds from Michael Sidney Myer through the
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

In fact, the use of Buddhist motifs for political statements has become one of the main approaches of contemporary Tibetan artists, among others, Tenzing Rigdol.

Figure 5. Tenzing Rigdol, Autonomy, 2011.
Collage, silk brocade and scripture, 200x200 cm, (78x78 in)
Courtesy of the Artist and Rossi&Rossi.

In his *Autonomy,* Rigdol follows a seventeenth-century Tibetan painting of Akṣobhyavajra, made in new *khyenri* style, albeit only in its basic contours.[4] Akin to Baaska, the Buddhist iconography here is also transformed to state a new message. The Buddha's form is created with the artist's close attention and is clearly recognizable; and yet beyond its basic shape, an artful selection of media and materiality ranging between paper, silk, brocade, and paint altogether produce a lushly textured work with nuanced layers of various meanings. The face and the body of the Tantric Buddha is entirely covered with Chinese money bills that show discernible images of Mao Zedong, whereas the female aspect, *yum*, who appears in a father-mother *yab-yum* embrace, is entirely built with Tibetan currency bills that were in circulation prior to the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959. The Tantric bodies, typically two complementary aspects of one holistic entity, here are shown in a tight embrace, where the disparate and independent cultures are forced to join: the power of the male aspect, here representing

[4] The seventeenth-century painting is part of the permanent collection of the Rubin Museum of Art and can be seen here: https://rubinmuseum.org/collection/artwork/akshobhyavajra

PRC, dominates and holds the female aspect, which is representing Tibet, and which appears to be submerging in an agonistic cry. The two bodies are placed against the silken brocade *mandorla*, which, in turn, is juxtaposed against a golden background filled with numerous pages of Tibetan Buddhist sacred texts. The wisdom and the essence of Tibetan thought and culture here are painstakingly tied within the enforced embrace of two entities that do not belong to each other. While Buddhist images are used for meditation practices, here they have additional meanings and functions. Akin to Gyatso, for Rigdol, the figure of a Buddha is "a marker of Tibetan cultural identity"[5] more than it is meant for a practitioner's visualization praxis. Or, shall we say, the meditation, as Rigdol puts it here, is undeniably centered on the conflicting embrace of two disparate bodies as a ghostly one.

Tsherin Sherpa, a well-known contemporary artist from Nepal, takes a different approach to Buddhist images without any references to the political situation of Tibet. Making constant use of figures and motifs taken partially from buddhas and bodhisattvas, he aims to create a new form of meditation that is, in his case, focused on his own personal questions of belonging and (dis) placement in the contemporary world.

Figure 6. Tsherin Sherpa, Blue spirit, 2013.
Courtesy of the Artist and Rossi&Rossi.

In his work, *Blue Spirit* (2011), Tsherin Sherpa liberates the Buddhist form from any meanings and associations it usually has within its original context and iconography; he plays with the Buddhist form completely at his own will and in such attitude he is distinct from his fellow Himalayan artists. If for Rigdol and Gyatso—and for Baaska, for that matter—it is the clarity of form and its essential meaning for which the buddha or bodhisattva is known (i.e., Avalokiteśvara, Tantric deity, etc.) that is kept sacred and closely followed;

[5] Clare Harris "Buddha Goes Global" in Clare Harris, In *the Image of Tibet: Tibetan Painting After 1959*. London, 1999, 243.

Tsherin Sherpa does not have any attachment to form. His *Blue Spirit* is intentionally free of any iconographic or historical connotations, and the robust juxtaposition against a golden background creates the sense of an unworldly realm akin to Byzantine icons and frescoes. According to the artist, the title here denotes his ideas and visions also inspired by the spirits of nature, whereas the tiny dark figures stand for those dark and negative energies that come to us on a daily basis through various channels, including real and fake news. The sacred and profane, in other words, are deliberately brought together and forms and shapes are devoid of their inherent meanings and original context; the displacement here is intentionally made into a seemingly unusual, new placement.[6]

Buddha Images for Auspicious Protection and Sacralization

Given these and many more examples of contemporary artists using Buddhist images in their works, Baaska's *Universe,* does not appear as a unique painting and shows a comparable effort to negotiate between the artist's views about today's world and the inherited tradition. Baaska uses a circular composition of Bvavacakra (Wheel of Life) (with the Buddha in the middle *(Figure 1. Universe)*. Among the surrounding deities and divinities, semi-gods and *apsaras* (supernatural female beings), the viewer is also confronted with shocking images of "men in black" who represent the business corporate world and who are here to seek enlightenment with the Buddha. This image of "men in black" takes a centerpiece in Baaska's following works, the first of which is *The Taste of Money In-Between Clouds* (2009) (hereafter: *The Taste of Money*).

Figure 7. Ch.Baasanjav, The Taste of Money In-Between Clouds, 2009. gouache on cotton. Courtesy of Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

[6] Uranchimeg Tsultemin "Tsherin Sherpa: Meditation on Art and Life as Metamorphosis" in Uranchimeg ed., *Metamorphosis: Recent Painting and Sculpture by Tsherin Sherpa.*Herron School of Art and Design, IUPUI, 2020, 6-8.

Here Baaska divides the composition into two unequal parts: the dominating, crowded, main upper part and the minor low register with very few images. Baaska's "man in black" resurfaces here as the central domineering image, now multi-armed and equipped with several heads. He is wearing a hat made of newspapers and the letters on it read in modern Mongolian, "Truth," "Today." His hands clutch an axe and dollar bills as well as the Mongolian seal that reads "Mongol State." He is backed by rows of men in suits who appear as half-human, half-animal hybrids with demon-like appearances, whereas another demon-like angry creature wearing a suit-and-tie, is at yelp right next to the main figure. The man in black is confronted with gods, spirits and goddesses of nature to his right (viewer's left) who are unfolding a scroll with an appeal written in Mongolian traditional script. The appeal reads, "Please leave to us, those who belong to mountains and rivers, our virgin land and our flowing rivers!" In the bottom register, an eerie scene with the men in black takes place where they fight with each other and have been transformed into hybrid creatures.

The political statement of this painting is very clear, since it speaks directly to the ongoing heated debates surrounding mining, corruption, destruction of nature and competition over its illegal gains by the corporate world. This is the one of the first cases in which a contemporary artist has voiced so blatantly and vividly the concern over environmental destruction, the lack of protection and rehabilitation of nature, and the corrupted government that allies with the equally corrupt corporate world for personal gain. While in some other artists' works, such as Orkhontuul's *Esprit* (2014), Ya. Bulgan's *Degenerate Times* (1999), or B. Nandin-Erdene's *Swings* (2012), there is a sharp critique of social welfare, political issues, and other forms of the failure of neoliberalism in Mongolia, Baaska was the first to specifically address the environmental issues.[7] Without resorting to multi-media or mixed-media art forms which dominate the contemporary art world today, Baaska's aim is to *understand* what constitutes "tradition" in the modern world of Mongolia, where rapid changes are transforming the culture and society.

The environmental, destructive damage began with the intensification of the mining business in Mongolia since the late 1990s, when Mongolia—a newly opened country to the world and Asia's new democratic government—legalized privatization of land, livestock, and mining in 1997.[8] The law was formulated and approved by the parliament as illegal mining activities rapidly increased in the country since 1994. When the democratic party gained the majority of seats in 1996 and their then leader, M. Enkhsaikhan, became Prime Minister, they made a first notable effort to regulate the viciously growing mining sector and organize the private and public use of the land for mining purposes.[9] The boom of mining with prospects of high-

[7] See more discussion about the work of these artists in Uranchimeg Tsultemin, *Mobile Homes and Modern Nomads: Contemporary Art of Mongolia* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, forthcoming).

[8] Julian Dierkes "Introduction" in Julian Dierkes, ed., *Change in Democratic Mongolia: Social Relations, Health, Mobile Pastoralism, and Mining* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 7.

[9] See more on these isssues here: http://uclalum.blogspot.com

profit mineral wealth was conducted by Mongolian companies and was spread over several locales in the country, among which the major ones are currently Oyu Tolgoi and Tavan Tolgoi. Mining was among those new areas of the capitalist world that were totally unknown to Mongolia, neither to its policy makers and the governmental authorities, nor to local businessmen. Mining also opened a new promising window into the global world for a very isolated nation that proclaimed democracy in 1992, and the corporate world made fast strides to take advantage of what appeared to be a highly profitable bid. The law in 1997 gave the freedom of utilizing so-called "licenses" for land to conduct mining business in Mongolia. Thus, the number of companies aiming for mining understandably increased, although none of them knew exactly how to properly run the mining businesses and save the environment in the process; neither did the governmental agencies. Many provinces suffered tremendous loss of pasture lands; rivers and riverbanks were irreversibly damaged to the extent that rivers dried up, for instance, in Onggi, Zaamar, Selenge *aimag* (province). The newly formed Ministry for Mining also organized a new agency for Mining and Oil that hypothetically was responsible for proper conduct of business, environmental protection and repair, as well as legal taxation and fees that the companies were now obliged to pay to the government. Many *nouveau riches* of Mongolia were able to establish themselves due to this new business, which proved to be lucrative, since the buyers and the markets were not too far away: rapidly growing industrial China needed new suppliers of copper, coal, and other deposits. These *nouveau riches* did not shy away from personal gain, and corrupt methods allowed the authorities to pass over the disastrous conditions they left in the mines. Once the deposits were deemed to be depleted, the companies quickly sold their licenses to local "ninja" companies or newer businesses and left without any responsibilities for environmental repair.[10]

While several provinces suffered from mining and lost their land and water resources to the wrongfully conducted mining businesses, the government did not take—and still has not taken—any measures to repair the damaged natural environment. Only a few activists, among them, the most prominent Ts.Munkhbayar, and A.Bayarjargal, stood against the environmental destruction.[11] Among the artists, it was also a handful, such as Baaska and Orkhontuul, who spoke up strongly against

[10] There are certain Mongolian mining companies, such as Erel, which did poor or no work for protection of the environment and caused much damage to the site they conducted mining.

[11] Ts. Munkhbayar is known for his longtime work to protect his native land and the Onggi River, which dried up due to the mining activities. Munkhbayar co-founded the Onggi River Movement as well as the Mongolian Nature Protection Coalition to protect the shrinking of rivers and waterways. In 2006, the government passed a new Law on Minerals that protects natural water basins and regulates mining. See more on Munkhbayar's successful efforts for environment protection at https://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/tsetsegee-munkhbayar/. However, there were also recent controversies surrounding Munkhbayar's work, questioning his efforts, and subsequently sentencing him to 21 years in prison in 2013. This incident, according to T. Enkhbat and quoted by numerous media, reveals the desperation of Mongolian herders and their fight against environmental damage due to mining. See more at http://world.time.com/2014/01/28/award-winning-mongolian-environmentalist-gets-21-years-for-terrorism/. About A.Bayarjargal, see here: https://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/bayarjargal-agvaantseren/

the mining and the corruption that ensued from the new business developments. For these and other artists, the negative outcome of neoliberalism in Mongolia were the main subject matter, and they took art as a critique of the government and the society. Baaska set up to take on environmental damage as the key message of his art, and thus it can indeed be seen as one of the very first works of political ecology intentionally created as a critical voice of a contemporary Mongolian artist.

Baaska continued his explorations and his ideas with a series of new works, such as *Checkmate* (2011), *Composition I* (2010-11), *Existence* (2017), and *Congress*, completed in 2011. While *Congress* was made separately, its subject matter and style relates closely to the *Taste of Money* as it makes a similar statement with similar motifs.

Figure 8. Ch.Baasanjav, Checkmate, 2011, gouache on cotton.
Courtesy of Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

Figure 9. Ch. Baasanjav, Existence, acryllic on canvas, 2017.
Courtesy of Sapar Contemporary Gallery+Incubator, New York City.

Here the female wrathful deity Palden Lhamo has taken the form of a polycephalic rider whose Buddhist iconography is now transformed to obtain new and different meanings. Baaska's *Congress* shows a goddess who has three wrathful faces with the frontal one painted in two colors, red and blue. She has six arms clutching various 'attributes' and is riding a polycephalic green horse amidst an assembly of numerous creatures all depicted as skeletons. Palden Lhamo, who is mostly a Dharma protector (*dharmapala)*, is a widely known deity popular in Vajrayāna Buddhism, and particularly in Tibet is worshipped across various schools. Here, Baaska's "goddess" is mostly based on Palden Lhamo's four-armed form known as Dudsolma, and in choosing her, the artist has also considered her essential meaning of an important Wisdom Protector.

Palden Lhamo Dudsolma is typically depicted with two arms, one holding a vajra scepter and the other one a ritual skullcup (*kapala*). When adopting this form for a modern context, completely unrelated to Buddhist ideas, Baaska made deliberate changes to the iconography: Baaska's "Wisdom Protector" has now four arms, which hold a flaming sword, an empty throne, and a gate of hell with flames of fire, and she is riding a two-headed green horse. The idea of a green horse came directly from the

ritual of Maitreya Procession in Mongolia, where a statue of the Buddha of the future, Maitreya, is taken in a chariot with a green horse in a day-long circumambulation of the monastery carried out by monks and attended by the local lay communities.

Figure 10. Ch.Baasanjav, Congress, 2011.
Courtesy of Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

In the Maitreya Procession, the green horse heralds the future, and this meaning is carried onto Baaska's use of a green horse. In the latter's case, however, the future is not a straightforward single path since the polycephalic rider can be taken in any of the two directions. As the face of the goddess is in half-red and half-blue, clearly pointing at the two major parties, the reformed People's Party (red) and the Democratic Party (blue), the divided directions are driven by these two dominant powers in Mongolia. The artist's critique of, and the work's political connotations about the wrongful Parliament are apparent in the assembly under the rider, which represents a dysfunctional meeting of its seventy-six members, here shown as skeletons. The goddess is essentially riding over an assembly of the dead. This Parliament is leaderless: an empty throne tops the assembly. The Buddhist Lord of Death, Yama, is seated right underneath the goddess, thereby also suggesting that these Parliament members will eventually be judged by the Lord of Death in their final destination of hell. A dried, barren tree, its dry roots tied with a string of human skulls, reminds us of the equally disastrous perishing of nature caused by the wrongful decisions and deeds of humans: a strong statement indeed.

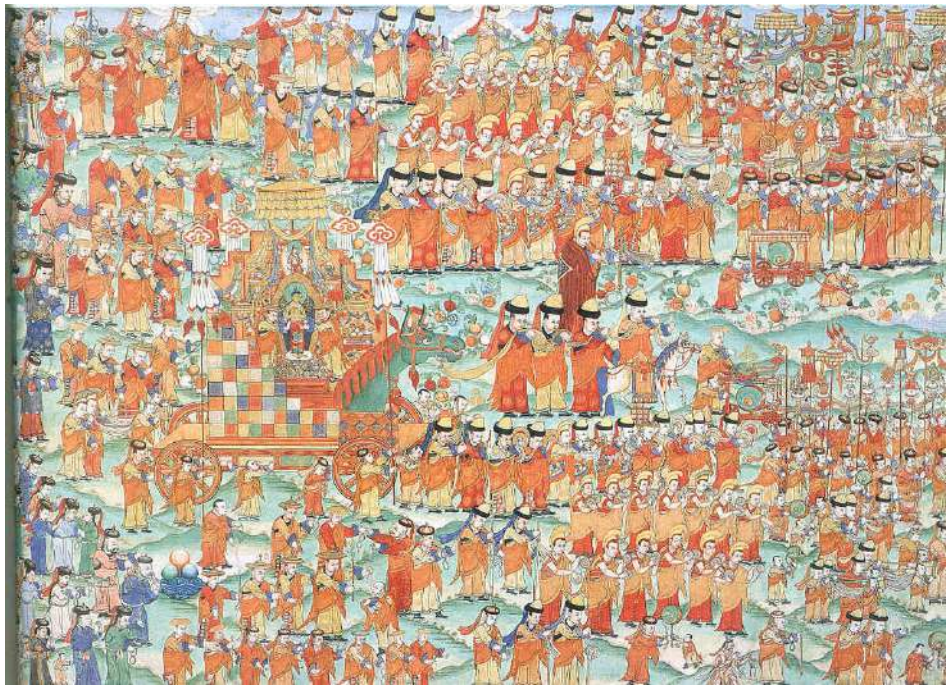

Figure 11. G.Dorj, Maitreya Procession. early 20th c.
Courtesy of Zanabazar Museum of Fine Art.

Political connotations in the use of Buddhist iconography is apparent in Baaska's work. Unlike Rigdol, however, he does not refer to the Buddhist form in relation to his identity. Rather, he relies on his own knowledge of the deity—here in the *Congress*, Palden Lhamo—in revealing the evils of human wrongful deeds and subduing the ills of modern-day troubles. The benign form of wrathful deity here, in Baaska's view, should assist in turning things for the better and bringing long-awaited justice to the community, which has lacked a ruling head and fair government. If, in the *Taste of Money*, the words on the central figure were in Mongolian, now the public words are turned into English. The apparent contrast and juxtaposition of Western and Buddhist forms, made evident in their visual and linguistic manifestations, points at that eerie cultural symbiosis about which Baaska is also critical. His innovative approach echoes the works of his fellow contemporary artists, such as Baatarzorig in particular. In Baatarzorig's *Mickey Polo* (2016) and *Analogue* (2015), the Western pop icon, Mickey Mouse, takes the center stage to illustrate the forced import of Western popular culture into a disorganized mix of cultural orientations in modern-day Mongolia. Baatarzorig's Mickey is a gruesome simulacrum of the original Mickey of Walt Disney, designed to be jolly, light, and funny. Wearing Mongolian traditional boots and garb, Baatarzorig's Mickey is riding a horse against a backdrop of fire flames and brandishing a polo mallet. He is surrounded by numerous smaller figures of polo gamer Mickeys who also wear Mongolian garb and similarly appear, curiously, of mixed cultures: he is a Mongolianized version of

Disney's Mickey. In his *Analogue,* the naked Mickeys, wearing nothing but underwear, are all engaged in odd, bizarre activities, which include jumping a rope, bathing in a tiny tub, riding a goat, jumping up and down, lying in leisure poses or other deeds that do not make any sense. The composition is in the shape of a mathematical infinity symbol, and the title, *Analogue,* suggests a likening of the Mickey proliferation—a metaphor for the superficial process of Westernization—as non-stop and indefinite. In other words, as the artist maintains, the fast process of neoliberalism is empty in its purpose and organization as well as devastating and meaningless in its socio-cultural impact.

Figure 12. B.Baatarzorig, Mickey Polo, acryllic on canvas, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 13. B.Baatarzorig, Analogue, gouache on cotton, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

In creating compositions with images, motifs, and certain elements borrowed from Buddhist images, both Baaska and Baatarzorig follow the precedent established by Mongolian artists in the twentieth century, such as Nyam-Osoryn Tsultem (1923–2001). In his well-known painting, *Appeal* (1972), Tsultem depicts a revolutionary hero in the center of a composition filled with flames of fire. The flat decorative quality of the picture and elements of the painting, such as a horse, fire flames, and the orientation of the main figure, are all based on the *thangka* painting tradition. Due to the taboo placed on Buddhism during socialist period in Mongolia, the artist used Buddhist elements and teachings disguised in the form of a revolutionary soldier who is blowing his conch to herald victory.

Figure 14. N-O.Tsultem, Appeal, 1972.
Courtesy of National Modern Art Gallery, Ulaanbaatar.

If Baaska's *Congress* and *Universe* incorporate Buddhist images directly from the *thangka* paintings that are clearly recognizable even within the new composition, with a new modern construct and meaning, Tsultem's borrowing from Buddhist images was subtle, mostly distinct in its treatment of the visual quality and overall texture of the composition as flat and devoid of linear perspective.

Conclusion: On Form and Identity in Contemporary Buddhist Art

Baaska is not alone in his efforts to address the wrongdoing of the corrupt neoliberal Mongolian government and the corporate world. As art historian T. J. Demos puts it, international artists such as Baaska "address new aesthetic strategies through which current ecological emergencies have found resonance and creative response in artistic practice."[12] Although, from his art, his critique is clear, his works also pose inevitable questions about the importance and the use of tradition in modern-day culture, his belonging and relation to the past and to his present-day heritage. Akin to some Tibetan artists, Baaska weaves his queries of authenticity and identity with his strong critique of political and ecological issues. For him, Buddhist forms are part of his tradition and heritage akin to Mongolian scripts, belief in natural spirits, and the painting style and composition. For him, the Mongol Zurag traditional style, as employed in his images, is based on Sharav's models of busy compositions with a storytelling narrative arrangement. He also follows Sharav in weaving seamlessly important Buddhist ideas with very mundane subject matter and motifs. He thus views the close following of Buddhist iconography as important, and in such following, his own understanding of Buddhist form and iconography grows as a continuous learning process. As the artist was nurtured and matured during the era of freedom of faith and religious practices in Mongolia, such effort for learning is logical, and is both inevitable and inseparable from his identity and from the cultural present of Mongolia today. Through their reliance on Buddhist form and iconography as part of the tradition, he and his fellow Mongolian and Tibetan artists reveal their angst for the loss of their land: for Baaska, as he is witnessing the destruction on both physical, spiritual, and cultural levels. As his countryman Baatarzorig has stated, "a question of whether Mongolia is really Mongolia nowadays […] how Mongolia retains its identity is my question."[13] That—what Narangoa and Bruun have described as "cultural disintegration" due to radical disparities between the growing city and the countryside—is also the concern for Baaska. Driven by his worries about the irretrievable loss of culture and for his land, his images are based on buddhas and bodhisattvas to secure protection against the destructive stride of neoliberalism that has resulted in the marketization and commodification of nature.[14]

[12] T. J. Demos "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology: An Introduction" in *Third Text* 27, no. 1 (January, 2013): 1–9.

[13] Interview with Baatarzorig in December 2017. See Uranchimeg Tsultemin "Political Ecology in Baatarzorig's Art: Mongolia *Is* in Business" in Rebecca Empson and Hermione Spriggs eds., *Five Heads (Tavan Tolgoi) Art, Anthropology and Mongol Futurism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 105–119.

[14] Neil Smith "Nature as Accumulation Strategy" in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys eds., *Coming to Terms with Nature*. Socialist Register 2007 Series. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006).

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_____. "Political Ecology in Baatarzorig's Art: Mongolia Is in Business" in Rebecca Empson and Hermione Spriggs eds., *Five Heads (Tavan Tolgoi) Art, Anthropology and Mongol Futurism*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018, 105–119

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