



Lee Henderson

The great American painter Mark Rothko once said, “There is no such thing as good painting about nothing.” Although he was labeled an abstract expressionist and is widely admired for his canvasses’ surfaces and his use of colour, Rothko intended his paintings to communicate a religious experience, and the related emotions of tragedy, ecstasy, and doom. But as critic Arthur Danto has noted, Rothko’s art, like all good art, is not “about” these emotions; rather, it exists between representation of the experience and its embodiment. Henderson’s work, similarly, both represents some of the tensions of Buddhism in western society and embodies a spirit of Buddhism itself.

Henderson has been working with spiritual themes since about 2002, after graduating with his BFA from the Alberta College of Art and Design and before commencing his MFA at University of Regina (which he completed in 2005). His exploration began as a study of the artificial division we make in western society between “technology” and “nature,” and was influenced by years of martial arts training in the Daoist tradition. He is not a Buddhist, but neither is he not-Buddhist—a paradox (or skepticism) that can be found at the heart of the Zen tradition.

Working in photography, video, and performance, Henderson has explored and reinterpreted some classic Buddhist themes. His 2003 video *Untitled Zenga #6* is a lush, hypnotic loop of raindrops splashing on a windshield—broken consistently by the sudden swooping of wipers, a process that can be viewed as a metaphor for meditation and the constant need for practitioners to re-centre on the breath. A recent photographic series, *Transmissions* (2007-08), portrays various Buddha figures sheathed in neon yellow condoms. A metaphor for the West’s fear of truly exploring or accepting other cultural values, the photographs also question the impulse of societies to resist cultural change in favour of an “authentic” or fixed tradition. Henderson said, “[I]f we place Buddhas and bodhisattvas in impermeable, sterile containers, they will eventually die in the same way that spermatozoa and viruses do, and it won’t matter which they were perceived to be.”

Henderson’s viewer-triggered video installation *Blueprint for a New Gravity* (2005) depicts an unfired porcelain Buddha figure slowly dissolving in water. It is projected on a stone tablet in an atmosphere that resembles a temple or other house of worship. The figure’s demise is both fascinating and dreadful to watch; it provides viewers with an opportunity to contemplate mortality and impermanence, not something many in the West feel comfortable doing. It also throws into question the nature and purpose of an art gallery, a place where, for many decades, discussions of specific religious traditions have been rather uncommon. Henderson said, “Just as I’m skeptical of spirituality and religion, I’m also skeptical of the art world, which has its own dogma and values and belief systems acquired through traditions. It is very much like a religion unto itself, with ideas of what is or is not appropriate to discuss. I understand the need for an art world that talks to itself, but I’m also sort of bored by it and want to expand the conversation.”

Viewers with a background in contemporary art will note the installation’s strange resemblance to a seminal work of contemporary video art, Korean artist Nam June Paik’s 1974 work *TV Buddha*, which had an antique Buddha statue watch a live video of himself on a spherical, “space-age” TV. One of the first works to explore the encounter of East and West in the West by an Asian artist, *TV Buddha* suggested an implicit antithesis between transcendentalism and technology. Henderson, it seems, begs to differ. He uses technology to make a genuine impact on his audiences. “To one-up Rothko,” he said, laughing, but only partially joking, “I hope people who see my work become instantly enlightened.”

Lee Henderson studied in Canada and Germany; his instructors include Maria Vedder, Brian Eno, Rachele Viader Knowles, and Ellen Bromberg. His work has been exhibited in Canada, Germany, the UK, USA, and Italy. Since completing his MFA in Intermedia in 2005, he has been furthering his time- and lens-based artistic practice while teaching in the Departments of Visual Art and Computer Science at the University of Regina. Along with teaching and making art, Henderson’s practise includes writing and curating.

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Curatorial essay by Jen Budney