A Toxic Vision (Catalogue Essay)

Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer

Citation for published version (APA):

Citing this paper
Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester’s Takedown Procedures [http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo] or contact uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.
A Toxic Vision

With Paper Dreams Nortse once again has begun the process of remaking himself. Since his initial training, which took him to art institutions in mainland China and Tibet, Nortse has amassed experiences that might feasibly take the average person several lifetimes to accumulate. He has run a billboard painting company, an art gallery for tourists, a handmade paper factory and a photographic studio specialising in wedding photography; he has designed carpets and worked as a set designer for Tibet Television (XZTV). Yet he also has found the time to become an acclaimed contemporary artist. Just as his career defies definition, so, too, does his artistic practice.

Since the mid-1980s, Nortse has moved between installation, photography, oil painting, ready-made multimedia compositions and sculpture. His subjects have ranged from landscapes to (self) portraits, from claustrophobic interiors to expansive horizons and from the sacred to the profane. Yet none of this should, in any way, suggest that the artist lacks focus, for he has consistently grappled with a series of global questions, to which he invariably responds using a tightly focussed Lhasa lens. Lhasa, Nortse’s home, gives him the experiences and, in a very physical sense, the materials he needs to work through issues of pollution, environmental degradation, the potential for violence and the continual erosion of cultural identity through mass production and globalisation.
As a curator of a large historical Tibet collection in Liverpool, UK, I first became aware of Nortse’s work in 2008. I was, at that point, just starting out on a long-term museum project to bring contemporary voices to Tibet and its diasporas. It was time for a change; the representation of Tibet in museums across North America and Europe had been, for more than a century, heavily cloaked in a robe of timeless spirituality and remoteness that says nothing of the contemporary region. The same year, Rossi & Rossi showed The State of Imbalance, a solo exhibition that made abundantly clear the artist’s growing obsession with self-portraiture—then a new direction for contemporary artists from Tibet. Nortse’s self-portraits, whose disconcertingly out-of-proportion heads are tightly bound (a reference to his father’s death) with everything from Tibetan printed prayers and texts to a child’s surgical mask, feel oppressive and threatening, and tell of personal tragedies whilst also raising questions over cultural and individual identity. These works say much about what it means to be Tibetan in the twenty-first century and, as a result, Nortse was one of the first artists whose work I decided to collect for the museum.

The three works that came to Liverpool—Prayer Wheel (2007), Big Brother (2007) and Automan (2007)—allude to the personal struggles that Tibetans living in Tibet face. In these photographic self-portraits drenched in rich colour, but set against stark-white backgrounds, Nortse asks his audience who or what he should be: the traditional Tibetan, the informer or even, perhaps, the superhero, an idealised imagining of a Tibetan as seen through Western eyes. In each portrait, he is loaded down with material markers of his chosen identity, from the prayer wheel, to the walkie-talkie, to the gun inspired by science fiction.
Nortse has continued to use the portrait and a series of material objects to discuss issues of loss and alienation. Most disconcertingly in the present show is Red Tablecloth (2015), in which one of the artist’s celebrated self-portraits hangs above a table, upon which rests a paper gun. While the self-portrait and the impossibly cramped room have become reoccurring features of his paintings, he has started to turn his attention to a new motif, the folded paper boat, which is occasionally made of Tibetan pecha, or manuscript pages. These paper motifs, Nortse says, “represent the memory of childhood, as a symbol of hope and spiritual sustenance”; however, he adds, “When I combine the memories and idea together, the artworks turn out to be very heavy.” These impermanent vessels can be seen carrying a range of identikit passengers, including what Nortse calls ‘clones’, a series of mannequin torsos, whose plastic bodies become fluid and drip through the base of their ineffectual vehicles. These ghostly ships also carry a series of hooded figures to an unknown destination—their bodies ominously slumped in meditation and clothed in the red cloth of the Tibetan monk.

The artist may be in flux, but he continues to include a number of binding elements that create connective threads across his constantly changing practice. The use of red handwoven cloth worn by monks to truss and wrap has, for example, been a feature of Nortse’s work since 1987, when he produced Bound Up Scenery, a performative piece. He staged this piece in the Changtang, a plateau in northwest Tibet, one of the last great wildernesses in the world and traditionally home to many of Tibet’s nomadic communities; here, Nortse wrapped himself in red and white lengths of fabric.

In an installation piece recorded for Paper Dreams, entitled Scene in the Desert (2014), he returns to the wide-open spaces of the Tibetan landscape in order to rework the red monastic cloth once again. Scene in the Desert follows on from an installation piece, entitled Zen Meditation, produced in 2012 and shown in Anonymous: Contemporary Tibetan Art at several venues across the United States from 2013 to 2015. In the earlier work, Nortse showed twelve meditating monks sitting within the framework of a meditational tent. These figures were completely enveloped by their robes; money casually thrown at their feet and in their laps. This time, Scene in the Desert takes the cloth out of its controlled space and reinstates it into the Tibetan plateau. The piece features a series of faded and worn monastic robes draped in a way that is highly evocative of a lama’s outer cloak or dagam, the type which is placed on the throne when the lama is absent from his monastic seat (the most well known being those of the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, which are shown in Lhasa’s Potala Palace). These battered monastic robes are a kind of cultural place marker; they attest to the continuing potency of Tibetan Buddhism and, despite its momentary absence, wait patiently for their owners to return. Nortse roots these
robes and what they represent into a pristine Tibetan landscape featuring turquoise-coloured lakes and snow-covered mountains. This is Tibet’s cultural heartland, a place that is devoid of recent commercial development and industrialisation, and the place to which Tibetan Buddhism will return.

Throughout his career, Nortse has manipulated a range of ready-made objects, such as the red cloth, in order to work through the effects of cultural change, industrialisation and mass-produced consumer goods. He has incorporated into his works, including Nyi ma mar po / Red Sun (2006), the decapitated body parts of a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha and lengths of khatak, the white ceremonial scarf of Tibet. Most recently, in a 2013 piece, Alienation, the artist used a collection of once-sacred Tibetan book covers repurposed as washing and chopping boards during the Cultural Revolution to raise questions over cultural loss and, specifically, the remaking of Tibet’s material culture. With his recent object-based experiments, Nortse has invited us into a very different material world of mass-produced toxicity, where seemingly innocuous items have the ability to form a harmful force field between the viewer and Tibet’s cultural landscape.

His new focus—cheap cutlery made from a porcelainlike plastic material—has given him the tools to explore objects that were once integral to the act of nourishing the body, and whose purpose is now seemingly reversed. “The porcelainlike tableware I used were very cheap, made from some illegal workshops”, Nortse explains. “It will do harm to people’s health if they use these unqualified product[s] every day.” Here, through the usually unacknowledged detritus of life, bought in the market stalls of Lhasa, Nortse draws our attention to the harm that mass-produced consumer culture is inflicting on people’s physical well-being. Furthermore, how he chooses to work with these substandard materials also reflects on the damage that such large-scale production wreaks on the Tibetan cultural body as a whole.

Look closely and you will see that each and every one of the plastic utensils used in these works has been snapped. Nortse thus accentuates their toxicity, allowing the poisonous substances contained inside each plate and spoon to seep out. In several of these new works, the artist builds cages or wirelike fences with the utensils—making it dangerous, if not impossible, for the viewer to reach beyond them and rescue the fragments of Tibetan culture that are trapped behind the polluting forces of mass production. In some cases, only fragments of Tibetan pecha are left to be rescued; while in other works, such as Mandala I (2014–15), an entire Tibetan Buddhist cosmic diagram, or mandala, is subdued under the forces of a series of geomantic lines. Here, the artist reveals a new world order,
in which a malign, mass-produced tradition is able to dominate and suppress Tibet and its culture. In other works, Nortse turns the snapped spoons into steps on a rope ladder, suggesting the alternative levels of attainment that can be reached if one participates in a consumer culture. For the artist, there will, however, always be casualties in this search for an alternative enlightenment and, in this case, it is the Tibetan language, represented by the loose-leaf pages of the Tibetan pecha. In climbing the ladder, one must walk over Tibetan culture and its language, crushing it during the climb towards consumer nirvana.

Fragments of snapped plastic also play a role in Nortse’s skeletal forms of Tibetan Buddhist beings, more commonly seen in painted thangkas, or meditational paintings. Laid out flat in this way and contained within a frame, they appear as if recently unearthed from a long-forgotten grave—perhaps suggesting the archaeological remains of a distant civilisation. In some cases, the artist has taken their skeletal appearance literally, producing his own plastic versions of Shri Shmashana Adhipati (Chitipati), the Father-Mother wisdom protector deities who are commonly depicted as dancing skeletons. In other cases, he hones down onto a row of meditating Buddhas, stripping them back to their new harmful plastic core and, with a large dollop of irony, he fashions in plastic Sarasvati (yang chen ma lha chu sum), the goddess of literature, poetry and wisdom. Here, the integrity of the protector of artistic creativity and knowledge is starting to shatter, and her cheap plastic persona is breaking away and scattering in the breeze.

Nortse once said, “Every once in a while, I feel I need to change every facet of my style of expression, from technique to medium, because for me, ‘duplicating’ myself is a very painful experience, which makes it difficult for me to continue using any one method for very long”.

With these new works, we see the artist on the move once again, remaking himself with new modes of expression. Nortse is now in the process of pushing away his preoccupations with his personal struggles and sense of identity—and instead, he is allowing a new toxic vision to emerge.

Emma Martin is Head of Ethnology for National Museums Liverpool and Lecturer in Museology at the University of Manchester.

---

1   Email correspondence with the author, March 2015.
2   Email correspondence with the author, March 2015.
WORKS
Wood, acrylic and polyester, white plywood base.
Each piece 14 x 12 cm
32 x 4 x 12
64 pieces in total.

Please note that this is a different version of the work on view in the exhibition, which is titled Death of Anax (2015).
Red Tablecloth / 2015
Mixed media
110 x 110 cm
(43 ⅜ x 43 ⅜ in)
Red Tablecloth I
2010
Mixed media
137 x 131 cm
(54 " x 51 1/4"")
The Red Man in a Paper Boat
2015
Mixed media
131.6 x 119.4 cm
(52 1/4 x 47 1/8 in)
Excuse in Paper Boats
2015
Mixed media
130 x 130 cm
(51 ⅜ x 51 ⅛ in)
The Modern Dyed Red
2015
Mixed media
120 x 187 cm
(47 1/4 x 74 1/16 in)
Ghou Meow
2015
Mixed media
150 x 187 cm
(59 x 74 in)
Title: Undead
Edition: 1/3
Medium: metal, plastic, nylon
Dimensions: 149 x 35.5 x 24 cm
title

Medium:

Size:

MUSIC NOTE
2015-10
Porcelain cups
10 x 6 x 0.3 cm
39 1/16 x 23 1/2 x 1/8
Atlas
2013-15
Plastic cutlery
260 x 80 cm
(102 x 31 in)
Mandala I
2001-02
Paint, cutlery and paper
34 x 34 cm
13 3/8 x 13 3/8 in
Mandala V
2251-12
Plastic, fabric, and paint
121 x 121 cm
47 1/2 x 47 1/2 in
Escape from the Nest
2001–15
Plastic, cutlery and string
190 x 130 x 5 cm
(75 1/4 x 51 1/4 x 2 in)
Progress
2005–06
Pigment on paper
319 x 319 cm
125 5/8 x 125 5/8 in
50
Grave in the Desert
2005
Photograph
100 x 200 cm
100 x 54.5 in
Edition 1 of 5
ABOUT
Nortse was born in 1963 in Lhasa, Tibet, where he still lives and works.

Education
Tibet University, Lhasa, Tibet
Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China
Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, Tianjin, China
Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Guangdong, China

Solo Exhibitions
2015
Paper Dreams, Rossi & Rossi, London, UK

2012
Bandaged Landscape, Rossi & Rossi, London, UK

2008
Self-Portraits—The State of Imbalance, Rossi & Rossi, London, UK

2000–02
Beyond the Boundaries, individual art exhibitions, Tibet

Group Exhibitions
2015
Transcending Tibet, Rogue Space, New York, USA

Buddha: Ten Thousand Embodiments, Chan Liu Art Museum, Taipei, Taiwan

2014
Parallel Realities, ARNTD, Berlin, Germany, in conjunction with Rossi & Rossi, London, UK

Anonymous: Contemporary Tibetan Art, Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at the State University of New York, New Paltz, New York, USA

Impermanence, Rossi & Rossi, Hong Kong

Anonymous: Contemporary Tibetan Art, Robert Hull Fleming Museum at the University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, USA, and Queens Museum, New York, USA

2013
SAME: DIFFERENCE, Rossi & Rossi, London, UK

In-Between: 21st Century Tibetan Artists Respond to 12th–15th Century Tibetan Manuscript Covers, Rossi & Rossi, London, UK

Anonymous: Contemporary Tibetan Art, Temnikova & Kasela Gallery, Tallinn, Estonia

Tibet. Art. Now. Tibetan Art between Tradition and Modernity, Asia Onlus, Grosseto, Italy

Tsering Nyandak and Norbu Tsering, 18th Street Arts Center, Santa Monica, California, USA

2012
Earth|Body|Mind, Kathmandu International Art Festival 2012, Kathmandu, Nepal

Victory! 'Triumph' in Classical and Contemporary Asian Art, Rossi & Rossi, London, UK

Roundabout: Face to Face, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israel

2011
What’s So Funny About Peace, Love and Understanding?, Rossi & Rossi, London, UK

Modern Tibetan Artists, Temnikova & Kasela Gallery, Tallinn, Estonia

2010
Works on Paper, Rossi & Rossi, London, UK

Roundabout, City Gallery Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

Scorching Sun of Tibet, Songzhuang Art Center, Beijing, China

Boys and Girls Come Out to Play, Rossi & Rossi, London, UK

2008
Phuntsok Tsering & Gendun Chopel Artists' Guild from Lhasa, Galerie ArtSite, Haarlem, The Netherlands

Return to Lhasa: The Second Tibetan Contemporary Exhibition, Red Gate Gallery, Beijing, China

Fragile Mandala, Plum Blossoms Gallery, Hong Kong
2007
Past and Present: Tibetan Art, 13th–21st Century, Rossi & Rossi at Christopher Farr, Los Angeles, California, USA

2006
Art from the Roof of the World: Contemporary Painting from Tibet, Siebengebirgsmuseum, Königswinter, Germany
Lhasa Express, Rossi & Rossi, London, UK
Lhasa Train, Peaceful Wind, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA

2005
Nation of All Flowers, National Minority Exhibition, Chinese Artist Association, Beijing, China

2003
Third National Oil Painting Exhibition, Chinese Art Department Ministry of Culture, Chinese Artists Association, Beijing, China

Lhasa: New Art from Tibet, Red Gate Gallery, Beijing, China

Inside Out: Tibetan Contemporary Art, Gedun Choephel Gallery, Lhasa, Tibet

Tibetan Encounters: Contemporary Meets Tradition, Neuhoff Gallery, New York, USA, organised by Anna Maria Rossi and Fabio Rossi
Founded in 1985 in London by Anna Maria Rossi, who has some forty years of experience in the field of Asian art, and later joined by her son Fabio Rossi, Rossi & Rossi specialises in classical works of art from India and the Himalayan region as well as early Chinese and Central Asian textiles. In the mid-2000s, Rossi & Rossi began working with contemporary Asian artists, with a special focus on Tibetan art. The gallery’s deep interest in both the art and culture of the past and the vibrant and innovative art being produced by Asian artists today is reflected in its international reputation for handling only the finest pieces.

Operating in the centre of Mayfair, London, and from a newly opened space in Hong Kong, Rossi & Rossi regularly stages specialist and groundbreaking exhibitions. The gallery also participates in renowned contemporary art fairs including Art Stage Singapore, London Art Fair and Art Basel Hong Kong.

**Major Institutions**
- CU Art Museum, University of Colorado, Boulder, USA
- Glenbarra Art Museum, Himeji, Japan
- M+, Hong Kong
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA
- Newark Museum, Newark, USA
- Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
- White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney, Australia
- World Museum, Liverpool, UK

**Artists Represented**
- Fereydoun Ave
- Benchung
- Konstantin Bessmertny
- Faiza Butt
- Heman Chang
- Lois Conner
- Shane Cotton
- Henri Dana
- Christopher Doyle
- Gade
- Naiza H. Khan
- Abbas Kiarostami
- Kesang Lamdark
- Ma Desheng
- Erbossyn Mel dibekov
- Nortse
- Tsering Nyandak
- Tending Rigdol
- Leang Seckon
- Tserin Sherpa
- Tsewang Tashi
- Palden Weinreb
- Nicole Wong

**Notable Exhibitions**

**2014**
- Faiza Butt, Symmetrical, London, UK
- Parallel Realities: Contemporary Tibetan Art, in collaboration with ARNDT, Berlin, Germany
- Shane Cotton, The Voyage Out, Hong Kong
- Impermanence: Contemporary Tibetan Art, Hong Kong
- Leang Seckon, Hell on Earth, London, UK
- Erbossyn Mel dibekov, Mountains of Revolution, Hong Kong

**2013**
- Gavin Au, Homan Ho, South Ha, Vivian Ho, and Nicole Wong, These Shores, Hong Kong
- In-Between: 21st Century Tibetan Artists Respond to 12th–15th Century Tibetan Manuscript Covers, curated by Tenzing Rigdol, London, UK
- Konstantin Bessmertny, One of You and All of Them, London, UK
- Tsering Nyandak, The Land of No Heroes, London, UK
- Heman Chang, The Part in the Story Where We Lost Count of the Days, Hong Kong
Abbas Kiarostami, *Photographs from the Snow Series*, Hong Kong
Liu Dahong, *Childhood*, London, UK
Tenzing Rigdol, *Darkness into Beauty*, London, UK
2012
Tsherin Sherpa, *Tibetan Spirit*, London, UK
Victory! ‘Triumph’ in Classical and Contemporary Asian Art, London, UK
Nortse, *Bandaged Landscape*, London, UK
Heman Chong, *LEM1*, London, UK
What’s So Funny About Peace, Love and Understanding?, London, UK
2011
Faiza Butt and Naiza H. Khan, *Shifting Ground*, Hong Kong
Tibetan Contemporary Art: Tantric Vision in Modern Self-Expression, Tibet House, New York, USA
Stories of Dreams and Realities, London, UK, organised in conjunction with the Drawing Room Gallery, Manila, Philippines
Kesang Lamdawk, *Son of Rinpochhe*, London, UK
Tavares Strachan, *Sometimes Lies Are Prettier*, London, UK
Beyond the Mandala: Contemporary Art from Tibet, Mumbai, India, in conjunction with Valte Gallery, Mumbai, India
Lois Conner, *Beijing Building*, London, UK
2010
Jaishri Abichandani, *Dirty Jewels*, London, UK
Fereydoun Ave, *The Sacred Elements: Wind*, London, UK
Boys and Girls Come Out to Play, London, UK
Shane Cotton, *To and Fro*, London, UK
2009
Tsewang Tashi, *Untitled Identity*, London, UK
Naiza H. Khan, *The Skin She Wears*, London, UK
2008
Caroline Chiu, *Gods and Monsters: Portraits of the Nyingjei Lam Collection*, New York, USA
Urban Spirituality: Contemporary Hong Kong Art, London, UK, in conjunction with Grotto Fine Art, Hong Kong
Erbassyn Meldibekov, *The (Dis)Order of Things*, London, UK
Dedron, Nearest to the Sun, London, UK
Konstantin Bessmertny, *Causarum Cognitio*, London, UK
Leang Seckoon, *Heavy Skirt*, London, UK
Palden Weinreb, *This World is Flat*, London, UK
Stillness and Shadows: Vintage Photographs of India, London, UK
Benchung, *Colours of Darkness*, London, UK
2007
Lois Conner, *Twirling the Lotus: Photographs from Tibet and China*, London, UK
Christian Haas, *Consciousness and Form: Contemporary Tibetan Art*, London, UK
Legacy: Contemporary Photographic Works from China, London, UK
2006
Peter Towse and Gonkar Gyatso, *Oh! What a Beautiful Day*, London, UK
2005
Visions from Tibet, London, UK