

Artist Statement

Sonam Dolma Brauen

At the end of the 1950s, as a little girl, I shared the fate of many Tibetans and fled with my parents to India. Our early years as refugees were very challenging. My sister and my father did not survive. As a child I only went to school for a short time. I was thirteen years old when I first learned the alphabet. I listened with great pleasure to piano music and would have loved to take piano lessons, but I didn't know where and it would have cost too much anyway.

My life took a great turning when I met Martin Brauen, a Swiss student and a friend of Tibet. I went to Switzerland and became a wife, a mother, and a housewife. And then later I became an artist. It was in Switzerland, after I had married Martin Brauen and had children, that I started knitting. I knitted pullovers for my children. First I knit a pullover all in green. Soon I added other colors such as orange or blue, but without following a set pattern. In the end abstract forms emerged in the patterns. When my children Yangzom and Tashi wore the pullovers, the neighbors asked, "Who made that? It's lovely!"

After some time, Martin suggested putting these forms on paper. At first I said I couldn't do that and would stick with the pullovers. So, I kept knitting a lot more pullovers. But later when the children grew older, I decided to take art lessons. I learned from various teachers and artists, but my best teacher was Fausto Sommer, as he let me be the way I was. He just explained to me how I could stretch the canvas and mix colors. I studied with him four or five years, and had no trouble painting abstractly, but I can paint forms only with very heavy deliberation.

When I devote myself to something for a long time, things emerge that astonish even myself. That is art for me. I could not imagine painting something that existed out there, directly. Everything comes from inside me.

It all takes a long time. First I see something that moves me, in the paper or on television. It pierces me deeply, sometimes quite imperceptibly, and from this arises deep sorrow. I would like to do something, but it is still too powerful, it is "undoable." Then I sleep badly, get up early. In this phase I can't think of making art at all. The whole process goes on for a long time. Only after that do I begin to work intensively. The sorrow that is in me I have by then already assimilated. What I bring to the canvas, or what I construct, is "calmed down," it is no longer something terrible.

In Manhattan I went to an exhibition on the subject of environmental disaster, and everything was so negative, and the pictures were terrible to look at. It is different with my paintings, for example, in the series "Silent Ocean." The pictures do not show the dreadful environmental

disaster realistically, but only hint at it. Those viewing them must look at and interpret the pictures in their own way. In April 2010, arguably the largest environmental disaster in the United States occurred, the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, or the BP Oil Spill. I was in residency in Vermont at the Vermont Studio Center at the time. The broadcasts I heard on the radio reported horrific conditions that haunted me day and night. So, I began to transfer my inner images of this tragedy to the canvas. Fortunately, I followed the events only on the radio and did not see any TV images that could have influenced my imagination of the environmental disaster. I created about ten paintings in the series “Silent Ocean,” one of which, “Silent Ocean 21” is shown on the cover of this journal. One of the paintings was exhibited in New York’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and it was wonderful for me that so many people were inspired by it and seemed to have understood my message.

For me, art is something through which I want to say something in a gentle way. When I want to convey something in words, it quickly becomes trivial. I want to express something with my art, and if I can’t, I personally have the feeling that I am not up to the challenge. I develop when I can show my art and talk to people about it. Interchange with others about my art helps me a great deal—it gives me support and self-confidence and inspiration.

From 2008 to 2011, I lived together with my husband, Martin, in New York. The change of place strongly influenced my art. The unpleasant encounters with art buyers and patrons brought me face to face once again with the powerlessness and helplessness I had suffered in my childhood and youth in India. This strengthened my yearning for homeland and identity and at the same time led me into a new artistic field: I began to produce installations. In my installations I use clay, plaster, fabric, ammunition shells, wood, and, for the first time, Tibetan Buddhist elements. I often follow a serial concept, arranging hundreds of plaster casts of teeth, cartridge cases or even penis models in—only at first glance—aesthetically harmonious artworks.

Working in New York inspired me to use Tibetan Buddhist objects, among others *tsa tsa* in the shape of stupas—manufactured with the aid of a *tsa tsa* mold that my parents had brought with them from Tibet—and cast-off monks’ robes from Lhasa, which I placed in different formal and functional contexts.

In the West we mainly associate Tibetan art with finely worked statues, or *thangkas*—the scroll paintings framed in brocade—which both fulfill religious functions. The first generation of Tibetan contemporary artists in many cases studied in Chinese art academies and after their return to Tibet felt the need to approach their own (Buddhist) roots with modern methods. A clear feature of their early years is reference to religious themes, for the most part Buddha portraits.

I have found in the course of the years that I would never paint a Buddha. A Buddha is already “there;” he is perfect. I would not have known at all what else I should say. I come from a generation who learnt from childhood that one should not paint these subjects until one has studied for several years from a pattern and one’s teacher has given permission. So, I also had fear of painting

such a thing, because that is so deeply established in me. It is misconduct—a “sin”—to just go and paint such a thing. That generates bad karma, I would not risk that, and this subject has never interested me.

I live in Switzerland and really have everything. But there is something that does concern me: I have no homeland, which certainly has an effect on my sense of identity. My northern European women friends go home twice a year and then come back to Switzerland. They feel happy here, but they still have their homeland. I have no homeland. This subject also resurfaces in my works, for example in “My Father’s Death” or in my series “Yishen,” which takes as its central theme the self-immolations in Tibet.

In Tibetan culture there is no tradition of self-immolation. We regard suicide as something extremely unbeneficial. But this sort of protest has existed in China long ago, and there, Buddhist monks in particular have burned themselves in impotent rage against the powerful and the government. I found the expression “yishen” for “abandoning one’s body” and considered it very appropriate. Because you cannot endure this unbearable situation and have to abandon your body. The “consciousness” goes out of the “building.” That suited my subject. Also I would like to convey to the Chinese: look here, now this is bringing you your own protest back to Tibet!

The series makes strong reference to Tibet and reflects its problematic situation. With these paintings I want somehow to fight for it and communicate about it. I want to convey with these works that Tibet still exists and must not be forgotten.



JTL Volume 2.1 displays a cropped version of Sonam Dolma Brauen’s *Silent Ocean 21* on its cover.

