

# Acting Dauntlessly

BY PAUL SERFATY

## Society, Violence and the Buddha in Wai Pongyu's Recent Work



WAI PONGYU, *Gandhara Buddha Study 2 (detail)*, 2015, ballpoint pen on paper, 30 x 21 cm. Courtesy Grotto Fine Art, Hong Kong.

Hong Kong artist Wai Pongyu is not one to exploit the commercial success of a formula. No sooner have his audiences learned their way into his meticulous works of ballpoint pen on paper than he expresses his artistic instincts in new ways. So far, Wai's artistic language has been largely nonrepresentational, inhabiting a middle ground between abstraction and nature. Initially, he achieved this by drawing lines or calligraphic transformations that evolved into waves or patterns, bringing to mind natural phenomena. More recently in his series "A Moment of Truth" (2011–), he assembles within the pictorial space highly disparate elements taken from

nature—stars, craters, bones, nerves, tree bark—and harmonizes them so that the composition alternates between the real and the conceptual. Earlier this year, rather suddenly, Wai's work crystallized around two new series that together, thus far, comprise 12 images based on the Buddha.

The specific icon that attracted Wai is the Tokyo National Museum's *Standing Buddha* of Gandhara, a statue sculpted from schist and dated between the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. Hailing from relatively early in the development of the religion and created at the geographic intersection between Greek influences and early Indian Buddhism, the sculpture exhibits directness in its realism

and vigor in its rendering. The icon's form and features reveal elements of traditional Asian and classical European cultures, incidentally aligning it with the situation of the Hong Kong artist, whose city lies across major trade routes between Asia and the world.

A number of triggers helped this sense of alignment cohere: the artist's personal experience of Japan and exposure to the serenity of its Buddhist temples; the muscularity of *Shūkongōjin* (Japanese temple guardians, believed by many to be taken from Hellenistic sculptural representations of the demigod Herakles) installed on either side of temple entrance gates; the political energies flowing through Hong Kong during its 2014 Occupy Central movement; as well as continued global tensions between peoples, religions and classes that result in extreme violence, as witnessed in the assassinations of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists in Paris earlier this year. The convergence of these experiences compelled the artist to wield his pen in radically more engaged ways.

Wai's new group of drawings began with nine works in the series "Gandhara Buddha Studies" (2015–), which led to three other works in the "Dauntlessly – Charlie Buddha" series (2015–). In these drawings, Wai's line, jagged but rhythmic as it is, evokes the stone carving's silhouette. One might perceive a strange mix of emotion and detachment hovering like a cloud around an aged Buddha, bitten by experience, whose contours have been chiseled and damaged by time, and whose pained features seem to express the inner emotions he suffered in attaining nirvana. Compared to the expression of its Gandharan inspiration, the lips of Wai's Buddha seem to have lost their rhythmic perfection. Pain or doubt now covers the eyes, though one might also detect a heroic resolve in their gaze. The very form of its cheeks is twisted by adversity.

The artist wishes to remind us that the Buddha did not wholly escape from attachment to the world, but that he carries within himself "threefold knowledge" or, in Sanskrit, *trividya* in early Buddhist thinking: the memory of his own history, and the knowledge and experience of cruelty, suffering, cheating, exploitation and all the mud that clings to man in his progress. Yet the message remains: despite all the sufferings of the world, the Buddha's

endurance, his determination to find truth and his faith in right actions will prevail.

Though these new works are representational, they are not about representation. Neither is the artist attempting to portray Buddha nor Buddhist iconography; rather, he is celebrating the spirit behind the object that he draws. As the literati of ancient China retreated into the landscape, physically and metaphorically, so thoughtful artists of the present time counterbalance the pressures of war and social conflict by seeking solace in the spiritual. For Wai, whose past work successfully projects a sense of both natural order and harmonious chaos, and whose previous intensely concentrated line drawings used forms of Chinese calligraphy derived from Buddhist sutras, a Buddhist vehicle suits this search well.

Realities intrude and histories are remembered through the artist's expressions of the Buddhist icon. To the global wave of faith-based acts of terror, Wai responds with works such as *Dauntlessly – Charlie Buddha 1* and *2*, in which he adorns the Buddha's hands with modern instruments, such as the pencil or the brush. They serve as modern equivalents to the medicine jar (often found in the left hand of the Japanese Buddhist deities such as Yakushi, the God of Healing) for curing the ills of ignorance (alluded to by the blood-dripping "Charlie Hebdo" text in the Buddha's right hand) and helping to foster tolerance.

Assassination is the opposite of the Buddhist doctrine of "letting go." It deploys pride, righteousness and a conviction of one's own closeness to God to avenge a small wickedness—in the case of *Charlie Hebdo*, the cruelty of satirical language and drawing—to achieve far greater wickedness: the destruction of families and lives, and an assault on freedom of expression. In reaction, the artist asks how a society that seeks progress through dialectical exchange and a willingness to be questioned should deal with a violent repudiation of this endeavor. His answer is that one fights ignorance by dauntlessly seeking the truth through honest questioning, and by confronting one's false attachments, through the medium of art and creative discourse.

By extending his Buddha-inspired works beyond the faith-based iconography of classical Buddhist art, Wai shows us the world as it is and acknowledges—indeed emphasizes—the difficulty of achieving



WAI PONGYU, *Dauntlessly – Charlie Buddha 2*, 2015, ballpoint pen on paper, 100 x 61 cm. Courtesy Grotto Fine Art, Hong Kong.

nirvana. The journey to enlightenment calls for great strength to resist the temptations of attachment—to self, to tribe, or to cult—if we are to find understanding. Viewers of these works must themselves abandon attachment to conventional presentations of the Buddha, which often point at states of post-enlightenment, but tell us nothing of the arduous route traversed to get there.

In asking whether Wai's representations may offend a proper treatment of the Buddha's image, one might also usefully recall that early Buddhism was likely aniconic and did not use Buddha images as icons for ritual, worship or meditation. So to specifically describe how one must represent the Buddha—to define the Buddha's presumed likeness at a specific point in his life, whether painted or sculpted—contradicts both early Buddhist practice and the continuing need to abandon attachment, including to images of the Buddha himself.

Perceptively, an ancient text from 746 CE, found on the pedestal of Amitābha Buddha of the Tang dynasty and now in Berlin's Museum für Asiatische Kunst, declares:

As a matter of general principle, while highest truth is devoid of any image, without images there would be nothing

to make visible its truth; and while highest principle is devoid of all words, how, without words, would its principle be made known?

Wai agrees the Buddha must carry within himself the memories of all his pasts. The artist has also said he perceives an elasticity between image and imagination. The closer a rendering approaches perfection, the less it calls on our imagination. The more ill-defined the "perfection," the more our own awareness is tested. It is in a similar way that Zen Buddhist koans drive true understanding. It is a role of art to assist this imaginative process.

Wai's "Dauntlessly – Charlie Buddha" series seeks in the social-moral world the equivalent of what the works in his "A Moment of Truth" series seek in the natural world: in the latter, the artist draws together marbles, nerves, ice, tree bark, exploding mud bubbles, blood vessels, muscles, anglerfish, deep-sea squid and a barnacled humpback whale, so that our perception of the actual contradictions between these entities—in time, dimension, perspective and space—can be dissolved. Essential unity supplants conflict. Similarly, by lifting up and making visible, in a framework normally defined by pure compassion and understanding, the most negative social and moral emotions, the artist heightens our awareness that, as Buddhist doctrine asserts, all is One: light cannot exist without dark, good without evil. These are painful truths we must acknowledge. The Buddha, *Charlie Hebdo*, the blood spilled over the publication's tragic incident and our feelings of anger toward it, and perhaps even the forces of alienation that led the perpetrators to the murders, are all unified within the frame of Wai's artwork. His "Dauntlessly – Charlie Buddha" works are thus politically engaged, progressive and generous in spirit.

If an artist's role is to provoke our thinking and lead our understanding forward, Wai Pongyu's latest works succeed both in traditional and in avant-garde terms. Through his imagery, he reminds us that the journey to enlightenment is hard and long, and only few will achieve it. Therefore, as citizens, artists or scholars fighting for justice, truth or enlightenment, we could emulate the Buddha through his many ages and rebirths, and remain dauntless when we confront that harsh reality, despite apparently insurmountable obstacles.