

APR 29 2011

INDIA CHINA

# LOST IN TRANSLATION, ALMOST

BY HEMANT SAREEN



Illustration by Alis Atwell for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

On March 28, 2011, the staff of Volte, a two-year-old gallery located in Mumbai's tony Colaba district, had an unfortunate rite of passage. According to the gallery's liaison officer Pia Goswamy, one week before the gallery was to finish its well-received show of contemporary Tibetan artists, "Beyond the Mandala," two men began railing against the alleged disrespect that Tenzing Rigdol's *Bollywood Buddha* (2011) showed toward the Buddha. Hindus revere the Buddha as one of the ten avatars of Vishnu, of the Hindu holy trinity of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the protector) and Shiva (the destroyer).

The Shiv sainiks (activists) called in the police from the nearby Colaba police station, and summoned a large crowd variously reported to be between 35 to 50 men including the sainiks and even some followers

of Baba Saheb Ambedkar, an icon amongst the low caste Indians and the Buddhists. The protestors tried to remove Rigdol's painting from the wall with an intention to destroy it. However, Volte's director Tushar Jiwrajika and Goswamy managed to intervene and carry the work to a safe place in the gallery. Jiwrajika even handed a stamped apology to the protestors after which they left, though small groups of agitators, including Buddhist monks, continued to protest outside the by then locked gallery.

The show, organized jointly with the London-based gallery Rossi & Rossi, featured both diaspora Tibetan artists—the New York-based Tenzing Rigdol, Tsherin Sherpa and Palden Weinreb—as well as the Lhasa-based Gade. All of their work either builds upon or alludes to traditional Tibetan art. In particular their work references mandalas, imaginary maps of the cosmos, and thangka, scrolls depicting the life and teachings of the bodhisattvas, human beings who have attained nirvana.

What drew the protestors' attention to the Bollywood Buddha was a staid and informative review with the ill-judged, racy title, "What's Bebo Doing on Buddha's Chin," in a local English-language newspaper, picked up by Saamana, a mouthpiece publication of Shiv Sena, whose clippings the protestors were waving. The title referred to Rigdol's use of images of movie actors and actresses clipped from magazines to fill the Buddha's face and torso—among them the glamorous star Kareena Kapoor, often referred endearingly as "Bebo" in Mumbai's film industry—complete with a collaged halo made of maps of cities home to Tibetan populations. Kapoor's image happens to be placed where the Buddha's chin would be. While the artist meant to convey Buddha's generosity and universalism, his work was opportunistically misconstrued as an affront by local right-wing politicians.

Jiwrajika maintains that he withdrew the work from the exhibition as a statement against the violent and illegal protest, and that his primary concern was the safety of the gallery staff and the artwork. Gallerist Fabio Rossi, of Rossi & Rossi, shares this sentiment, and told ArtAsiaPacific that in spite of this incident he does not plan to limit the kinds of art he will send to India in the future, adding, "I believe art can in fact help break taboos and stimulate conversations about important issues. India is after all the largest democracy on the planet." Rigdol himself responded quickly with an apology, explaining the work in the light of the Tibetan plight and extended his "good-willed hand" towards the agitators as a fellow "activist . . . in the hope to work with all of you on [our] shared concerns."

Disappointingly, the incident received little coverage in India's national broadsheets. This cautious omission might have been their attempt to prevent sections of the vernacular media that thrive on sensationalism from further distorting the story and feeding rumor mills.

Nevertheless, this regressive episode still has some cause for optimism. This incident did not evoke the kind of terror that was stoked with the repeated, organized attacks that Hindu extremists made on the Indian modernist MF Husain in 2006, in response to his paintings of nude Hindu deities. The reason for this is not simply that Husain, a high-profile Muslim figure, was an easier target for the Hindu hardliners, but the fact that the art world, the public and the media have wized to the matrix of self-interests within which the outraged parties operate.

Even so, Volte is considering installing surveillance cameras and a lock and doorbell for the gallery. The incident also highlighted the need for the Indian art galleries and curators to be more vigilant and assess in advance the nature and the degree of outrage a work of art could instigate. Volte's rapid and tactful handling of the incident suggests that these painful lessons are already been internalized by the Indian art world.

[Back to News](#)

[Tools](#)

---

[| More](#)

© 2011 ArtAsiaPacific

[Credits](#)

[Log In](#)

ArtAsiaPacific

245 8th Avenue #247

New York, NY 10011

[info@aapmag.com](mailto:info@aapmag.com)

