



"Few people know the modern art of Tibet. It is like a strange creature, growing without preparation," wrote Tibetan artist Gade in a brochure for the GedunChoephel Artists' Guild, formed in 2003 to exhibit the works of artists from Tibet.

Even as Gade's words went to print, contemporary Tibetan art was beginning to step out of obscurity: not only did the artist-led guild help create awareness about contemporary Tibetan art, but museums and galleries in China, the USA and Europe have since organised shows for artists living within and outside the region. Last year, contemporary Tibetan art was the focus of two major exhibitions – Tradition Transformed: Tibetan Artists Respond at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York and Scorching Sun of Tibet at the Songzhuang Art Center in Beijing.

This fortnight, Volte showcases four Tibetan artists – Gade, TenzingRigdol, Tsherin Sherpa and PaldenWeinreb – in Beyond the Mandala – Contemporary Art from Tibet. The show, the first of its kind in India, is supported by London gallery Rossi Rossi, which promotes traditional and contemporary Tibetan art. Though Beyond the Mandala doesn't have the scope of a survey show, it provides a glimpse into the growing field of contemporary Tibetan art. Unlike traditional works, these don't follow the rules prescribed in Buddhist scriptures. They don't serve a religious function but highlight the experiences of the artists.

Most new Tibetan art, like the works featured in Beyond the Mandala, focuses on issues of cultural identity and change. Though not all artists have learnt traditional techniques, many contemporary Tibetan artists – including Gade, Rigdol and Sherpa – use traditional imagery with a modern twist.

Gade, the only artist featured in the show who is still living in Tibet, studied socialist realist painting in Beijing. His art reflects the impact of the Chinese occupation of Tibet as well as globalisation on Tibetan identity. "My generation grew up with thangka painting, Hollywood movies, Mickey Mouse and rock 'n' roll," said Gade in a 2007 interview published in the community journal Tibet Writes. These influences are evident in Gade's Black Scripture, a painting that tweaks traditional imagery such as Yab-Yum, or the union of the male and the female. In Gade's version, the male deities are clothed in army camouflage and the female deities wear red high heels. In the rest of the work, Buddha wears a military shirt, Ronald McDonald sports a morbid grin and Mickey Mouse reveals his red fangs.

Where 40-year-old Gade attempts to capture the complex identity of Tibetans living in their homeland, 28-year-old Rigdol interprets the shock of being an immigrant in My Exilic Experience. In the work, stylised footprints, which are traditionally used to represent the Buddha, contain subway maps. "I was very nervous when my uncle taught me to navigate New York's subway system," said Rigdol, who moved to America in 1999, and has studied both traditional and Western art. "The map questions my journey as a Tibetan living away from his occupied country," he added.

The work of two artists in particular showcases the different approaches taken in engaging with issues of identity. Sherpa, who was a thangka artist in the 1980s and '90s, is principally concerned with what Buddhism means to Tibetans. In one of his untitled works, hands in various mudras emerge out of a Buddha's head, suggestive of anémigré's struggles with communication.

Weinreb, who was born and raised in New York, has no training in traditional art and is among the few Tibetan artists to have broken out of the mould of Buddhist art. He creates minimalistic charcoal drawings. In Weinreb's untitled work, fine lines form half a circle with a frayed edge that seems to have been torn apart, perhaps a reference to the Chinese occupation.

"A lot of Tibetan artists wrestle with the importance of having a recognisable Tibetan aesthetic," Weinreb said. "I think that artists play a role in pushing the preconceived notions of what that aesthetic is. After all, no one can really predict what we will consider Tibetan art in ten years.