

The Mind's Eye

Project Statement by Juana Clem McGhee

Over a span of 10 years, Myron and I with our daughters have enjoyed observing the Tibetan monks creating sand mandalas at Emory. It has become a wonder-filled tradition for our family, as our eyes are drawn to the exquisite beauty of their art, and as our minds are inspired by their religious devotion.

The Mind's Eye project provides a way of sharing our experiences with others, through the lens of Myron's photographic perspectives. We have sifted through thousands of photos in his archives, to select some favorite images that convey various aspects of the mandala process from distinctive points of view. It is intriguing to assemble an exhibit of photographs depicting sand mandalas, since it involves juxtaposing a relatively modern and "permanent" art form, with an ancient art form which is intended to be at least in part an expression of "impermanence."

In spring 2011, we were honored to interview one of the monks, Yeshe Palden, with translation assistance from Tibetan language instructor, Tsepa Rigzin. The conversation covering a range of topics was profoundly meaningful on a number of levels. When I asked Yeshe what he enjoyed most about the sand mandala process, he spoke with immense delight about the freedom to create mandalas here in the United States. When I asked him about the most difficult components of the work, he responded with a heavy heart about the lack of freedom of the Tibetan people in connection with their ancestral homeland. It was a poignant moment that moved me to tears, as we stood together beside the mandala table in the Carlos Museum.

It is my hope with this exhibit that viewers will come to appreciate even more the deep levels of awareness and stillness required of the artisans, monk and photographer alike, as they invite us to pause long enough to see beyond the seen to the unseen.

To view exhibits online, visit www.myron.smugmug.com/sand-mandalas
For more information, contact Juana Clem McGhee, jmcghee@emory.edu

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Photographer's Statement

by Myron McGhee

A camera's frame of vision allows me to filter through the extraneous and focus on specific elements of an experience. Observing life through a camera lens facilitates a different awareness of the moment for me and inspires a narrative of images. Contrasted with a more assertive photographic approach, my forte relies upon working quietly as witness, but rarely as orchestrator. Using a blend of candid portraiture and macro photography (images recorded in close proximity of the photographic subject), I see the ordinary and the obvious, but can more intimately engage particular aspects of the moment that are frequently overlooked. A photograph extracts a cross section of time, providing a means for the viewer to revisit a moment that has come and gone.

From an artistic perspective, both the photograph and the mandala are two dimensional representations of three dimensional objects or experiences. The photograph flattens our three dimensional reality into a fixed, two dimensional perspective. The mandala engages us with a rich symbolic array of colors, layers and textures representing a deity seated in his/her temple. As a visual artist framing the mandala's creation through a camera lens, all of my aesthetic sensibilities converge on what I see, creating an image which appeals to me and hopefully to later viewers of the image.

When I am photographing the monks and the mandala, I feel a connection of what Howard Thurman described as "the essence and authenticity in two different religious experiences." The intention of the monks' movements, the controlled pace of their breathing, their patient collaborations and silent meditations assembled together invoke an engaging and sacred space. Working in this kind of space, has raised the consciousness of how I move, how my breathing is held still or how I must pause or respond quickly to capture a quintessential moment. While photographing these mystical arts of Tibet never equates with what is often characterized as religious experience, creating a narrative with images in such an intentional, meditative space gives rise to my own authentic voice, renews a sense of self and extends the dialogue with Creation's call.

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Mandala Statement from *Mystical Arts of Tibet*

From all the artistic traditions of Tantric Buddhism, that of painting with colored sand ranks as one of the most unique and exquisite. In Tibetan, this art is called *dul-tson-kyil-khor*, which literally means “mandala of colored powders.” Millions of grains of sand are painstakingly laid into place on a flat platform over a period of days or weeks.

Formed of a traditional prescribed iconography that includes geometric shapes and a multitude of ancient spiritual symbols, the sand-painted mandala is used as a tool for re-consecrating the earth and its inhabitants.

The lamas begin the work by drawing an outline of the mandala on the wooden platform, which requires the remainder of the day. The following days see the laying of the colored sands, which is effected by pouring the sand from traditional metal funnels called *chak-pur*. Each monk holds a *chak-pur* in one hand, while running a metal rod, called a *thur-ma*, on its grated surface; the vibration causes the sands to flow like liquid.

Traditionally most sand mandalas are destroyed shortly after their completion. This is done as a metaphor of the impermanence of life. The sands are swept up and placed in an urn; to fulfill the function of healing, half is distributed to the audience at the closing ceremony, while the remainder is carried to a nearby body of water, where it is deposited. The waters then carry the healing blessing to the ocean, and from there it spreads throughout the world for planetary healing.

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