GREGORY P.A. LEVINE

Buddha Rush

A story of art and its consequences

In August 2005, the artist Casey O'Connor placed hundreds of small, porcelain objects cast in the shape of the Buddha's head into the American River near the town of Colfax, in Placer County (fig. 1). O'Connor, a professor of art at Sierra College in nearby Rocklin, could not have fully anticipated the consequences of his act, which grew into the "Legend of the Colfax Buddha Heads, "and brought questions of the found object, landscape, and creative intervention together with remarkable ease. It also set in motion events that ricocheted off California histories of the Gold Rush, the Central Pacific Railroad, and immigration, rebounded into modern-contemporary understandings of Buddhism and multireligious society, and collided with enduring gold fever. Colfax was not the same afterward. In smaller ways, the events may have altered art and Buddhism. As the legend grew, California began to seem strange in a new way. The state can still surprise its populace and confirm its wider reputation for the peculiar, even far-out.

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Figure 1. O'Connor's porcelain Buddha Heads. Collection of Jim Weber, San Francisco. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR.

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Buddhas in the river

In general, the American River is not a place where most people expect to meet the Buddha, and therein lies part of the legend's genesis and appeal. Rivers, after all, are as unpredictable as they are bountiful, offering the unforeseen and inspiring the imagination. Entering their currents, though, can be risky.

I first spoke with O'Connor about his Buddha heads in late spring 2010. After driving up Interstate Highway 80 from Berkeley to his home in Sacramento, I sat with the artist beneath the persimmon tree that shades his backyard. As early summer heat set in for the day, O'Connor recalled the now half-decade-old events. As he spoke, his expression seemed to shift between mirth, satisfaction, perplexity, regret, and awe. Then there was his confession: "I was naïve," he said, "I didn't consider gold fever."

While living in Colfax in 2005, O'Connor explained, he had cast hundreds of half-dollar and quarter-sized Buddha heads from plaster molds he created from figurines purchased in Chinatowns in Seattle and Los Angeles (fig. 2, fig. 3). He fired the porcelain heads, unglazed for the most part, in an electric kiln. He also made some shell-shaped forms, but the Buddhas were the main work.

Figure 3. O'Connor in his studio filling molds with liquid clay to cast Buddha heads, Sacramento, 2010. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR.

Figure 2. One of two prototype heads used by O'Connor to make plaster molds to cast his Buddha heads. O'Connor studio, Sacramento, 2010. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR.

Then, on an especially hot afternoon that August, O'Connor took a bucket full of Buddha heads with him to the American River. Donning mask, snorkel, and fins, he swam into the river and "sifted them," as he put it, into the leisurely current, dispersing them "methodically." O'Connor told me that he tended to get bored swimming, and the heads would be like coins tossed into a pool—something to dive for. Then he acknowledged another motive. What would it be like for other swimmers and those rafting down the river to glimpse something on the bottom that caught the light differently from rock and sand, something that did not make immediate sense in its surroundings? Imagine diving into the water, he said, then surfacing with the glistening head of a Buddha in one's hands: "Hey, look what I found!" followed quickly by "What's this doing here?" O'Connor admitted that he had wanted to "pleasantly freak out" the tourists who stop off at the American River en route to and from the Bay Area and Lake Tahoe. He had wanted an audience. And he had sought to send his audience home wondering what

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the Buddha was doing in the river near Colfax. Intervene in the landscape, O’Connor seemed to suggest, and the mind will follow—or at least head off in a new direction.

I came late to the Colfax story, but the Buddha heads and the picaresque aspects of their story were too fascinating to ignore. How, I wondered, do O’Connor’s Buddha heads fit into California history, landscape, and contemporary art? Might the Colfax legend reveal something unexpected about contemporary Buddhism and Buddhist imagery?

O’Connor’s outwardly odd and potentially illegal act (in strict terms he was littering) was not without precedent in a general sense. Portraits of Caligula and other out-of-favor Roman emperors were tossed into the Tiber. In ancient Japan, a statue of the Buddha blamed for a plague was thrown into a canal. In 1991, during the Chechen Independence movement, Grozny’s statue of Lenin was toppled, dragged through the streets, and dumped in the Sunzha River. Historically, statues of the powerful and prominent, as well as living bodies and corpses, have often ended up in waterways as acts of punishment, purification, iconoclasm, and revolution. None of these incidents or objectives directly motivated O’Connor’s behavior, I sensed, and the sculpture at issue was diminutive, in comparison, and placed in the river by the artist himself. This was not iconoclasm or revolution. Was it art? Was it Buddhist art? Was it merely a stunt?

California is not without its share of places where one chances upon strange objects and where unexpected things are unearthed or washed ashore. There is the usual beachcomber stuff, the Ice Age plants and animals mired in the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles, and the sixteenth-century Chinese export porcelain dishes excavated at Drake’s Bay north of San Francisco. Native American artifacts—potsherds, arrowheads, grinding stones, and occasionally human remains—turn up all across the state. We await the arrival of debris floating across the Pacific Ocean following the devastating 11 March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Northeastern Japan. Californians are familiar with street, guerrilla, and landscape artists whose work has altered, lyrically and jarringly, urban and rural spaces and has sometimes shifted social, ecological, and political consciousness. Buddhism, too, is familiar in California, not merely in Beat, new age, and commercialized forms but in the state’s many Buddhist religious communities, both of Asian heritage and converts. In Sacramento and the surrounding counties, there are several dozen Buddhist temples, churches, and meditation centers.

Above the fog, below the snow

Colfax straddles Highway 80 twelve miles northeast of Auburn, the county seat. At an elevation of 2,400 feet, the town is, its official website boasts, “Above the Fog” that shrouds the Bay Area and “Below the Snow” that can close off the Sierras. It was originally a work camp established by the Central Pacific Railroad Company in 1865 as rail was laid eastward, eventually crossing Donner Pass three years later. Today, Amtrak’s California Zephyr line stops at a new Colfax station, while its Colonnade-style 1905 Passenger Depot, restored and listed in the National Registry of Historic Places, houses a visitor’s center and museum. Local history draws heavily upon the railroad as well as the town’s location in Gold Country, north of Sutter’s Mill, where a rich find in 1848 drew thousands of modern Argonauts to the state. On North Main Street in Colfax, there’s an old iron water cannon, or “Monitor,” the tool of choice for the industrial mining that blasted away large portions of the canyons, banks, and beds of the American River, irrevocably altering its hydrology and ecology.

Born in the High Sierra, the American River’s North Fork is a mile or so east of town. In spring it surges with snowmelt toward the Pacific Ocean. During the summer months, it slows to a saunter. As one descends into the river canyon on the Iowa Hill Road, swinging along switchbacks and surrounded by conifer, Live Oak, Pacific Madrone, and chaparral, the hillsides fall steeply in places into sharply carved ravines. When the road reaches the river it crosses a modern concrete bridge alongside an old iron and plank bridge that is now a picturesque walkway. On the river’s east side, at the northern boundary of the Auburn State

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Figure 4. North Fork of the American River, adjacent to the Mineral Bar Campsite, with the Cape Horn promontory above. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR.

Recreation Area, is the Mineral Bar Campground. This is the point in the river where O'Connor deposited his Buddha heads. (fig. 4).

Favored today for canyon hiking, rafting, kayaking, and swimming, this stretch of the American River has been a much older home to Native American communities, who were followed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by Sonorans, Europeans, freed African slaves, and trans-Pacific immigrants. For all its resources and beauty, nineteenth-century Placer County became a landscape of occupation, racist violence, and fear: a place scarred by the genocide of native peoples by white colonizers, exploitation of immigrant labor in railroad construction, and forcible expulsion of Chinese immigrants and their families in the 1870s and 1880s. Then, during World War II, Japanese immigrants and Japanese American citizens, who had settled in the county as farmers and merchants from the turn of the century, were forced into concentration camps.

This dark underside of Colfax history seems strangely at odds with its susceptibility to legend and miracle.

Northeast of town is Cape Horn, a rocky promontory and registered historical landmark. The tracks of the Central Pacific Railroad negotiate the bluff, which offers a panoramic view of the canyon below. Cape Horn has long been associated with stories of heroic Chinese laborers suspended down a sheer cliff face in shaky bosun's chairs to drill slots for the powder charges that blasted away rock to create a shelf for the rails. Chinese labor and sacrifice for the railroad were real, but the historian Edson Strobridge (a descendent of James H. Strobridge, who supervised work at Cape Horn) has discounted the bosun's-chair stories as, he writes, "a jungle of pseudo-historical flimflam" fabricated by the railroad company in the early twentieth century as an advertising strategy.

In November 1990, sunlight passing through a lamp hanging inside Colfax's St. Dominic's Catholic Church cast an image above the altar that some viewers believed was an apparition of the Virgin Mary. Until Bishop Francis Quinn of the Sacramento Archdiocese deemed this occurrence a natural phenomenon, it attracted pilgrims and the media in droves. The discovery of Buddha heads in the American River in August 2005 suggested another miracle of sorts, albeit one that attracted different pilgrims.

No one witnessed O'Connor dispersing his artworks into the river. Within a week, however, a local resident and part-time prospector, Herman Henry, made a startling find. Not precious metal, but hundreds of porcelain Buddha heads. He brought a sample to Jim Bowers, then the proprietor of Colfax's Better Than Naked T-Shirt and Gift Shop. When I interviewed Bowers in July 2010, he had already sold his business; we met instead at Evangeline's Café on Depot Street. Bowers brought along some of the Buddha heads he'd purchased from Henry or bartered for gold-laced quartz from his own prospecting. In 2005, Bowers had set to work identifying the heads, contacting the local press and posting queries online. As theories came in, he tested each as far as it would go. At one point he found himself reading a website devoted to alien visitations. The site's owner provided Bowers with a detailed explanation of how the Buddha heads had been deposited by spaceships.

Despite the efforts of Bowers and others, the mystery proved remarkably stubborn. What were these objects? Where had they come from? Who had made them and when? What did their sudden, abundant appearance in the American River mean? Had Henry struck it rich? In an effort to determine their provenance, Bowers and others debated whether their facial features were Chinese, Japanese, Cambodian, or Thai. There was one especially promising theory, namely, that the Buddha heads had washed into the river from the remains of a railroad work camp used by Chinese laborers, perhaps in "Robber's Ravine" below Cape Horn. This would make them nineteenth-century Chinese religious objects or, as some speculated, tokens for the Chinese gambling game Fantan. If true, this would surely establish them as important artifacts of California and Asian American history. They might also be valuable antiques. As speculation grew, reporters from the *Colfax Record*, *Sacramento Bee*, and other newspapers began

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Events took a serious turn.

to interview Bowers, Henry, and other residents. Local television affiliates sent their own reporters and picked up the story. Colfax found itself in the middle of a Buddha rush.

Bowers and others in town began to view the discovery as another remarkable episode in Colfax history, one that might renew tourist interest and generate local business revenue. Some envisioned personal monetary gain as the Buddha heads moved into circulation. Henry continued to sell and barter his find (Bowers told me that the prospector had traded one of the larger Buddha heads for a twelve-pack of beer at the Colfax Market). Bowers sold some of the heads he had acquired from Henry; thanks to the Internet, word spread beyond the town and region. According to Bowers, an East Coast collector apparently gave Henry a deposit of several thousand dollars to put a hold on what remained of his find. Henry believed he was "gonna make a million dollars," Bowers said. Unfortunately for Henry, and other residents now holding heads, the collector turned out to be a fraud.

The whistleblower

Events then took a serious turn, one with personal impact and legal implications. Near Colfax, the river and watershed are partly under the jurisdiction of the California State Parks Department and the US Bureau of Land Management. Russell Towle, a self-taught mathematician and computer animator, as well as environmentalist and local expert on the North Fork area, tipped off the agencies to Henry's discovery. Towle believed that the Buddha heads were protected artifacts that the prospector had removed illegally. (Bowers told me that after Towle was tragically killed in a vehicular accident in 2008, he had wondered if Towle's death was due to bad karma resulting from his having contacted the authorities.) County sheriff's deputies and BLM agents then raided Henry's trailer looking for the prospector and the Buddha heads. Henry had made himself scarce, but the State Park Ranger Donna Turner, interviewed by Patti Lee of CBS affiliate Channel 13, had questions for the prospector: "Where [had] he found them? Were they in the park? Did he know that by taking them out of the park, it was a crime?" Turner found it hard to believe that there were "500 of them laying in the middle of the river."

Despite a thorough search, the deputies and agents failed to find anything in Henry's trailer (Bowers told me that the prospector had buried his horde). The authorities located Henry, but unable to present evidence of his violation of the Federal Antiquities Act, they arrested him instead for illegal firearm possession and a suspended license, and transported him to the Auburn County Jail. They also raided Bowers's shop and confiscated his collection of Buddha heads. Bowers complained to CBS that his civil rights had been violated. In response, Turner informed *The Union* reporter Dave Moeller, "It's likely they will be returned to Bowers if they are not stolen and if he did not loot a Chinese dig site." Bail for Henry, Kerana Todorov reported in the *Colfax Record*, was set at $9,500.

Law-and-order sensation aside, these events suggest a perceptual shift from marvel over out-of-place and potentially marketable curiosities to legal jurisdiction over objects that were quickly acquiring specific identity, history, and cultural value. The authorities appear to have concluded all too quickly that the Buddha heads were nineteenth-century Chinese artifacts found on public land and thus subject to laws against artifact removal and cultural heritage policy. Concern over looting is entirely understandable, given the lucrative market for Native American artifacts removed illegally from sacred sites and public lands. Nevertheless, as Blaire Anthony Robertson reported in the *Sacramento Bee,* the BLM—subjecting the Buddha heads to forensic study—was unable to determine their true status as antiquities or anything else.

Then, like a gold claim that quickly bottoms out, the mystery abruptly ended. One day in early March 2006, Bowers was in his shop when he received a call from, as he put it, a "local sheriff buddy." The deputy told him that there was a professor at Sierra College who could tell Bowers about the heads. Bowers phoned the college and reached O'Connor. Bowers asked the professor five questions that would reveal if he had produced and deposited the heads. O'Connor answered them all "right on," Bowers said, proving he was the "Real McCoy." Bowers had come to the end of the whodunit. These small but enthralling objects were not antiques, religious artifacts, gambling tokens from Asia, or owned by Chinese immigrants in America,

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but the work of a local, Caucasian art professor. They were contemporary art.

The resolution exhilarated Bowers. His months of research had paid off, albeit in unanticipated ways. He was "happy that the legend had put Colfax on the map," he said, although he acknowledged that some residents were left with a bad taste in the mouth, particularly toward O'Connor. Helen Wayland, archivist at the Colfax Area Historical Society, told the *Sacramento Bee*'s Robertson: "I have no respect for [O'Connor] whatsoever. I think he set out to make a splash. He knew they would be found. He's not dumb. He should be ashamed of himself. He was playing with history and the stories of that area. It's an insult to the Chinese who were there." Bowers was not so quick to criticize the artist. On the discussion page of the California Pacific Railroad Photography Museum website, he opined that "The only people that deserve any blame (or shame) in all of this are the Feds and State for treating me like a criminal when I was very public about my attempt to protect the find if in fact they were historic (and they tore Henry's home apart more than once looking for Buddhas)." There were some with whom I spoke, in Colfax, the Bay Area, and beyond, who considered O'Connor's act brilliant and fully in the spirit of nonsanctioned art installations and the Earthworks art movement.

Some who took offense at O'Connor's act got their gripes in print and on the evening news, but they were complaints primarily about stunt, hoax, and fraud. Reviewing the coverage years later, it is notable that the various articles and segments did not incorporate comment from Buddhist teachers and practicing Buddhists in the Sacramento and Placer County region. Did devout Buddhists take offense, respond with amusement, or react in ways we might not expect? Perhaps O'Connor's somewhat unformed rhetoric and the narrow reporting tell us something about California's under-acknowledged histories and multireligious communities.

Clearly, O'Connor's Buddha heads and their installation could mean different things to different people. Others were surprised by the local commotion and strong emotions provoked by tiny heads of the Buddha. After all, isn't the Buddha's presence supposed to be calming, about equanimity? Isn't Buddhism a religion of nonattachment? Were there, I wondered, important backstories hidden behind the sensationalism of the discovery and the ensuing furor?

Isn't Buddhism a religion of nonattachment?

The artist and his Buddhas

When O'Connor, now in his late forties, was hired to teach ceramic art at Sierra College, he moved to Colfax from San Pedro, south of Los Angeles, and commuted to the Rocklin campus. Colleagues wondered why he chose to live in Colfax rather than Sacramento, where many faculty members reside. To O'Connor the capital seemed initially "like an amoeba," and he found it beautiful living among the trees of the Sierra foothills. He had little interaction with folks in Colfax, but he didn't feel like an outsider. At the time he was preparing work to exhibit in a gallery in Los Angeles—porcelain baby heads. When I visited O'Connor in Sacramento, several of these heads were displayed in his studio, which he shares with the sculptor Elisabeth Higgins O'Connor. Somewhat smaller than life-size, and hollow, the baby heads have bone-white, immaculately smooth faces set in varied expressions. Each wears a different hat, which O'Connor created by saturating actual knit caps with porcelain and then firing them, producing a startlingly naturalistic ceramic fabric. The baby head idea had come to him, he said, from an after-school job many years earlier in a doll factory in upstate New York. When the baby head project lost momentum, however, he looked around for new ideas. "I was in Chinatown," he said, "and they had these little figurines that they sell. I'll cast that and stick them on [the baby heads]. Maybe I'll sell a few of these baby heads as Buddhas." O'Connor's Buddha heads began, therefore, with curios he had purchased as a tourist in Chinese American ethnic enclaves, objects that were neither ancient artifacts nor recently made religious images. Casting the Buddha heads, O'Connor added, has been "like background noise," a distraction from other projects.

I asked him what drew him to the Buddha in the first place, and why he had cast only the head. Buddhist communities, I mentioned, rarely made religious images that comprise only the Buddha's head. He quickly replied, "Buddha heads are huge right now, they've always been huge," as in hugely popular. The Buddha heads, focusing attention on the face, appealed to O'Connor, but behind their fragmentary forms, he knew, was the modern

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history of looting heads and other body parts from sacred statuary in Buddhist sites across Asia. He described how years earlier, during a visit to the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, he had realized that the torso-less heads displayed in museums had "been jacked and busted, then jammed into a backpack and stolen." As a subject for creative work, the Buddha head was therefore not without certain liabilities.

The Buddha, I soon learned, had other genealogies in O'Connor's experience. In Southern California, where he spent part of his youth, there were Asian American Buddhist families in his neighborhood and Buddhist temples nearby. He had also been a fan of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, published in German in 1922 and translated into English in 1951. O'Connor was unable to recall when he first read the novella, but he has reread it every few years because, as he put it, "There's still stuff there for me." He is uncertain how Hesse's book has come to be viewed, although he suspects that it has come under criticism for its representation of Buddhism and South Asia; but "for a California, white, suburban surfer," he admitted, recalling his first encounter with the story, "it was all I could handle. And you know, it got me there. The river, the love with Kamala, the fasting."

O'Connor is not alone. Hesse's *bildungsroman* appears to have gotten many readers "there," with its story of indulgence, love, loss, asceticism, and, ultimately, awakening to the teachings of the Buddha. What especially captivated O'Connor was Hesse's description of the face of the novella's protagonist upon attaining awakening: a "mask-like smile, this smile of unity over the flowing forms, this smile of simultaneousness over the thousands of births and deaths—this smile of Siddhartha—was exactly the same as the calm, delicate, impenetrable, perhaps gracious, perhaps mocking, wise, thousand-fold smile of Gotama, the Buddha."

Buddhamania

O'Connor's enthusiasm for *Siddhartha* was part of the "Hessemania" that erupted in the 1960s and 1970s. There was "Saint Hesse among the Hippies," as the Hesse scholar Theodore Ziolkowski put it in 1969. Before that, in 1963, was Timothy Leary and Ralph Metzner's encomium, "Hermann Hesse: Poet of the Interior Journey," published in *The Psychedelic Review*. Leary and Metzner exclaimed, "Hesse is the master guide to the psychedelic experience and its application. Before your LSD session, read [his novels] *Siddhartha* and *Steppenwolf*." They, too, focused on Hesse's portrayal of the Buddha's facial expression, which, they suggested, could equally describe the expression of someone having a good LSD trip.

Hesse, Leary, and Metzner were by no means the first or last modern writers, in the West or Asia, to focus intently on the Buddha's face. From the late nineteenth century there arose among art collectors, critics, philosophers, novelists, and poets what we might call a cult of the Buddha's face, in which the Buddha's features were associated with particular spiritual and psychological states and the exotic Orient. By the mid-twentieth century, the heads of Buddha and Bodhisattva statues could be found not only in the salons of the wealthy and the galleries of public museums but also among household furnishings of the middle class, a trend that continues today, with replica heads available from retailers such as Target and Crate and Barrel's CB2 and stores purveying cushions, bells, and other goods for meditation. Buddha heads turn up in many other forms—candles, pendants, earrings, on T-shirts, and as tattoos, to name a few—and this diverse consumption is propelled by what many viewers take to be the contemplative, transcendent, blissed-out, and thereby trendy features of the Buddha's face.

For some of us, it may be soothing, inspiring, or fashionable to have life-size Buddha heads in our meditation rooms or smaller heads hanging around our necks as pendants. But we may make these spiritual and lifestyle choices unaware of a not entirely happy history, one in which the Buddha's image and the term "Buddha head" have had diverging and conflict-filled significance. To begin, the substrate of much of the modern-contemporary affection for Buddha heads, as well as complete statues and paintings, is the allure of the exotic visual and cultural

The Buddha head was therefore not without certain liabilities.

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Other, which in the context of fine art collecting has spurred the ongoing looting of ancient statuary. The appeal of Buddhist imagery as it has spread in recent consumer culture, meanwhile, has sparked outcry in the academic press, mainstream media, and the blogosphere over neo-orientalism. Buddhist communities, as well as nations in which Buddhism is the official religion, have vehemently protested disrespectful use of the Buddha's form. In 2004, for instance, Buddhists in Asia and the West successfully pressured Victoria's Secret and OndadeMar to discontinue sale of their Buddha bikini and tankini, revealing swimwear with images of the Buddha printed on the breast and crotch. Buddhists were also outraged the same year by the poster for Philippe Caland's film *Hollywood Buddha* (2003), in which Caland sits atop the Buddha's head. Caland issued an apology and changed the poster design. In American culture, moreover, the term "Buddha head" itself has a particular linguistic history as a racist slur directed at Japanese Americans, as well as a derogatory label used by mainland Japanese Americans for Japanese Americans in Hawai'i. If this causes you to do a double take when looking at your own Buddha head (of whatever variety), perhaps this history has caught up with you.

Buddha transmogrified

Meanwhile, despite the global familiarity of the contemplative-faced or laughing Buddha, the West has represented the Buddha as threatening and evil. Perhaps the most famous example is *Peoples of Europe, Protect Your Holiest Possessions* (*Völker Europas wahret eure heiligsten Güter*), conceived by Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm II in 1895 and rendered by the artist and art historian Hermann Knackfuss, which depicts the Archangel Michael warning Christian Europe of the looming threat of the East (fig. 5). The angel points to a town engulfed in flames and its inhabitants presumably incinerated. The conflagration rises upward to a mass of black smoke upon which the Buddha sits astride a dragon and backlit by fire. This juggernaut bears down upon another town, tranquil, unsuspecting, and punctuated with church steeples. The Buddha—modeled after the Great Buddha of Kamakura—represents Asia or more specifically Japan, whose victory during the First Sino-Japanese war that year inflamed the Kaiser's Yellow Peril paranoia.

Jump ahead to the cover of *Captain America Comics #35*, drawn by Sydney Shores and sold in February 1944 as the American military "island-hopped" across the Pacific in its campaign to reach the Japanese mainland. Using the hyperbolic conventions of golden-age comic illustration, the cover depicts the superhero and his sidekick attacking a Japanese stronghold in order to rescue white American soldiers being tortured by an "evil Jap" with buckteeth and glasses. Seated behind this racist caricature is a colossal Buddha statue with fangs, blood-red lips, and blue skin. Buddhism, the illustration suggests, is a monstrous source of Japanese militarism and barbaric fanaticism. Then there is the Korean War propaganda leaflet produced in 1952 by the Psychological Warfare Section of the United States Far East Command that presents a yellow-hued Buddha with the mustachioed face of Josef Stalin and a hammer and sickle emblazoned in red across the torso. Placed before this Stalin-Buddha are cauldrons labeled "North Korean People" that contain bloody corpses offered up to this "deity" by Kim Il Sung. This hybrid Buddha—dispersed by air over North Korea in leaflet form in the tens of thousands—is a nefarious vector of Cold War evil. What these and other pictures reveal is that the nonviolent, awakened, and feel-good Buddha might be transformed into something malevolent, to be attacked and destroyed. All Buddhas, therefore, are not Happy Buddhas.

The arc of biography

Casey O'Connor's installation of Buddha heads found points of reference not in the preceding visual imagery but in the site-based art, guerrilla art, and the art happenings of the mid-to-late twentieth century, interwoven with post-war pop-Buddhist cultures. He was somewhat taken aback by my description of the aforementioned "evil Buddhas," which, like the severed sculpted heads in the Norton Simon Museum, made a presumably familiar and harmless, if still exotic, visual form less certain and perhaps open to controversy.

As our conversation continued, however, O'Connor situated his Colfax installation within a longer arc of biography. As a child he had moved frequently with his family. Before departing the Northern California town of Lodi at the end of second grade, O'Connor made drawings on Zig Zag rolling papers, which he stuck on his neighbors'

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THE YELLOW PERIL.
(THE GERMAN VERSION.)
Drawn, in 1895, by H. Knackfuss, from a Design by His Majesty William II., German Emperor, King of Prussia.

Figure 5. Hermann Knackfuss (1848–1915), *Peoples of Europe, Protect Your Holiest Possessions* (also known as the "Yellow Peril"). Lithograph. 1895. After, Arthur Diósy, *The New Far East* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1899).

front doors for them to find after the family had driven away. Returning to Lodi in the 1990s, he visited a former neighbor who, it turned out, had kept the drawing he had left for her decades earlier. He was touched by her act, he said, and startled by the survival of his presumably ephemeral drawing. Later, he began to quietly place his ceramic work on the doorsteps of neighbors before moving on. His art also found its way into bodies of water: "I've always thrown stuff in the ocean. Newport Harbor [south of LA] has a lot of my work. It was all the stuff that was too much to carry forward. I didn't want to take it to Goodwill, although I've done that as well. In the harbor mouth there are a lot of my pots, probably with octopi living in them. 'Cause there's an octopus there that isn't found anywhere else. And when I found out that they would probably gravitate to open containers, I started dumping there."

Some of his work, he imagines, will outlive him. "Not that I dwell on death," he said, "but I'm fascinated by what happens to material things. You know, three hundred years from now." Whether or not a Buddha head will be found in Colfax that far into the future, the work of O'Connor's art often seems to begin after he has left it behind, on a doorstep, at Goodwill, in a harbor, or in a river.

Too much to carry forward, letting go, and moving on; it sounds like a pop-Buddhist vibe. But O'Connor is not a practicing Buddhist, and his comments did not suggest that Buddhism per se had motivated his Colfax project. Was it even, I wondered, a deliberate "project"? Had he planted his Buddha heads below Cape Horn to draw attention to the history of Chinese labor? Was the effect of oddity—Buddha heads in Gold Country—an effort to unsettle perceptions of the California landscape in terms of race and religion? Like

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many grade school children in California, O'Connor had been taught sanitized histories of the Gold Rush, railroads, and immigration from Asia. Later he became more aware of California's history of racially driven violence. Living in predominantly white Colfax, he had learned the stories about Cape Horn and, as he put it, "the 'nameless' Chinese laborers that lived and died up there." It was dangerous work on the bluff, he said, "pre-hydraulic, pre-plastique, pre-Gortex, pre-Hollofil, just pre-, pre-, pre-." He also had the eerie thought, he told me, that the bones of workers killed working on the railroad and buried on the bluff might be leaching minerals slowly into the river. When he cooled off in the summer current he was, he suspected, swimming with the dead.

But O'Connor demurred from linking his Buddha heads directly to the Cape Horn history or larger debates regarding ethnicity, race, and religion. He had not assumed, he told me, that the Chinese laborers were all Buddhist or necessarily Buddhist at all. He admitted instead to a looser mash-up of objects, ideas, landscape, and mischievousness. He began casting the Buddha heads after discovering Buddhist figurines in Chinatown shops, but he was not, I came to understand, crafting an explicit statement about Buddhism in America or modern-contemporary pop-Buddhist affectations. The heads were "for the tourists, the kids," he said, adding that he was merely taking advantage of the locale and interacting with the environment. Leaving the heads, he added, was partly a form of resistance against the art gallery system and the discomfiting commodification of his ceramic art. He was not, after all, selling the heads. As for the media frenzy and Henry's arrest, he observed that "you do stuff, and you don't know how it would come out." Some in Colfax would view this as opportunistic and self-indulgent, but O'Connor told Robertson of the *Sacramento Bee*, "It never crossed my mind to fool somebody."

In its own way, reporting on the Colfax episode largely eschewed inquiry into issues of race, religion, and history beyond the possibility that the Buddha heads were nineteenth-century artifacts that had come from Chinese laborers presumed to be Buddhist. It was the mystery and its sensational ending that were newsworthy. "Guy in jail. Crazy art professor," as O'Connor put it.

Bay Area Buddha-scape

After my interviews with O'Connor, Bowers, and others inland in Colfax and Sacramento, it became clear that the larger story involved the coast. It is by no means difficult in the Bay Area to find Buddha heads, including those cut from ancient statuary. One's first stop might be the San Francisco Asian Art Museum, whose galleries display a number of sculptural heads, including the large Tang-dynasty, limestone head of a Buddha looted in the early twentieth century from the Longmen grottoes in Henan Province, China. One Bay Area Artist, Scott Tsuchitani, has recently drawn attention to the modern collection of Buddha heads severed from sacred sites with his Brundage Buddha Head, a composite of the head of a Buddhist statue with that of the collector Avery Brundage (fig. 6). One can dine at restaurants whose décor conspicuously situates Buddha heads (old, fake, or of recent fabrication) under boutique lighting. It would be a tall order to count the replica heads in wood, stone, concrete, and resin that adorn Bay Area living rooms, gardens, and spas.

Contemporary artists from Asia have also contributed to the area's Buddha-scape, no more dramatically than Zhang Huan, whose colossal copper statue, *Three Heads Six Arms* (2008) was installed temporarily in front of City Hall in spring 2010 as part of a sister-city exchange with Shanghai (fig. 7). The Shanghai and New York-based Zhang, who identifies himself as Buddhist, has created a series of monumental works featuring forms of Buddhist sculpture (including *Long Island Buddha*, 2011, and, at Storm King Art Center, *Three-Legged Buddha*, 2007). Inspired partly by Zhang's encounters with fragments of Tibetan Buddhist statuary in Lhasa—religious images damaged, he notes, during the Cultural Revolution—his hulking statues evoke the multi-head, arm, and leg forms of Buddhist deities while suggesting trauma and truncation followed by abrupt conjoinment and revivification.

When he cooled off in the summer current he was, he suspected, swimming with the dead.

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Three Heads Six Arms includes a portrait of Zhang himself, and the artist's website links this interpolation to Zhang's earlier performance art in which his body was the primary and often mortified medium. The presence of Zhang's face, we read, "draws a parallel between the body of Buddhist deities and his own."

In material, scale, and singularity, *Three Heads Six Arms* would seem to be the polar opposite of O'Connor's multiple Buddha heads. Their disparity would seem all the more striking given the presence in Zhang's statue of the artist's physiognomy, his work's official installation in a site of civic power, its association with China-US bilateral relations, and its possible political subtext (Tibet under Chinese occupation). But the controversy that flared up in both cases arose from essentially the same questions: What is this thing, and what is it doing here? Kenneth Baker, writing in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, sought to make sense of the not entirely unified iconography of Zhang's statue: "It merges cultural and historical references, yet blunts specifics such as the symbolic attributes typically associated with luminaries of the Buddhist and Daoist pantheons. I see it as embodying the peculiar dilemmas of the contemporary artist anticipating an international audience, against a cultural background in which no belief system any longer appears intact." Baker may be overstating the statue's ambiguity and the disruption of belief in the global world. For other viewers, meanwhile, the identity of *Three Heads Six Arms* was entirely unambiguous: the statue was Buddhist, and it was religious art, for better or worse. Not long after Zhang's statue was inaugurated at San Francisco's Civic Center, it was marked with graffiti. The phrase that drew the most media attention was "Jesus is the one," an implicit denunciation of the statue and Buddhism. This act of fundamentalist vandalism precipitated a deluge of hyperbolic online comment in the *Chronicle*. The writer "rebel_scum" responded that tagging the statue was "akin to what the Taliban have done to Buddhist sculptures in Afghanistan—blowing them up." "Sfnative650" asked, "Why is this not being treated as a hate crime??? If it were Mohammed . . . The city would come unglued trying to find the taggers." Others were less concerned about desecration (or the work's success or failure as contemporary art) than the statue's identity as a religious image placed on public property: it violated the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. Be it O'Connor's tiny Buddha heads or Zhang's big, multiheaded Buddha, the sculpted form did not find an easy "angle of repose," to borrow from Wallace Stegner. Each collided with diverging notions of art, public space, and multireligious society. The furor that arose over the sculptural work of each artist prevented it from just being "art." Then again, when is art, especially that employing religious imagery (recall Chris Offili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* of 1999), ever a matter of being "just" anything?

Figure 6. Scott Tsuchitani, Brundage Buddha Head. Preliminary design for screenprint in hoisin sauce on corn tortilla, for collaborative performance with the Great Tortilla Conspiracy at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco on July 26, 2012.

IMAGE COURTESY OF SCOTT TSUCHITANI

Dénouement

After coming forward in the spring of 2006, O'Connor spoke with several reporters but began to feel hounded. He was also uneasy about his work as an artist becoming too closely associated with the Buddha heads. Nevertheless, I pressed him for his version of the mystery's dénouement. After Henry was arrested, O'Connor said, the incident was reported in the *Grass Valley Times*. A fellow academic at Sierra College noticed the article, got in touch with O'Connor, and observed, "Hey, aren't those your Buddha heads?" Shortly thereafter, O'Connor received a call from Sierra College's interim president, Morgan Lynn. O'Connor was instructed to come clean; Lynn gave him

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Figure 7. Zhang Huan, *Three Heads Six Arms*. 2008. Copper. 26´ 3˝ x 59´ 3/4˝ x 32´ 9-3/4.˝ Temporary installation, Joseph L. Alioto Performing Arts Piazza, Civic Center, San Francisco, 2010. Zhang Huan Studio, courtesy of Pace Gallery, New York.

PHOTO BY: BRUCE DAMONTE—COURTESY OF THE SAN FRANCISCO ARTS COMMISSION.

phone numbers for the Sheriff's office, the BLM, and the State Parks Department. Having no desire to thwart the authorities, O'Connor told me, he informed each agency that the heads were his and, yes, he had placed them in the river. The BLM agent with whom O'Connor spoke said little more than, "State your name, you made them? Okay, send us a statement." The Placer County Under-sheriff who took his call was a bit more art-minded and emotive, suggesting, "Yeah, so like Christo or something, right?," referring to Christo and Jeanne-Claude (1935–2009), whose California landscape works *Running Fence*, in Sonoma and Marin Counties (1972–1976), and *Umbrellas* (1984–1991) north of LA (and Ibaraki, Japan) garnered both admiration and notoriety. O'Connor admitted that the comparison thrilled him.

After the truth emerged, there was the possibility that O'Connor might face criminal charges. Bowers told me that Henry wanted O'Connor jailed because his stunt had led to Henry's arrest, his trailer being trashed, and his find and investment ruined. O'Connor's response was that he could appreciate Henry's feelings, but he did not feel responsible for everything that had happened. Nor did he view his act as littering. It "verges on pollution," he acknowledged, but the Buddha heads are nontoxic porcelain and their addition to the river, he observed, was far less destructive to the environment than the gold prospecting he had witnessed in California. In any case, he added, there was not much left to clean up and little material evidence in the river. In the end, O'Connor was never cited. Bowers suggested that the BLM did not really view the Buddha heads as litter. "It was art, not litter," Bowers said, but added, "still, it makes you wonder, can anyone chuck art into the river?"

Did O'Connor have regrets? Although the Buddha heads yielded him no discernable financial gain and were

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Walking and planting; the Johnny Appleseed of Buddha heads.

not intended to do so, he was surprised how quickly they created a circuit of desire and consumption. "The only time I got worried," O'Connor admitted, was when he realized "that people who were living on limited money were buying these things. That freaked me out. They were speculating. I've got a job, I'm working. And there are people with food stamps, who were expending resources for these things." Gold fever: already a part of Colfax culture, O'Connor had failed to anticipate its particular intensity in tough economic times.

O'Connor appears to have been both disconcerted by and a bit pleased with the subsequent creative endeavors sparked by his Buddha heads. Appropriating the "Got Milk?" advertising campaign created in 1993 for the California Milk Processor Board, Bowers designed and sold Buddha head T-shirts captioned "Got Buddhas?" He also sculpted a snow "Buddah" head and gave public talks about the Colfax legend. A Bay Area filmmaker, Jim Weber, who by chance overheard Bowers describe the saga in a Sacramento restaurant, made multiple trips to Colfax to interview the principals and scout locations for a documentary. Weber envisioned a short film that might be aired on PBS. It would take up the question of what constitutes art, probe the relationship between art and profit, and address the contemporary art penchant for the found object. Unfortunately, Weber's financial backing disappeared following the 2008 economic collapse. Another filmmaker, Derek Dockendorf, also got to work on a documentary. Weber told me that the idea of a film struck Colfax residents in different ways. Some felt that the story, now part of Colfax lore, was worth telling. Others worried that they might be portrayed as being duped by a big city artist or that a film would attract more unwanted outsiders to town. Others, according to Weber, imagined Hollywood-scale payouts, something neither he nor Dockendorf could offer.

Since March 2006, O'Connor has continued to cast and plant his Buddha heads, doing so in a widening geography. If his installation in the American River was somewhat naïve, "now there's intent," he told me, "now there's knowledge" of the possibility of unexpected consequences. Nevertheless, he has since "dropped Buddhas," as he puts it, on beaches in Southern California, in his neighborhood while walking his dog, and at restaurants along with his tip. In spring 2010, he "dribbled them" all over Manhattan, from Soho up to Central Park, and throughout Brooklyn. Manhattan, he observed, "just sucks everything up. Like, what *hasn't* been seen there. Especially in the arts." He left them on the street and on stoops. He pressed one head onto a wad of chewing gum stuck on the wall of a subway station. Walking and planting; the Johnny Appleseed of Buddha heads. O'Connor would probably resist being likened to a folk hero, but he continues to seed his Buddhas in unexpected places where they might germinate with discovery into surprise and perhaps realization. He did wonder, "Am I still doing it because of the media hype [around the Colfax mystery], the 'fifteen minutes,' so to speak? Do I want another hit, a lightning strike? I don't know, I guess so." Perhaps, too, the Buddha heads are for O'Connor a bit like Proust's madeleine.

Coda

Before I departed O'Connor's home in Sacramento in 2010, he filled an empty bread bag with fifty or so new Buddha heads. "Give them to your friends and students," he said, adding, "Throw some on Telegraph Avenue." When I returned to the Berkeley campus of the University of California I told my summer school class about the legend of the Colfax Buddha Heads and gave each student two heads. They were free to keep them, I said, but they might also carry forward O'Connor's intervention and "drop Buddhas." I also gave Buddha heads to friends in the Bay Area and elsewhere. Reports soon came in. One student left a head at the foot of a tree near UC Berkeley's Free Speech Café. Another placed a head at the base of a wood statue of a seated Buddha in San Francisco's Asian Art Museum. The following spring, a friend placed a head in her Buddhist household altar. Another threw a head into the River Ouse in Sussex County, Great Britain. All sorts of things and bodies have found their way into the Ouse—the river in which Virginia Woolf drowned herself. Perhaps this is the Ouse's first Buddha.

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Figure 8. Fieldwork at TEPCO Beach, Point Isabel, Richmond. Autumn, 2010. PHOTOGRAPH © ZENA KRUZICK.

Figure 9. Buddha head discovered at TEPCO Beach, Point Isabel, Richmond. Autumn, 2010. PHOTOGRAPH © ZENA KRUZICK.

It had crossed my mind to look for one of the heads that O'Connor had planted in the American River—the "original" Buddha heads that triggered the legend. When I visited the Mineral Bar campsite during the summer of 2010 the current ran high and cold after a wet winter. The clear water bent the sunlight blue upon the riverbed. There were several tents and kayaks beached on shore. Three park rangers stood alongside a pickup truck discussing the state's budget problems and the looming layoff of park personnel. After paying the day-use fee, I asked them if they were familiar with the Colfax legend and the discovery of the Buddha heads 100 yards or so from where we stood. None of them had heard the story, and all were surprised. Then they cautioned me not to venture into the river in search of remaining heads. I'd likely be swept downstream, they laughed, all the way to Folsom Lake 35 miles south.

That fall brought a surprise. UC Berkeley Professor Laurie Wilkie took her class, "Anthropology 121C: Historical Artifact Identification and Analysis," to Richmond's Point Isabel to study potsherds strewn along Tepco Beach. Named for the adjacent Technical Porcelain and China Ware Company, an industrial manufacturing factory in operation from 1918 to 1968, the beach is covered with the debris of a half-century of misfirings and kiln rejects. One student plucked a porcelain Buddha head from the millions of potsherds of dishes, cups, and saucers that cover the pebbly shoreline. The class deemed it the most valuable find of the day, but neither Wilkie nor her students knew what to make of it. (fig. 8, fig. 9).

When word of the discovery reached me, I emailed O'Connor and asked if he had dropped Buddhas at Tepco Beach. "Absolutely," he replied, adding that he been visiting the beach since his student days at the San Francisco Art

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Institute. His Buddha heads, he noted, have been "mixing with the Tepco potsherds for a few years."

At Tepco Beach, O'Connor had selected another seemingly unexpected site for his Buddha heads, but it was not altogether surprising. Some of Tepco's patterns employ imagery of transcontinental migration specific to California: the Spanish Missions, the Donner Party, and gold-digging Forty-Niners. Some are decorated with landscapes evoking China, while "chinaware" is itself, of course, a trans-Pacific traveler. Moreover, Tepco had used molds to mass-produce its decorated chinaware in huge volume (at a peak of 30,000 pieces a day). Like O'Connor's smaller Buddha heads, therefore, Tepco dishes, cups, saucers, and other pieces were all cast objects.

In late 2010, I drove the short distance from Berkeley to Tepco Beach. Sunlight reflected off the innumerable white, pink, blue, and brown porcelain fragments lying high enough from the waterline to avoid a verdant coat of algae. At quiet low tide, the waves wandered in, then drew back gently, rattling the potsherds in bright chiming tones. My eyes trained on the beach without innocence. After poking around for an hour or so, I turned over part of a saucer and saw one of O'Connor's Buddha heads. In my palm, the Buddha's features were clear, familiar: rounded cheeks, the crisp line of the nose above a closed mouth with full lips, arcing eyebrows above half-closed eyes, and raised hair curls. It had unexpected weight. Not quite the heft of a small stone, but a tangible presence that suggested it might persist for a long time.

It was gratifying to follow Casey O'Connor's Buddha heads from inland Colfax and Sacramento to the coast, to chase a story that began some distance away but effortlessly, it seemed, found its way close to home. The rush of adrenaline I had experienced upon finding a Buddha head at Tepco beach wasn't bad either. But this discovery prompted me to ponder more directly what it meant to become part of O'Connor's audience, to act as a participant in his intervention, and to be responsible, in some sense perhaps, to the questioning that his art, his installation, his stunt—whatever it may be—seems so ably to incite. There are already too many Buddhas in Berkeley and the Bay Area for the Tepco finds to generate the intensity of surprise and deliberation that occurred in Colfax. But standing at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, it still seemed worth asking: What visual forms does the Buddha take; where do we find them; what do they mean within religion, art, and popular culture; and what might they do to our perceptions of California? I looked down the coastline and inland to the East Bay hills and the Campanile tower on Berkeley's campus; to the west, San Francisco, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Pacific Ocean. For a moment this familiar landscape, so prominent in California's coastal exceptionalism, seemed slightly different, less self-evident and secure, and possibly more open to imagination. Perhaps O'Connor has sought to provoke this sort of defamiliarization wherever he has "dropped Buddhas." **B**

Note

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