



Drawing down the gods in the Buddhas of suburbia



Karma Phuntsok's paintings reveal the sacred is everywhere, writes **Claire Scobie**.

KARMA PHUNTSOK sits cross-legged in his studio, putting the final touches to a shimmering Buddha. Radio National murmurs in the background and outside, cicadas strike up in a cacophony.

The Tibetan artist's self-built, solar-powered home in the northern NSW bush is a far cry from his mountainous birth-place, which he fled on horseback as a child.

Trained as a Lharikpa or "Drawer of the Gods", Phuntsok, 54, has pioneered a genre of art that fuses traditional Tibetan techniques with surrealist imagery, capturing the spirit of East meets West. Phuntsok unfurls some recent canvases and a riot of colour fills the room. Tibetan goddesses in soft hues and bold striking Buddhas float above a city skyline. There's a touch of realism in many of the works – a lorikeet, a waratah, a steel watering can serve as a reminder that the sacred is found everywhere.

"Unlike in Western art where artists paint a lot about personal things, anyone can relate to a Buddha. Maybe it touches something beyond the individual story," says Phuntsok. "A lot of

people who buy my paintings are very happy [with them]."

Acclaimed by the Dalai Lama and Professor Robert Thurman – Tibetologist and father of American actress Uma Thurman – Phuntsok's works are in private collections and galleries around the world, including the Art Gallery of NSW. He holds regular exhibitions in America and India, but says he still has difficulty in finding a gallery in Australia.

Yet he's inspired and deeply attached to his adopted country. *Cassowary Forest* depicts a scene near Cape Tribulation with three jewel-coloured deities in the rainforest and a cassowary bird. *Melbourne White Pages* shows the phone book and in one corner, as if peeled back, peeps the face of a Buddha.

"I had fun with this," he laughs. "In the Buddhist philosophy there's a belief that everybody has a seed of the Buddha within them. So this says if you look up in the Melbourne White Pages you find only Buddhas."

Born in Tibet, Phuntsok fled with his parents on horseback to Sikkim in 1959 following the Chinese occupation. He was educated in an impoverished Tibetan refugee school in northern India. At 21 he moved to Nepal, taking a six-month apprenticeship with a master of Tibetan thangka painting (a Tibetan Buddhist meditation aid).

He emigrated to Australia with his American wife, Carol, and young son in 1981. At first he struggled to find a market for his work but continued to experiment, mastering the airbrush before favouring strong acrylic paints on thick cotton canvas. Eleven years later his paintings were part of the Biennale of Sydney at the Art Gallery of NSW, and later that year they came to the attention of the Dalai Lama during his 1992 Australian visit. Phuntsok then started a successful collaboration with the Sydney artist Tim Johnson.

Four years ago, Phuntsok returned to Tibet for the first time since his exile. He was left with a deep sadness about the Norbul-ingka, the Dalai Lama's former summer palace, which is reflected in his *Free Tibet*. "This [the palace] has been turned into a dusty tourist place with lots of Chinese tourists tramping through. There's no respect at all." In frustration, Phuntsok daubed Free Tibet in red angry letters across the work. "I had to do that to give it meaning," he says. "The Tibet I knew is a memory; it doesn't exist now."

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An exhibition of works by Karma Phuntsok opens tomorrow at Project Contemporary Art Space, 255 Keira Street, Wollongong, as part of Wollongong's Festival of Tibet. His work can be seen at www.karmaart.com.



Going beyond the individual ... Karma Phuntsok, top left, and one of his boldly coloured works. Photo: Steve Holland