

The background image is a large-scale photograph of a Buddha sculpture. The sculpture's surface is covered in a dense, granular texture that resembles a condom, which is a key element of Lee Henderson's 'Kool-Aid Buddha' series. The lighting is warm and orange, creating a hazy, atmospheric effect. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

lee henderson

art gallery of regina
july 2nd to august 28th, 2009

curated by jack anderson

misty rain on mount lu,
river che at high tide.
**when you have not been there,
your heart is full of longing.**
but when you have been there,
it was nothing special.
misty rain on mount lu,
river che at high tide.

Lee Henderson: Phantom Space
by Wayne Baerwaldt

The selection of subject matter in contemporary photography can appear to be arbitrary, without reason, or can even seem unreasonable. It is a key consideration for Lee Henderson to juxtapose disparate forms and symbols in his large-format C-prints from the last three years in the Art Gallery of Regina exhibition entitled *when you have not been there, your heart is full of longing*. The photographs offer something alternately uncanny, deeply humorous and highly critical. By mixing three series of related photographs Henderson asks viewers to contemplate the proverbial slender filament that can exist between objects and ideas in a photograph, including ancient Buddha sculptures and 'Chinatown' figurines, prehistoric wasps, a colour-saturated synthetic impermeable (condom) and his own performative body as subject in a Museum setting. The result is an approach to assemblage that directs attention to the fundamental importance of open accumulation and collage to facilitate and dissolve notions of difference in contemporary art.

Henderson's starting point is a fascination with the heterogeneity of materials, the importance attached to surroundings and conditions, and to the spiritual 'environment' of the work, embedded as it is in a particular space weighted with related meanings and values. Henderson has studied in Korea at a Zen temple and roamed throughout Asia, immersing himself in far eastern cultures and their regional customs, directing himself to find a universal tradition in past cultures. His Buddhist religious studies are, as an artist, an investigation comprised of collating the ideas and symbols of ancient wisdom. This investigation becomes a hybrid of ancient and contemporary forms resulting in a complex pattern of photographic works.

Kool-Aid Buddha (after Serrano)—detail cibachrome, silicone, plexiglas, wood frame, 60"x40"



Bowing to Every Buddha [Art Institute of Chicago 1995. 274]—wide c-print, 29"x43.5"

Henderson's relationship with Zen studies and the Buddha figure does not come without challenges that have impacted on his work. It was not long ago that an Asian-Canadian colleague of his, in a fit of frustration, suggested Henderson could never "know" what it is to be a Buddhist because he wasn't Asian. A racial division had been drawn. Henderson's artistic subject matter abruptly changed course. He adopted a strategy of quiet humour to address his sense of dismay. He began photographing various Buddha figurines, each attired in a coloured condom as a visual reaction to the imposed, racialized colour and its supposed spiritual barriers. Henderson saw the impermeability of the protection going both ways — protecting us from the Buddha's influence but also protecting the Buddha from our own influence. The 'protected' Buddhas came in various shapes and sizes and not without a dose of spiritually restorative humour. The smaller ones from Korea are seen as popular toys doing strange things. One miniature Buddha is crying and another is lifting up his shirt, each slightly irreverent.



Transmission 11 of Budai transmounted c-print, 24"x36"



The Impact of Hyphenation in Wasps "10 transmounted c-print, 24"x36"

The other motif that enters Henderson's photographic lexicon is the hovering or bowing wasp, close up, suspended on a biologist's pin in direct contact with a Buddha statue, like an elaborate, coded *memento mori*. It is an odd but not extreme perspectival juxtapositioning for contemporary art. The combination of ancient forms, Buddha and wasp, questions the illusory unity of the visible, the coherence and division of space, the decoupage and partitioning of forms and even colours (if the condom co-exists within an extended frame). Each harkens back to the most archaic of forms and, just as one colour or form may 'awaken' another, more importantly they awaken the frameworks and the themes. Based on an association that is not arbitrary for Henderson (both Buddha and wasp are ancient, virtuous entities) and more or less justified (in humour alone the W.A.S.P. artist pun segues into the absurdity of a wasp-waisted Buddha!), the assemblage turns Henderson into a kind of demiurge seeking to align the mysteries of a religion with a material Nature. Henderson gives himself over to creative liberty, to make material the dynamics of the unconscious, regardless of the threat of loss or multiplication of identities.

Enlightenment through photography? Henderson's juxtapositions of suspended wasps and deities contain some of the basic ideas and driving forces in 21st century aesthetics. What has he uncovered? Space—the medium of contamination, and papery thin walls between inside and outside (for human, wasp, and Buddha); the locus of chance encounters (for the spiritually and materially curious); the revealer of hidden meanings. And space emerges as the vital dimension that drives relations, establishing a sense of continuity and discontinuity. Henderson's approach to assemblage offers an affirmation of fusion between objects, forms, actions and underlying foundations, and the visual prompting to have them interact. It is photography that is Henderson's instrument capable of restoring a sense of circularity in meaning, by breaking down racial and spiritual barriers, recognizing the totality and the indissoluble unity of space.

—Wayne Baerwaldt, 2009



Installation view, Art Gallery of Regina, 2009