

VISUAL ART

*Travels
with the
Buddha*

Andres Serrano, in case you've never heard of him, is an American artist who is best known for his photographs of corpses, and whose pictures generally incorporate an inanimate object of some kind with a common fluid — blood, semen, a nursing mother's milk.

In 1987, Serrano ignited a firestorm of outrage in Brooklyn and far beyond the boundaries of New York City by producing a red-tinged photograph that showed a plastic crucifix he had placed in a glass container filled with his own urine. He called it "Piss Christ."

Serrano is a Catholic himself, and as a photographer he has waved enthusiastically the banner of artistic freedom. He had long been exploring the relationship between beautiful imagery and vulgar materials, frequently presenting the two in juxtaposition. Shock art, his defenders argue, is art nonetheless.

"Piss Christ" offended countless people around the world, Catholics and non-Catholics alike — and three years later, in London, England, it sold for \$162,000.



**NICK
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All of this is good to know when you are at the Art Gallery of Regina, standing in front of a photograph that measures 60 inches by 40 inches, a red-coloured image of a religious figure, in silicone, under Plexiglas, framed in wood.

Lee Henderson, a local artist, soon to depart for the greener pastures of Toronto, has titled it "Kool-Aid Buddha (after Serrano)."

Clearly a spoof, this stand-alone piece joins 20 other photographs taken from three different series to form an intriguing solo exhibition Henderson calls *when you have not been there, your heart is full of longing*.

Curated by Jack Anderson, the show continues at AGR through Aug. 27, closing two days before the 30-year-old Henderson and his wife, Nikki, a professional designer of handbags, move to Ontario. He has not been there and his heart is full of longing.

Henderson's objective was to explore, through photographs of three-dimensional figures of Buddha, the ways in which the concept of Buddhism, and Buddhist traditions themselves, have been transmitted, not only from community to community, region to region and country to country in the East but, more importantly, perhaps, from the East to the West.

Having concluded that this transmission, East to West, is conducted largely, if not exclusively, through the mass media, Henderson has set the photographs in the context of contemporary pop culture. While they do, from a distance, resemble religious icons, up close they are revealed as kitsch.

The "Transmission" series, for instance, consists of seven photographs in which Buddha figurines of one type or another (there are many) are shown wrapped in yellow condoms. The prophylactic is closely associated with transmission, and therefore makes an effective metaphor that also raises, if you will, the issues of prevention and protection, or the absence of it. There is also the notion of reproduction, and the way the human race advances itself — or not.

Another of the series, "The Impact of Hyphenation in Wasps," comprises seven photographs in which Henderson puns playfully with wasp, as in the insect, and W.A.S.P. as in White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. (If you happen to be a Buddhist yourself, relax. No wasps were killed in the making of these photographs.)

The third series, "Bowling to Every Buddha," consists of six photographs from a trade fair in which Henderson participated at the Art Institute of Chicago. The inspiration comes from a fact-finding mission he took to Korea several years ago, where he was told by a master in a monastery in Seoul: "I bow to every Buddha that I see."

Henderson himself had a secular upbringing. His fascination with Buddhism dates from an interest in the martial arts, which he discovered as a child and has maintained to this day. To earn his MFA from the University of Regina, he created a mixed-media installation called "Zen in the West."

It worked like this: The viewer approaches a wooden platform upon which rests a black cushion. If the viewer sits on the cushion, or even stands close to the platform, a beam of white light illuminates the figure of Buddha on a tyndlestone "screen." Eventually, the image fades away into ... nothingness.

■ Visual Art appears every second Thursday. To express your views, or convey your news, contact the columnist at nmilioкас@leaderpost.canwest.com.