

ArtReview Asia



High stakes at high altitude – contemporary art comes to Ladakh

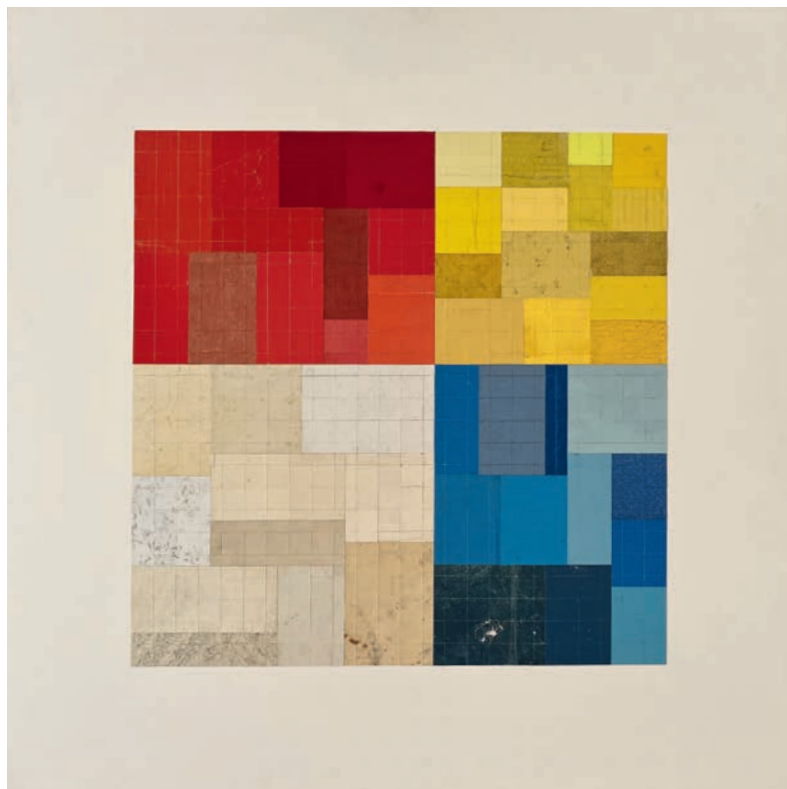
Farming, fishing, housebuilding and pottery – the art of life in rural Japan

Buried men, stray dogs and old mums – the films of Lin Htet Aung

Can the Pali canon teach us how to make art? A Buddhist monk turns artmaker



YoungEun Kim



Stephen Batchelor is well known for his many books on Buddhist subject matter. But he is far from orthodox; indeed, in some ways he is a subversive. Nevertheless, he is a man of persuasion and objective, and his books often serve to bring to light ancient histories to the modern reader. But he is not carried away by the alluring possibilities of the distant past, in which an act that was uncertain or unplanned comes later to be framed as the deliberate move of a religious hand. In truth, the Buddha's doctrine has come down to us through many hands and tongues, and it is challenging for any reader to decipher the intent behind acts of renunciation. So, instead, Batchelor opts to test the position of what it is to be an enlightened being.

I first encountered Batchelor listening to his talks online, after which I progressed to his books. *After Buddhism* (2015) is a polemical text that investigates the biographies of (extra) ordinary people given a space in the canon and the philosophical insights of diverse Buddhist traditions by objectively interpreting what has been traditionally handed down as the received

Picturing Ethics

In the distinctly
contemporary
collages of one
Buddhist artist,
Suraj Yengde finds
echoes of a tradition
that stretches
back centuries

Four Primary Colours, 2012,
found materials. Courtesy the artist

knowledge of the faith. Batchelor is an advocate of a secularised non-orthodox practice of awakening rooted in the Buddha's insights into the nature of life, with all its flows and flaws. Consequently he sees a threat in the obsessive dogmatism of some Buddhist ideas.

But it was not just his spiritual and scholarly work that led me to drive to meet him in Arles this summer; rather it was his artwork – primarily photographs and collages that experiment with solid colours – which was on show at a newly launched Zen centre in the southern French city.

Batchelor primarily works with trash. And he is proud of it. His material is detritus, objects without an identity or use function that are now ready to be forgotten. But Batchelor sees in trash a continuity rather than an ending; he recycles the materials to create solid cubes – accumulations of recognisably individual objects arranged according to, but not limited to, four colours: yellow, white, blue and red.

He is fixated on arranging things: his artworks have clean edges, and the items that

make it up are forcibly constrained to grid-based patterns that convey this essential, pithy neatness. When I caught up with him, Batchelor explained the thinking behind his approach: “Constraints provide possibilities, and mastering the limitations paradoxically opens up a freedom.”

He says his practice is moved by the Buddhist values of compassion and investigation that he incorporates into his life. The virtue of compassion is practised to alleviate the suffering of the world and sits as one of the central pillars of the Dhamma.

After a failed attempt to get into an art school to study photography as a teenager, Batchelor, who was born in Scotland during the 1950s, set out for other worlds. He spent several years with Tibetan people in northern India, in the foothills of the Himalayas, then in the Korean Buddhist tradition of Son (the Korean version of Zen Buddhism), before realising, during the mid-1980s, that he had had enough. He disrobed and became an evocative whisperer about topics considered foundational in the Buddhist religion. He challenged conventional notions of rebirth, karma, monastic supremacy and the interpretation of Buddha’s doctrines encoded as *suttas*.

His training in liturgy at the Tibetan monasteries brought Batchelor closer to the philosophical urgency of life: further from the speculative dogmas accepted as received wisdom and closer to wisdom gained through experience. He cultivates the project of Truth, Liberation, Dhamma, Nibbana in writing, photography and collage. Art for him is a “non-conceptual pairing to the written works”: a way of practice rather than theory. His latest photographic pursuits, on display in Arles, were shot on his iPhone, using the ‘silvertone’ filter to capture his voyages in Peru as well as scenes from La Sauve, where he lives in the South of France.

The colours with which he experiments in his collages are eye-catching but not suggestive. And the found objects he uses subvert any abstract qualities of the works. In line with his favouring of practice or experience over theory. The four-fold tasks as he describes them are: embrace life, let go of what arises (concerning the mundane and supramundane), see its ceasing, act (upon it or independently).

In this he follows a long lineage of Buddhist art that seeks not to entertain but to describe faith in the Dhamma. Historically, we see this in the countless engravings from the Western Ghats of India, cut in Gandharan simplicity, as well as in Tibetan, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Zen practices, all of which ensure that art provides a visual element to the otherwise abstract concepts of ethics – the *sheelas*.

Batchelor’s scholarship extends to art criticism, too. His book *The Art of Solitude* (2020) is about his experiences of Vipassana meditation alongside other contemplative practices and brings in artists such as Agnes Martin and Antony Gormley, in whose work he finds the meditative depth that allows for the freedom towards which he, and humans in general, strive. The freedom is coming to terms with the impermanence of life and the assurance of death. It is the practice of living in the oasis of generosity, compassion, joy in others’ success and a balanced state of mind.

Buddhist philosophical tradition and practice have been enriched by art through the ages. That’s a tradition that Batchelor appears keen to extend.

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Robert, Marcelle et Bernard, c. 2000, found materials. Courtesy the artist