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Divine Bodies at the Asian Art Museum

Exceptional Art and Exhibition Programs Focus on the Sacred Power and Earthly Delight of Self-Transformation

February 21, San Francisco — The human form in art has always helped shape how we answer life's biggest questions: Where do we come from? Why are we here? Who are we? What happens when we die?



To explore these questions, the Asian Art Museum presents *Divine Bodies* from Mar. 9 through Jul. 29, 2018. Bringing together nearly 70 large-scale **historical sculptures and paintings** from Hindu and Buddhist traditions, along with **contemporary photo- and video-based work**, this innovative exhibition invites us to ponder the power of transformation, the possibility of transcendence and the relationship of our bodies to the cosmos.

By showcasing newly acquired contemporary art alongside world-famous historical works, *Divine Bodies* presents a unique opportunity to experience a “remix” of the Asian Art Museum’s renowned collection as the museum commences its own “transformation project” with the construction of a new special exhibitions pavilion, opening in 2019.

Exhibition Shares Enduring Nature of Sacred Concepts

Divided into four sections, *Divine Bodies* allows visitors to explore how sacred art makes divine ideals tangible by mapping them onto the human body. Evocative quotes

from spiritual leaders, philosophers, and poets then invite visitors to contemplate and discuss the ideas in the exhibition. By juxtaposing artworks from across time and culture, *Divine Bodies* will spark conversations about our shared humanity — and especially about how we mortal human beings use artworks to establish a relationship with the transcendent divine.

1. *Transience and Transcendence*

The first section of *Divine Bodies* explores a peculiar but persistent pattern in human religious traditions: many of them begin with the death of the founder. From Christ on the cross to the Buddha's decease, works of art take over when the teacher ceases to be. Highlights include:

- A **miniature bronze stupa** from the Qing courts of China (1700-1800) — a once-gilded reliquary that reminds adherents of the Buddha's infinite divisibility, and hence the ubiquity of his teachings.
- A **Tibetan cloth painting (*thangka*)**, *Death of the Buddha Shakyamuni* (1700-1800), reveals that the Buddha's power did not end, but rather expanded at his death (*parinirvana*). With two handprints belonging to the consecrating lama to “seal in” the Buddha's body, speech, and mind, this painting is understood to contain the virtual presence of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni.
- Serene yet penetrating **black-and-white photographs of burial and birth** from a series begun in 1999 by Guari Gill. Her images reveal the ever-present link between the two termini of life — birth and death — emphasizing the ephemerality of all phases of human existence.
- An **original video work**, *Impermanence*, from artist duo David and Hi-Jin Hodge featuring 122 interviewees from a range of age groups, ethnicities and professions who movingly reflect on their diverse experiences and the **mortal inevitability of confronting change**.

2. *Embodying the Sacred*

The second section of *Divine Bodies* surveys the culturally specific messages conveyed through bodies — the external markers of posture, hair style, and ornamentation — and shows how different cultures interpret these codes differently. Highlights include:

- An arrangement of **seven Buddha's heads** from across southern Asia, from Pakistan's Peshawar Valley more than 1500 years ago to the early Thai kingdoms of the 1300s. The variety of features, expressions and materials paint a portrait of cultural diversity, while enduring similarities underscore artistic connections across faith traditions.

3. *Aspects of Divinity*

The third section of *Divine Bodies* explores how sacred artwork expresses both human emotions and super-human capacities. Awesome physical elaborations — the multiplication of familiar features like arms, heads, or eyes — appear in this section; properly created and understood, such imagery inspires humans to exalted thought and decisive action. Highlights include:

- The intricate stone “**sculptural mandala**” of the *Buddhist deity Vajra Tara* (1075–1200), whose eight arms, three bemused faces, and flexing tummy — still crisply carved and invitingly touchable even after centuries — project her powerful protective magic.
- The **carnally resplendent bodies** of a Ming-era (1400-1500) gilded statue of the *Buddhist Deity Guhyasamaja* (“secret union”), whose two figures meet in a sexual embrace, rendering the Buddhist philosophical ideals of wisdom and compassion tangible. Imperial workshops crafted works such as this one as kingly gifts for Tibetan monks.
- **Contemporary photo-based works** by Pamela Singh and Vivan Sundaram reconsider how human bodies can relate to the sacred: Singh layers herself into composite photographs of worshippers and sites of worship; and Sundaram creates cheeky, yet insightful, doodles onto found photographs of devotional sculptures.

4. *Divine Metamorphosis*

The fourth section of *Divine Bodies* explores the transformations that divinities undergo when circumstances demand their intervention. Whether they take on new bodies, like Vishnu’s avatars, or alter their bodies in any number of ways, like Avalokiteshvara, the change is always made in response to an otherwise intractable problem. Highlights include:

- A Chola-era (1050-1150) stone statue of the *Hindu deity Shiva revealed in the linga* from India. The **limitlessness of his phallus-shaped lingam** expresses Shiva’s supremacy over other Hindu divinities, in this case the boar-headed Vishnu and the goose-shaped Brahma.
- *Myself Mona Ahmed* (1999–2017), a series from photographer Dayanita Singh documenting the **life of a “eunuch”** and member of Delhi’s *hijra* community. Born male and self-identified as female, *hijra* are considered a third sex in India and are simultaneously shunned and revered as close to the divine, capable of containing — like several important deities on view in *Divine Bodies* — both male and female cosmic forces.

From dance to food, hands-on activities bring *Divine Bodies* to life (and into your mouth)

The Asian Art Museum’s award-winning programming engages the senses of audiences of all ages. In addition, from Feb. 8 through Sept. 27, 2018, the museum will be open until 9 PM on Thursday evenings with reduced admission rates (ticket prices for events vary, so be sure to check the museum website for details).

Body and Expression with CALI & CO. Dance Company

Saturday, Mar. 24

Experience “Everybody,” a gallery-hopping series of reflections on and explorations of ritual, divinity, and supernatural qualities from 10 dancers accompanied by original live music performed by Matt Langlois/Matt EL.

Pop-up Meditation

Saturday, Mar. 31, Apr. 28, Jun. 30

A meditation “plus” event deploying yogic positions to sharpen the mind and relax the spirit. On Jun. 30, give your *prana* an extra tingle with special guests from Brahma Kumaris Meditation Center.

Movement Workshops with Antoine Hunter and Zahna Simon

Sundays, Apr. 15, Jun. 17, Jul. 15

Learn to express yourself through body language in this series of group sessions led by deaf dancer and renowned “movement advocate” Antoine Hunter.

Tasting Menu: The Buddha’s Diet

Thursday, May 3

Hear Dan Zigmond, author of “Buddha’s Diet: The Ancient Art of Losing Weight Without Losing Your Mind,” discuss his experience of becoming a Zen priest and the biohacking benefits of enlightened eating. Annie Somerville of beloved San Francisco icon Greens Restaurant will specially prepare her version for attendees to sample.

These Bodies Sing of Home

Thursday, May 31

Through interdisciplinary storytelling, music, and dance, local Asian and Asian American artists celebrate how intersecting strands of queerness, and experiences of immigration and (de)colonization, all shape the meaning, ideal, and healing power of “home.”

Indonesian Puppet-Making

Sunday, Jun. 3

Join hundreds of families for special guided art-making activities on Target Free Sunday focusing on the famous paper cut-out puppets that traditionally enliven myths and legends in Southeast Asia.

Tasting Menu: Peiru Ko of Real Food Real Stories

Thursday, Jun. 21

Join four women chefs and farmers whose journeys led them to understand how growing and cooking food can heal our bodies and nourish our souls.

Health, Wellness, and Body Modification

Thursday, Jul. 7

Celebrated scholars of Indian asceticism James Mallinson and Mark Singleton share insights from their decades of experience on and off the yoga mat.

Tasting Menu: Chef's Hawker Centre

Thursday, Jul. 19

A smorgasbord of epic proportions, this gathering of food lovers features Tu David Phu and a posse of 10 chefs who push the boundaries of Asian and Asian American cooking

traditions, showcasing the delicious side of evolving traditions. This hotly anticipated evening will also see two guest bartenders competing with specialty cocktails, while live music and performances keep spirits high throughout the night.

Exhibition Organization & Publication

Divine Bodies is organized by the Asian Art Museum. Presentation is made possible with the generous support of The Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang Fund for Excellence in Exhibitions and Presentations, The Bernard Osher Foundation, Dixon and Carol Doll Family Foundation, Warren Felson and Lucy Sun, Blakemore Foundation, Rajnikant T. and Helen Crane Desai, John Maa, M.D. and Society for Art & Cultural Heritage of India.

An illustrated, 120 page catalog featuring original essays by exhibition curators will also be available for \$19.95.

About the Asian Art Museum

The Asian Art Museum—Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture is one of San Francisco's premier arts institutions and home to a world-renowned collection of more than 18,000 Asian art treasures from throughout Asia spanning 6,000 years of history. Through rich art experiences, centered on historic and contemporary artworks, the Asian Art Museum unlocks the past for visitors, bringing it to life while serving as a catalyst for new art, new creativity and new thinking.

Information: 415.581.3500 or www.asianart.org

Location: 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102

Hours: The museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 10 AM to 5 PM. Hours are extended on Thursdays until 9 PM February through September. Closed Mondays, as well as New Year's Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

Special Exhibition Admission: FREE for museum members and children (12 & under). \$25 for adults and \$20 for seniors (65 & over), youth (13–17) and college students (with ID). On Target First Free Sundays and on Thursday evenings, 5-9 PM, admission to the exhibition is \$10.

Access: The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access: 415.581.3598; TDD: 415.861.2035.

Never miss a moment: @asianartmuseum #DivineBodies

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