

DAILY RECORD

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2023

Existential angst in Ellensburg

Buddhist monk explores humanity through junk art

ANNA ROSE
staff writer

Is it beautiful, or is it just junk on a board?

Jampa Dorje says, "Both."

Dorje embraces entropy in his art — or rather, "anti-art" — using found objects to create assemblages; three-dimensional mosaics that spark curiosity, confusion, and, he hopes, self-reflection.

"Each piece has its compositional element, of course. I pay attention to form, line, and

texture," he said. His found objects range from shards of glass and wood to dead batteries and guitar strings. Bonus points if they've been exposed to the elements.

"But the meaning is in the junk," he said. "It's about the relationship between randomness and order."

Dorje said his art expresses the unity of contradictory elements in the mind.

"Everyone feels angst about existence," he laughed. "We're just fragments finding their place, just like this junk on the board."



ANNA ROSE / DAILY RECORD

Jampa Dorje shares a knowing look with himself in the reflection of one of his art pieces. Dorje makes assemblage art out of found items some may consider "junk."

Art/ from A1

He cited Dadaism as a major influence, a modern art movement that posed the question, "Can anything be art?"

Dorje recalled a particularly significant piece of Dadaist work by Marcel Duchamp in 1915, when he simply hung a snow shovel from the ceiling and titled it "In Advance of the Broken Arm." The exhibit still hangs today in the Museum of Modern Art.

"Honestly, anything can be art in the right context," Dorje said.

But his inspiration goes deeper than snow shovels; Dorje has lived a life as varied as the elements of his artwork.

He was a Berkeley, Calif. street poet in the 1960s, part of the Beat scene with Alan Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. He lived for a while in a wilderness cabin in Alaska, printing chapbooks on a hand press.

Then he found himself a cowboy

on a cattle ranch in Badger Pocket, a tree planter on the slopes of Mount St. Helens post-eruption, and the longtime proprietor of Four Winds Bookstore and Cafe in Ellensburg.

Dorje is also a Buddhist monk; he spent four years in Tibet on a solitary retreat.

"I had two hours each day devoted entirely to making art," he recalled. "I spent it writing and painting."

Alongside the assemblage pieces, the Palace Gallery in Ellensburg displayed some of the watercolors he created during that time in a November exhibit titled "Yab-Yum, Repetition & Difference."

"They were painted on notebook pages," Dorje noted. "Now that they've been blown up, you can see the lines. But I think the lines just add another element."

Dorje blended Dadaism with Buddhism in his paintings to illustrate "harmonious dichotomy."

Yab-yum ("father-mother") is a common symbol in Tibetan Buddhist art. It represents the union of

wisdom and compassion, depicted as a male deity in union with his female consort through the ideas of coalescence.

In Buddhism, the masculine form is active, representing compassion and skillful means, and the feminine form is passive and represents wisdom; both are necessary to enlightenment.

Dorje's paintings portray this concept through bright colors, strong imagery, and just a splash of his trademark chaos.

Art historian Lu Auz calls his series a "visual and spiritual exploration of human experience, our struggles, and the ultimate quest for inner harmony."

Dorje just calls it "ironic sincerity."

"If you can't have fun with your religion, you're doing it wrong," he said. "I'm a playful artist. What is beauty? Anything you want it to be. What does it all mean? Who knows. It's always good to have controversy in art."



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PALACE GALLERY

"Chengall" by Jampa Dorje. Dorje painted this with watercolors on notebook paper during his four-year Buddhist solitary retreat in Tibet.