

# THE TIBETAN BUDDHIST SHRINE ROOM & SHRINE ROOM PROJECTS

## NOTES FOR SELF-GUIDED TOUR RESOURCE GUIDE



### Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room overview

- This Shrine Room, a space for devotional prayer, offerings, reflection, and rituals, integrates elements of traditional Tibetan architecture and color schemes, displaying art and ritual objects as they would appear in an elaborate private household shrine.
- The installation rotates every two years to showcase each of the four major Tibetan religious traditions. The current version features the Kagyu tradition and includes images of buddhas, bodhisattvas, tantric deities, protectors, and teacher portraits specific to this tradition.
- To take a virtual tour of the Shrine Room and learn more about the objects, please visit <http://shrineroom.rma2.org/>.

### Shrine Room Projects overview

- Inspired by the *Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room* at the center of the gallery, contemporary artists, Shiva Ahmadi, Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, and Tsherin Sherpa each reinterpret traditional and religious iconography and practices through painting, text, sculptural installation, and video.

<p><b>Main Themes</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worship and rituals</li> <li>• Reconnection to our inner selves</li> <li>• Tradition</li> <li>• Wisdom</li> <li>• Transformation</li> </ul>
<p><b>Ritual Objects &amp; Contemporary Artists</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diverse mediums including scroll paintings (known as thangkas), sculptures, ornamental textile decorations, ritual items, musical instruments, texts, sculptural installation, and video</li> <li>• Recordings of Tibetan monks and nuns chanting prayers, along with the subtle smell of incense</li> </ul>
<p><b>Shrine Room objects to focus on</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buddha Shakyamuni; Tibet; 18th century; metal alloy statue with traces of gilding; located on the right wall of the <i>Shrine Room</i></li> <li>• Handheld Drum (Damaru); Tibet; early 20th century; wood, silk, and leather; located on a table against the left wall</li> <li>• Lama (Teacher) Milarepa; Tibet; 18th century; stone statue; located on the right wall near the Buddha Shakyamuni statue</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ritual Mandala Offering; Tibet; 20th century; silver, coral, turquoise, brocade silk; located on a table to the right side of the central wall</li> <li>• Vajrayogini; Kham Province, eastern Tibet; 18th century; pigments on cloth; located on the central wall to the right</li> </ul>
<p><b>Contemporary artworks</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shiva Ahmadi; <i>Lotus</i>, 2014; single channel animation with sound; 8 min. 52. sec.</li> <li>• Genesis Breyer P-Orridge with assistance from Daniel Albrigo; <i>Touching of Hands</i>, 2016, bronze with brass plaque</li> <li>• Tsherin Sherpa; <i>Wish-fulfilling Tree</i>, 2016; bronze cast mandala, found objects, rubble</li> <li>• Tsherin Sherpa; <i>UFO (Unidentified Fettering Organization) No. 2 and No. 3</i>, 2016; acrylic, ink, and gold pen on cotton</li> </ul>

# TIBETAN BUDDHIST SHRINE ROOM



Before you begin examining the objects, think about how you are experiencing all your senses. What do you hear? See? How do you feel being inside this space? Relaxed? Overstimulated? Note your observations below:

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# 1. BUDDHA SHAKYAMUNI

Tibet, 18th century

Metal alloy with traces of gilding

Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art

Located on the right wall of the Shrine Room



Observation notes:

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# BUDDHA SHAKYAMUNI

Tibet, 18th century

<b>Main Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Enlightenment</li><li>• Reality</li><li>• Awakening</li></ul>
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**As you look at the statue, take note of the Buddha's physical features and hand gesture.**

- Do these features imply anything? Is the Buddha communicating something with his gesture?
  - What are some key moments in your life, and how would they be depicted in art?
  - What do your physical features imply about you?
  - Note your observations.
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<b>A Deeper Look</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Who was Buddha Shakyamuni?<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Buddha means “awakened” or “enlightened.”</li><li>○ The term “Buddha” was first used to refer to Shakyamuni who lived sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE in northcentral India and whose teachings became the foundation of Buddhism.</li></ul></li><li>• The most represented figure in Buddhism, Buddha Shakyamuni is touching the ground here, a reference to the moment just before his enlightenment (a complete understanding of the true nature of reality), when he called the earth to witness the impending moment of his full awakening.</li><li>• Depictions of key moments from the Buddha's life, aspects of his being, and other sacred images are treated as icons in Tibetan Buddhist culture.</li><li>• The eyes of this Buddha sculpture were once painted, and some of the pigment, including the black of the pupils, is still visible.</li></ul>
<b>Connections to other artworks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Shiva Ahmadi; <i>Lotus</i>, 2014; single channel animation: iconography of cultural events</li></ul>

## 2. HANDHELD DRUM (DAMARU)

Tibet; early 20th century

Wood, silk, leather

Collection of Robert and Lois Baylis

Located on the left wall of the Shrine Room



Observation notes:

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# HANDHELD DRUM (DAMARU)

Tibet; early 20th century

<p><b>Main Themes</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ritual</li> <li>• Music</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Togetherness</li> </ul>
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**Look at the different materials used to create this drum and imagine how those textures would feel in your hand while playing the drum.**

- Take note of the symbols embroidered on the tassel. What do you think they mean? How loud do you think this drum is?
  - What materials would you use to create a drum, how loud would it be, and what symbols would you decorate it with?
  - Think about your own practices. What instrument would you use to accent them and communicate them to others?
  - Note your observations.
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<p><b>A Deeper Look</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In Tibetan Buddhism, the damaru is used as an instrument in tantric practices, religious rituals where the mind comes into play as much as the body, as an accent or to punctuate recited verses.</li> <li>• The drum is held in the right hand and is usually used together with a bell held in the left hand.</li> <li>• Often made from wood, damarus can also be made of two skulls; they always have two beaters, beats, or rolled leather pieces swaying from threads that generate a pelting sound when the drum is spun back and forth.</li> <li>• This drum has a long, black decorative tassel embroidered with the Eight Auspicious Symbols.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ These symbols represent the transient universe.</li> <li>○ The symbols include the endless knot, the treasure vase, the lotus flower, two golden fish, the parasol, the conch shell, the dharma wheel, and the banner of victory.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Connections to other artworks</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Genesis Breyer P-Orridge with assistance from Daniel Albrigo; <i>Touching of Hands</i>, 2016; sculpture: communication, togetherness</li> </ul>

### 3. LAMA (TEACHER) MILAREPA

Tibet; 18th century

Stone

Rubin Museum of Art

Gift of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation

F1997.52.4 (HAR 700037)

Located on the right wall near the Buddha Shakyamuni statue in the *Shrine Room*



Observations below:

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# LAMA (TEACHER) MILAREPA

Tibet, 18th century

<b>Main Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teaching</li><li>• Communication</li><li>• Hardship</li><li>• Redemption</li><li>• Listening</li></ul>
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**Notice the colors of this statue. How is it different from the others in this room?  
What does his gesture suggest to you?**

- How have you overcome hardship in your life?
  - Are there any poems or writings that are important to you? What do they focus on?
  - Write your own poem.
  - Note your observations.
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<b>A Deeper Look</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Who is Lama Milarepa?<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Considered one of Tibet’s most famous yogis and spiritual poets, Milarepa was a murderer as a young man before he turned to Buddhism and became a highly accomplished Buddhist disciple—someone who is a follower or student of a teacher, leader, or philosopher.</li><li>○ Profound teachings and practices associated with Milarepa and his disciples flourished across Tibet.</li><li>○ While his story of hardship, magical powers, disillusionment, and perseverance to achieve liberation are well understood, very little is known about him as a historical person, including when he was born and how he died.</li><li>○ He lived sometime during the 10th to 12th century when Buddhism was reintroduced in Tibet.</li></ul></li><li>• Milarepa, also known as “Mila, the cotton clad,” is easily recognizable in this portrayal.</li><li>• Seated in a relaxed posture on an animal pelt with a meditation belt over his right shoulder, Milarepa holds his right hand to his ear as if he is listening.</li></ul>
<b>Connections to other artworks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Genesis Breyer P-Orridge with assistance from Daniel Albrigo; <i>Touching of Hands</i>, 2016; bronze: communication, togetherness</li></ul>

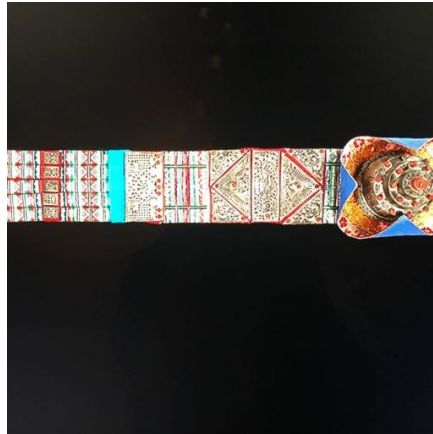
## 4. RITUAL MANDALA OFFERING

Tibet; 20th century

Silver, coral, turquoise, brocade silk

Eugene Pollock Collection

Located on a table to right side of the central wall in the *Shrine Room*



Observations below:

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# RITUAL MANDALA OFFERING

Tibet, 20th century

<b>Main Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offering</li> <li>• Ritual</li> <li>• Environment</li> </ul>
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**What do you think it represents? What do you think is the relationship between the metal object and the fabric it is placed on?**

- If a mandala represented your environment, what would it look like? Sketch one or create a list of its features.
- What are seven qualities you think everyone should possess?
- Note your observations.

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<b>A Deeper Look</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is a mandala?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Generally, it is a geometric structure of symbols.</li> <li>○ In the Eastern religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Shintoism, it is used as a map representing an enlightened environment, or palace, of one or more deities.</li> <li>○ It is seen like a blueprint and is used as a visualization device.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• This mandala is a symbolic ritual offering that represents the universe and is adorned with a plate featuring Mount Meru at the center surrounded by continents.</li> <li>• Typically, the mandala plate would be laid on a white scarf, which serves as a further offering indicating pure intentions.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Here the white scarf is replaced with an ornate textile panel, indicating the high status of the person making the offering.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• The silver plates attached to the textile also represent other Buddhist offerings, including the Eight Auspicious Symbols and the Seven Attributes of Royal Power.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The seven qualities that all buddhas and bodhisattvas possess as factors in attaining awakening are the precious golden wheel, precious wish-fulfilling jewel, precious queen, precious minister, precious elephant, precious horse, and precious general.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Connections to other artworks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tsherin Sherpa; <i>Wish-fulfilling Tree</i>, 2016; bronze cast mandala: offerings, ritual, environment</li> </ul>

## 5. VAJRAYOGINI

Kham Province, eastern Tibet; 18th century

Pigments on cloth

Rubin Museum of Art

Gift of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation

F1997.3.3 (HAR 61)

Located on the central wall to the right of the Shrine Room



Observation notes:

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# VAJRAYOGINI

Kham Province, eastern Tibet; 18th century

<b>Main Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fear</li><li>• Transformation</li><li>• Realization</li><li>• Protection</li></ul>
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## Study this figure's features, colors, and adornments.

- What do they represent? Make a list of the objects that adorn this figure.
- What is she standing on?
- What objects would you wear to represent your victories over negative emotions? Sketch out a crown you would wear.
- Vajrayogini is always represented in red. What color would represent you?
- Come up with a verse that would honor you.
- Note your observations.

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<b>A Deeper Look</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Who is Vajrayogini?<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ She is a female buddha and one of the most important female tantric deities in Tibetan Buddhism. Her essence is great passion, a transcendent passion that is free of selfishness and illusion.</li></ul></li><li>• She works for the well-being of others and for the destruction of ego clinging. Her dynamic, fearsome features symbolize the ways she can assist followers in swiftly and successfully transforming their negative qualities into enlightened ones.</li><li>• In this painting, she takes the form of Vajrayogini, Naro Khechari, which is specific to the Drugpa Kagyu tradition.</li><li>• Red in color with one face and three eyes (including the third eye of wisdom), she balances a weapon on her shoulder while drinking</li></ul>
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	<p>from a white skullcap held in her left hand, which represents her realization of non-duality and the bliss that she pours out to her devotees.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Her right hand holds a curved knife with a gold handle that extends down, symbolizing her ability to cut through the illusions and obstacles of her followers.</li> <li>• She is adorned with a crown of skulls, bone gridle, bracelets, and a garland of freshly severed heads, which all signal her victory over delusions and negative emotions, and she stands atop the bodies of the subdued god Bhairava (black) and his consort Kalaratri (red), showing that Vajrayogini and her lessons have prevailed.</li> <li>• The back of the painting is blessed with palm imprints and an honoring verse possibly by one of the masters of the Drugpa Kagyu Buddhist tradition.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Connections to other artworks</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tsherin Sherpa; <i>UFO (Unidentified Fettering Organization) No. 2</i> and <i>No. 3</i>, 2016; acrylic painting: power, transformation</li> <li>• Shiva Ahmadi; <i>Lotus</i>, 2014; single channel animation: transformation, power</li> </ul>



6. **SHIVA AHMADI** (b. 1975, Tehran, Iran)

***LOTUS*, 2014**

Single-channel animation with sound; 8 min. 52 sec.

Courtesy of the artist and Haines Gallery, San Francisco



Observation notes:

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# SHIVA AHMADI (b. 1975, Tehran, Iran)

## LOTUS, 2014

<b>Main Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cultural events</li><li>• Transformation</li><li>• Oppression</li><li>• Power</li><li>• Corruption</li></ul>
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Watch the video in full if you can. What is happening in the video? What did you focus on while watching the video? Think back to the Buddha Shakyamuni statue and Vajrayogini painting in the *Shrine Room*. How do they compare?

- What contemporary cultural events have affected or been a part of your life?
  - What are your thoughts on the relationship between power and corruption?
  - Note your observations.
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<b>A Deeper Look</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Shiva Ahmadi was born on the eve of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and grew up during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980. Her close experience of sociopolitical turmoil is central to her work.</li><li>• With this theme in mind, Ahmadi references miniature painting and the iconography of various religious traditions and contemporary cultural events to narrate universal traditions.</li><li>• This film features two Buddha sculptures from the Asia Society Museum, New York, who commissioned the animation, and a 2013 watercolor by the artist.</li><li>• <i>Lotus</i> transform the Buddha from serene and enlightened to a faceless oppressor who could be an allusion to the Buddha, Islam's Prophet, or other sources, speaking to the ongoing concerns about the relationship between power and corruption.</li><li>• This film also reflects Ahmadi's translation of the narrative qualities of Persian and Indian miniature painting into large-scale painting transformed into moving images through the animation of hand-drawn figural elements.</li></ul>
<b>Connections to other artworks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Buddha Shakyamuni, metal alloy statue: reality, awakening</li><li>• Vajrayogini, painting: transformation, realization, power, protection</li></ul>



7. **GENESIS BREYER P-ORRIDGE** (1950-2020, b. Manchester, England) with assistance from Daniel Albrigo (b. 1982, Pomona, California)

***TOUCHING OF HANDS***, 2016

Bronze; brass plaque

Rubin Museum of Art

Gift of BREYER P-ORRIDGE and INVISIBLE-EXPORTS

C2016.2.1, C2016.2.2



Observation notes:

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**GENESIS BREYER P-ORRIDGE** (1950-2020, b. Manchester, England) with assistance from Daniel Albrigo (b. 1982, Pomona, California)  
***TOUCHING OF HANDS***, 2016

<b>Main Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Communication</li><li>• Wisdom</li><li>• Touch</li></ul>
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**Look at the bronze hand. Does it look new or worn? Look down at the plaque and read the phrase out loud. What does it mean to you? Think about the handheld drum and the Milarepa statue in the *Shrine Room*. How do these pieces compare?**

- Think about our current world and the isolation and digitization caused by the pandemic. Does this phrase still hold true?
  - If not, how is wisdom now passed? How do you specifically pass wisdom?
  - Come up with your own phrase on how wisdom is or should be passed.
  - Just because wisdom is being passed, does it mean we are listening?
  - Note your observations.
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<b>A Deeper Look</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Touching of Hands</i> is a life-sized bronze casting of the artist's arm.</li><li>• The title refers to the remark from artist and mystic Bryon Gysin to Breyer P-Orridge that "wisdom can only be passed on by the touching of hands."<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ This quote appears on the plaque below the bronze sculpture.</li></ul></li><li>• This sculpture evokes some medieval Christian shrines, fashioned as arms, hands, feet, and heads to hold the bones of saints acknowledged as holy or virtuous individuals said to go to heaven after death.</li><li>• A collective reminder of the life of the object is shown via the wear down of the bronze over time through visitors' touch.</li></ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ This erosion also recalls the wear of devotional touch and ritual usage seen in many of the historical bronze sculptures in the Rubin Museum’s collection.</li> <li>• Breyer P-Orridge was an artist, musician, and cultural provocateur who traveled to and worked in Nepal for about thirty years and engaged with philosophical and spiritual aspects of Himalayan cultures.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Connections to other artworks</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Handheld Drum (Damaru), Wood: ritual, communication</li> <li>• Lama (Teacher) Milarepa, Stone Statue: teaching, communication</li> </ul>

8. **TSHERIN SHERPA** (b. 1968, Kathmandu, Nepal)

***WISH-FULFILLING TREE, 2016***

Bronze cast mandala, found objects, rubble

Rubin Museum of Art

C2019.1.1a-j



Observation notes:

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# TSHERIN SHERPA (b. 1968, Kathmandu, Nepal)

## *WISH-FULFILLING TREE*, 2016

<b>Main Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Memorial</li><li>• Destruction</li><li>• Hope</li><li>• Environment</li></ul>
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**Look at the mandala and the rubble below. What do you see? How is a tree portrayed in this piece? How does the mandala in the *Shrine Room* compare to this one?**

- Have you or anyone you know ever encountered a natural disaster? What were your emotions surrounding the event?
- What objects would be found from your home? Add some sketches to your *Shrine Room* mandala sketch.
- What worldly desire would you want the wish-fulfilling tree to satisfy? Sketch what your wish-fulfilling tree would look like.
- Note your observations.

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<b>A Deeper Look</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tsherin Sherpa returned to his home city of Kathmandu to create <i>Wish-fulfilling Tree</i> after the devastating earthquake that hit Nepal on April 25, 2015, and he worked with local craftsmen to construct this seven-layer bronze mandala.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ A mandala is an idealized representation of the cosmic universe.</li></ul></li><li>• This mandala is both a memorial to the destruction caused by the earthquake and a wish for the future.</li><li>• Surrounding the mandala is rubble, debris, and found objects signifying the types of household goods demolished during the natural disaster, thus creating a relationship between cosmic aspiration and earthly reality.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ These were all sourced from within five blocks of the Rubin, Museum, creating a local connection that also speaks to the work's universal objectives.</li></ul></li></ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Found across Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, the wish-fulfilling tree is intended as a means to satisfy worldly and celestial desires.</li> <li>• This installation speaks to the Nepalese’s practical hope for economic compensation post-earthquake, symbolized in an earlier iteration of this work with rupee notes on the mandala.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Connections to other artworks</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ritual Mandala Offering, silver sculpture: environment, ritual</li> <li>• Vajrayogini, painting: transformation, realization, power, protection</li> </ul>

To find out more and hear Tsherin Sherpa speak about *Wish-fulfilling Tree*, visit <https://rubinmuseum.org/mediacenter/destruction-can-inspire-creation>.

9. **TSHERIN SHERPA** (b. 1968, Kathmandu, Nepal)  
***UFO (UNIDENTIFIED FETTERING ORGANIZATION) No. 2, 2016***  
***UFO (UNIDENTIFIED FETTERING ORGANIZATION) No. 3, 2016***

Acrylic, ink, and gold pen on cotton  
 Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi



UFO (Unidentified Fettering Organization) No. 2



UFO (Unidentified Fettering Organization) No. 3

Observation notes:

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**TSHERIN SHERPA** (b. 1968, Kathmandu, Nepal)

***UFO (UNIDENTIFIED FETTERING ORGANIZATION) No. 2*, 2016**

***UFO (UNIDENTIFIED FETTERING ORGANIZATION) No. 3*, 2016**

<b>Main Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Chaos</li><li>• Natural forms</li><li>• Mythical beings</li><li>• Aftermath</li></ul>
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**What are your first reactions when looking at these two paintings? Can you make out any figures? What emotions do these paintings elicit? Think about the Vajrayogini painting in the *Shrine Room*. What connections can you make?**

- What do you think this deity's purpose is?
  - Sketch your own UFO. What is it protecting you from?
  - Note your observations.
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<b>A Deeper Look</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In this series, chaotic swirls and clouds surround historic-looking structures.</li><li>• In <i>UFO No. 2</i>, tentacle-like forms appear to be extensions of the swirling, flattened deity located at the top center, overtaking built elements and the multi-limbed humans below.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ The composition includes natural forms, skeletons, mythical beings, and abstracted motifs encircling the façade of a Tibetan building.</li></ul></li><li>• In <i>UFO No. 3</i>, there is a clear reference to the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal with the curved, colorful forms surrounding a Tibetan temple and architectural pieces dispersed among the composition</li><li>• The same swirling, flattened deity in <i>UFO No. 2</i> appears here, but his orange, blue, and green tentacles seem more connected to his body.</li><li>• These paintings are painted in a contemporary style that hints at the artist's training and experience in traditional thangka painting.</li></ul>
<b>Connections to other artworks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Vajrayogini, painting: transformation, realization, power, protection</li></ul>