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Asian Art Museum Asks Life's Biggest Questions in *Divine Bodies*

Original exhibition showcases historical sculpture from Buddhist and Hindu traditions along with contemporary photo-based work from renowned Indian artists



San Francisco, Jan 9, 2018 — 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? In response, from March 9 through July 29, 2018, the Asian Art Museum presents *Divine Bodies*, bringing together nearly 70 large-scale historical sculptures and paintings from Hindu and Buddhist traditions, along with contemporary photo-based work. This original exhibition invites us to dwell on these mysteries as we ponder the power of transformation, the possibility of transcendence, and the relationship of our bodies to the cosmos.

"*Divine Bodies* presents masterpieces from 1500 years ago to today, from what is now India, Pakistan, and the wider Buddhist world, to engage visitors in a real conversation," explains Qamar Adamjee, the museum's Malavalli Family Foundation Associate Curator of Art of the Indian Subcontinent. "These artworks demand that we contemplate our role in a larger cosmology by asking, 'How we can see the human in the divine and the divine in the human?'"

Artists from across Asia have long depicted deities — Hindu gods and goddesses, Buddhas and bodhisattvas, from the gentle to the fierce— in carnal human form. Their familiar facial features and unexpectedly corporeal figures allow mortals to relate to immortals, establishing an ongoing interaction between human and divine bodies: between material and ethereal, physical and metaphysical, finite and infinite.

The Buddhist deity Guhyasamaja, approx. 1400–1500. China; Beijing, Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Bronze with gilding. Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B64B23. Photograph © Asian Art Museum.

“The idea is that by contemplating physical beauty, devotees experience the metaphysical beauty behind such images,” says exhibition co-organizer Jeff Durham, Assistant Curator of Himalayan Art, and a practicing yoga instructor. “A statue is not *just* a statue: the exhibition encourages us to look at these artworks as devotional images imbued with real divine potency and reminds us of our own spiritual agency on the path to enlightenment.”

In addition to traditional depictions of sacred forces, *Divine Bodies* also presents four series from contemporary Indian photographers — Gauri Gill, Dayanita Singh, Pamela Singh, and Vivan Sundaram — as well as video work from American-Korean duo David and Hi-Jin Hodge. An extensive presentation of photography for the Asian Art Museum, these works together address an issue central to the exhibition: How can we discover meaning in an ever-changing, impermanent world?

These award-winning photographers are widely celebrated in their home country. From deeply personal stills of 20th-century graves, to images of temples and worshippers wittily reworked with pen and ink, the mostly black and white selection of photographs provides a familiar foothold to explore the rich theology underlying *Divine Bodies*.

In the most well-known series, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (1999–2017), photographer Dayanita Singh documents 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 Hindu deities on view in *Divine Bodies* — both male and female cosmic forces.

“Artists like Dayanita Singh document the centrality of the human body to our understanding of ourselves and our place in the universe,” says Karin G. Oen, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art and an exhibition co-organizer. “At the same time, like a religious experience, Mona’s difficult life offers us a glimpse of transcendence within self-transformation, a parable for what happens when we embrace what lies beyond the material world as it is given to us.”

By putting the human at the center of the exhibition as much as the artwork on view, *Divine Bodies* invites visitors to draw connections to their own lives and inspires personal interpretations.



“Viewing divine bodies from China, India, Thailand, Tibet, Indonesia, Pakistan and other regions side by side reveals truly universal themes as well as culturally specific ideals of beauty and godliness,” says Asian Art Museum director and CEO, Jay Xu. “You don’t have to be an adherent of these faith traditions to grasp the power and meaning of these incredible devotional artworks.”

The Asian Art Museum will be the only venue for *Divine Bodies*.

Mona and Myself (still), 2013, by Dayanita Singh (Indian, b. 1961). Single-channel video with sound. Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London. © Dayanita Singh.

Exhibition Organization

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.

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). On weekdays, \$20 for adults and \$15 for seniors (65 & over), youth (13–17) and college students (with ID). On weekends, \$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.

General Admission: FREE for museum members, \$15 for adults, \$10 for seniors (65+), college students with ID, and youth (13–17). FREE for children under 12 and SFUSD students with ID. General admission is FREE to all on Target First Free Sundays (the first Sunday of every month). On Thursday evenings, Feb. 23 – Sep. 28, 2017, 5–9 PM, \$10 general admission.

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

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