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A Guided Tour of Hell at the Asian Art Museum

American Buddhist Teacher Shares Near-Death Visions of the Afterworld in Contemporary Paintings by Tibetan Master



San Francisco, February 26, 2018 — Vortices of fiery crimson, multi-dimensional cities of ice and silence, beings made of beings made of beings: from Apr. 20 to Sept. 16, 2018, take the Asian Art Museum's *Guided Tour of Hell* through the many layers of Buddhism's karmic afterworlds.

A Guided Tour of Hell is the outcome of an unusual collaboration between American-born Buddhist practitioner and teacher Samuel Bercholz and Los Angeles-based Tibetan *thangka* painter Pema Namdol Thaye. When

Bercholz suffered an almost fatal heart attack, he went careening into hellscapes populated by fierce demons, proud gods, tortured humans — and a few surprisingly benevolent forces.

To help share insights he brought back from his journey, Bercholz narrated the experience to Thaye to use as the basis for original drawings and paintings. The Asian Art Museum's exhibition showcases 22 of the resulting acrylic paintings. Stylistically inspired by Thaye's childhood love of graphic novels, they are created with legendary Tibetan technical excellence. The combination brings Bercholz's visions to vivid, hallucinogenic life.

Gates of Hell, 2015, by Pema Namdol Thaye (Tibetan, b. 1967). Acrylic on canvas. Lent by the artist. © Pema Namdol Thaye.

"In telling this strange tale, my intention has been to communicate the stark reality that is hell," notes Bercholz in the introduction to the 2016 graphic memoir that he and Thaye produced. A reality "both as I perceived it during a near-death experience and as it corresponds to Buddhist cosmology, which is quite distinctive compared with Western traditions."



The works on view in *A Guided Tour of Hell* — exclusively at the Asian Art Museum — dramatically depict the karmic suffering of hell-beings in fantastical landscapes, both fiery and crystalline. These characters — among them a suicide bomber, a murderous warlord, a self-absorbed socialite, a scientist who invents a doomsday bomb — each represent a negative habit of mind: envy, hate, greed, disdain, materialism.

"People immediately connect with Thaye's depictions of Bercholz's harrowing, Dante-esque journey, whether they're simply interested in graphic art or curious about how religious teachings can be transmitted through contemporary painting," explains Assistant Curator of Himalayan Art Dr. Jeffrey Durham, who organized the exhibition. "Either way, visitors will be able to enjoy the kind of masterful visual storytelling that has always appealed to audiences: the thrilling, the chilling and the awe-inspiring."

The series begins with *Descent*, where a luminous orb embodies the entire cosmos. Inside, the fires of hell glow with menace. Then, in *The Gates of Hell*, a swirling crimson vortex spinning with Bosch-like figures draws us into the borderland between hells hot and hells cold, realms claustrophobic and others just as desolate. Thaye's art can also take on a more peaceful tone. For example, *Janna Sophia* portrays a goddess of compassion who shows Bercholz that pure kindness can ameliorate the anguish of those in hell.

"Buddhism has long held near-death visions to be important vectors of wisdom on the path to enlightenment," says Asian Art Museum Director and CEO Jay Xu. "*A Guided Tour of Hell* continues this legacy, encouraging us to contemplate suffering in order to inspire us toward greater good in life."

The final painting in the series, *Liberation*, reveals the final purpose of hell: release from the poisonous states and dynamics that caused it in the first place. Or as Bercholz concludes, "Even the worst hell contains the seed of wakefulness," for, in the end, "everyone gets out of hell."

Exhibition Programs, Organization and Support

On June 23, join Pema Namdol Thaye to hear more about his artwork.

A talk with Samuel Bercholz is scheduled for August 2018.

Please check the Asian Art Museum's website for a complete schedule.

Copies of Bercholz and Thaye's *A Guided Tour of Hell* will be available in the museum store for \$24.95.

A Guided Tour of Hell is organized by the Asian Art Museum. Presentation is made possible with the generous support of Glen S. and Sakie T. Fukushima and Peter and Beverly Sinton.

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.

Museum 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 museum is \$10.

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

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