Save as Buddha.tif:
Buddhist Iconography and the Australian Sangha
Imaged Through Digital Transformation

Exegesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts by Research in Photography

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

JP Gural

01/06/08
All things are born of causation and phenomenal, but ignorant people cling to them as real.
-Buddha, *Mulajata-hridaya-bhumi-dhyana sutra*
(Suzuki 1981 p.105)
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Abstract

This research encompasses a body of photographic work that documents and artistically interprets Buddhist influences in Australia by using digital photography, both in manipulated and representational form. The collection of images provides an aesthetic experience to further an understanding of Buddhism in the West and also generates a creative interpretation of new media art inspired by traditional Buddhist forms.

Buddhism’s increasing popularity parallels a movement in the West away from traditional Newtonian physics, i.e. models based on solid forms, to post-modern relative physics, i.e. models posited on flows of energy. This writing looks at the influences of technological development and scientific exploration which inform the understanding of the photographic image. Debates fueled by the advent of digitisation pose new questions in visual culture in understanding what is real. The uniqueness of digital artwork is challenged by the shift from fixed form to flow.

The works of several artists which relate to contemporary Buddhism, consumerism and digitisation are investigated as part of the development of the imagery formed through this research. Consumer trends coupled with technological advancement have generated a proliferation in photographic imagery, a phenomenon that is echoed in the ubiquity of religious and spiritual products on sale to the general public. A critique of kitsch as it relates to the photographic image is further investigated by documenting popular expressions of Buddhism in Australia, including personal collections of iconography and larger public festivals.
Forward: My Personal Background

This project is part of a spiritual path that began with my curiosity as a teenager reading the iconic novel, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig 1999). Throughout my life I have developed a more focused and engaged practice within the tradition of Zen Buddhism, a path that has intersected my art practice as a painter and photographer. Of particular interest to me has been the cross-pollination of artistic and cultural forms. The poetry and writings of Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsberg were also grist for my creative mill. At McGill University in Montréal I took courses in Buddhism and developed a better theoretical framework of understanding.

Starting in 2003, I relocated to Seoul, South Korea, ostensibly to immerse myself in a Buddhist culture and to more formally develop my Buddhist practice. As well, I am a painter and have a great fascination with East Asian art forms. I studied *Su Muk Hwa*, Korean traditional landscape painting at the studio of master Kim Bong Bin. I found this style of painting to be quite radically different from the contemporary Western art that I had studied. The use of the black line, of ink, of flattened spaces and emptiness that indicate depth as well as the peaceful mind that must be cultivated to really honour this tradition, were all elements that opened my eyes to new creative possibilities.

I attended the Seoul International Zen Centre at Hwa Gye Sa Temple and could more deeply develop a meditation practice, and familiarised myself with traditional Korean culture in transition. Through contact with several monks and nuns I could share in their time and thoughts, a process of familiarisation that affirmed the commonality of our human experience in Zen.

A chance meeting led to the inspiration for this current research project. I had just begun my life in Seoul when on one winter’s day in early 2004, by happenstance I came upon a back street temple where a nun was giving an evening dharma talk. It turned out she was Australian, but I did not have an opportunity to speak with her that night. Nearly two years later, I did meet her at a Vesak (Buddha’s birthday) celebration amidst great throngs of celebrants at massive Dongdaemun stadium in Seoul. Her name is Beom Hyon Sunim¹ and she planned to leave Korea soon to return to her native Australia.

Approximately half a year later, I moved to Brisbane and began a new life in an unfamiliar country. At that same time, Beom Hyon Sunim unexpectedly arrived at our door and stayed with us for the next few months. Throughout this time, my intrigue with transplanted Buddhism in Australia grew and the idea for this project took shape. While having tea at a café, I noticed a Buddhist theme in the gardens, where Buddha statues took up residence next to gnomes and flower pots. Seeing Buddhist artefacts decontextualised and used away from a spiritual environment seemed absurd and I wished to further document this proliferating phenomenon. I grew curious about an oft-quoted statistic that Buddhism is Australia’s fastest growing religion (*Changing Face of

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¹ *Sunim* is a name applied to monks and nuns, meaning ‘venerable’. 
a Nation 2007; Danaher 2007). What did that mean and how did it relate to the Buddha in the garden?
Chapter I Introduction

1.1 Overview

This section introduces the research project by providing a project brief and a list of specific questions, followed by a rationale that cites certain social and cultural trends as well as artistic and technical transformations. An overview of critical theory pertaining to the development of photography in an age of digital imaging is examined. As well, debates surrounding kitsch are introduced, and Buddhist spirituality and its relevance to contemporary art is examined in the works of select artists. A methodology sets the direction of the research project’s culmination in an exhibition of photographic work.

1.2 Project Brief

This research project developed a body of photographic work that documented aspects of Buddhist influence in Australia and presented this information in a creative way, utilizing processes of digital manipulation to illustrate fundamental tenets of Buddhist philosophy, with respect to the situation of Buddhism in the West. It was intended to provide an aesthetic experience for people to better understand Buddhism and to bridge a gap in perception regarding the place of Buddhism within contemporary mainstream society. In providing meaningful dialogue regarding the proliferation of spiritual kitsch, a more critical response to Buddhist imagery used for commercial purposes may be cultivated. This project sought to:

- Investigate the multi-cultural significance of Buddhism in and around Melbourne;
- Document activities of the community of practitioners, both lay and monastic;
- Document non-religious manifestations of Buddhist imagery;
- Experiment with digital imaging processes to develop a visual language that illustrates cultural paradigm shifts through scientific and technological devices (computers, cameras, Photoshop) as art making tools;
- Focus on certain Buddhist ideas such as emptiness, transcendence, interconnectedness, and the use of koan-like visual absurdities as creative tools.

The project addressed several questions:

1. How do criticisms of photography fail to address the medium’s greater applications and potential for artistic expression, particularly in light of the advent of digitisation as it relates to the context of this research project?

2. In looking at several artists’ works, how has digital imaging fostered growth in image creation and in the understanding of new forms of art?
3. How can the transformations ushered in by digitisation be part of my own photographic explorations of the Australian Buddhist community and its mutations and manifestations as a cultural voice, and be reflected in the creation of an aesthetic reflecting this spiritual practice?

4. Susan Sontag (1977 p. 5) writes ‘A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture.’ How do scientific theories of light and matter affect the understanding of the production of a photograph change the interpretation of digital imaging, as this pertains to the discourse on image making and ‘truth’?

1.3 Rationale and Introduction to Relevant Issues

This exegesis contributes to the ever-expanding realm of critical theory on digital art that is itself in a state of permanent revolution. With continuous innovation firmly entrenched in the medium’s existence, Coleman (1998 p. 74) argues that the ‘artist-as-producer has no time to consolidate a hermeneutics, which leaves the critics lacking the necessary foundation for their exegetics. Continuous innovation does not render analysis superfluous, but instead makes it impossible.’ Through further critical investigation, larger questions surrounding social trends may be better understood and related ideas linked together.

This project participates in several areas of discourse. Globalisation is bringing various cultures together and through understanding their respective images one can understand one’s own place in this world. Buddhism, and its related iconography, is taking root in the developed world, manifesting a popularisation of an Eastern religion. For this research, Australia provided a case study of. The appeal towards Buddhism parallels a paradigm shift in the West away from traditional Newtonian physics, i.e. models based on solid forms, to post-modern relative physics, i.e. models posited on flows of energy. The digital images created through this project demonstrate how technology can be used to illustrate cultural movements and the underlying ideas that shape consciousness.

Photography, as a global force of image exchange, is rapidly embracing new digital technology faster than it can be understood. The framework of understanding a photograph is largely based on criteria established during the silver-halide era. New interpretations of what a photograph means need to be established in order to not be deceived by the seductiveness of the digital image. While image objectivity slips to a realm of flux, the power of subjective communication explosively grows through the availability of digital media. There is great value inherent in the interpretive qualities of the digital image that may be used to critique social evolution. Questions of scale relate to other processes as well.

One such development is the rise of Buddhist iconography as a cheap mass product. There is humour inherent in the cornucopia of religious iconography clustered in the pantheons of new age stores, in the proliferation of Buddhist iconography related to
upscale lifestyle marketing, and in Buddhism’s growing presence in popular media and culture. This shift indicates an altered cultural landscape which may or may not be understood in a broader sense. For example, until recently, Australia was governed by an administration which suggested that multiculturalism be expressed as a sharing in an Australian myth, similar to the American idea of the ‘melting pot’. Throsby (2006 p. 19) criticises the former administration’s propagation of a national myth based on outdated icons and the stifling of debates surrounding notions of multiculturalism. ‘The symbols of nationhood to which [John Howard] constantly refers are drawn from what he sees as defining moments in [Australian] history - Gallipoli, Kokoda - opportunities for the Australian battler to emerge as hero and for the pivotal characteristic of mateship to be forged … [Howard further] declares that ‘as a nation we’re over all that identity stuff’.’ Regardless of political leanings, understanding cultural shifts is an essential undertaking not embraced by the words of the former prime minister. A greater understanding of Asian cultures is essential for Australia to not become, as Milner (1990) cautions, ‘a colony of European settlement suddenly set adrift, in intellectually and imaginatively uncharted Asian waters’.

As societies grow closer though political, economic and cultural interactions, many elements are being shared and appropriated. Movies such as Seven Years in Tibet (1997), television shows like Dharma and Greg, high profile actors like Richard Gere (On World Views with Richard Gere 2007) championing Tibetan political and religious causes and the increasingly ubiquitous Buddha-gnomes in residential gardens are all visible manifestations of Buddhism in popular culture. Social issues that have thrust Buddhists into the media spotlight include the self-immolation of Buddhist monks during the Vietnam War (McCutcheon 1997), the tireless campaigning of Tibet’s Dalai Lama against the Chinese occupation of his homeland and most recently the protests of Buddhist monks and nuns against Burma’s ruling military junta (Burmese Monks in Pagoda Protest 2007). In response to the Australian government’s willingness to invade Afghanistan in 2001, several hundred protesters ‘lay down on the ground to create a group mandala2 praying for world peace and harmony’ (Chiu 2002 p. 1).

Since the time of the historical Buddha, a long history of image making and iconography has been constantly developing in Buddhist cultures, providing practitioners with a visible representation of human enlightenment. The Buddha has become a potent symbol of freedom and the awakened mind. In addition to the Buddha, other symbols have developed and been used to augment Buddhist practice, such as the mandala, hand gestures called mudras and paintings from various cultures. Now in the West, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have become common objects of kitsch, while other symbols have assumed decorative functions.

This trend towards kitsch is a visual manifestation of a shift in perception as well as a style in this new niche market. Stores selling the cheaper imitative forms seem like pantheons: temples of Buddha, Shiva, Vishnu, and many other deities all shelved under one roof. On the proliferation of inexpensive replicas and their semblance to original forms, Dorfles (1973 p.12) describes them as being ‘something with the external

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2 The mandala is a complex drawing often framed within a square border. It symbolises lines of energy and a balance in polarities.
characteristics of art, but which is in fact a falsification of art’. While not necessarily
art, kitsch provides something like art to less wealthy consumers. That this trend is
looking eastward is noteworthy. The nature of Western kitsch is subsequently evolving
as plastic Buddhas take their place alongside soft drink bottles and sundry Mona Lisas.

Technology has beget instruments of creation and production that challenge previous
eras’ understanding of visual form and object making. The camera was hailed as a great
recorder of ‘truth’, an objective mark-making tool that never lies. However this faith in
objective seeing and the claim to be ‘real’ have been challenged on a number of
grounds. Choices of lighting, contrast and colour define through production what a
photograph will look like and convey; subjectivity is inherent in the process.

It is suggested that computers serve the same function as enlargers. ‘Digital printing is
simply another way of printing photographs, and the debate is becoming as pointless as
if oil and watercolour painters were to argue which medium is the most valid’ (Jones
2007). With a rich history of photomontage, airbrushing, double exposures and other
forms of visual trickery, manipulation has always been part of the practice. The desire
to manipulate predates technological facility. Effects seamlessly blend, creating
something virtual which never existed outside imagination. But their slick
seductiveness poses problems of credibility as anything appears real with no pasted
borders to reveal imperfections in fabrication. The technology that facilitates image
creation is itself in a state of permanent flux. The constant perfection of ever-newer art-
making devices is a process engendered by scientific exploration and applications of
new knowledge.

Through scientific innovation, technological growth has mushroomed. Physics affects
all aspects of life, an influence not strictly technological. ‘It extends to the realm of
thought and culture where it has led to a deep revision in our conception of the universe
and of our relation to it’ (Capra 1982 p. 21). Technology and science have significantly
influenced many aspects of the human domain, particularly since the industrial
revolution. ‘Even the most abstract of scientific concepts make a significant, albeit
often unconsciously absorbed, impact upon our daily lives. Both visually and
conceptually, science informs the way we experience the world, and in turn it is within
this ambiance that the visual arts, including photography, occupy their place’ (Peat 1998
p. 148). According to Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, ‘space and time are so closely
interwoven … that one observer’s space becomes both space and time to another
observer who is at motion with respect to the first. The same holds for time’ (Genz
1999 pp. 167-168). In short, Einstein held that empty space has no existence
independent of that within it. Such thoughts echo the famous Mahayana text, the Heart
Sutra, which states that ‘emptiness is form and form is emptiness’.

Starting in the late Nineteenth Century, many artists have explored ideas that are
intimately connected with Buddhism. Contemporary artists like Mariko Mori, Wang
Qingsong and Tim Johnson as well as others directly borrow and comment on
Buddhism and contemporary culture. However concepts of emptiness and
impermanence permeate the works of other artists, such as Charles Cohen and
Alexander Apóstol to name just two, who are using new media forms to explore non-Buddhist themes. The works of several artists are investigated in Chapter III.

1.4 Methodology

The highlights of this research involved my documenting temples and participants in *Buddha 2550*. I attended the Melbourne Diamond Way Centre and I diligently documented kitsch products and other Buddhist oddities and commodities. As well, many festivals and public performances that I documented include Buddha Day (Vesak) 2006 & 2007 at Federation Square, *Buddha 2550* opening and closing ceremonies, Lama Ole Nydahl’s lecture at RMIT’s Kaleide theatre and the Gyuto monks on tour in Hobart and Melbourne. Added to the list was the *Gardens of the World 2007* exhibition in Melbourne which featured many Buddhist landscaping themes. I further photographed around Australia, particularly in Victoria, as additional reference material for the exhibition. The Incinerator Arts Complex was chosen as the exhibition site.

A literature review was formulated and a survey of related artists was investigated. Throughout the period of image documentation, a rigorous exploration of Photoshop was conducted to formulate interpretive images that illustrate Buddhist tenets as a reference to the photographic genre and to the position of multiculturalism in Australia.
Chapter II Literature Review

2.1 Overview

This exegesis crosses several areas of discourse and this chapter examines relevant theoretical debate. An overview of photography introduces the contemporary issues surrounding digital art making as part of a longer historical process. The role of technological development as a consequence of scientific exploration is important in understanding the photographic image and its applications. Critical debate on digitisation introduces a discourse on understanding what is real. The role of machines in providing new ways of understanding reality is critiqued in light of the change in emphasis from fixed form to flow, and what impact this has on the uniqueness of digital artwork. Susan Sontag’s benchmark writings on photography are discussed with counter arguments raised and critiqued with specific reference to the research questions. Finally related Buddhist scholarly discourse intersects postmodern deconstructivism in understanding the shift towards determined causation, flow and emptiness.

2.2 The Photograph: An Ever-Evolving Lie That Hints at the Truth

The creation of the first photograph by Nicephore Niepce was the culmination of a long process towards recording nature in a fixed form by mechanical means. Photography came about not so much as a result of the workings of an individual genius, but rather as an expression of an entire cultural process. The photograph grew out of a desire to capture landscapes and objects of nature, a desire particular to Western culture. 'Its discursive traces only began to appear in Europe in the late Eighteenth Century, from whence it steadily increased in insistence and dispersal up until photography's public disclosure and commercialisation in the 1830s' (Batchen 1997 p. 56). Capturing points in time through mechanical recording is a practice which began with the widespread use of the camera obscura.

The prototype of the photographic camera, the camera obscura had been in use for centuries as an aid to drawing. It was through this practice that constructs of reality were translated into visual records, that perspective, light and shadow could be used to render an image of what the eye apparently perceived. Based on these foundations the critical understanding of film-based photography was coupled with a philosophical paradigm steeped in a belief in realism that was objectively knowable, a God’s eye view.

Photography grew rapidly during the Nineteenth Century, an era of technological and social upheaval. Early projects entrusted to the camera included documenting these effects upon people, recording differences in work and life. ‘It became common for authenticity to be stressed through using such phrases as “drawn from an original photograph”. The photographic image was already being mobilised as witness’ (Wells 2004 p. 58).
Photography’s contributions to all disciplines extended what could be studied and scrutinised as real or knowable. The camera gave truth. It also gave vocabulary and ideas that were unknowable and inconceivable before its birth.

Photography was adopted as an instrument of science almost from its inception. ‘Fox Talbot found his “pencil of nature” capable of revealing such a wealth of detail as to confound those who first perused his photographic images. People who believed they had been looking carefully at nature now realised how much their acts of seeing had been filtered through the strategies of consciousness and habit … Photography’s abilities further extended until, in our modern age, it tells us about everything from the early state of the universe to the ultimate building blocks of matter’ (Peat 1998 p. 144).

figure 1: Stalin routinely air-brushed his enemies out of photographs. In this photograph (circa 1930) a commissar was removed from the original photograph after falling out of favour with Stalin (Photo Tampering Throughout History n.d.).

Analogue photography is modernist in its objectives, i.e. a quest for the real, and its method (create a fixed object). This ‘painting of light’ remains a subjective record of a moment in time, however framed. As seen in figure 1, techniques of manipulation have defied the fixed attachment to ‘reality’ throughout history. Photography has always created imagery that slipped along the continuum of subjective interpretation, and by extension made it dependent on power, although its modernist associations linked it to schools of realism.

The photograph participates in many critical debates, a testament to its versatility. Peat (1998 pp. 145-146) relates some of the myriad ways that photography may be embraced as a practice:

Some photographers lean towards the medium’s objective, documentary ability as a means of reporting on the world and human society. Others argue that photography inevitably selects, frames and manipulates the images it produces according to the subjective values of individual photographers. Some embrace the most advanced technologies, sampling, selecting, and processing images through digital means … In particular, they look for ways in which nature can be persuaded to reveal herself in the gentlest manner possible. Some have even
become fascinated by the alchemical nature of the photographic processes and
by the metaphysical qualities of light and its interactions with matter.

The seductiveness of photography has many appeals and the new found facility of
digital manipulation has re-invigorated the love affair with mechanically reproduced
imagery. The new possibilities have raised new questions.

2.3 The Dawn of Digitisation

Technical Director of The Asian Classics Input Project (ACIP), Robert R. Chilton,
writes that ‘unlike analogue materials, digital content can be rapidly transmitted over
networks and duplicated onto inexpensive media without loss of information’ (Chilton
n.d.). The new ways digital information may be interlinked and interacted upon are
opening new paths and possibilities through access feasibility and ease of operations.
The ability to access and re-contextualize information ad infinitum has created a
revolution of random access, ‘a revolution based on the possibilities of instant access to
media elements that can be reshuffled in seemingly infinite combinations’ (Paul 2003 p.
15). The feasibility of image collection, storage and manipulation became increasingly
important to the realisation of this research project and ultimately provided the visual
vocabulary to produce the final exhibition.

A highlight of the digital world is the ability to be ‘portable and compact ... Copies of
digitized materials can be made quickly and easily at little expense, and with no loss of
information from one copy to the next’ (Paul 2003 p. 15). The economy of scale has
exploded exponentially. Coleman (1998 p. 66) concurs when he asserts that ‘it’s a
consequence of the new technology that one becomes so engulfed by the process of
absorbing or trying to absorb all the information … because you simply become
swamped by data’.

The ever-growing pervasiveness of technology has engendered artistic response. ‘As
the industrial age made its transition into the electronic era, artists became increasingly
interested in the intersections between art and technology’ (Paul 2003 p.16). The works
and influences of selected artists are further examined later in this exegesis. To
understand the current paradigm shift in relation to the dominant view, the debate must
be situated in the evolution of theoretical physics, the philosophical underpinnings of
science and subsequent technological development.

A golden era of science, the Enlightenment, was itself born of a fragmented world view,
that of the Christian Church, which places God external to subjective reality. There is a
division between the self and the other, subject and object. ‘The scientific revolution
began with the assumption that an external God created the world prior to and
independently of human consciousness. Physicists then set themselves the goal of
perceiving that objective universe from a “God’s-eye” perspective and formulating its
laws in terms of God’s own language, which they thought to be mathematics. Since they
were focused on the realm of objective space and its contents that exist independently of
consciousness, it was quite natural for them to marginalize the role of mind in nature”
(Wallace 2007 p. 23). The camera’s role of objective note-taker should come as no
Wallace (2007 p. 31) asserts that the scientific mind places *objectivism* as a cornerstone of all subsequent thinking. ‘This view, which is rooted in the Seventeenth Century metaphysics of René Descartes, implies that the objective world *lies beyond* the subjective world of appearances, including all the evidence from our senses, which are deemed to exist only within our heads.

Wallace (2007 p. 68) maintains that:

> When we look at a rose, no brain cells actually turn red; when we taste wine, our brain cells don’t taste like wine; and when we smell a rose, its fragrance is not to be found in the brain. Yet all these qualities, according to Descartes, are not located in the world outside either. The implication is that all our sensory impressions of the objective world exist nowhere in the objective world, neither outside not inside the brain! ... there is no technology that can detect the presence or absence of any kind of consciousness, for scientists do not even know what exactly is to be measured. Strictly speaking, *at present there is no objective, scientific evidence even for the existence of subjective experience!*

The case of colour is significant. The camera now has the ability to record colour. But what is the ‘reality’ of colour? Schofield (2007) states that ‘colour is a function of the human visual system, and is not an intrinsic property. Objects don’t “have” colour, they give off light that appears to be a colour. Spectral power distributions exist in the physical world, but colour exists only in the mind of the beholder’.

On the surface, it would appear that the camera could provide a visual record of reality, an objective and incontrovertible truth. A photographic image is a *reduction* of reality. Any moment in time is an infinite web of moments from many perspectives. The photograph is only seen from one angle. It’s a slice of the whole. The scientific method reduces phenomena into smaller working models. According to Wallace (2007 p. 36) this approach fails by oversimplifying more complex relationships and by often rejecting not-conscious, or irrational knowledge. He states that ‘humans are concerned not only with survival and procreation but also with the pursuit of meaning and happiness … Scientific materialism offers no clue as to how humans might actually experience genuine happiness, for this is one more facet of human existence that does not make “evolutionary sense”’. One of the stronger criticisms of photography points out the faults of the passive witness, the disengaged observer. Therefore interrelationships of subjective and objective modes of understanding may be needed to better form critical debate surrounding a photograph’s meaning and function within an art-critical context.

Miller (1998 p. 41) summarises the relationship between the progress of scientific research and the development of photography:

> Throughout the history of the medium, photographers have appropriated, aestheticised, documented, and re-examined scientific information based upon
life, the body, the environment, and technology ... In broad scope, they pose larger questions about evolution, physicality and degeneration, the speed of technological advancements, and man’s existential position within the universe ... Itself a scientific process and the result of scientific investigation, photography not only changed the capacity for representing the world, it profoundly influenced art as well ... their discoveries, in fact, resulted in new and unusual forms of interaction between artists and science.

In presenting new objects of seeing and knowing, photography is not a passive notetaker, but rather an active agent in formulating thought. The word ‘theory’ is derived from ‘theatre’ and so carries with it implications of visual display. No mathematical result or piece of raw data can exist purely in the realm of the abstract forever; at some point, a visual manifestation is necessary to make it relevant in the material world. Science is dependent on photography as both a visual note taker and as an informant that shapes the nature of thought and concept (Peat 1998 p. 144).

Besides understanding physical realms, researchers also uncover ideas, a non-physical domain. Through this process, new models of understanding are formulated upon speculation, inquiry and investigation. This is a mutual process of co-dependent interaction of the subjective and objective modes of understanding all phenomena. Wallace (2007 p. 69) illustrates some of the conceptual conflicts that surround this divide. ‘Modern science relies heavily on technological instruments for detecting physical phenomena, and on the basis of the appearances, or data, produced by such instruments, scientists devise ingenious models and theories to explain the objective processes that give rise to those phenomena. It should immediately be obvious that such data result from both the objective processes in nature and the specific kinds of measuring devices used to detect them. They do not exist independently in nature any more than experienced colours or sounds do’.

Throughout history, as art-making tools developed through technological innovation, new forms of expression grew in tandem and with them came new definitions of visual language. The cross-pollination of art and technology ‘has led, not just to the provision of new tools for the carrying out of existing practices, but to the evolution of unprecedented activities and modes of thought’ (Wands 2006 p. 1).

Rather than being an isolated phenomenon that sprouted from nothing, digital art, a part of which digital photography must be considered, is itself another point in a long line of aesthetic and technological innovation and has persisting historical antecedents. Paul (2003 pp. 11 – 12) looks at the breadth of Twentieth Century art and concludes that digital art has much in common with previous movements that stress concept, occasion and interaction, rather than focussing on the production of an art object. She cites Dadaist poetry which ‘aestheticised the construction of poems out of random variations of words and lines, using formal instructions to create an artifice that resulted from an interplay of randomness and control. This idea of rules being a process for creating art has a clear connection with the algorithms that form the basis of all software and every computer operation’.
In an era of slippage, the nebulous boundaries of photography make it hard to define as a unified practice. Miller (1998 p. 12) argues that ‘the identifying labels – artist, photographer, or the more neutral and encompassing imagemaker – are consequential to the museum only when it is considered significant to the maker to be so distinguished, for photography has always been about a continual questioning of the medium itself and cross-fertilization.’ Effectively photography ‘can be identified with multifaceted conceptual, cultural, historical, political, and social ideas, as well as being a visual practice’.

Thus advertising photography is advertising, photojournalism is journalism, scientific photography falls under the category of science, creative photography becomes fine art and fashion photography is fashion. In light of these facts, this research contributes to many debates: multiculturalism, spirituality, digital compositing, technical development, postmodernity and theoretical science, all under the catch-all heading of photography. Photography is the tool that functions in many disciplines. To use a shooting analogy, it’s a hired gun.

2.4 What is real?

By choosing processes of image manipulation, this project charted a course through stormy debate on what is real and the quest to manipulate imagery to convey specific meanings. Public faith in photography has rested largely on a perception that ‘a photograph never lies’ creating ‘a blind faith that photographs can be trusted implicitly – that what we see in a photograph is “real”’ (Coleman 1998 p. 46). Given the honourable position accorded by the legal system’s acceptance of photographs as admissible evidence in court, Coleman (1996 p. 46) asks ‘Could this society demonstrate any greater confidence in the photograph’s unimpeachability as a witnessing mechanism?’ Recent developments are eroding this faith.

In 2006, Reuters, the global news and information agency, withdrew the left-hand image (figure 2) after evidence emerged that it had been manipulated to show more smoke. Photojournalist Adnan Hajj doctored his coverage of the Israeli bombing of Beirut but claimed he was only using Photoshop to clean dust marks. Reuters subsequently ended the working relationship with the discredited photographer.

*figure 2*: Just cleaning dust? The image on the left was pulled from circulation. *(Lebanese Photographer Doctored Image 2006)*
Rosler (2002 p. 289) cites Baudrillard’s assertion that ‘truth is no longer an issue, since all signs are interchangeable’. Real is no longer real enough. Paul (2003 p. 36) suggests that ‘apart from the shifts that digital technologies have brought about in the realms of collage, montage, and compositing, they also challenge traditional notions of realism by facilitating the creation of alternative or simulated forms of reality, or a sense of the “hyperreal”’.

From the beginning though, photography has been a deceptive purveyor of ‘truth’. ‘The concept of artistic realism has been inextricably interconnected with the history of photography. The idea that the photograph records and represents reality “as it is” is both an important aspect of the medium and an arguable historical convention’ (Paul 2003 p. 36). This attribute of photography is a social construction of perception, and not something grounded in universal truth. A photograph’s veracity comes not from the immutable laws of nature, but rather from social construction. Ironically, right from photography’s inception, technology was developed to capture the moment and simultaneously techniques evolved to manipulate images to say something else.

With the loss of credibility in the photograph as a witness and bearer of reliable information, Coleman (1998 p. 77) points out that ‘that’s going to generate a major cultural shift in our relationship to photography as information’. Ironically the search for what is real has been deceptively given ‘hyperrealism’, better techniques and results achieved through digital imaging which allow for improved image creation that have little to no connection to the outside world. Traditional concepts of ‘real’ are challenged by other constructed forms of reality. But what do we get in return? Jenkins (n.d.) sums up this point by stating that ‘Computers that promise photorealism aren’t promising us reality; they are promising computer graphics that look like photographs.’ Perhaps the truth lies not in an objective depiction of phenomena but rather in the subjective interpretation of their meanings. This dual nature of the photographic image ultimately was expressed in the final exhibition by establishing two sections of images. This result is further discussed in Chapter V.

Debate abounds regarding the nature of what is represented in a digital image. Manovich (1996) affirms this manufactured reality, pointing out that ‘digital photographers can construct vivid, compelling, absolutely convincing photographs of architectural spaces or historic encounters which never existed … In such a world, seeing is no longer believing. The computer ignores photography’s indexical relation to reality, translating images into pixels which can be transformed, reworked, and redesigned like text in a word-processing program’ (Jenkins n.d). Computer-based information is strictly encoded and does not necessarily record or recreate a physical reality, while at the same time promising us something ‘real,’ or at least, credible.

While this is debatable on the level of the ‘content’ of the image, which often simulates and represents a physical reality, it is true from the perspective of its production. The digital image consists of discrete, modular elements, pixels that are based on algorithms, mathematical formulas. While bits are still essentially threads of lights, they do not by nature require a physical object to ‘represent’ and are not based on a principle of continuity with a real world … they also
sometimes visualize a process that otherwise would remain unseen, by translating and ‘encoding’ visual information (Paul 2003 p. 48).

All of this slippage of form echoes Mabbett’s (2006 p. 23) claim that ‘both Nagarjuna\(^3\) and deconstruction avoid any claim about a determinate reality’. In order to illustrate deeper layers of meaning in the research, layered and juxtaposed elements were worked through the computer, yielding images of more complete meaning. In photographing Buddhist expressions, getting beyond the fixed object posed questions for the method of the research. How has the value of the art-object changed in an age of infinite mechanical reproduction?

### 2.5 Unique Auras of Digital Art

‘It has been suggested that the creation of artworks such as paintings or drawings on a computer implies a loss of relationship with the ‘mark’ – that is, that there is a significant lack of personality in the mark one produces on a computer screen as opposed to one on paper or canvas’ (Paul 2003 p. 60). To this one may add analogue photographic processes that require traditional negatives and paper stock enlargements. Sontag (1977 pp. 87-88) writes that ‘the earliest photographers talked as if the camera were a copying machine; while people operate cameras, it is the camera that sees’. However, uniqueness does persist and an artist’s role is no less original. ‘The individuality and voice of an artist does not manifest itself in a direct physical intervention. Concept, all elements of the composition process, the writing of software, and many other aspects of digital art’s creation are still highly individual forms of expression that carry the aesthetic signature of an artist’ (Paul 2003 p. 60).

The rise of digital and computer-aided imaging has raised questions surrounding authenticity and originality, what previously Walter Benjamin identified as an artwork’s presence or aura, which he claimed as absent in photography. According to Wolin (1982 p. 188) ‘Benjamin defines the aura as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close (an object) may be”. The aura testifies to the authority of art in its cultic form, its condition of inimitable uniqueness, a singularity in time and space which is the hallmark of its autheticity’. This aspect of his argument focusses on the physical reality of an object and reduces the artist to a ‘producer of commodities for a market’ (Frisby 1985 p. 258). Issues surrounding kitsch and photography are examined more closely in Chapter IV.

This point is countered by many critics, including Susan Sontag who points out that aging photographs acquire an aura of decay that adds to their artistic value (Sontag 1977 p. 140). While attempting to counter Benjamin’s argument, Sontag effectively supports it. Her point continues to uphold the physical object, or atoms, of a photograph in the evaluation of its value. In an age of complete digital transfer, the existence of a physical

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\(^3\) Nagarjuna is considered the founder of the Madhyamika (the Middle Path/Way) school, a branch of the Mahayana Buddhist school. In the Zen tradition, he is the 14th Patriarch. He is also recognized as a patriarch in Tantric Buddhism and the Amitabha Buddhist sects. Nagarjuna used negation not to prove another viewpoint or truth but to negate all viewpoints. He thereby destroyed all logical arguments or speculation about Ultimate reality, denying the inherent existence of any such “reality” (June 2004).
print fading on a wall is of lesser importance in evaluating the value of digital art, which often exists purely as a series of replicable bits. Rather what is of greater relevance is ‘process’ rather than ‘product.’ In an era of information conveyance, ‘the change from atoms to bits is irrevocable and unstoppable’ (Negroponte 1996 p. 4).

Another strike against originality in digital art lies in the sameness of the technological devices used. For example, the Photoshop program used in this research project is the same Photoshop used by all imagemakers. The effects that are rendered are products of an operating system created by a team of engineers. As such, the original mark remains anonymous and subject to the availability of programs and plug-ins to realise it: ‘how media ecology functions in a climate where the viewer cannot distinguish between the expressive and the canned effect. Even the digital artist who controls the language, software and hardware manifestations of their product will rarely find a viewer sophisticated enough to know that the artist structured all of the resulting effects and environments. It is practically assumed that the artist adopts and inherits structures that are created by engineers, and to their credit, engineers can certainly arrange for spectacular entertainment’ (Weiland 2002).

Vaughn (2006 p. 6) challenges Benjamin’s prioritizing of an art object’s uniqueness by identifying two challenges laid by digital imaging. ‘First, it is by its very nature infinitely reproducible. Indeed it is nothing but reproduction. There is, literally, no original of a digital image, since every version has equal status by virtue of being absolutely identical’. Where variation does occur is in the choice of device used for image output and production, physical uniqueness is subordinate to concept. The process of reproduction is also inherently changeable. ‘The digital image is a ‘passive’ reproduction in the way that photographic copying is. It can therefore be creative in its interpretation, fragmenting and analysing as well as reproducing’ (Vaughn 2006 p. 6).

Another great irony of the digital age lies in questions of durability. Vaughn (2007 pp. 7-8) questions the longevity of current modes of production.

In theory the digital image has an indefinite life. The code that creates it does not decay. However, such code is dependent for its survival and communicability on the electronic processes that store it and perform it. How reliable are such processes? An Egyptian hieroglyph, carved on a wall or even inscribed on a parchment scroll remains readable today, thousands of years after it was made. How long will a digital record last? When our civilisation follows the course of all previous ones and meets its end (either by catastrophe or by decay), how will it be possible for future beings to gain any kind of access to the information that we have been storing in our idiosyncratic and highly vulnerable machines? There may be an answer to this question, but it is unlikely that we will be around to find out what it is.

At a time when the ease of reproduction has made the photographic image absolutely accessible and infinitely reproducible, critical theory surrounding photography has become infinitely more complicated. The role of education will continue to play a crucial role in developing photography’s future and in constructing informed
understanding. Coleman (1998 p. 66) suggests that educators should instruct students ‘to make fewer and fewer images, and to think harder and harder about them’.

Having entered the realm of concept, photography is free from the need to be ‘real.’ ‘Instead of realistic renditions, perhaps the best contribution of photography is to give us a hint of the spiritual forces that might see us through the dangers and dislocations that our own ingenuity has brought about … It is difficult to represent visually a change in the way we think of our relationship to the universe’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1998 p. 187).

2.6 On Susan Sontag’s Critical ‘Realism’

Against the romantic view of photography held by many of its practitioners and allies whose descriptives are replete with heroic, mystical and otherworldly terminology, Sontag cautions against photo-shamanism. As a less-than-perfect ‘image-world that bids to outlast us all’ (Sontag 1977 p. 11), photography is ‘like the footprint or the death mask’ (Wells 1997 p. 40). Sontag suggests that photographs can ‘give us an unearned sense of understanding things, past and present, having both the potential to move us emotionally, but also the possibility of holding us at a distance through aestheticising images of events’ (Wells 1997 p. 40).

With instruction such as ‘No matter how slow the film, Spirit always stands still long enough for the photographer It has chosen’ (White in Johnston 2008), Minor White’s writings and teachings drew fire from Sontag. She skeptically singles out White’s spiritual approach to photography thus:

In this century, the older generation of photographers described photography as a heroic effort of attention, an ascetic discipline, a mystic receptivity to the world which requires that the photographer pass through a cloud of unknowing. According to Minor White, ‘The state of mind of the photographer while creating is a blank … when looking for pictures … The photographer projects himself into everything he sees, identifying himself with everything in order to know it and to feel it better.’ Cartier-Bresson has likened himself to a Zen archer who must become the target so as to be able to hit it (Sontag 1977 p. 116).

To which, she concludes: ‘photography is advanced as a form of knowing without knowing: a way of outwitting the world, instead of making a frontal attack on it.’ In short, a less-than credible second-guess at reality, a deadly half-truth.

In contrast to this starkly reductive interpretation of photography, Minor White’s teachings inspired and encouraged a complete life practice steeped in artistic and creative thinking. Sontag again misses the connection between creative mind and spiritual mind. Satisfied with her attack on photography’s role of knowledge bearer, she then moves the cross-hairs over the creative claims of photography. ‘Where the claims of knowledge falter, the claims of creativity take up the slack’ (Sontag 1977 pp.117-118). By demeaning the value of creativity, Sontag fails to understand photographic art. Meaning in life may be understood in various paths and the rational intellectual is but one of many. Consciousness and understanding take many forms. Or, as Loori (2005 p. 26).
writes, ‘The less we know, the less we’ll try to intellectualize our experience. Intellectualization closes many doors’.

Throughout its history, photography has been a vast and changing field of mechanical representation based upon image capture, its roles and objectives as varied as its practitioners. Like any tool, photography has beneficial applications, such as its use in teaching and idea conveyance. Many Buddhist scholars maintain that any action that can wake human consciousness, be it through imagery, verbal trickery or any other device, takes on the task of exposing reality’s underlying forces. Confronting existence, being in the moment of reality, understanding things as they are form key points of Buddhist practice. To be aware is to become socially engaged on some level.

2.7 Contemporary Buddhist Responses

Technological changes, no matter which era, are harbingers of both good and bad. Buddhism teaches seeing the complete picture. Regarding the Buddhist situation, Chilton (n.d.) asks ‘how can the technology of the Twenty First Century “information age” be effectively utilized to help preserve and strengthen ... Buddhist traditions of learning and practice? ... how can traditional Buddhist institutions selectively adopt and apply appropriate technologies to advance their core mission? ... modern digital technologies have the potential both to aid and to dissipate the continuity and vigour of the Buddhist traditions’.

Kitiyadisa (2004) refers to Phra Dhammapitaka (1995), a Thai monk and scholar whose tremendous output includes focus on social, scientific and educational studies from a Buddhist perspective and a leading critic of issues of advance and complex technology, who ‘has warned against adverse consequences of technology against sustainable development’.

‘The Venerable sees the importance of technology ... as technology can be used for good or evil ... [he suggests that] the application of this teaching to layman’s life is more towards the restrain of greed and materialistic gratification’ Kitiyadisa (2004).

Understanding the dual nature of all things is essential to forming balanced perspective; therefore both good and bad elements are present.

4 Sermey Khensur Lobsang Tharchin (cited in Chilton n.d.) relates a story that is told in Tibet:

Once there were two Buddhist monks who were progressing very well in their spiritual practices toward liberation and enlightenment. Seeing this, a demon became jealous and decided to interfere with the monks, to hinder their progress. Now these monks, in the course of their studies, were learning Sanskrit so that they could read the texts in that Indian language (from which the Buddhist scriptures in Tibet had been translated). The demon created a magical pen that had the power of writing Sanskrit, including the difficult rules of euphonic combination, called samdhi, perfectly and with ease. Upon finding this pen the monks were so enchanted by its powers, by what they could do with it, that they neglected their practice and were thus distracted from accomplishing their spiritual goals.

Kitiyadisa (2004) echoes ‘Heidegger’s warning of the danger of viewing information technology purely as a means to an end had fallen on deaf ears’. Chilton explains that ‘this story clearly warns of the dangers of getting distracted by the potential of the technology itself and emphasizes the importance of maintaining a perspective that sees technology as merely a tool for accomplishing one’s real goals.’
Web pages such as Buddhanet.net have become standard bearers in the sharing of Buddhist thought, imagery and community. In the information wars, Buddhism is well represented. The worldwide networking of the Dalai Lama, the state of permanent travel of Lama Ole Nydahl and the online debates surrounding the teachings of Buddhist leaders and scholars have multiplied the mass of information. However, ‘Phra Dhammapitaka (1997) states that the priority is to develop human beings to be “above” technology so as to protect and ensure freedom which is the basic condition for the pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment’ Kitiyadisa (2004). Questions surrounding the future electronic use of this project’s imagery need to address these questions of information conveyance and will be discussed later in the conclusions.

Postmodern thinking emphasises the flux and impermanence of form, corresponding to how ‘the Buddha emphasizes that one’s understanding of being and the world is seriously impaired by one’s “determination” and “desire” to grasp something permanent’ (Park 2006 p. xi). Park continues to suggest that postmodern deconstruction reflects the tendency towards formlessness, or impermanence, which characterises late Twentieth and early Twenty First Century critical debate. As with the trend away from Newtonian physics based on solid form, deconstruction ventures away from Cartesian duality of certainty towards a causal, non-fixed approach to analysis. She echoes Lyotard in saying that the great crisis of modernity, World War II, highlights the failure of the formalist method, and heralds the end of dominance of a ‘rational’ school.

Park (2006 p. xiv) asserts that ‘Derridean deconstruction created a rupture in the Continental philosophy … the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault prophesied the disappearance of the human episteme, the main layer in Continental modernist philosophy, from the shore of human science. What is more, the postmodern philosophy of Jean-François Lyotard has symbolically defined the nature and the result of modernist philosophy when he declares that Auschwitz is a “paradigmatic name for the tragic ‘incompletion’ of modernity … Auschwitz cannot be explained with reason; it scorns Cartesian belief in human subject as a rational being”’. The end of the fixed individual as philosophical cornerstone continues to create a deep crisis in Western societies. Manifested as globalisation, boundaries dissolve and many ideas and approaches co-exist, vie for expression and push against the dominant paradigm. The resistance against multiculturalism in Australia is a movement that posits a fixed notion of an Australian identity. The 2007 debate over new citizenship exam questions that test applicants’ ‘understanding and respect of Australian values’ (Metherell & Dick 2006) is a crude manifestation of the power struggle that defines identity and non-identity. ‘Identity is constantly in the process of being created without giving us a chance to name it as “identity,” for dependent co-arising of différance is always already at work, before we name it’ (Park 2006 p. 17).
Chapter III Contemporary Art and Buddha Mind

3.1 Overview

This chapter introduces the connections between Buddhist thought and the arts in light of the growth of Buddhism in the West. The works of several artists may be regarded as either deliberately Buddhist in imagery or influenced by thoughts that may be viewed from a Buddhist perspective. Their works address issues of contemporary Buddhism, consumerism, Aboriginal spirituality, and digitisation amongst others. Conceptual and image referencing in the project’s artworks is introduced with further analysis on visual influences discussed in Chapter V.

3.2 Buddhism Blooms in New Lands

Of great interest in this research is Modern Buddhism, a new division of Buddhism that continues to take shape worldwide. It started as an attempt to produce a single form of Buddhism, without local accretions, one that all Buddhists could embrace, emerging as a truly international movement (Robinson 2007). This form is popular with new followers developing a Buddhist practice less tied to cultural traditions. It is a new imaging of Buddhism that the final exhibition addressed through digital processes that borrow from traditional form.

Interest in Buddhism flourished in the 1950s and many artists were influenced by Buddhist elements, a movement eloquently narrated in the works of Beat authors like Jack Kerouac. Spuler (2003 p. 13) writes that despite the pioneering efforts of scholars such as D. T. Suzuki, ‘interest in the practice of Zen meditation began later; the influence of the Beat generation in the 1950s was one reason for this’. Zen exerted a particularly strong push on the American scene through its expressive forms and ideas, specifically Japanese Zen arts. Artists were adopting a new approach. ‘In the visual arts of the Western world in the nineteen-fifties there was a distinct preference for …

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5 Conventionally, Buddhism is broken down into three main schools:

- **Theravada** Buddhism, also known as the School of the Elders, has been the dominant school of Buddhism in most of Southeast Asia. The gilded temples of Thailand that greet tourists are of this tradition. It is sometimes called Southern Buddhism, or, somewhat pejoratively, Hinayana or ‘Lesser Vehicle’ Buddhism.

- **Mahayana** Buddhism is largely found in China, Japan, Korea, Buryatia, Tibet and Mongolia. It is sometimes called Northern Buddhism and ‘Greater Vehicle’ Buddhism. To this may be added the Zen school which developed from within the Chinese Mahayana school known as Chan and spread to Korea, where it is known as Seon, then to Japan, from whence the English name is derived. Zen Buddhism is becoming increasingly popular in the West through the teachings of various masters such as Korean Seung Sahn Sunim, Japan’s Suzuki Rōshi and Vietnamese peace activist and Thien (Zen) monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

- **Vajrayana** Buddhism, also called Tantric Buddhism and includes Tibetan Buddhism, is considered by many to be a third Buddhist path although it evolved in isolated form from the Mahayana path between the third and seventh centuries BCE. It has gained attention through mainstream focus placed on *tantra* and associated sexual practices. It has become a significant player on the world stage with the emergence of the Dalai Lama as an international spiritual leader.
direct emotional experience … by expressing their personal experience they could produce art of a universal nature’ (Westgeest 1996 p.7).

To achieve a state of mind that is present and aware of the moment, that sees reality as it is and not hindered by attachment to name and form is a condition central to Buddhist practice. Photographer Ernesto Pujol eloquently states that the ‘best of art and spirituality can both improve and transcend this moment’ (Jacob 2004 p. 202). He adds ‘art is the enlightened, formal, cultural expression of an evolved mind that is fully awake, capturing and embodying the full awareness of a moment, while at the same time transcending it. Ideally, the right practice of art should produce as many saints as the practice of spirituality’ (Jacob 2004 p. 202). To echo Rosler (2002 p. 78), ‘This is the modern artist’s dream! McLuhan granted artists a shaman’s role, with visionary, mythopoeic powers. McLuhan wrote that art’s function is “to make tangible and to subject to scrutiny the nameless psychic dimensions of new experience” and noted that, as much as science, art is “a laboratory means of investigation”’.

Lieberman (2006) distinguishes between depicting spirit versus depicting form, naming the latter as ‘Occidental’, the former ‘Oriental’. ‘Oriental artists are not interested in a photographic representation of an object but in interpreting its spirits . . . Occidental art . . . exalts personality, is anthropocentric . . . Oriental art . . . has been cosmocentric. It sees man as an integral part of nature . . . The affinity between man and nature was what impressed Oriental artists rather than their contrast, as in the West. To Occidentals, the physical world was an objective reality -- to be analyzed, used, mastered’.

Religious teachers suggest that one way spiritual power actualises is through the emergence of the intuitive aspect of our consciousness. Both artistic and spiritual powers manifest intuitively, and so, ‘this is one of the reasons why Zen and creativity are so intimately linked … getting in touch with our intuition helps us to enter the flow of life, … whether in our art or simply in the day-to-day activities of our lives, we feel a part of this creative continuum’ (Loori 2005 p. 57).

### 3.3 Morris Graves

Further inquiry re-examines a cornerstone of Western philosophy, Descartes’ assertion, *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am. To assert thus is to attach to an ‘I’, a self, according to many Buddhist scholars, Buddhism stresses that there is no ‘I’, that binary reasoning which creates ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ is illusion and leads to suffering. Suzuki (1935) states ‘Zen does not wish to tie down to the rule of antithesis’ (Suzuki in Westgeest 1996 p. 22).

While the perceptual shift from a Cartesian dualism to a view of holism is difficult, artists pioneer new modes of understanding. ‘Under the influence of Zen, [Morris] Graves (*figure 3*) arrived at his theory of the “Inner Eye”, with which he referred to the state of awareness in which the artist attains a view of his own, by way of the meditative act of painting. He says, specifically with regard to his own painting: “I paint to rest from the phenomena of the external world – to pronounce it – and to make notations of its essences with which to verify the inner eye”’ (Westgeest 1996 p. 51).
Westgeest (1996 p. 20) affirms this connection of perception and perceiver, the individual and the moment. ‘The world is seen as a dynamic and constantly changing whole … It may not be a noncommittal spontaneity on the individual’s behalf, but one which is only attained after a disciplined learning process, in which the unity of subject and object has to be attained. The ensuing spontaneity is then one of nature itself’.

### 3.4 John Cage

Understanding the moment is critical to such works as John Cage’s 4’33”, a silent piece of music which heightens awareness of the present moment through *not adding* musical notes to corrupt the auditory experience of the here and now. No two performances are ever the same as no two situations are ever identical. ‘Cage used everyday objects and sounds to remove the boundary between life and art, reminiscent of the integration of the two in Zen Buddhism’ (Westgeest 1996 p. 57).

Lieberman (2006) asserts that ‘Cage has, in fact, created a method of composition from Zen aesthetics. It was originally a synthetic method, deriving inspiration from elements of Zen art: the swift brush strokes … which leave happenstance ink blots and stray scratches in their wake, the unpredictable glaze patterns [Asian ceramics], the eternal quality of the rock gardens, the great open spaces in [landscape] paintings”. And “just as the skilled photographer often amazes us with his lighting and framing of the most unlikely subjects, so there are painters and writers in the West, as well as in modern Japan, who have mastered the authentically Zen art of controlling accidents” (Lieberman 2006). Ways in which digital accidents could inform the project and reflect a trace of the artist’s hand are addressed in the montage piece *Smith Street Skandhas (Automate Photomerge nos. 1-5)* discussed in Chapter V.
3.5 Ad Reinhardt

The use of negative space by Ad Reinhardt, whose work with pure black conveyed emptiness (figure 4) in a pure form to Western audiences, supports the Zen understanding of Mu, a concept discussed in greater detail regarding the work of Charles Cohen. The black void remains full of possibility. In fact through his many series of negations he affirmed the unity of all form. ‘For Reinhardt, physical and philosophical polarities were emblematically resolved at the point of intersection – the precise centre of the black paintings’ (Chiu 2002 p. 25).

Echoing the heart sutra, Reinhardt formulated the rules for making a painting in 1957. ‘He advises using no texture, no brushwork, or calligraphy, no drawing or sketching, no forms, no design, no subject and no matter’ (Westgeest 1996 p. 73). A significant legacy of Reinhardt’s work is a general understanding in the art field that ‘emptiness in a work did not have to be subordinate to the figuration. In the course of the Twentieth Century the awareness grew that emptiness and nothingness could at the same time also be ‘full’ and ‘something’ … emptiness was indeed no longer the absence of something, but was actually something’ (Westgeest 1996 p. 74).

3.6 Alexander Apóstol

In his use of digital manipulation, Apóstol adds meaning by re-constructing details. His ‘erasures’ are fabrications, where a wall is re-made to ‘fill-in’ the missing details (figures 5 & 6). While his work does not directly reference Buddhist traditions, his use of empty space speaks of absence, or emptiness, like in Japanese Zen painting. While depicting the ruined promises of early modernist idealism, they are also a stark reminder of the present moment as part of a long continuum of time where past, present and future are one. Current urban decay, patterns of metropolitan living, city planning, and all the shortcomings of ignorance have left legacies that determine current and future generations’ existences. There is a transcendent quality in historical persistence and the use of void injects his imagery with an infinite promise of potentiality. These works are koan-like in their absurdity; what is the view through a non-existent window? How do you open the door that isn’t? What do the letters on a blank sign say? When the familiar points of entry are blocked, what do these monoliths of progress mean?
3.7 Charles Cohen

Charles Cohen (figure 7) utilises a diametrical opposite style of emptiness which investigates ‘representational qualities in the context of abstraction through erasure. Cohen’s work, which eradicates the human figure from pornographic scenes, subverts the images’ original function and creates a void where absence becomes a presence in its own right’ (Paul 2003 p. 38).

Figure 7: Select images by Charles Cohen (Buff 2007)

This clever use of emptiness draws comparisons with other Buddhist artforms. ‘In the Zen belief the concepts of emptiness and nothingness do not refer to an absence of something, but are “complete” in themselves. It means that empty is also full, and nothing is something, in Zen negations are often applied, as there is no rational way of saying what Zen is, only what it is not ... The great significance of emptiness and nothingness in Zen is reflected in the descriptions of Mu⁶ (meaning emptiness and

⁶In breaking down subject and object in photography, an exercise of interconnectedness may also be developed. In a very famous Zen Koan posed to Master Joshu the question is asked ‘Does a dog have Buddha nature?’ to which the Master replied ‘Mu’. Mu means ‘no’ but in this case, Master Joshu confused his student by denying Buddha nature to a dog, even though all entities have Buddha nature. Do not distinguish between things that have and don’t have Buddha nature. To know Mu is to understand that a dog’s nature, or a tree’s nature, or your own nature can never be grasped intellectually by defining what is and is not.
nothingness) as “pure experience, the very foundation of our being and thought”’ (Westgeest 1996 pp. 17-19). Western Europe developed a system of perception based on a duality of forms, a reality built on the concept of a ‘first principle’ that transcends time. A questionable premise, it is attacked by Park (2006 p. 12) who sees this as a denial of death. Such dualism is delusional. ’This immortality of essence- has been explained as grounded in the nature of essence. Be it as Plato’s idea, Descartes’ ego-cogito, the Kantian a priori, or even Heidegger’s crossed-out Being, philosophy has survived by identifying the unoriginated origin as the ground of our being in the world … Western metaphysics, Derrida argues, has survived throughout history by subscribing to this negation of death, negation of absence’. Empty space and the transience of all phenomena are again addressed in the analysis of the research exhibition.

Regarding the dichotomy of absence/presence in his images, Cohen explains in a 2006 interview that the cut-out produces three effects. ‘The “first effect” is the immediate recognition of the void; a mere observation, not an intellectual reaction, per se. The second effect is “the abstract effect,” which would be any subsequent intellectual activity for the viewer. This sets up an ideal and final “reflexive effect”’ (Cooley 2006). Viewers expect something from Cohen’s images. The suggestive sexuality, the tensions between the known and unknown, and the play on spatial relations ‘confront the void … It is no longer a transparent and immediate experience, as it is so often in photography where the experience is oversimplified’ (Cooley 2006).

3.8 Minor White & John Daido Loori (Photography as Spiritual Practice)

Author Stephen Batchelor rediscovered an earlier interest in photography through making collages out of found materials. ‘The practice of photography is similar as well to the practice of meditation. By meditation, I mean the practice of paying mindful attention to whatever is occurring in the moment’ writes Batchelor (2004 p. 142). Capra (1991 p. 46) cites meditation as a function in Eastern forms. ‘They are not so much a means for expressing the artist’s ideas as ways of self-realization through the development of the intuitive mode of consciousness’.

Such sentiment was eloquently expressed by the influential work of Minor White (figure 8) whose educational methods and photographic pieces were deeply influenced by Zen awareness. Continuing in the tradition of spiritual-photographers, John Daido Loori (figure 9) is a former student of White’s and a current Zen Master and founding abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York. He teaches contemporary art practices through Zen Buddhism and has authored several books and continues exhibiting at the top levels. ‘Drawing on over 40 years of experience as an artist and Zen teacher, Loori shows how classic Zen meditation, zazen, can provide a wellspring of inspiration’ (Art in Nature: The Photographs of John Daido Loori 2005).
Ray Anne Lockard (2002), head of the Frick Fine Arts Library at the University of Pittsburgh, focuses on the layers of meaning in Minor White’s work:

White attempted to explore the depths he perceived beneath the surfaces of things and within his models. He avoided ... pictorialism ... or surrealism ... but he attempted to infuse into his photographs a spirituality that might transform the worldly and the carnal.

Loori (2005 p. 5) looks at art as another potential device to access meditation-mind, and in particular the tradition of the Zen arts. ‘The most interesting aspect of these arts of Zen, as D. T. Suzuki has said, is that they don’t exist for the sole purpose of creating a
work of art, but they are rather a method for opening the creative process. They comprise means of training the mind and of living our lives’.

While White’s imagery certainly has one foot firmly planted in realism, his mode of presentation, through the use of text coupled with elements hinting at abstraction, combines layers of elements. Recalls Loori (2005 p. 220): ‘Minor White experimented with combining images and words, in one case going so far as to inscribe the poem directly on the emulsion surface’. In a way, by integrating external elements, White was laying the groundwork for later experimental new-media artists like Mariko Mori and Wang Qingsong, whose works are discussed later.

Like quiet impressions of time spent in contemplation, White’s spiritual imagery forms a play on reality. By using familiar references, his work gives a broad point of understanding. But there are often elements that degenerate into pure forms, losing their representational character. This paradox, a confusion of forms and representations freely interacting, is difficult to quantify or categorize, creating tension. He “strove to capture this paradox on film, and used it to his advantage in directing his viewer toward the ‘specific places’ he has in mind: Like a Zen Koan”, which utilizes a paradox or a seemingly irrational statement to push a Zen practitioner beyond his reasoning mind” (Lockard 2002).

The practice of photography requires a trained eye. It is not in the mechanical act of activating a shutter that individual vision manifests itself. Through cultivation, the way of seeing that is particular to photography is developed. And therein lies the first stage of mind work.

Regarding his photographic work, Batchelor (2004 p. 142) writes:

“... In order to take photographs, I need to get into a certain frame of mind. This is similar in feel to the process of starting a meditation session. … one needs to get into a contemplative frame of mind in order to have that sharpness of attention, that focus, that precision. And this requires a willingness to see things other than the way we see them habitually.

This position is echoed by Minor White (n.d. cited in Loori 2005 p. 17) who approached the teaching of photography from the perspective of mind cultivation. ‘The state of mind of the photographer while creating is a blank … It is a very active state of mind really, a very receptive state of mind, ready at an instant to grasp an image, yet with no image pre-formed in it at any time’.

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7 Seemingly absurd short verses and questions, koans are a particular form of Zen teaching designed to break mind’s patterned thinking. Loori (2005 p. 124) asserts that:

Though koans appear on the surface to be paradoxical, the fact is that there are no paradoxes. Paradox exists in language, in the words and ideas that describe the truth. Koans go beyond words and ideas to a direct and intimate experience. The answer to a koan is not a parcel of information. Rather it’s one’s own intimate and direct experience of the universe and its infinite facets. In frustrating the intellect, koans dismantle the customary way of solving problems and open up new dimensions of human consciousness.
3.9 Tim Johnson

Spirituality is a primary force inspiring the works of Australian painter, Tim Johnson. His large works draw upon indigenous and Buddhist imagery and cultures, resulting in a rare blend of spiritual consciousness that does not descend into realms of superficial New Age popism or gaudy effects of religiosity. His artistic and spiritual paths are parallel. ‘For him, painting is like summoning the Spirit ... “if you paint the Buddha, you invoke the Buddha, and the Buddha acts in your life or in other people’s lives … The image has some of the power and energy of the Buddha’” (Johnson in Drury & Voigt 1996 p. 104; 113).

‘Buddhism says that the mind is like a mirror and what you are looking at isn’t the real thing - you are looking at a reflection in the mirror because your mind is dealing with the information after it has been perceived. It’s not an absolute reality and it’s one that you don’t have to perceive to experience - you just “know” it. Buddhism talks about receiving an empowerment when the teaching comes to you’ (Johnson in Drury and Voigt 1996 p.115).

**figure 10:** Tim Johnson (assisted by Karma Phuntsok, My Le Thi and Daniel Bogunovic) (*Dhyani Buddhas*, 2001) synthetic polymer paint on linen 78 x 324 inches

**figure 11:** Tim Johnson and My Le Thi *Yab Yum* (detail), 2002 (A collaboration with contributions by Karma Phuntsok, Daniel Bogunovic and Edward Johnson) (*Tim Johnson & My Le Thi: Yab Yum*, 2002)
The juxtaposing of elements from traditional Buddhist iconography coupled with abstract expressionist grounds and various Aboriginal motifs, as well as integrating 3D elements into installations (figures 10 & 11), link disparate elements. By referencing the land as a spiritual realm that is universal, Johnson affirms that ‘The ant or the tree or the cloud can be an overwhelming force, and you can have enormous respect for it if you are in an enlightened state of mind - but few of us are in that state, so we end up thinking it doesn’t matter. We centre on self all the time, instead of seeing ourselves as part of everything else. To me, everything that’s out there – beyond yourself - is more than you can ever contemplate, and that’s God, that’s the Dreaming, that’s the Buddha’ (Johnson in Drury & Voigt 1996 p. 112). This melding of forms ultimately will transform the definition of what the term ‘Australian’ means.

3.10 Karma Phuntsok

Karma Phuntsok studied in his native Tibet and moved to Australia in 1981. Several of his pieces were on display at Buddha 2550 at Melbourne Town Hall, depicting a blend of traditional Tibetan and Australian imagery. He has also collaborated with Tim Johnson. He lives in the bush north of Kyogle, New South Wales, and is inspired by the land and vegetation of his adopted environment.

*figure 12: Brunswick Buddha, 2002 (Phuntsok 2007) 48 x 65.5 inches*

*figure 13 (right): Tertonpa Peter Parker, 2005 (Phuntsok 2007) 30 x 24 inches*
figure 14: Queen Street, Brisbane, 2003 (Phuntsok 2007) 66 x 48 inches

figure 15: Melbourne White Pages, 2005 (Phuntsok 2007) 22 x 18 inches

figure 16: Waratah Buddha, 2005 (Phuntsok 2007) 66 x 48 inches
Brunswick Buddha (figure 12) was painted to commemorate the arrival of the Dalai Lama in Melbourne in 2005. The Buddha at the side displays the teaching mudra, an acknowledgement of the role of the exiled spiritual and political leader, while depicting a Melbourne icon. The notion of the ‘Western Paradise,’ or Pure Land realm of Amitabha Buddha, is deconstructed in Queen St, Brisbane (figure 14), juxtaposing wealth, poverty and the Buddha. Disparities in wealth between the rich West and vast majority of the world as well as the idealisation of consumer culture are confronted in this painting. Tertonpa Peter Parker, 2005 (figure 13) has a kitsch feel in its aesthetic but has a deeper meaning. ‘Tertonpa’ means revealer of treasured teachings, a role he assigns to the superhero Spiderman in this rather kitsch piece. The environment also plays a dominant role in his work. He often blends local elements, such as the waratah tree, common to New South Wales, into iconography from Tibet such as Waratah Buddha, 2005 (figure 16). Phunstok referenced the phone book in illustrating how Buddha nature is clear and defined in Melbourne White Pages, 2005 (figure 15).

3.11 Gonkar Gyatso

Patterns of globalisation can be evidenced in the fusion of traditional forms with modern motifs. The Chinese invasion of Tibet thrust an ethnic diaspora onto the world stage and artistic response has been growing around the West. “Tibetan painting is an emerging field of contemporary art and the work of artists in Tibet and in exile is attracting increasing interest in the West, as Beijing’s hardline policies against Tibetan religion and culture threaten creative expression and Tibet’s religious heritage” (Old Soul, New Art - Exhibition of Tibetan Contemporary Art 2005).

Gonkar Gyatso is a London-based artist who originally trained in Chinese painting and became interested in his own ethnicity later in life. In 1992 he went into exile and now engages current issues through his evocative imagery. The facelessness of his Buddhas lends a feeling of anonymity and powerlessness in current political crises, and his treatment of the subject references contemporary issues. The successful videogame Pokémon meets the Buddha in a critique on consumerism amidst the vague form of the Buddha (figure 17). In Untitled (figure 18) the unravelling flow of Buddha DNA forms a connection with science and contemporary Buddhism, hinting at the interconnectedness of all phenomena.

This idea is echoed by Capra (1991 pp. 77-78) who states that ‘the language of modern physics refrains from certainties, but instead acknowledges flux … At the subatomic level, matter does not exist with certainty at definite places, but rather shows “tendencies to exist”, and atomic events do not occur with certainty at definite times and in definite ways, but rather show “tendencies to occur”’. ‘If no one thing exists in isolation of the world around it and is joined in the continuum through the interactivity of energy flow, then all divisions between matter and mind, subject and object become temporal creations of changing paradigms. The experience of the mind’s understanding of this unity of consciousness and space leads to “the Great Perfection”, often referred to as the “one taste” of all phenomena’ (Wallace 2007 p. 20).
figure 17 (left): Gonkar Gyatso *Pokemon Buddha* 2005 (*Old Soul, New Art - Exhibition of Tibetan Contemporary Art*, 2005)

figure 18 (right): Gonkar Gyatso *Untitled* n.d. (Hunter 2006)
3.12 Paik Nam June

Paik Nam June created several versions of his iconoclastic installation, *TV Buddha*, 1974, a piece where a statue of the Buddha sits staring at his own image projected on a video screen by a camera (*figures 19, 20 & 21*). ‘Digital art is intimately linked to science and technology, which are fundamental to its creation and physical substance. Arguments of technological determinism in art proclaim that it is the development of technology that has allowed artists to create these works’ (Wands 2006 p. 11).


*figure 20 (right)*: Paik Nam June, *Techno Buddha*, n.d., *(Offer a reflection to the Techno Buddha, 2006)*

*figure 21*: Paik Nam June, *TV Buddha* (*Boston Gems #2 - TV Buddha, 2007*)

Paik references traditional Buddhism but takes it one step further. By introducing a common element of modern technology, he turns notions of self-reflection upside down, creating a puzzling reference to inward/outward contemplation. Technology is being used to refer to the self and at the same time creates a conflict in the face of the related discourse.
Hofstadter (2000 p. xxiv) describes the creation of a self in words that express a situation similar to Paik’s *TV Buddha*. ‘“I” comes about ... via a kind of vortex whereby patterns in a brain mirror the brain’s mirroring of the world, and eventually mirror themselves, whereupon the vortex of “I” becomes a real, causal entity ... think of what happens when a TV camera is pointed at a TV screen so as to display the screen on itself’.

### 3.13 Lewis deSoto

This 25 foot long inflated sculpture (*figure 22*) unites American artist Lewis deSoto’s interests in Buddhist tradition and in contemporary media. Drawn from a famous stone sculpture in Sri Lanka, deSoto used Photoshop to place his own face on the inflated dying Buddha. Commercial balloon manufacturers created the nylon blow-up and fine details were airbrushed in. The piece literally ‘breathes’ to maintain its shape, an integration of natural and fabricated elements.

![figure 22: Lewis deSoto, Parinirvana (self-portrait), 1999 (Parinirvana 2007)](image)

Appearing hard and massive, the work is in fact delicate, its size almost ironic, ephemeral like a cloud. The nod to tradition is apparent, yet the self-portrait directly points to the Buddha nature that dwells in all beings (*Lewis deSoto* 2001).

### 3.14 Wang Qingsong

Chinese artist Wang Qingsong’s works are deft manipulations of reality that strongly criticise current consumer trends in his native China. Through using his own image, his works are not merely external commentary, but offer insight on how an individual copes with a particular circumstance. His photos reflect current social trends with obvious historical references, in this example, Buddhism. ‘As the quintessence of Chinese traditional culture, Buddhism has accompanied Chinese civilization for thousands of years. It brings comfort and fortune to the people, inspires their soul and enlightens a responsibility for having good relations with the others. This Buddha used to set its goal to save the suffering through self-devotion. However, in the current commercial society,
the respectable Buddha has also been changed. It reaches out its hands insatiably for money and material goods towards every troubled person. *The Requesting Buddha Series* (figures 23, 24 & 25) is the faithful representation of such a phenomenon, overflowing with desires, hypocrisy and exaggeration’ (Wang 2004).

**Figure 23 (left):** Wang Qingsong *Requesting Buddha no.1*, 1999 (*Out of the Red*, 2004)

**Figure 24 (right):** Wang Qingsong *Requesting Buddha no.2*, 1999 (*artnet*, 2008)

**Figure 25:** Wang Qingsong *Requesting Buddha no.3*, 1999 (*New Chinese Art*, 1999)
In the *Requesting Buddha* series (1999) Wang uses digital manipulation to create composite self-portraits that reference the 1,000 hands of Avalokiteshvara, Bodhisattva of infinite compassion (Chinese = Guanshiyin) while at the same time criticising current materialist trends. Seated in Buddha-poses, the figure holds ‘all varieties of commercial products people consume in real life such as cigarettes, mobile, golden cup, money, VCD etc. The artist hopes to achieve the effect of irony through imitating adverse phenomena in the society. It is clear that he uses honour to poke fun at pursuit for material gains. Through his own body, the visual impact is deepened’ (Gao 2001).

*figure 26: *Wang Qingsong *Thinker*, 1998 (Ribas 2006)

In *Thinker*, 1998 (*figure 26*), Wang imitates a Buddhist in meditation while poking fun at a well-known logo. ‘He has the posture and expression of someone praying, but on his chest is carved a McDonald’s symbol and in his hand a name brand object, expressing a kind of “worship” of name brands. It also makes clear the way in which consumer culture changes not only outer appearances, but also people’s inner spirits and beliefs. Wearing only striped underpants and sitting on a leaf of cabbage that sits on a trashcan, he becomes a blasphemous and farcical symbol of the kind of worship of wealth typical of peasants who get rich quickly… triggered and worsened by American consumer culture’ (Li 2000).
The convergence of popular imagery from the East and West has passed in both directions. Referring to his own campy red velvet Buddha, Pegrum (2001) writes ‘for Buddhism to take hold in the West, it must learn to speak the language of Western culture. Is that not what my [kitsch] Buddha represents? … Isn’t this really a case of Andy-Warhol-goes-East, or Buddha-goes-to-the-Factory? Is this why so many Westerners take to my Buddha straight away - because the children of postmodern culture recognize, in some way, the clash of East and West which is both resolved and yet, simultaneously, remains unresolved in this single figure?’.

Wang (2003) laments:

In the current commercial society, the respectable Bodhisattva has also been changed. It reaches out its hands insatiably for money and material goods towards every troubled person. What a pity that it has only one thousand hands! If it had ten thousand hands, it would become a billionaire on the earth whose assets could surpass those of Bill Gates ... Maybe in ten more years, the old doctrines of Confucius and Mencius will be only found in books of libraries.

3.15 Mariko Mori

Self portraiture also figures prominently in the works of Japanese artist Mariko Mori. At first, Mori’s images appear full of details, a cornucopia of forms, almost noisy, often referring to Buddhist imagery. For example, ‘Nirvana (figures 27, 28 & 29) consists of multiple elements, and refers to Amida or Pure Land Buddhism, whose adherents believe that after death they will be reborn in the … Pure Land and from there can attain Nirvana. In the video itself, also called Nirvana, which incorporates 3-D effects when viewed through special glasses, Mori depicts the goddess Kichijoten hovering in mid-air above an empty pink watery landscape, surrounded by six cute multi-coloured animated musicians which she calls “Tunes”. The piece also includes four mural-sized digitally manipulated photographic images loosely representing the four elements of Buddhist cosmology (mandala) – wind, fire, water and earth; and “Enlightenment Capsule”, a clear plastic teardrop which … one will be able to sit in, suspended on a plastic lotus flower’ (Kernan 2000 p. 104).

**figure 27 (left):** Mariko Mori *Pureland*, 1996

**figure 28 (right):** Mariko Mori *Pureland* (detail), 1996
Mariko Mori affirms the presence of harmony in her practice, a practice that is part of Buddhist balance. ‘It is very important to keep harmony within society; harmony is a very important element in life. Also, there is chowa, which means a balance that needs to be maintained in nature. Harmony and balance are represented well in the gardens of Buddhist temples’ (Mori in Jacob 2004 p. 259).

However, in this ‘realm of neo-Buddhist pop spirituality with fantastic goddesses and deities set in stunning landscapes (Gagnon 2002 p. 51) lies an ironic playfulness that is aware of the emptiness of all form. Deitch (2003) comments that ‘Empty Dream (figure 30) embraces the ironies of contemporary Japanese pop culture, but its title has a double meaning: “Empty dream” also refers to a state of religious enlightenment in Buddhist practice, pointing toward the increasingly spiritual focus of Mori’s work’ (Schneider 2003 p. 142).

### 3.16 Jesse Kalisher

Loudon (2005 p 59) posits that ‘if young Buddhists continue to develop a philosophy around conscious consumerism, then we will also need to think about how Buddhist products are regarded within that’. American photographer Jesse Kalisher wryly documented the proliferation of Buddha images around the world. He eloquently conveys the multitude of Buddha images and the subtle rapport people have developed with it in his book, *If You Find the Buddha*. The title itself is a play on the koan which
states ‘If you find the Buddha, kill him.’ This is not a literal instruction, but rather a teaching that cautions against attachment to form.

**figure 31**: Images from Kalisher (2006)

Greenwald (2006) writes, ‘as with a lover-or a close relative, or good friend — meeting with the Buddha is always a welcome surprise. Like those familiar faces, it snaps us back to what’s truly important: the joy of community, the value of kindness, and the benefits of being focused and engaged, whatever our enterprise’(Greenwald in Kalisher 2006 p. 8-9).

Kalisher’s work tracks the Buddha’s many appearances around the world as a talisman for good driving, one of sundry gilded objects for sale and alongside other icons of pop culture (figure 31). The commonplace environment is transformed by the presence of spiritual icons. However their commonality and random contextualisations often render them as charming but hollow references to greater matters. The role of photography and art in the debate surrounding mass marketing of spiritual products and their transformation of cultural imagery is of great interest. The emergence of Buddhist kitsch is itself a trend that requires further investigation.
Chapter IV Kitsch, Consumerism and Popular Culture

4.1 Overview

This section opens with a Marxist investigation of commodity-driven culture and relevant implications for the production of the photograph. The endless supply of subjects results in endless images recorded, a virtual consumption of reality. Along the path of the research, kitsch was documented as part of the final exhibition. The philosophical understanding of what Sontag (1966) refers to as camp is looked at, with specific reference to the role of Buddhist iconography as pop icon and the response by Buddhist scholars.

4.2 Consuming Images

Rosler (2004 p. 5) raises a Marxist critique that addresses culturally materialistic tendencies and the dependent economic superstructure that propagates it. ‘Our mode of economic organization, in which people seem less important than the things they produce, prompts us to stand reality on its head by granting the aura of life to things and draining it from people: We personify objects and objectify persons. This fetishism of commodities, as Marx termed it, is not a universal mental habit’. This addiction to image un-reality is a symptom of a social system that is based on an economic foundation that mandates constant consumption and the fantasy world of consumerism. This is a world view that is materialistic in its objective: absolute commodification.

Sontag affirms Rosler’s position in her criticism of photography, implicating the camera as an adjutant to mass consumerism, not as mere accomplice but as co-saboteur. ‘A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying’ (Sontag 1977 p. 178) and through retail therapy, soothe the modern malaise of never having enough consumable objects. Society is now run by an information-hungry machine that never stops gathering data, ‘the better to exploit natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, make war, give jobs to bureaucrats’ (Sontag 1977 p. 178). Norberg-Hodge (2000 p. 56) agrees that ‘only with the rise of the mass-producing industrial economy – dependent on endlessly increasing production and consumption – did unrestrained materialism become acceptable’. ‘The final reason for the need to consume everything lies in the very logic of consumption itself. To consume means to burn up, to use up – and, therefore, to need to be replenished. As we make images and consume them, we need still more images; and still more’ (Sontag 1977 p. 179).

Some scholars argue that consumerism is rooted in distortions of the mind and incorrect thinking. Vaughn (2005 p. 5) distinguishes between information and knowledge. He characterises the latter as a mind process of long-term conceptualisation. ‘Information is a form of short statement that can be delivered easily by automated processes ... We are constantly being made aware of the increasing shortness of our attention span, and the ways in which this seems to be related to the diversions of a consumerist society’. Norberg-Hodge (2000 p. 56) warns that ‘as materialism becomes more and more
entrenched in our society, so greed becomes a more powerful force in the world. The price of this consumerism is an ever more atomised and fragmented society centred on large-scale globalising economic and political systems.

4.3 Kitsch

Under a régime posited on a psychology of infinite consumption, a subsequent by-product is kitsch, an inferior replica borne of false consciousness. Olalquiaga (1998 p. 81) theatrically writes of the effects of industrialisation on cultural expressions of remembering. ‘The destructive lightning strike was mechanical reproduction, and the shattered remains left after this major electrical storm were none other than kitsch’.

Subject to the discrepancies of what constitutes good taste, kitsch takes on many, many forms. Kitsch is about consumable product, a reference to art, classical form and profundity, but by nature of its relative inexpensiveness and ubiquitous availability, it becomes a pale substitute. In contrast to the ivory tower of high art, kitsch is almost democratic.

The advent of Facebook and MySpace gives name to the latest phase of Internet connectivity, or ‘kitsch’ connectedness, and takes the notion of kitsch beyond the simple manufacturing of gaudy objects and extends it to be a state of mind, universal in its linking and commonality. Nichtern (in Martin 2007) looks at the situation as unhealthy but with great potential. ‘We need to examine the mindset that is engaging in the technology to know the difference between using technology to genuinely connect, versus using technology to escape’.

Some critics object to the art-world’s narrow and rather undemocratic operations. ‘While cultural myth actively claims that art is a human universal – transcending its historical moment and the other conditions of its making, and above all the class of its makers and patrons – and that it is the highest expression of spiritual and metaphysical truth, high art is patently exclusionary in its appeal, culturally relative in its concerns, and indissolubly wedded to big money and “upper-class” life in general’ (Rosler 2004 p. 12). Contrary to this spirit, kitsch is strength in numbers, a McDonaldisation of art-objects made readily available for mass production and consumption.

In her groundbreaking essay ‘Notes on Camp’, originally published in 1964, Susan Sontag identifies certain traits of kitsch, which she calls ‘camp.’ ‘The first sensibility, that of high culture, is basically moralistic’ (Sontag 1966 p. 287) so it is against this that kitsch, or camp, makes its passive statement. Where so-called high art strives for ever deeper meanings, kitsch picks up the slack of the common person’s desire for art objects that don’t confront, that skim the surface. Kitsch is not art. For example, it lacks depth ‘for Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content’ (Sontag 1966 p. 278).

The humour inherent in kitsch is often inadvertent, a mocking consequence of its attempted gravitas. ‘The pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious. The Art Nouveau craftsman who makes a lamp with a snake coiled around it is not kidding, nor is he trying to be charming. He is saying, in all earnestness: Voilà! the
Orient!” (Sontag 1966 p. 282). The New Age Lifestyle store that offers Buddhas beside Kama Sutras and XXX Tonight! is offering, in capital earnestness: Voilà! The Orient! (figures 32 & 33).

4.4 Consuming Buddhism

Of peculiar interest is the arrival of the Buddha image in the domain of kitsch. Buddhist and other mystical references of Eastern origins are rapidly entering the lexicon of consumerism. Pegrum (2001) offers this casual list of Asian incursions in Western culture:

Self-help books and home decoration magazines are telling us to watch our *karma*, keep our *yin* and *yang* in balance, and redesign our houses according to principles of *feng shui*. In a quiet moment, you can read Benjamin Hoff’s *The Tao of Pooh* or *The Te of Piglet*; you can watch Dharma and Greg on TV; and you can buy Samsara from the *House of Guerlain*, who describe it as the place where Orient and Occident meet.

Why do people need to purchase and cling to so many objects? Goldstein (2005 p. 18) suggests that ‘there may be many psychological underpinnings of this behaviour, seeing it as compensatory action, even at times compulsion for some deeper lack. But we can also understand the force behind this habit of accumulation in a simpler way, namely the profound influence our consumer society has on our minds. It continually reinforces desires and wanting, often co-opting spiritual values to do so’.

Loundon (2005 pp. 56-57) points out that Buddhism is many things but not explicitly ‘a religion associated with an abundance of products that one can buy. Given that Buddhism teaches nonattachment, where is the place for a teak altar set or an expensive Buddha statue? For this reason, some students disparage “boutique” Buddhism and the way Buddhism has become popularized through chic Zen clothing, Samsara perfume, a rock band named Nirvana’.
Some Buddhist scholars suggest that any system posited on benefit to all beings inherently expresses a Bodhisattva spirit. One possible form is in the conveyance of ideas through various media of kitsch. Perhaps in an ironic way, kitsch has the power to inform; in extreme generosity, kitsch may educate. Loundon (2005) posits that ‘for many young people, the first contact with Buddhism is precisely through consumer avenues ... Important seeds are planted from that initial consumer contact’ (pp. 57 – 58).

Artistic critique of shopping Shangri-la has been cutting. Mariko Mori exposes the hollowness of the capital dream by asserting that ‘When the promise of utopias and the ennui of materiality are brought together, the spiritual realm seems to beckon as an antidote to the vacuousness of consumption. But is it so easy to escape the circuits of social economies and hollowness of consumer culture? ... For any spiritual insincerity would suggest a succumbing to commodification and, therefore, to the ultimately cynical considerations of a spiritual marketplace’ (Mori in Gagnon 2002 p. 53).

Pegrum (2001) cautions that religious sampling carries traps. ‘We run the risk of betraying the integrity of the religions from which we are quoting, and interacting with them on merely the most superficial level ... Is the West, in picking and choosing, in recoloring and recoding, in buying and selling, undermining the spirit of the East, enveloping its Oriental otherness in Western trappings? Is my Buddha a bright, empty, saleable shell of something that, far away and long ago, had meaning?’

Buddhist kitsch is now part of world culture. Loundon (2005 p. 59) suggests that if ‘young Buddhists continue to develop a philosophy around conscious consumerism, then we will also need to think about how Buddhist products are regarded within that’. Proliferation of Buddha imagery is a recognition of postmodernism, an acknowledging of the process of ‘flow’ and qualities of ‘formlessness’ that dominate current thinking in physics, cultural studies and photography. The baseness of kitsch is just a sign of the times.
Chapter V Development of Research and Analysis

5.0 Overview

This chapter looks at the bulk of this work in light of the questions posed at the outset. The result produces a blending of Buddhist discourse as it relates to certain contemporary issues and creates a visual dialogue that borrows heavily from traditional iconography and form. The culmination of this project was the exhibition titled Empty Lens, Empty Mind: Photographic Meditations on Australian Buddhism (figure 54). A period of observation yielded a body of documentary images which were hung together as a group at the exhibition. They are discussed as part of the progression towards the manipulated imagery that form a second part of the research. Manipulated imagery illustrates several Buddhist ideas and addresses the development of new modes of visual expression.

5.1 Empty Lens, Empty Mind: Photographic Meditations on Australian Buddhism

The exhibition Empty Lens, Empty Mind: Photographic Meditations on Australian Buddhism presented a selection of eighty nine photographic prints, divided into two groups. The first division, subtitled Phenomena consists of sixty two 7 X 11 inch (17.78 X 27.94 cm) and 11 X 6.5 inch (17.78 X 16.51 cm) prints. This section represents a documentation, a straight record of the rise in Buddhist reference in Australia. These images were hung together in a grid-like pattern, an affect chosen to emphasise the sheer volume of popular manifestations. This section deals explicitly with the phenomenon of kitsch, and pays attention to more substantial public expressions of Buddhism.

The rest of the exhibition consists of twenty seven photographs that range in size from 14 X 20 inches to 36 X 24 inches (35.56 X 50.8 cm to 91.44 cm). The five piece Photomerge is 110 X 17.75 inches (279.4 X 45.09 cm). These works represent new possibilities in digital art making. Transcendence, emptiness, and formlessness define the aesthetic that is developed through processes of juxtapositioning, collage and automation. New modes of understanding a photographic image are necessary to read these images and require a critical divergence from former modernist interpretation of what a photograph can mean. They are subjective interpretations of Buddhist thought and philosophy and are my personal expressions of this spiritual path contextualized in the Australian situation.

The final exhibition was printed on Chromira 70 paper. While digital imaging subverts the importance of the image-object, the printed photograph is an effective means of sharing imagery. The exhibition itself opened with a Korean Seon (Zen) tea ceremony and dharma talk, contextualising the works within the realm of Buddhist spiritual practice. The application of digitisation was used to create an illustrated effect which ultimately was printed into a traditional form.
5.2 Contemporary Expressions of Buddhism

The first grouping of images represents a documentation of the multiplicity of expressions of Buddhism. While no known depictions of the Buddha exist today, there is an abundance of stylised depictions of his form. ‘It has often been remarked that in Pali texts there is no express tradition prohibiting the making of anthropomorphic images of the Tathagata (Buddha)’ (Coomaraswamy 2006 p. 4). In fact ‘the making of Buddha images in India developed as a commercial enterprise which was exploited by other regionalists too ... Very pretty Buddha images with ... sex appeal ... betray a feature of commercial exploitation’ (Wickramasinghe 1971 p. 70).

**figure 34:** JP Gural Buddha with Essential Oils, 2008

In photographing Buddha with Essential Oils (figure 34), a situation that demonstrates a kitsch, or surface, understanding of deeper issues arose. The sales assistant insisted that the head was ‘not Buddha, but a Thai goddess’, while in fact the head is clearly that of Buddha (Kirkham, D 2007 pers. comm. 6 April, 2006). Many people purchase religious icons with little to no knowledge of the object’s meaning, value or even name. Another, more knowledgeable sales assistant joked that ‘people come in and ask for a statue of the fat guy with an elephant head,’ in reference to the popular and often reproduced Hindu god Ganesha (Dufresne, M 2007 pers. comm. 28 December, 2007).

What is unusual about this consumer tendency is the underlying desire to express something profound, spiritual, while at the same time participating in mass acquisition. ‘In fact, the current Western vogue for Eastern spirituality is, perhaps like Eastern spirituality itself, less about either-or and more about both-and. Homage, and rip-off. Superficial, and sincere. What is certain is that the Eastern religions, and Buddhism in particular, have become increasingly popular over recent decades, and that our eclectic popular culture is more and more frequently turning eastwards for inspiration’ (Pegrum 2001). The iconic emblem of Superman has now been co-opted by Om-man (figure 35).

**figure 35:** JP Gural Om-man, 2008
A ubiquitous figure is that of the round, happy, fat ‘laughing Buddha’, often as a garden gnome or in dollar stores. In contrast to the meditating Buddha’s tranquil pose, curly hair, slim and more Indian form, this common jovial Chinese ‘Buddha’ appears noisy, fun and offers promise of good health and financial success (note his residence near tip bowls in cafés in figure 36). Who is he and why does he appear where he does?

‘The Laughing Buddha, also known as Hotei in Japan, Pu-Tai [or Budai] in China, embodies the ideals of the good life: health, happiness, prosperity and longevity’ (Fotopoulou 2008). Originally derived from Angida Arhat, one of the 18 original Arhats during the time of the Buddha, representations blended with ‘a fat wandering Zen monk named Pu-Tai, who possibly claimed to be an incarnation of the future Buddha Maitreya … Today, the Laughing Buddha image is a reminder of our own capacity to achieve happiness and life satisfaction of our capacity to enjoy the good life.’

Cheap Budais connect with what Sontag (1966 p. 291) calls ‘camp’. She writes that ‘camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of “character” . . . People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as “a camp,” they’re enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling’. Indeed there is a saccharine-sweet tenderness in an overstuffed Buddha mascot working the public on Buddha Day (Vesak) 2007 at Federation Square (figure 37).
As well as on the shelves with Santa’s elves and mixed in with scales, bottles, pigs, plastic flowers, wicker baskets, candles and coffee cups, Budai is frequently placed in gardens (figure 38). The cross cultural mix is a true hybrid of forms, as much dependent on geography as culture. Unlike in heavily populated and now urbanised Asian centres which lack individual and even public green space, the Australian suburban condition is intimately connected with the quarter acre lot. The garden serves both physical and psychological functions and the Buddha, particularly Budai but not exclusively him, has entered this realm. Landscape architect Shane Clifford (Clifford, S 2007 pers. comm. 10 December, 2007) comments that ‘the Landscape (natural and contrived) is perhaps our last physical place of refuge or meditation in/from contemporary society – of course the ‘self’ is a less tangible place of refuge but in the complexity of modern life many find it harder and harder to reach that place of “equipoise”’.

One of the strangest products, Lucky beer incorporates Budai in its green glass and promises ‘Enlightenment comes in a Bottle’. There is some concern, particularly amongst monastics that Buddhist iconography is misused for financial gains.

Formal festivals like Buddha Day (Vesak) provide opportunities for established Buddhist groups, particularly the Chinese Pure Land order Fo Guang Shan which organises the event (figure 39). This weekend extravaganza has become a major festival in Melbourne and is actively supported by the city. The public attention garnered from encouraging large events is not lost on Melbourne Mayor John So, who demonstrates his spiritual sense (figure 40).

5.3 Digitally Interpretive Realities

In order to better question the limitations of photography as posited by Sontag (1977), new possibilities in interpretation and production were developed through computer image making. This work is part of a larger shift in image creation that pervades current debate. (Paul (2003 p. 31) suggests that ‘digital technologies add an extra dimension to the composite and collage, for disparate elements can be blended more seamlessly, with the focus being on a ‘new’, simulated form of reality rather than on the juxtaposition of components with a distinct spatial or temporal history. Digital collages and composites often constitute a shift from the affirmation of boundaries to their erasure.’ This movement away from a ‘decisive moment’ in the spirit of Henri Cartier-Bresson has freed the medium from its constructs of being ‘real’.

Peat (1998 p. 146) writes:

The modern city is a construction of steel, aluminium, plastics, and large expanses of glass. Scientific advances quickly leave the laboratory bench to be developed as products for general consumption ... Within such an ambiance inner and outer become overlaid and interpenetrating in a multiplicity of ways. Trees literally grow inside modern buildings, while earth and sky reflect each other in their glass walls. Boundaries become fluid and even paradoxical; certainties are replaced by flux and transformation.

In View From the Top, 2008 (figure 41) Buddhist products for sale were layered over reflections on glass. The sky emerges as almost imprisoned and lost behind the cacophony of products for sale. The large Buddha head became rendered white, blank, empty; my inquiry turned towards the meaning of the Buddha product. Another aspect of Buddhism is the concept of void, which often is portrayed in Zen arts.

![figure 41: JP Gural View From the Top, 2008](image-url)
Paul (2003 p. 33) directly connects the current image orgy of distortions and mass scale production with the realm of capital coercion. ‘The language of advertising is obviously closely connected to the history of image manipulation and the proliferation of imagery in a media society – which has increased with digital media and the Internet.’ Some scholars suggest that the sheer volume of marketed products can lead to confusion and complicated webs of deluded thinking (figure 42).

One of the most ubiquitous symbols associated with Buddhism is the lotus. The water lily is a beautiful flower with an extremely strong root that grows deep in mucky waters, a great dharma teaching on being firmly grounded and on perceiving beauty amidst a foetid mire. This flower is also understood to be a seat for Buddhas. ‘The Buddha throne, however, is usually a lotus, or lotus- and lion-throne combined: the Bodhisattvas, and all who are born again in Buddha paradises, are similarly lotus-supported, but on smaller flowers’ (Coomaraswamy 2006 p. 49).

The black space of the water amidst the lotus leaves with kitsch refers to a state of total darkness, an absence of light, a void, an infinite emptiness full of possibilities (figure 43). Hands held in meditation are reflected in the calm waters of a lotus pond (figure 44).
All phenomena carry potential for both good and bad actions. One of the fallouts of the technological era is a divorce from natural systems, a chasm that grows with potentially disastrous consequences. In *Burning for Power, 2008* (figure 45) attention is drawn to a massive brown coal-fired generator that, while ugly, destructive, and ultimately unsustainable, the blast furnace currently is necessary, and without which, digital culture could not survive. The monk’s ephemeral feet represent a transcendence of this situation, that one day the generator will cease production, if for no other reason than the coal will run out. Buddhism teaches that life is suffering and impermanent. ‘What makes the current wave of consumerism distinct from previous eras is that it encompasses the entire world community and gravely threatens the future health of the planet’ (Kaza 2005 p. 5). How this relationship of detriment and benefit will survive remains to be seen.

When considering Buddhism in Australia, the natural landscape needs to be visually addressed. While most Australians live in major urban centres⁸, the uniqueness of this vast dry continent impacts the national psyche very strongly. Recent environmental

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⁸ ‘In the 2001 Census, 16.5 million people, or 87.2% of those counted were living in 713 urban areas’ (http://www.abs.gov.au)
problems have forced an acknowledgement of the effects of disrupting natural systems upon the human condition.

*After the Bush Burns, 2008 (figure 46)* confronts the prevalence of forest fires in Australia. The skeletal remains of a Gippsland forest provides the background for this image of re-birth. While obviously the fires are devastating and no doubt exacerbated by human impact on natural ecosystems, the charred forests are not killed. Soon life returns as an environment well adapted to the flame germinates its seeds and rises from its ashes. Knowing how to live within this environment, to respect its ebbs and flows, to be mindful in actions is a point many humans have not yet achieved.

![Figure 46: JP Gural After the Bush Burns, 2008](image)

Tibetan monks have been creating ornate mandala paintings of loose sand for centuries. These elaborate works are based on flows of energy, circular patterns framed in squares and created through ceremonies of meditation, chanting and prayer. And then, the energy lines are broken, the sand swept up, the mandala dissolved, its grains dispersed to the waters of the earth. Such is the beauty and impermanence of life.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1998 p. 187) posits a more spiritual and esoteric role for photography: ‘instead of realistic renditions, perhaps the best contribution of photography is to give us a hint of the spiritual forces that might see us through the dangers and dislocations that our own ingenuity has brought about’. To illustrate transient flow and impermanence, traditional Tibetan sand mandalas were photographed in three locations around Australia. Mudras, or hand gestures that control the flow of energy through the body were woven into the mandalas to create a tension of forms, a seamless blending that creates a new spatial relationship outside conventional reality (*figures 47, 48 &49*). Some suggest that at the dissolution of the mandala, when the esoteric experience ends, courage and strength of character become essential elements to take away from the spiritual practice in order to live free of delusion and in a state of clarity.
**figure 47:** JP Gural *Abhaya Mudra* (Fearless Protection)

**figure 48:** JP Gural *Jnana Mudra* (Wise Teaching), 2008

**figure 49:** JP Gural *Dhyana Mudra* (Meditation), 2008
What began as a technique gone wrong materialised into a piece. In seeking a way to present a cross-section of the array of Buddhist iconography around Melbourne, paying particular attention to the presence of many Buddhist groups from all manner of traditions, a process of juxtapositioning and blending documentary elements as well as montaged vistas was required. The photos of many Buddhist statues were originally part of documentation for the exhibition *Buddha 2550*.

![Image of Buddha statues]

**figure 50**: JP Gural *Smith Street Skandhas (Automate Photomerge nos. 1-5)*, 2008

In *figure 50*, the five images reference the five skandhas, the five aggregates that create our form. The Heart Sutra says the five skandhas are all emptiness. They form, unform, reform endlessly. The evolving urban landscape forms and reforms, its own aggregates changing through time. The images of Smith Street speak clearly of Melbourne and its well-preserved Victorian-era edifices. While using the Photoshop tool ‘automate-montage’, this unusual blend occurred.

The montages had a fragmented, cubist feel, somewhat choppy and unreal. The images refer to Smith Street, but in a distorted way echo the Heart Sutra again when it says ‘form is emptiness and emptiness is form’. The images referred to form (Smith Street) but in fact refer to nothing (emptiness). Mind creates Smith Street. A photo of Smith Street is not Smith Street, yet a distortion can point to the reality.

Of particular interest is that Photoshop, an automated function of a computer program, created the artwork. There are ways in which this brave new world of pixels and information technology can be used to awaken the mind to what is real; that same information technology may also be used for less productive, even sinister, purposes, but such is the dual nature of all phenomena.

Referencing the Buddhist teaching of not attaching to the sign that points the way, I wanted to continue using a theme of hands. Hand gestures and positions form a vocabulary unto themselves. The pointing finger, like the previous ephemeral monks’ feet motif represents journeying, travelling, direction. Again, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1998 p. 187) speaks of the artist’s role in our collective path. ‘Artists must always meddle with reality, or they could not make us see it. But once we do, we may get a clearer picture of where we have been, where we are, and where we may be headed.’

The Kalama Sutra states: ‘do not abruptly draw conclusions by what you see and hear. Do not be fooled by outward appearances.’ In considering sceptical inquiry, I wanted to use Photoshop tools to create illusions that trick the eye, and to challenge the notion of photographic ‘truth.’ The images of monks in prayer (*figure 51*) and of a nun walking towards the girders of the Great Stupa Project near Bendigo (*figure 52*) formed a basis of relation. To remind viewers of the fact that these photos are traces of reality, and not
reality itself, I used the computer to create water ripples, almost vibrating across the picture plane to create a fluid, non-rigid illusion.

There is a Buddhist teaching that speaks of a hand pointing to the moon, like a road sign indicating a destination. The purpose of the hand is to show the moon, to direct your attention. The object of looking is the moon, not the hand. Just like a journey’s destination is not the mile marker. Buddhist teaching says that the statue of the Buddha is like that hand pointing not at itself, but at the ultimate end. Inner Buddha nature is the object of contemplation and veneration, not an inanimate gilded object, or idol. Coomaraswamy (2006 p. 15) mentions this tale in describing the human tendency to confuse spiritual and material forms as a kind of ‘fetishism’.

By fetishism we understand an attribution to the physically tangible symbol of values that really belong to its reference; or in other words a confusion of actual with essential form. It is a fetishism of this sort that the Buddhist texts deprecate.
when they employ the metaphor of the finger pointing to the moon, and ridicule
the man who either will not or cannot see anything but the finger.

The hand that points appears to cause a ripple. That is how this image reads. In reality,
it’s all illusion.

Juxtaposing Buddhist elements in boarded-up windows (figure 53) created a play on
contemporary urban environments and perception. Referencing Alexander Apóstol’s
re-contextualised buildings, the windows of Prahran’s former Big Store were
manipulated to assume new meanings. Repeated motifs of the all seeing Bodhisattva of
infinite compassion, Avalokiteshvara, known as Chenrezig in Tibetan, were
documented at the Atisha centre and placed within the context of the windows as a
reference to perception. The modern urban condition is one which can obstruct clear
thought; it can be rife with distraction and pre-occupation which result in deluded
thinking and dislocation from surroundings. Failures of the utopian ideals which
permeate urban architecture are brought to light particularly when traces of past
function linger in stone work or cement, their meanings expired long before. Like the
‘Iron Monger’ and ‘Grocery’ that once occupied the Chapel Street Big Store warehouse
now serving as a Coles supermarket, traces of history persist, defining a present moment
as a consequence of the past. Such is the web of all reality. Buddhist scholars argue that
seeing this connectedness is also seeing Buddha. Buddha nature resides everywhere;
one does not have to climb a mountain to see it. You just have to see it.

*figure 53: JP Gural The Big Store (Avalokiteshvara Sees All), 2008*
Chapter VI Conclusions

This research project sought to document the multi-cultural significance of Buddhism in Australia, including the non-religious manifestations that belong to the domain of kitsch. Along the way, several learning objectives were achieved. These images formed part of a body of work which investigated possibilities of digital manipulation. This further develops visual language that illustrates cultural paradigm shifts through scientific and technological devices in art production as well as a revealing of multicultural elements that shape the concept of what is ‘Australian’. In cultivating aesthetic sensibility, emphasis was placed on several Buddhist ideas to produce a body of work which references similar parallels in contemporary art.

The long-standing relationship between Buddhism and contemporary arts includes a lively and constructive dialogue with photography. Sontag’s (1977) criticism of the medium misunderstands the importance of the creative experience and the possibilities of subsequent idea conveyance. Current research needs to incorporate new modes of thought and perception in forming an updated exegetics regarding photography in the digital age. The shift from film to pixel has ushered in a whole new arena of dialogue and possibilities, both with good and bad ramifications.

The works of several artists were examined and their contributions to their respective fields scrutinised in light of criticisms levelled against photography. The scope of communication through mechanical media continues to dominate human expression, and ideas play significant roles in defining visual culture. The role of the camera in an age of digital transfer is one of great power and challenge. Deft material manipulation is now but one form of artistry as digitally rendered art takes its place alongside traditional object-forms. Digitisation is a language of flow, of information codes and processes of communication that place the subjective mind in the centre of production. The maleability of the image renders all work subject to interpretation, rendering as much autobiography as ‘truth’. The photographic works produced in this research reflect new trends in subjective image making.

Digital collage allowed the blending of various elements in formulating the body of images. Traditional iconography and elements particular to Australia were creatively blended through use of Photoshop to communicate deeper and more complete interpretations of phenomena.

The shift away from Newtonian physics with its faith in the existence of fixed forms and relationships towards a Postmodern science founded on states of flux and transfer, reflects the slippage of truth regarding the medium. The layering and juxtapositioning of various elements contributes towards a greater understanding of the medium’s versatility and power.

Using a documentary approach, the proliferation of Buddhist kitsch is a growing trend that runs parallel with the general mainstreaming of Buddhism in the West. The
The pervasiveness of popular forms of Buddhism indicates a growing realm that will need further investigation as time goes by.

The process of creating this body of work required me to learn the Photoshop program. At the project’s outset, I knew nothing of how to use any digital software or camera. As a personal learning objective, digital capture, adjustment, and manipulation were established and by the end of the research, I have garnered great skill development.

Further, the phenomenon of Buddhist influence in the West has been greatly uncovered. As part of a process of globalisation, this situation will likely continue to grow and interest in the subject will increase. The role of spirituality in Australia was revealed to be one that carries little formal adherence, as in a temple environment, but rather manifests itself as a lifestyle accoutrement. The role of kitsch plays a key role in expressions of a transcendental nature.

With the completion of this exhibition, there is interest in the Buddhist community to use the photographs as part of further dialogue in the Australian context. Electronic versions of the images are currently being used by members of the Australian sangha and future exhibitions are being planned.

As part of a larger research project, the greater role of engaged Buddhism in issues of social justice will define the next phase of this project. With the growth of spiritual commodification, a tension between the actual and the contrived will continue to generate intrigue and research possibilities. It is my intention to look at changing traditional forms and models of adaptation in Buddhist cultures as they respond to the same forces of development and economic rationalisation that are currently directing world development. This can take on several forms. A webpage of my imagery is being developed, which opens the possibilities of sharing electronic imagery. Further exhibitions are planned in Canada and ultimately a publication is being proposed. All of this will take time.
Appendix i

Understanding Buddhism

A key principle, Sunyata\(^9\), or Void, makes the very idea that there is a fixed self anathema. Infinite emptiness, or possibility, exists in all form. An individual’s consciousness is composed of 5 aggregates or conditions called Skandhas\(^{10}\). Through the clinging to form, i.e. skandhas, Avidya, or ignorance arises. Upon dying, these skandhas dissolve and reform, giving rise to the reincarnation of an individual. This new being’s consciousness is neither different from nor the same as the previous individual’s. It is a product of previous condition, and so carries karma\(^11\). Form is not permanent, but always changing, and thus a person may be considered not as a finalised creation but rather an incarnation along a continuum of many incarnations. The self comes and goes, forms and dissolves and reforms, and is never the same while being the same. Buddhism stresses the reality of non-self as a middle path between self and non-existence. Any entity is dependent on the conditions that give rise to it. ‘Existence is a result of a combination of various conditions; these conditions, or constituents, of a being exist dependent upon other constituents. This interdependency of things - interdependency of being and non-being - is what the Buddha calls “the middle path”’ (Park 2006 p. xii). Mind training and practice are required to perceive this way of seeing.

Through deep meditation, Buddhists gain insight into the nature of existence in a condition known as Samadhi\(^{12}\). The ultimate aim is to dwell in Nirvana\(^{13}\); in a state of total freedom and non-attachment to self upon the complete dissolution of the five skandhas. This state is not a form of knowing that can be acquired through conscious means; such seeking is lost in a maze of words and arguments. Renowned scholar Daisetz T. Suzuki (1969 p. 51) writes that ‘Zen always aims at grasping the central fact of life, which can never be brought to the dissecting table of the intellect’. Buddhism posits an intuitive realisation that is beyond words or pictures. It is not otherworldly, but rather it addresses existence as such and includes intellectual thought as part of a much

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\(^9\) Sunyata: Suchness (reality as it is), void, emptiness (Suzuki 1981 pp. 41-45).

\(^{10}\) Skandhas: The five conditions that make us human: form, sensation, mental activity, perception, and consciousness (Chaline 2003).

\(^{11}\) ‘Karma controls the universe as well as individuals, and is due to ignorance, Avidya which involves a series of rebirths … all working according to the law of cause and effect’ (Suzuki 1981 p. 36).

\(^{12}\) As a common framework of understanding, Buddhism is based on three principles. The three basic principles are 1) All is transitory; 2) All is suffering; 3) All is ego less. These lead to the Four Noble Truths which are 1) All existence is suffering; 2) Suffering is caused by desire; 3) The extinction of desire leads to the extinction of suffering; 4) The way to the extinction of suffering is the Eightfold Noble Path. These in turn engender the Eightfold Noble Path. The steps of the Eightfold Noble Path are right views, right aspiration, right speech, right behaviour, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. From ignorance come the Twelve Links in the Chain of Dependent Origination as follows: 1) In the beginning, there is ignorance; 2) From ignorance, comes action; 3) From action comes consciousness; 4) From consciousness, name and form; 5) From name and form, the six organs; 6) From the six organs, touch; 7) From touch, sensation; 8) From sensation, desire; 9) From desire, clinging; 10) From clinging, being; 11) From being, birth; 12) From birth, pain (Suzuki 1990).

\(^{13}\) Nirvana literally means ‘extinction”. ‘When all the evil passions rising from egoism and consequently from dualism are subdued or uprooted, the mind regains its original purity and grace and becomes altogether free’ (Suzuki 1990 p. 45).
larger and complete way of knowing. Zen is, in fact, almost impossible to characterize. ‘Suzuki wrote that just when you imagine you are catching a glimpse of it, it disappears. And by writing or talking about it, it escapes you even more’ (Westgeest 1996 p. 11).

Teachings, meditation, many forms of practice and issues of morality are directed towards the attainment of wisdom, the peak of Buddhist understanding. ‘The path to Enlightenment engages in an inner journey through the processes of meditation and visualization that break through materiality and seek a profound understanding of reality. It is also a realization of working toward the bodhisattva – a Sanskrit word meaning “one whose being or essence is enlightened”’ (Chiu 2002 p. 12). In reaching this Enlightened state, a deep understanding of the non-divisive nature of knowledge is achieved.
Appendix ii

Empty Lens, Empty Mind:
Photographic Meditations on Australian Buddhism

A Solo Exhibition by J-P Gural
3 March to 23 March 2008

Opening Tea Ceremony & Dharma Talk
3 - 5pm
Saturday 8 March 2008

Incinerator Arts Complex
OPEN HOURS
Wednesday - Sunday
11am - 4 pm

Incinerator Arts Complex
180 Holmes Road
Moonee Ponds VIC 3039
MEL WAYS 28 D7
Phone: 8325 1750
Email: incinerator@mvcc.vic.gov.au
jp.gural@yahoo.com
Website: mvcc.vic.gov.au/incinerator

Proudly owned and managed by the City of Moonee Valley

*figure 54:* Invitation to research exhibition
Reference List


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Image List for DVD (Exhibition Empty Lens, Empty Mind)

Interpretive Imagery

108
20 X 12.5 inches (50.8 X 31.75 cm)

Abhaya Mudra (Fearless Protection)
20 X 11 inches (50.8 X 27.94 cm)

After the Bush Burns
30 X 20 inches (76.2 X 50.8 cm)

Approaching
14 X 10.5 inches (35.56 X 26.67 cm)

Burning for Power
30 X 20 inches (76.2 X 50.8 cm)

Seeing is Believing 1
18 X 12 inches (45.72 X 30.48 cm)

Seeing is Believing 2
18 X 12 inches (45.72 X 30.48 cm)

Cacophony (So Many Choices)
30 X 12 inches (76.2 X 30.48 cm)

Calm
20 X 12.5 inches (50.8 X 31.75 cm)

Dhyana Mudra (Meditation)
20 X 13 inches (50.8 X 33.02 cm)

Empty Window
14 X 20 inches (35.56 X 50.8)

Flow 1
16 X 26 inches (40.64 X 66.04 cm)

Flow 2
16 X 26 inches (40.64 X 66.04 cm)

Fragments from the Sea
14 X 21 inches (35.56 X 53.34 cm)
Jnana Mudra (Wise Teaching)
20 X 11 inches (50.8 X 27.94 cm)

Listening
18 X 10 inches (45.72 X 25.4 cm)

Mahaparinirvana
22 X 14 inches (55.88 X 35.56 cm)

Passing Through
14 X 20 inches (35.56 X 50.8)

Price Per Head
18 X 12 inches (45.72 X 30.48 cm)

Procession 1
18 X 12 inches (45.72 X 30.48 cm)

Procession 2
18 X 12 inches (45.72 X 30.48 cm)

Smith Street Skandhas (Automate Photomerge nos. 1-5)
110 X 17.75 inches (279.4 X 45.085 cm)

Teaching
18 X 10 inches (45.72 X 25.4 cm)

The Big Store (Avalokiteshvara Sees All)
36 X 24 inches (91.44 X 60.96 cm)

The Sun Also Sets
24 X 16 inches (60.96 X 40.64 cm)

The View from the Top
18 X 12 inches (45.72 X 30.48 cm)

Within This Cracked Earth
22 X 22 inches (55.88 X 55.88 cm)

**Documentary Imagery**

This folder contains 62 images subtitled Phenomenon. The vertical images measure 11 X 6.5 inches (17.78 X 16.51 cm) and the horizontal images measure 7 X 11 inches (17.78 X 27.94 cm).