PRESS RELEASE

Date of Release: 12 October 2018

PERFORMING TIBETAN IDENTITIES
PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS BY NYEMA DROMA

An installation on display in the main galleries, the Long Gallery and Clore Balcony of the Pitt Rivers Museum

and

TIBETAN OBJECTS IN TRANSITION

A case display curated by Thupten Kelsang, student at the University of Oxford

The Pitt Rivers Museum is pleased to announce the launch of a series of interventions in one of the world’s most important museums of anthropology and archaeology. Interacting with the Museum’s historic collections, two young Tibetans have devised new ways of representing Tibet and their fellow Tibetans.

Performing Tibetan Identities: Photographic Portraits by Nyema Droma

*Performing Tibetan Identities* features stunning images made by the Tibetan photographer, Nyema Droma. Taking inspiration from the historic collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum, she has created portraits of other young Tibetans that celebrate their experiences and challenge stereotypes. The exhibit includes an installation in the heart of the Museum, as well as film and digital displays which explore the interplay between past and present, diaspora and homeland, the local and the global, in Tibetan identity formation.

Dr Laura Van Broekhoven, Director of the Pitt Rivers Museum, writes:

*It is an honour to display the work of one of the most exciting talents to emerge from a new wave of young contemporary Tibetan artists at the Pitt Rivers Museum. Nyema Droma’s portraits bring vibrancy to the Museum and offer possibilities for multiple readings.*

Further Information

Nyema Droma is a young Tibetan photographer and curator from Lhasa, in the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China. She developed her practice as a photographer at the London College of Fashion and has worked in both the UK and China.

During 2018 she received support from the Museum’s *Origins and Futures Fund* to become ‘visiting artist’ at the Pitt Rivers Museum. This is her first exhibition in a major museum.
For Performing Tibetan Identities, Nyema photographed other young Tibetans, whether living in Europe as members of the Tibetan diaspora, or in Tibetan-speaking areas of China. Her pictures document the many things they share as global citizens and consumers of popular culture, as well as the particularities of their Tibetan heritage. By producing double portraits of each person, in daily wear and ‘traditional’ clothing, Nyema alludes to the fluidity of identity formation and how it may be expressed in dress and objects, revealing the range of options for self-fashioning that are available to contemporary Tibetans.

During her visits to the Pitt Rivers Museum, Nyema studied the Museum’s collection of historic photographs of Tibet and created her own work in response to it. The collection features more than 5000 photographs created by British visitors to Tibet in the first half of the twentieth century and includes many studies of Tibetans, often framed according to the mode of ‘ethnic type’ photography that was first formulated in anthropological photography in the late nineteenth century. Among them are a set of glass plates portraying Tibetans living in Lhasa in the 1920s. Viewing the plates in both positive and negative formats was one of the inspirations behind the double portraits she subsequently created. When displayed in the Museum, they articulate Nyema’s critical interaction with the representation of Tibet in British museums and seek to disrupt the stereotyping of Tibetans by non-Tibetan photographers in the past.

In addition to a display of photographs in the Long Gallery, this exhibition also presents Nyema’s work in a variety of innovative ways that refer to the context of their creation, including filmed interviews with those she photographed. In them, her subjects express a diverse range of responses to questions about their identity and sense of belonging. Digital displays are used for the first time in the main galleries of the Pitt Rivers to make examples of the material Nyema studied in the collections accessible to museum visitors. Large scale photographs, with portraits of the same subject on each side, are suspended as banners in the heart of the Museum in the style of a contemporary art installation but also emulating the prayer flags hung at Buddhist sites across the Tibetan-speaking world. By inserting Nyema’s pictures amongst the thousands of objects from all over the world that have filled the Museum since the late nineteenth century, this installation acts as a commentary on a historic ethnographic museum. It is also designed to acknowledge the dynamism and modernity of Tibetan culture and to inject the presence, creativity and agency of the current generation of Tibetans, wherever they may reside.

This exhibition is the result of a collaboration between Nyema Droma and Clare Harris, Curator for Asian Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum and Professor of Visual Anthropology in the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford.

Professor Clare Harris is a leading expert on Tibetan art and material culture, who pioneered the study of contemporary Tibetan art and the critical analysis of the representation of Tibet in museums worldwide. Her publications have received awards from the Association of Asian Studies and the International Centre for Ethnohistory and her research has been funded by the British Academy, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the Leverhulme Trust. She has appeared on BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4 and is an experienced public speaker. She is available for interview.

For further information about Nyema Droma’s work and the history of photography in Tibet, see Clare Harris, *Photography and Tibet*, Reaktion Books, 2016.


**Tibetan Objects in Transition: A Case Display curated for the Pitt Rivers Museum by Thupten Kelsang, Doctoral student at the University of Oxford**

This case display is an experiment in creating a ‘Tibetan’ mode of displaying Tibetan material culture. Drawing from the Museum’s collections, as well as from items loaned by members of the Tibetan
community in the UK, the display inserts the presence of contemporary Tibetan voices, narratives and perspectives into a historic museum space. It was devised when Thupten Kelsang became the first Tibetan to study for a Masters degree in Visual, Material and Museum Anthropology at the University of Oxford in 2018.

Thupten Kelsang is now a doctoral student in the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford. He is available for interview.

Private Viewing for Press

We will be holding a special press event on Monday 29 October, 10.00 – 11.30, which will include tours of the exhibition and display and a talk by Professor Clare Harris. Professor Harris and Thupten Kelsang will be available for interview. Please contact press@prm.ox.ac.uk for further details of this event.

About the Pitt Rivers Museum

- The Pitt Rivers Museum is one of Oxford’s most popular attractions, famous for its period atmosphere and outstanding collections from many cultures around the world, past and present. Admission, exhibitions and most events are free.
- The Pitt Rivers Museum was founded in 1884 when General Pitt Rivers, an influential figure in the development of archaeology and evolutionary anthropology, gave his personal collection of some 26,000 items to the University on condition that a museum was built to house the material, and a post was created to lecture in anthropology. Today the collection numbers approximately 600,000 items and the Museum remains an active department of Oxford University, doing and supporting research and teaching in archaeology and anthropology.
- The Origins and Futures Fund supports visits by Indigenous researchers to the Pitt Rivers Museum; for further information, see: https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/support.
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