

# Kesang Lamdark

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY HG MASTERS

**An afternoon visit to Lamdark's Zürich studio, where he creates "neo-tantric art" combining the esoteric energies of Tibetan Buddhism with licentious images from Western popular culture**



Kesang Lamdark outside the Rote Fabrik studio complex, on the shores of Lake Zürich.

Shirtless and teetering atop a ladder in Shanghai's heavy midday haze is how I first remember seeing Kesang Lamdark, back in September 2008. He was melting bright pink plastic sheeting over a massive, four-meter-tall boulder with a minuscule heat gun. That evening, at the opening of the ShContemporary art fair, he recounted an equally improbable-sounding tale of how he arranged for this 10,000-kilogram rock to be smuggled out of Garzê, his father's hometown in the military-occupied area of eastern Tibet—at night, by truck—and had it driven all the way to central Shanghai.

The slab was first carved with Tibetan characters reading *Om Mani Padme Hum*—meaning roughly “the jewel in the lotus,” suggesting the tantric union of male and female creation symbols—and then Lamdark covered this sacred piece of earth with a profane, incoherent suit of kitsch belonging more to the material universe of Hello Kitty and

Barbie than that of Buddha. Given the aggressive sinification campaign being pursued by China in Tibet, which includes efforts to transform the rugged steppe into a Disneyesque, tourist-friendly destination, *The Pink Himalayan Boulder* (2008) is a brutally ironic monument.

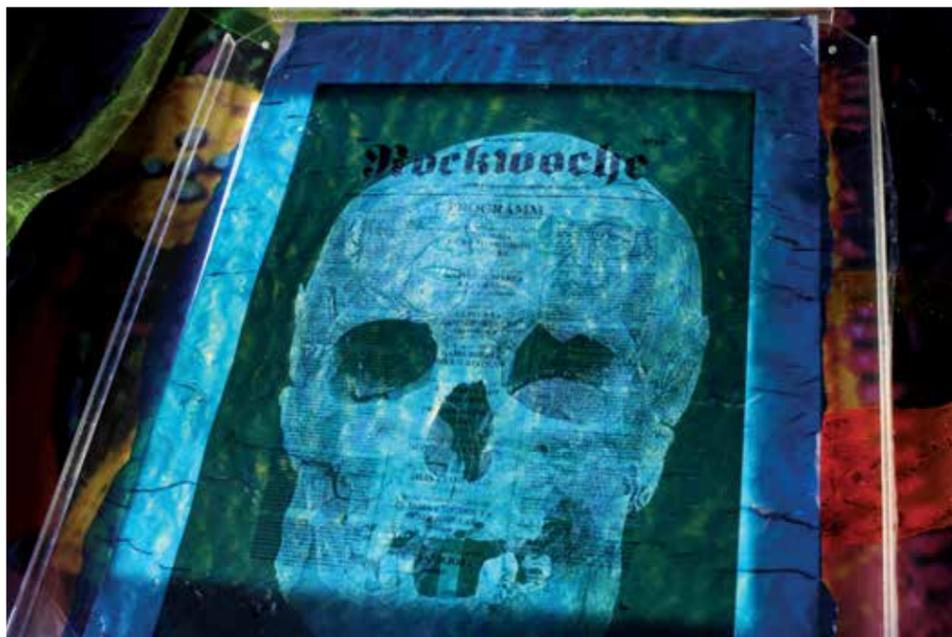
Nearly six years later, when Lamdark picks me up at the Zürich Hauptbahnhof on a Saturday afternoon in June, he has spent the morning trying to connect two televisions together—one of which has a broken screen. I see later that he has repeatedly punctured its already cracked plastic surface to create a pointillistic impression of a skull alongside the painted face of Kiss rock star Gene Simmons, wagging his lascivious tongue. Lamdark wants to see what the soccer World Cup might look like on a screen behind these two figures, in a kind of mash-up of some of life's great (male) preoccupations: sex, death, rock 'n' roll and football.

A short tram ride from the

city center, Lamdark's studio is located in the Rote Fabrik (the Red Factory), on the idyllic shores of Lake Zürich. Its street-level exterior is covered in graffiti and lined with bicycles. When I arrive, families are picnicking and bathing just beyond the complex, taking advantage of the summer afternoon. Visible across the blue water are church spires and stately apartment blocks nestling into the green hillsides.

Inside, the Rote Fabrik remains roughly finished, with strong odors of turpentine. Lamdark's studio is designated by cut-out letters of his name and a picture of holy peaks in Kham in eastern Tibet on the door. He has been a denizen of the Rote Fabrik since his return to Switzerland in 2000, following eight years in New York. There, he studied sculpture, first at Parsons and then taking an MFA at Columbia. He later helped run a Tibetan restaurant on Second Avenue between 5th and 6th called the Angry Monk. “The Ramones ate there once,” Lamdark tells me proudly as he unlocks the door. “They were all vegetarians, so they liked it.”

Inside his crowded, 60-square-meter studio, there are a few traditional Tibetan accoutrements: a door hanging that bears a blue eternal knot, reproductions of thangkas and mandalas on the walls and a pair of snow lions affixed to the windows alongside the Tibetan flag. Piled high in the corners and hung densely on the walls are works and projects, both past and in progress. There are numerous skulls on the walls, some of Gene Simmons (again) and a surprisingly similar-looking, wide-eyed visage of the Dorje Drakden, an ancient Tibetan state oracle, with his tongue extended—if this shows red, it is a mark of truth-telling in Tibetan culture, or, in the case of Simmons, of the possession of a voracious sexual appetite. Sex and truth are



always intertwined in Lamdark's "neo-tantric art."

Lamdark's work over the last decade incorporates all kinds of references to Tibetan history, as well as to popular culture (especially rave) and to high art—ranging from his colorful vests made with melted plastic to Duchamp-esque bicycle wheels dripped with plastic. His technique of melting and burning holes in layers of plastic sheets, using a heat gun to create grid patterns, is entirely his own. In May, at Rossi & Rossi gallery's booth at Art Basel in Hong Kong, for a project he called "The Museum of Modern Mars," or "MoMARS," he showed *Fire-Proof Suit Over Palden Choetso* (2013), which comprises a golden body suit on top of a black web of plastic that covers an image of the Tibetan nun Palden Choetso. She set herself on fire in November 2011; Lamdark's golden suit acts as a symbolic protective coating for the deceased. Like nearly all Tibetans, Lamdark has been greatly affected by the more than one hundred monks and nuns who have immolated themselves in recent years in protest at the draconian Chinese restrictions to eradicate religious learning and observance in Tibet.

Concurrent with these melted plastic works, Lamdark has been producing another body of work incorporating the pricking of metallic surfaces to allow light in from the reverse side, thus creating images. This started in

2006 with *Can in Blue Hand*, in which he punctured the bottom of a beer can in varying degrees of density so that, when peering in through the can's mouth, one can see the form of a naked woman. The series has evolved; recent works utilize intricate perforated mirrored surfaces, with LED lights or television monitors embedded behind them, to depict wild tantric montages of porn stars and dragons, and scenes of kinky mask parties. Lamdark also created a noble portrait of Native American tribal chief Sitting Bull that he called *Sitting Bull / Ling Gesar* (2014), a reference to a mythical Kham king whose deeds are recounted in songs across Central Asia. This same technique is used in a project he worked on for the past three years comprising 108 round mirrors that tell an epic tale of Lamdark's life, of Tibet's history and of his life in the West. A commission by collector David Teplitzky, it sits in two crates in his studio, awaiting its chance to be shown.

After a brisk overview of his current projects, Lamdark shows me family photos. His Tibetan father is a rinpoche; he was recognized as a reincarnated lama at a young age and given a traditional monk's education. The Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 forced him into exile in India. Lamdark was born in Dharamsala in 1963, and when he was very young he and his family were accepted by Switzerland as refugees. Several years after living in a dedicated Tibetan residence, Lamdark's parents found him a Swiss family to live with and help with his education (though he saw his Tibetan family regularly on weekends). His adopted parents were previously department-store owners and already had five children—Lamdark became their eldest (his Swiss brother Damian runs Grieder Contemporary gallery, where Lamdark also exhibits). Lamdark refers to both his "Swiss family" and his "Tibetan family," and is close to both. His father is well known in Tibet because he chose to return to his monastery in Kham in the 1980s, one of the few exiled lamas who has done so. Lamdark showed me a picture of his father on horseback, riding in the cloud-covered mountains wearing a Khampa outfit, the animal festooned in red and yellow garlands.



(Opposite page, top)  
The walls of Lamdark's studio lined with works in progress, and the wire surface he uses to produce his melted plastic pieces.

(Opposite page, middle)  
Lamdark holds a print-out of Kiss rockstar Gene Simmons's face up to the light to show how he punctures images with needles to produce his lightbox works.

(Opposite page, bottom)  
A melted plastic sheet covering a pointillist drawing of a skull, seen on a lightbox.

(This page, top)  
The artist taking down works from the wall to show how he makes his plastic surfaces. In the background, a hanging work features the face of Tibetan state oracle Dorje Drakden.

(This page, bottom)  
Photographs of Lamdark's Tibetan father, a rinpoche, in a Republic of China uniform from the late 1940s and on horseback in traditional Kham costume.



In another photo album, he shows me installation shots from the early 1990s of his first Parsons projects, which were abstract sculptures of wavy, bent-metal forms, whose ends were connected by bands of clear cellophane wrap. There is always an undertone of the gritty and the sordid in a work by Lamdark that clashes with its sensuous or traditional appeals. “It should never be too beautiful,” he says in his laconic fashion, as he pulls down from the wall a melted pink plastic work embedded with cigarette butts. As we speak, I notice a prayer taped to a water bottle on his desk. Though he prays several times a day, Lamdark says he is not religious: “I don’t understand the prayer, but like everyone, I hope to wake up one day and know what it means.”

Later we settle down to talk at the Rote Fabrik’s café alongside the water. I ask Lamdark whether his use of heat, or fire, had any spiritual significance. He doesn’t

answer directly, but instead tells me a story. In his early 20s, the left side of his face and mouth mysteriously became paralyzed. Swiss doctors had no idea what caused it. His Tibetan mother, however, persuaded him to see a traditional doctor. They brought the Tibetan doctor a piece of gold, which he fashioned into a thin needle and then heated and used to puncture the skin in specific places on Lamdark’s face. Not long after, the paralysis disappeared and has never returned. From then on, Lamdark explains, he took more interest in his native Tibet and its culture. The procedure, he says, “awakened my Tibetan soul.” And it’s never left him.

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(This page, top)  
 Lamdark entering the graffiti-scrawled Rote Fabrik complex.

(This page, bottom)  
 On a desk in the artist’s studio is a lamp covered with a colorful plastic skull and his daily prayer taped to a water bottle.