Baas, Jacquelynn: *Smile of the Buddha. Eastern philosophy and Western art from Monet to today*, Berkeley, Calif. [u.a.]: University of California Press 2005
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Jacquelynn Baas' „Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today" is a concise, crisply written overview of the influence of Buddhist philosophy, doctrine, and visual arts on European and American painting, drawing, and sculpture from the late-nineteenth century to the present. It is surprising that there have not been more studies of these issues and that there is no other book-length study of this important and fascinating aspect of modernist art. The influence and impact of the philosophies, religions, and artforms that originated in Eastern and Southern Asia on modern art in Europe and North America have only just begun to receive serious attention by scholars. Baas' book suffers somewhat from its ambitious intentions and scope, with provocative but unevenly scattered insights in some chapters and rather superficial, hasty summaries of what is already known in others. Nevertheless, as the first overview of its kind in a book-length format, it is a worthwhile addition to every art library.

Bass begins the book with a very useful explanation of Buddhism and its fundamental differences from Christianity, Islam and Judaism. She emphasizes that Buddhism is a religion of personal, introspective contemplation rather than preached and taught revelation of the Divine. The book consists of twenty chapters that are case studies of major artists from Impressionism to the present. The chapters are grouped mostly chronologically according to five broadly defined themes of Buddhist ideas and artistic influences and development. The artists given individual chapters include Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh, Odilon Redon, Wassily Kandinsky, Constantin Brancusi, Georgia O'Keeffe, Marcel Duchamp, Isamu Noguchi, Jasper Johns, Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono and Richard Tuttle. All of them, and many more who were not discussed, were influenced and inspired by various aspects of Buddhism to greater and lesser degrees. For some, Buddhism was essential. For others, it was useful and significant but not as vital. For still others, it was rather circumstantial and incidental, but subtle affinities are apparent. In some cases, Buddhism provided the artist with a sense of purpose. In other cases, Buddhist art had greater visual influence on artworks; it provided stylistic direction and visual motifs for artworks.

The format of case studies has necessitated severe limitations on how many artists may be included, and although the artists given individual chapters have been chosen with care, each reader will probably be disappointed at some of the exclusions. I found the absence of several pioneers of abstraction, such as Mondrian, Kupka, Delaunay, Malevich, Arthur Dove, and Pollock, rather disappointing. The use of separate chapters for case studies tends to disrupt an awareness of continuities of Buddhist themes, visual sources, and artistic practices among modern artists. Issues of the intrinsic meaning of artistic activity as meditative, of the immateriality and transience of physical life as reflected in materials and techniques used, the contemplative aspect of making and viewing much of modern art (from abstraction to conceptualism) are dis-

cussed, but the reappearance of these issues among various artists who are not usually connected is somewhat obscured by the case study format. Baas has proffered many useful insights, but there are times when her analyses are rather incomplete, vague, and too reliant on existing scholarship that is merely viewed through the „lens“ of Buddhism. This flaw is partly the result of the book‘s attempt to survey a huge amount of material while respecting the limited length of the book. Bass is more interested in how Buddhism influenced artists‘ sense of purpose. Consequently, she often pays too little attention to the influence of Buddhist art on specific artworks, on what Buddhism contributed visually to modernist artworks. This is apparent in her chapters on Gauguin, Noguchi, and Tuttle, and by the exclusion of artists such as Paul Ransom and Marsden Hartley, some of whose best known paintings feature Buddhist imagery.

Bass interprets many of Van Gogh‘s ideas on his art as spiritual enlightenment and messianic salvation originating as a Christian mentality with parallels to Buddhism. She discusses a few of van Gogh‘s lesser-known paintings, among them a painting of a tree and a self-portrait where the artist appears vaguely as a Buddhist monk, as indicative of the importance of Buddhism for him. Bass sees similar trends in Gauguin‘s sense of purpose and also finds the influence of Buddhism in several of his works. Ironically, Bass does not explore older scholarship written decades ago, such as the studies of Gauguin‘s use of Buddhist art from Southeast Asia as source material for figures in some paintings.[1] The handful of works by Gauguin discussed by Baas are not particularly well-known or important, and since more significant works have Buddhist themes and stylistic and iconographic components, it would seem that they merit inclusion. Baas‘ discussion of the influence of Buddhism on Odilon Redon‘s thinking and subjects is probably the most insightful, revealing chapter in the first section of the book. She concludes that Buddhism was a means of personal healing for him and that Buddhist ideas on the duality of the spiritual and the material influenced numerous works, especially Redon‘s late, colorful pastels and oils.

In discussing Kandinsky, Bass dwells on the Siberian and Mongolian, and hence Buddhist, aspects of his genealogy, and she draws parallels between Kandinsky‘s writings and Buddhist writings. Although enlightening, this chapter feels incomplete. Bass says little about how Kandinsky might have been influenced by Buddhist aspects of Theosophy or what aspects of Theosophy are particularly Buddhist. She has little to say about how Buddhism influenced aspects of turn-of-the-century spirituality and mysticism that were important to many pioneers of abstraction. She pays more attention, but still not enough, to these issues in the introduction for the second section of the book, in which Kandinsky is discussed. Even though the mysticism and spirituality of abstraction have been discussed in such earlier studies as The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985, a new, more detailed explanation of the Buddhist aspects of Theosophy and the other spiritual movements that influenced early abstraction would be welcome here.[2] The chapter on O‘Keeffe is somewhat more substantial. It discusses the influence of the ideas of Arthur Wesley Dow and Japanese and Chinese painting and prints on O‘Keeffe. Baas‘ comments on Dow help to clarify his aesthetic positions and teachings, which were important for many American modernists, and how they relate to Buddhist ideology. The possible Buddhist influences on other leading abstractionists comes to mind, but many important artists have not been discussed. The influence of Buddhism on abstraction is easily worth a book of its own, but Bass has intrigued the reader in these chapters only to leave him wondering and a little confused.

Buddhism was not that important for Fantasy Art, Dada, Surrealism, and Pop Art, with a few impor-

tant exceptions that cannot be overlooked, including Duchamp, John Cage, Yves Klein, and Jasper Johns, all of whom are given chapters. These chapters are surprisingly insightful and constitute some of Baas' more original, thought-provoking studies. She offers some astute observations concerning the Buddhist visual references in several of Duchamp's early paintings and readymades, such as the indirect suggestions of the Wheel of the Law and the mandala in Bicycle Wheel (a spinning wheel for contemplation), which contradicts interpretations of Dada as aesthetically vacuous icons of the failure or non-existence of art in modern life. Furthermore, she probes the Buddhist aspects of Duchamp's play with words and phrases. Baas' chapter on Yves Klein demonstrates that his performances, monochromatic sponge-covered abstract paintings, and the theatrical presentations of these paintings that Klein arranged and conducted may be understood as Buddhist-influenced in how they explore the introspective and contemplative states of existence and environmental contemplation, which were important to Klein. In discussing Johns, Baas proposes that several of the artist's best-known, most startling early works can be understood as Buddhist in how they engage some of the most important themes and issues of the artist's elusive oeuvre, such as the difference between the actual thing and the representation of it in painting and the implicit, discretely evoked autobiographical meanings that scholars have often examined. Baas explains that Johns was knowledgeable about Buddhism through certain writings he is known to have read or heard about through his friend John Cage. The chapter on Cage is a cogent overview of his influential aesthetic theories and artistic practices and their Buddhist roots.

The quirkiness of the author's choices of artists and the limitations of the book's predetermined structure become very obvious in the last two sections of the book, which are devoted to artists of the past forty years. The choices are sometimes very logical, particularly with Nam June Paik, Agnes Martin and Richard Tuttle, but the huge gaps and zigzagging pattern in discussing more recent art are painfully obvious. For example, Conceptual Art and Earth Art are virtually absent. It seems that for recent art, Buddhism has become much more implicit and indirect in its influence, and yet Baas never seems to notice this trend, let alone attempt to explain it. Major writings on Zen and Tantric Buddhism from the past 75 years were important for some of these more recent artists, and Baas often mentions what was published and when and where it was available and who read these texts, but the dearth of references to Buddhist concepts in artists' statement is overlooked. This tendency even appears in some of Baas' interpretations and analyses from these later chapters, when she often forgets to refer to the very Buddhist connections that are the basis for this book. It is probably the author's assumption that by the last third of the book we are familiar with the ongoing themes and issues, but the format of case studies encourages reading separate units of the book and overlooking its loose connecting structure.

Although useful and interesting reading and the first of its kind as a book-length study of the impact of Buddhism on modern art, The Smile of the Buddha is lacking in scope and even more so in depth. Readers will be somewhat enlightened by the scattered insights and intelligent analyses that Baas offers, but they will probably be equally disappointed by what has been omitted, dismissed, or overlooked, by the frustrating omissions, and the uneven depth in which they are examined. Although very useful, Baas' book proves that more thorough, specialized studies are overdue.

Notes:

[1] For example, see Bernard Dorival, „Sources of the Art of Gauguin from Java, Egypt, and Ancient Greece," Burlington Magazine 93 (April 1951): 118-122.

[2] For the most thorough discussion of the influence of spirituality and mysticism on abstract art, see Maurice Tuchman et al., eds., The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985 (Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art / Abbeville, 1986). The introductory essay by Tuchman and the glossary at the back of the catalogue are particularly useful. However, the discussion of the manifestations of this mysticism and spirituality in specific artworks is sometimes complicated and unclear.

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