



SANTA BARBARA

A giant sized Buddha helps an artist tackle death through humor

APR 18, 2016 By Kathryn Barnes

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(Photo by John Flandrick)

Made of the same material as a bouncy house, a new sculpture at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art approaches the topic of death with a playful tilt.

Artist Lewis deSoto has created a 26-foot inflatable Buddha that lies across the entire gallery. It is the fourth inflatable Buddha created by the artist, who calls them **Paranirvana (Self-Portrait)**.

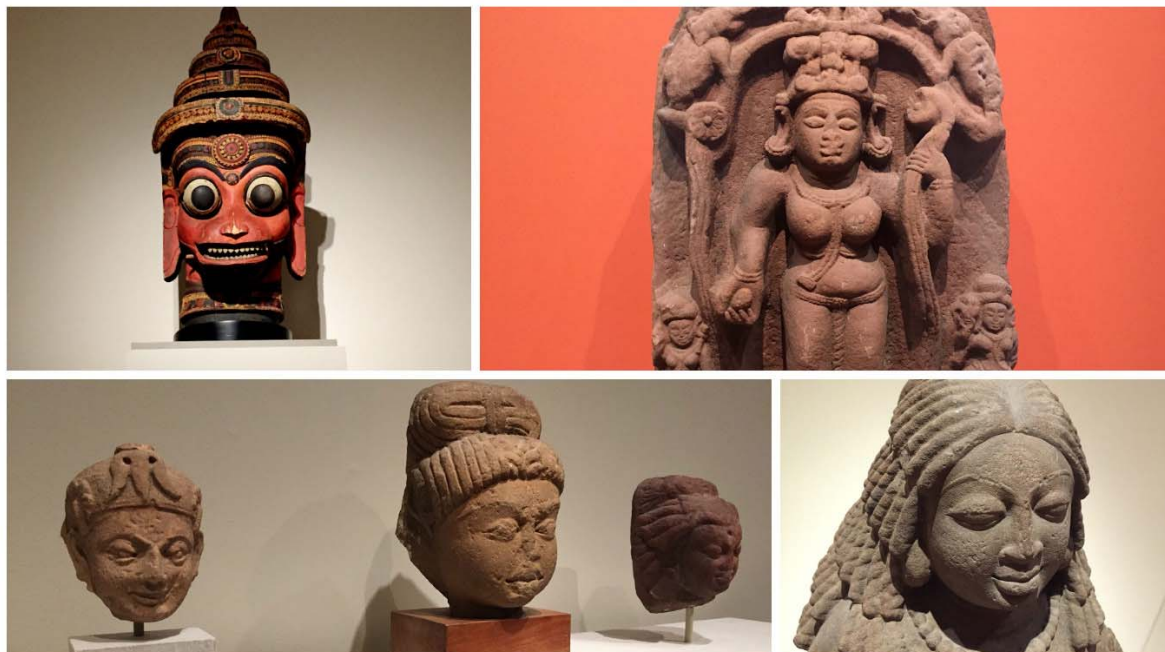


This is Lewis deSoto's fourth inflatable Buddha sculpture. Photo: Larry Perel.

The piece was commissioned by the SBMA to complement the **Puja and Piety exhibition**, which opened this week and centers around three native religions of South Asia – Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. It examines the relationship between the devotional practice of prayer and the art that accompanies it.

According to Susan Tai, who curated the accompanying exhibition, deSoto's contemporary sculpture is an example of how Buddhist thought has extended.

“Buddhism was practically wiped out in India by the 12th century. It’s only recently



Photos: Larry Perel

that there's a revival," she said.

KCRW spoke with deSoto about his piece.

What inspired you to create this piece?

In 1998, my father passed away alone. He was sitting in his easy chair in the den. Unlike the hospital drama I experienced with my mother many years later, there was an unknown, mysterious quality about his passing. It made me start thinking about the experience of dying. Buddhism seems to be unafraid of talking about this. The Christian saints are generally dying under all kinds of adverse situations, like being tortured or having their heads chopped off, but there's no real scene of serenity, knowledge and preeminent consciousness.

Why is your face on the Buddha?



Photo: Larry Perel

It's there to remind me to think about how to approach dying. Also, the Buddha proposes that all beings have Buddha nature. So, all of our faces are the faces of Buddha.

The sculpture has an absurd, childlike quality to it. Did you ever worry about mocking the religion?

A lot of my work has humor built into it. It's a way of creating an atmosphere that doesn't weigh you down as much. Plus, the history of Buddhism is full of humorous stories and funny jokes.

Is there something you hope people take away from this?

I haven't been interested in controlling what the viewer thinks about, but I think there have been some commonalities which I find interesting. A number of galleries have had meditation sessions in front of the Buddha. It's much like the old Buddhist teachers having students contemplate a corpse, the idea that we will pass away inevitably. There's this string that seems to connect all the experiences of the sculpture – delight. Then, depending on your state of mind you can sink into the deeper meaning behind the end of the historical Buddha's life, and then jump to the end of our lives.

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