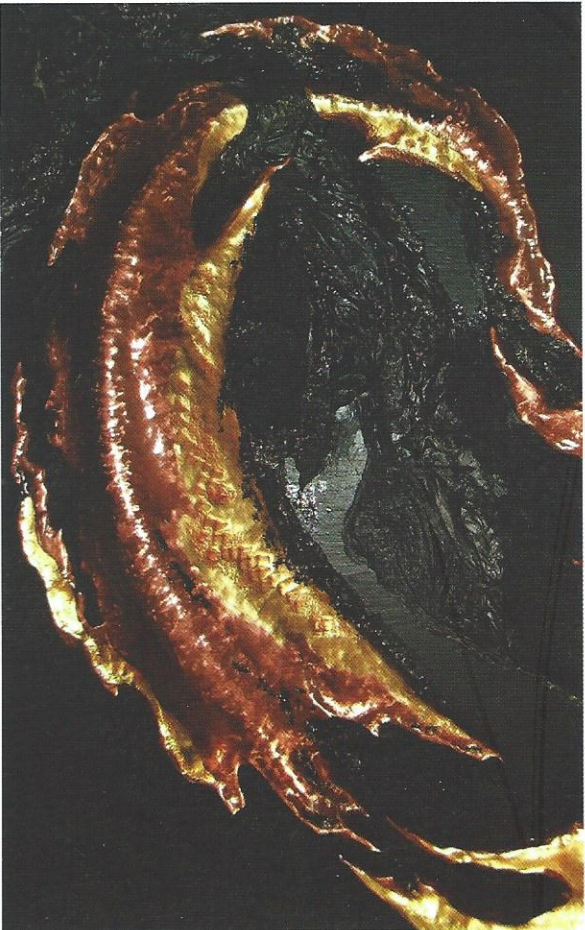


# THE PRAKRITI PROJECT:

E t e r n a l  
V i s i o n s



C o n t e m p o r a r y  
F o r m s

RABINDRA SHAKYA - MAUREEN DRDAK  
FEBRUARY 9th to 26th, 2012

**Sponsors:**

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## **Acknowledgements:**

Special thanks to Ms. Patricia Mahoney, Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of the United States of America, for so graciously agreeing to inaugurate this exhibition and honoring us with her presence.

The artists are grateful to Sangeeta Thapa and her team at Siddhartha Art Gallery and the Kathmandu Contemporary Art Centre (KCAC) for their support in numerous ways for making this exhibition a success.

Special thanks to Dr. Mary Slusser, noted scholar of Nepalese art and author of Nepal Mandala, for her valued words of appreciation. Thanks also to Fulbright Director Dr. Laurie Vasily for her gracious words; she and her Fulbright team were ever available to guide and support.



# The Art of Rabindra Shakya and Maureen Drdak: An Appreciation

Dr. Mary Slusser

Although many of today's Nepalese painters are profoundly influenced in style, subject matter, and iconography by the traditional paubha, banner paintings on cloth, none appear to have drawn likewise from sister traditions. That this is an unfortunate omission is amply illustrated by the astonishing paintings presented here. They represent the fecund collaboration of a North American painter, Maureen Drdak, with a Nepalese master of the art of repoussé, Rabindra Shakya, an inspired coupling apparently without antecedents.

Translated "pushed again," repoussé has been described as an "art of the cognoscenti," those who recognize that the deceptively simple technique of hammering malleable metal into three-dimensional form is in fact one of the most difficult – surprisingly, perhaps, far more difficult than the complex art of casting. It is an exacting technique dependent wholly on the human hand, a modest set of hand tools, and the experience and skills of years of training and practice. Indeed, its difficulty explains why in our mechanized age worldwide practitioners are few. Nepal is almost the last bastion of an otherwise dying art.

From existing examples and literary references it is known that the "pushing again" and gilding of copper has been practiced in Nepal since at least the seventh century of the Common Era. Over the long years since then, father to son, the skills of these masters have been transmitted to their descendants. None is more famous than the family of Rudra Raj Shakya of Mahabuddha, Ukubahah, Patan, father of Rabindra whose work is featured in this exhibition both as traditional practitioner and as teacher and collaborator. As scion of Rudra Raj he is a direct descendant of Kuber Singh Shakya (ca. 1881 -1937), prolific artist and artisan, famous throughout Nepal and all the neighboring Buddhist countries (see "Kuber Singh Shakya: A Master Craftsman from Nepal," Asianart.com). One of these countries is Bhutan where another of Kuber Singh's great grandsons, Raj Kumar, is currently creating an enormous image of Padmasambhava in gilt copper repoussé. Unlike his grandfather's Bhutanese commission, a giant image to be enshrined, Raj Kumar's colossus will itself house the shrine. This reversal of function - not icon within the gumpa but gumpa within the icon - is revolutionary. It would be utterly impossible to achieve without the sure hand of one of the Shakya masters of Ukubahah, Patan.

One need not travel to Bhutan, Tibet, Sikkim, or Ladakh to see the Shakya's work however. Though unsigned, as the traditional anonymity of artists dictates, their works are everywhere in Nepal, most notably in the Kathmandu Valley, as architectural adjuncts to the temples and as icons within them. Further, Rabindra is exhibiting here a half-dozen of his recent works, splendid objects that merit close attention. As a supplement to this exhibition focused on repoussé, a visit to the Patan Museum is recommended. Through a series of models, Raj Kumar Shakya demonstrates all the stages of the technique in Gallery G.

It is not surprising, then, that the American painter, Maureen Drdak, should turn to Nepal and the Shakya family to realize her inspiration to incorporate repoussé in her contemporary compositions. It is fortunate that Rabindra Shakya did not view this revolutionary use of his art with the skepticism that so many of us did and willingly accepted Drdak as student and collaborator. Together they have shown us that there is nothing mutually exclusive between contemporary and traditional art, and even different arts, and that a meaningful dialogue is not only possible but fruitful. It is to be hoped that contemporary Nepalese artists will take note of this accomplishment and themselves search for ways to nurture further dialogue between their traditional arts and contemporary forms of expression.



# **The Best Of The Fulbright Tradition:**

## **An Artistic Collaboration Between**

### **Maureen Drdak and Rabindra Shakya**

Dr. Laurie Ann Vasily  
Executive Director, Fulbright Commission in Nepal

On a recent tour of the Shakya family's "On Metal" Atelier, I had the great privilege of witnessing at first hand the collaboration between U.S. Fulbright Senior Scholar Ms. Maureen Drdak and the Nepali repoussé master, Mr. Rabindra Shakya whose works are on exhibit in Kathmandu and are captured here in this catalog. This collaboration is a powerful example of the best of the Fulbright program in that it so well advances mutual understanding between peoples, an objective that guides the Fulbright program worldwide.

In the aesthetically rich context of the Kathmandu Valley where intricate repoussé work dons the entryways of so many temples, one might begin to take for granted the strength, patience, meticulousness, and the highly tuned skill that each piece of repoussé work requires. A brief tour through the Shakya's atelier will disabuse any observer of any such taking for granted as one sees before one's own eyes the painstaking transformation of sheet metals into minutely detailed and exquisitely expressive repoussé forms. Indeed, the extraordinarily humble Rabindra Shakya, his family members and the other artists who dedicate their lives to hammering repoussé share with the world something sacred - they create beauty. While many an outsider may take an intellectual or aesthetic interest in this form of artistry, it was Maureen Drdak's intellectual and artistic curiosity about the surrounding culture and personal veneration for the generations of masters who have dedicated their lives to carrying on the practice that brought her to this particular project and brought her to work with contemporary master of the tradition, Rabindra Shakya. The dedication she has demonstrated in learning the repoussé form and the artistic inspiration she has demonstrated in now incorporating the form into her own artistic work is a tangible manifestation of the immeasurable value of cross-cultural learning. The generosity with which the Shakya family has shared their art, and their lives, is an enduring gift not only to Fulbrighter Maureen Drdak, but also to the broader world as it has made possible a truly original artistic synthesis.

On behalf of the Fulbright community, I would like to extend this word of gratitude and appreciation to both Maureen Drdak and Rabindra Shakya. As Senator J. William Fulbright himself said, "International educational exchange is the most significant current project designed to continue the process of humanizing mankind to the point, we would hope, that men can learn to live in peace--eventually even to cooperate in constructive activities rather than compete in a mindless contest of mutual destruction....We must try to expand the boundaries of human wisdom, empathy and perception, and there is no way of doing that except through education." Through their collaboration, Maureen Drdak and Rabindra Shakya have superbly demonstrated the synergistic and creative power of cooperation in constructive activities.



# MAUREEN DRDAK

I first met Maureen Drdak in Patan in 2009. Inspired by the glorious repoussé work of generations of Newari masters adorning the architecture of the valley, she had come to Patan to undertake a self-funded feasibility study for *The Prakriti Project*; her vision and ambition was to create an exciting new material synthesis of repoussé metal work and painting. To this end she succeeded in initiating personal study with repoussé master Rabintra Shakya, grandson of the famed Kuber Singh Shakya of Mahabuddha, Ukubahah, Patan. Complementing this mission, she also exhibited at the First Kathmandu International Art Festival and at Indigo Gallery, where she exhibited work from *The Lungta Collaborative* - her 2008 journey to Lo Monthang with international composer Dr. Andrea Clearfield--an artistic effort commissioned by the Network for New Music. For this artistic collaborative Maureen created three immense paintings modelled on the form of prayer flags or lungta (windhorse). These paintings - *The Lungta Triptych*--inspired the form of an original chamberwork of three movements titled Lungta - The Windhorse by Clearfield. The biomorphic forms of three great windhorses surged across immense color fields painted with the sacred clays of the rigsungompa - the protective Buddhist trinity of the region - upon which was written in iron a Tibetan *Prayer for Planetary Peace*. The paintings, exhibited with the chamberwork performance, have been a resounding success. Premiering in Philadelphia to a sold out audience, *Lungta* will have its American Midwestern exhibition-premier at the Rockefeller Chapel in the University of Chicago on May of 2012.

Though Lo had beckoned, a return to Patan--Lalipur--the ancient City of Beauty, was never far from Maureen's thoughts. The beautifully worked copper deities, the gilded toranas above the doorways of the temples, the recurring image of the nagas as protectors of nature itself--all spoke of the unparalleled skill of local artisans. Her growing admiration and fascination with this artistry resulted in *The Prakriti Project*. For Maureen, the quest for knowledge has always been the ultimate challenge; her search for the finest teacher of the art of repoussé led her to master Rabintra Shakya. Entering into an ancient Guru - Siksya practice, Maureen journeyed each day on the dusty route to Imdol to study the techniques of repoussé in Rabintra's atelier, and entered ever more deeply into the living creative traditions and artistic life of Nepal. Maureen's dedication, determination, her successful study with Rabintra, and the beautiful resulting works from that initial study (some of which are exhibited here) were to secure for her the 2011-12 Fulbright Senior Scholar award for Nepal. The new works presented in this exhibition are the results of both this continued study with Rabintra Shakya and her work as KCAC's Artist in Residence at the Patan Museum as a Fulbright Senior Research Scholar for the last six months--yet another example of her journey as artist-pilgrim.

Sensitive to the vital meaning and significance of the symbolic forms which surrounded her--as evidenced by her *Lungta Triptych* - Maureen selected the Nagas as her vahana--her vehicle--for a visual meditation on environmental degradation, a subject of timely import for Nepal and the Kathmandu valley in particular. Like her *Lungta Triptych*, the mythical Nagas in her work encapsulate a highly charged energy, befitting of their status as custodians of the water of the earth and the amrita of the heavens. Using only black and the heavy granulation of mineral particles in acrylic medium, the artist evokes an austere opulence in these works. The deliberate juxtaposition of high and low materials, gilded repoussé with black plastic bags - the bane of the environment - work to create a contemporary frisson descriptive of the visual paradox of an environment and culture at once sublime and debased. Noted scholar Dr. Mary Slusser writes that these "astonishing paintings" represent an "inspired coupling apparently without antecedents." Maureen's diptych, *Flying Nagas*, is the amalgamation of her skill as a Western artist embracing the ancient Newari artistic tradition that continues to flourish in Lalipur. It is therefore most fitting that the selected works of Rabintra Shakya, Maureen's guru-ji, also be exhibited alongside her own work, in order that we acknowledge, comprehend, and celebrate the fabulous tradition of the Shakya clan--which is Nepal's heritage. Maureen represents the quintessential artist-pilgrim, artist-voyeur, whose boldness gives her the strength of a warrior and the subtle energy of an artist to create profound works of art that simultaneously reveal a personal epiphany and a visual interpretation of her interaction with the exterior environs. It has been exciting to see Maureen's work in transition at the KCAC studios in Patan Museum and it is imperative that these studios continue to represent a confluence of tradition and contemporary expression that bring both national and international artists together in creative work and dialogue in Nepal, for Nepal.

**Sangeeta Thapa**  
**Celia Washington**  
KCAC





## RABINDRA SHAKYA

### Artist Statement February 2012

The art of repoussé has been practiced by my family's forefathers for many, many centuries: the history of metal working in Nepal is believed to be very ancient and has been traced as far back as the 11th century. Our family is deeply motivated by our past-particularly by the illustrious work of our famous grandfather Kuber Singh--and we appreciate the rarity and uniqueness of our occupation and are dedicated to its future. As it is our destiny to make images of the gods, goddesses and other related artifacts on metal sheet, our work is found mostly in the temples, mahabihar, gompas and stupas of Nepal and Tibet. Dedicated to the preservation of this special art-form, we continue to create art using the same self-designed handmade traditional tools and follow the methods taught by our forefathers.

Because repoussé as a practice and art-form is rare and presents unique qualities, we are now experiencing an increase in interest and demand for our work from private collectors as well as traditional religious commissions, especially from foreign clients. We are very happy with this new interest as it promotes awareness and appreciation of Nepali arts, and increases the fame of our cultural heritage throughout the world. Yet, we worry that the younger generation may not be interested in the practice of repoussé due to its technical challenges. I hope that this exhibition will inspire young artists of talent and dedication to support and continue this difficult but very important work. I am very proud and pleased to have been invited to exhibit my work-work that represents my family legacy-along with the work of American artist Maureen Drdak in this exhibition. I feel renewed pride and fulfillment in our family legacy, and in the continued practice of our ancient and venerable art.



## MAUREEN DRDAK

### Artist Statement February 2012

The Sanskrit word *prakriti* signifies both physical matter and the primal creative force that shapes it- the conceptual elegance of *prakriti* speaks to this exhibition. My work is both exploration and celebration of material synthesis--the unique properties and possibilities found in the metal art of repoussé and its potential for dynamic new expressive applications-- and a philosophical and cultural synthesis in which eastern and western iconographies and cultural paradigms are meaningfully integrated, bringing together disparate materials, traditional and contemporary aesthetics and symbolic language. It enlists the sacred imagery of the naga- symbolic of the integration of opposites and both an indigenous and universal symbol of the waters-- as an expressive vehicle for visual commentary on global warming and environmental degradation. Nepal itself inspires my synthesis: Its Himalayan summits are a powerful metaphor for universal forces in opposition and integration. The remarkable religious tolerance of Nepal--its unique and harmonious synthesis of Buddhist and Hindu systems is something in which the Nepali people can be justifiably proud. Land, people, art and culture--all powerfully inspire this project.

It is difficult for me to adequately express - to extract from the tangled mass of memory and emotion a distillation of the feelings that I have as I reflect upon my Fulbright journey, the culmination of which is represented here by the work presented here in this exhibition. There are few places in the world today where one can study with an artist-master of venerable lineage, and there are fewer places of sublime and profound physical beauty within which the living arts that nurture such masters can be found; Nepal is that rare place. To study and work with Rabintra Shakya has been a professional and personal privilege. It has been no less a challenge - and one from which I have profited immensely - technically, conceptually and spiritually. It is a great honor and deep joy to show my work alongside that of my teacher - my guru--Rabindraji.



# THE PRAKRITI PROJECT:

## Eternal Visions-Contemporary Forms

### Rabindra Shakya and Maureen Drdak

February 9 to 26, 2012

This exhibition showcases the dynamic relationship of two artists as master and student, their work as individual artists, and the interface of their two traditions. Giving form to their creative vision is repoussé, an ancient technique in which sheet metal is hammered from both sides to produce a three-dimensional bas-relief.

*The Prakriti Project* represents the first synthesis of contemporary painting and the metal art of repoussé, for which the American artist Maureen Drdak received the 2011-2012 Fulbright Senior Scholar Award for Nepal. The works here are the culmination of that creative thesis in which Drdak uses traditional Newari repoussé techniques to create contemporary expressive forms, integrating them within the paint surface in works that address both material and cultural dichotomies, they present a unique contribution to the vocabulary of the visual arts. The subject of these works is the Naga--the protector serpent deity of Nepal associated with environmental health--which she employs as a vehicle for commentary on environmental degradation and global warming, a particularly acute problem for Nepal and the Himalayas.

Drdak's works are presented here along with those of her guru, contemporary repoussé master Rabindra Shakya. The Kathmandu Valley is the last great bastion of repoussé practice and Newari artists are universally recognized as the master practitioners of this ancient and demanding art. Rabindra, and his brothers Raj Kumar Shakya and Rajendra Shakya, are the sons of Rudra Raj, and grandsons of the venerable Kuber Singh Shakya--the acknowledged historical master of the form. (see "Kuber Singh Shakya: A Master Craftsman from Nepal," Dr. Mary Slusser, [Asianart.com](http://Asianart.com)) A powerful artist in his own right, Rabindra's work showcases the excellence of his family legacy; the Shakya Atelier family lineage of artists and scholars, patronized by the Malla rulers, is traceable back to Pandit Abhaya Raj Shakya, founder of the Mahabuddha Temple in 1564 A. D. To study with Rabindra remains a significant personal honor for Drdak; few foreigners have studied with this atelier.

The works in this exhibit evidence the unexplored contemporary applications of a venerable and ancient art form, address the relevance of qualitatively endangered material techniques and traditions to contemporary art practices, and further the dynamic expansion of cultural boundaries and artistic and cultural dialogue between the Asia and the West. Nepal and its Himalayan summits speak to universal forces in opposition and integration, and powerfully inspire this exhibition. It is the artists' hope that this show will impel both Nepali and Non-Nepali artists to find renewed inspiration in this venerable form--and by extension all traditional practices in the arts--and to preserve, promote, and pursue their aesthetic potentials into the distant future.





## Bajra Yogini

Copper Repoussé (with gilding and precious stones upon finishing)  
Height 6.5 feet





Bajra Yogini (detail)





# Jhambala

Copper repoussé with patina and  
precious stones  
Height 3.5 feet





Jambhala (detail)





## Seated Buddha

Copper repoussé with gilding and painting  
(and precious stones)  
Height 11 feet





## Akasha Bhairab

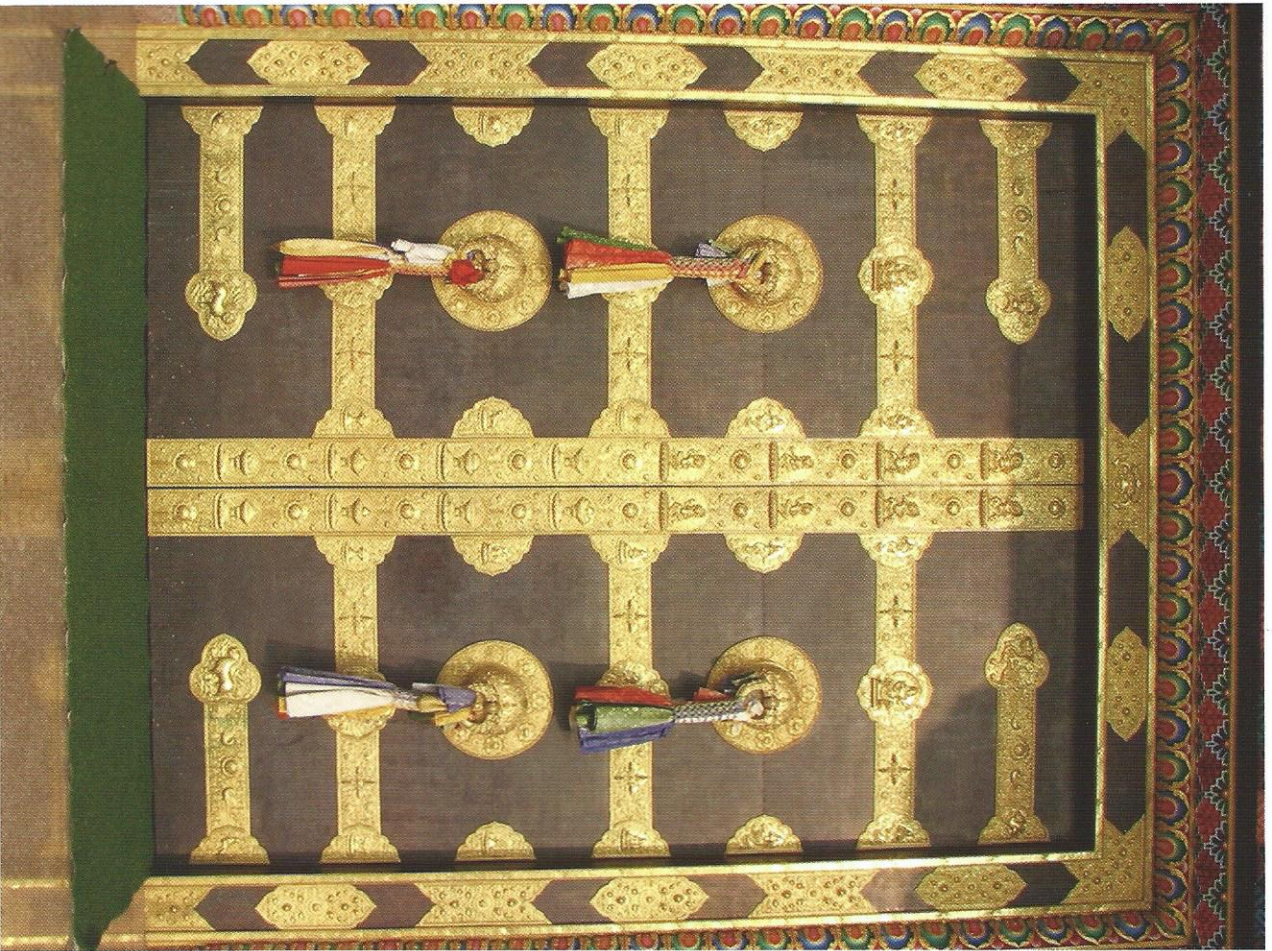
Copper repoussé  
Height 3 feet



## Shweta Bhairab

Copper repoussé with gilding, paint and precious stones  
Height 12 inches





## Samye Monastery

### Memorial Doors, Pharping

Copper repoussé with gilding

Height 12 feet

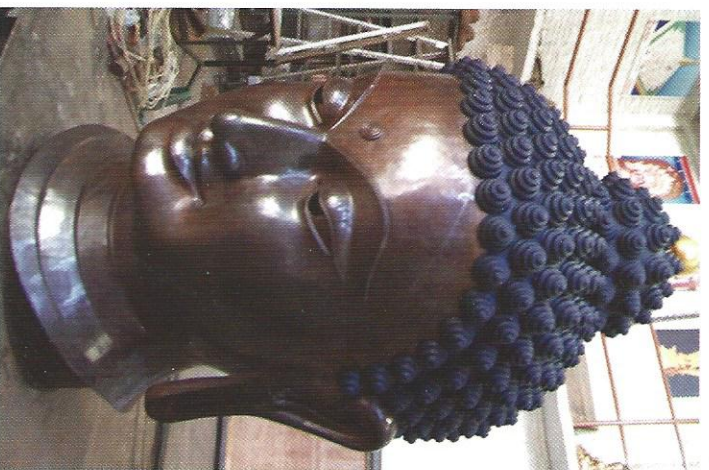
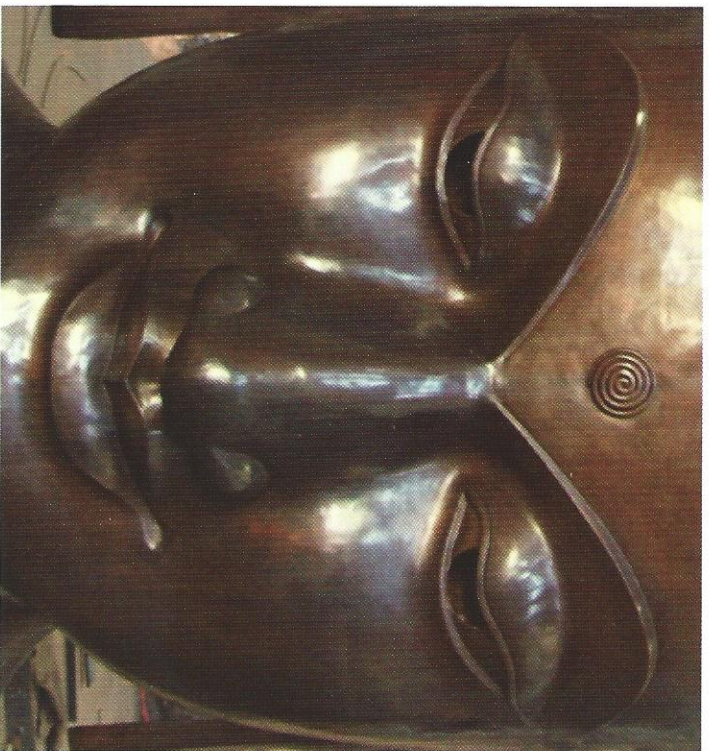


Samye Monastery Memorial Doors (detail)



## Colossal Buddha Head

Copper repoussé with gilding and patina  
Height 6.5 feet







## The Flying Nagas (diptych)

Acrylic, copper gilded repoussé,  
plastic bags, and mineral particles  
on wood board.  
Two panels each at  
71.5 H x 36 W x 1 D inches  
2012





Flying Nagas (details)





**Naga Study (triptych)**

Acrylic, mineral particles, and fire-gilded copper  
repoussé elements on wood panel  
Three panels each at 14 H x 12 W x 1.25 inches  
2011



## The Flying Naga

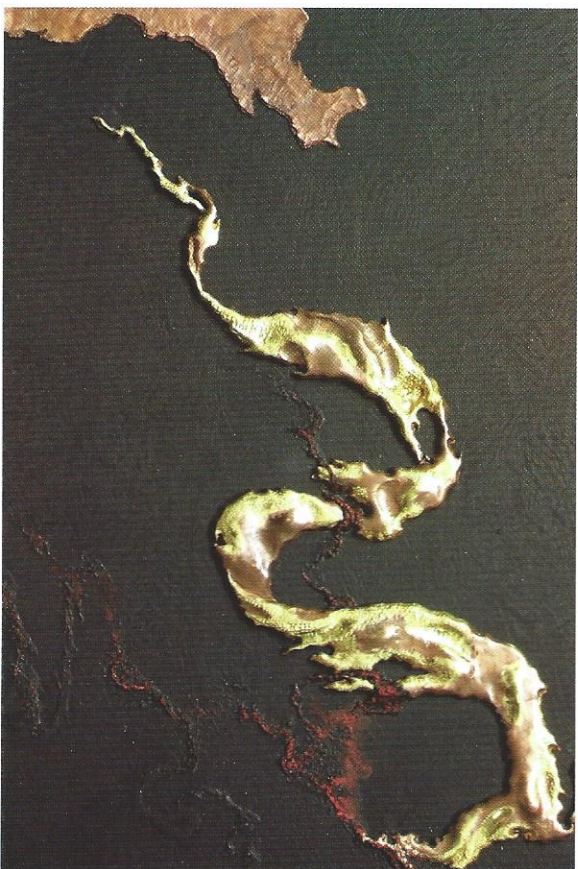
Collection of Berthe and John Ford

Acrylic, mineral particles, and fire-gilded copper repoussé

elements on wood panel

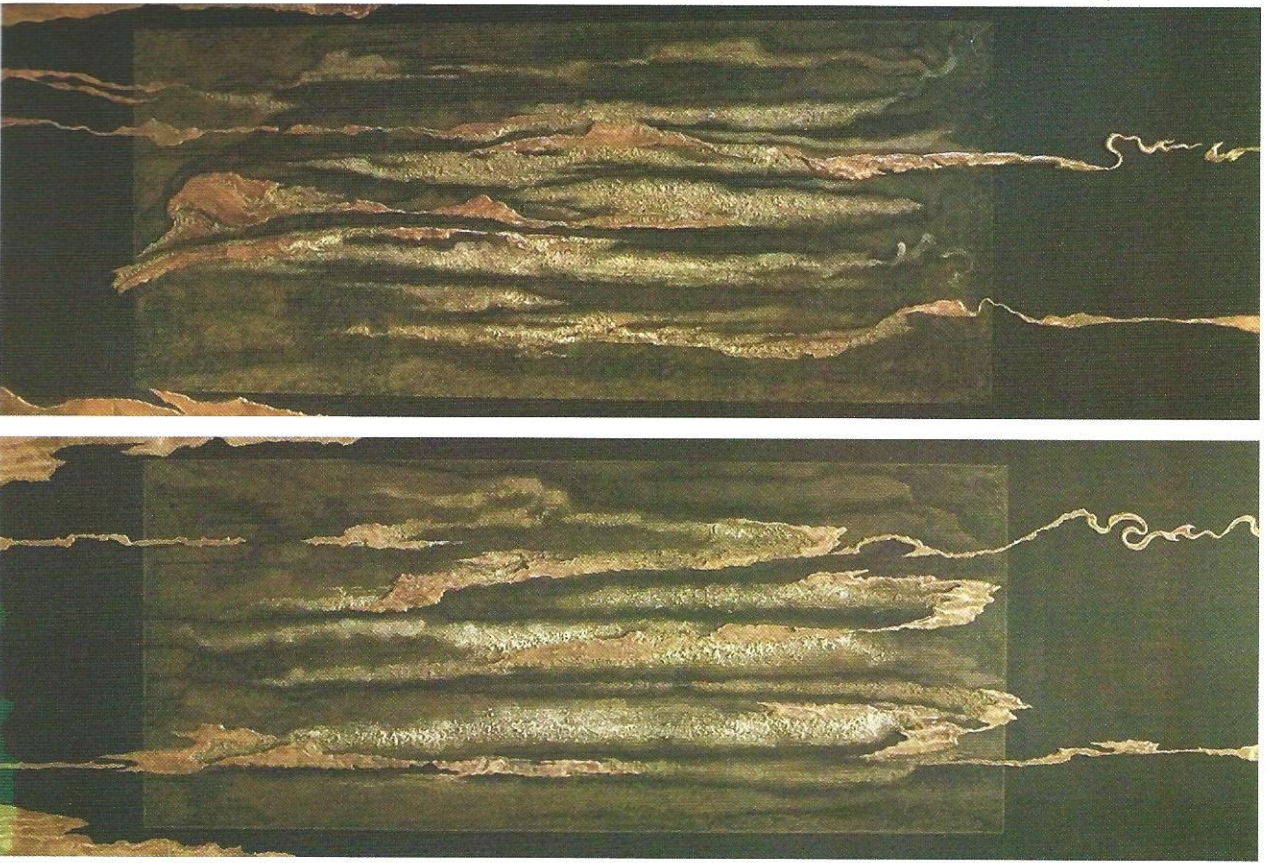
32H x 19W x 1.24D inches

2009



The Flying Naga (detail)





## Dreaming of Yara (diptych)

Acrylic, mineral particles, and repoussé  
copper elements on wood panel  
Two panels each at 70 H x 23.5 x 2D inches  
2010





Dreaming of Yara (detail)



MAUREEN DRDAK



## Uma's Thrall

Acrylic, mineral particles, 24K gold leaf and copper  
repoussé elements on wood panel  
28 h x 16 W x 1.25 inches  
2011

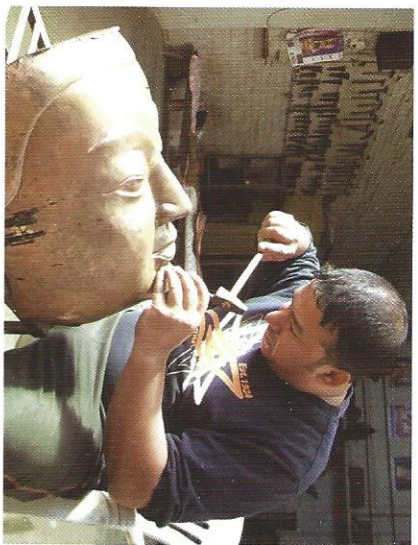


## Burning World 2

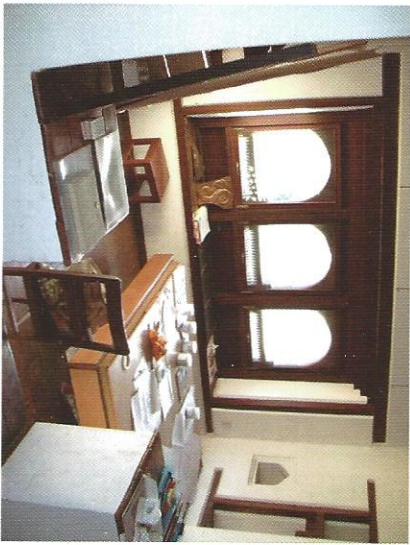
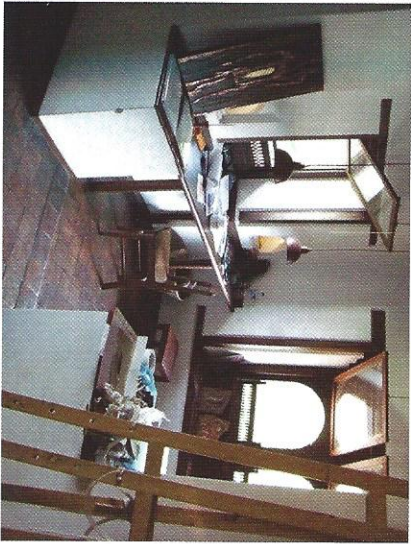
Collection of Shelley and Donald Rubin  
Acrylic, mineral particles, 23 karat gold and repoussé  
copper elements on wood panel  
20 Diameter x .75 D inches  
2010



SHAKYA'S ATELIER



KCAC PATAN MUSEUM  
STUDIO



VIEW FROM KCAC  
PATAN MUSEUM  
STUDIO







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The **Prakriti Project** - a Fulbright project by Maureen Drdak  
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