when you have not been there, your heart is full of longing.

misty rain on mount lu, river che at high tide, but when you have been there, it was nothing special.
At the Art Gallery of Regina Henderson has paired two series of photographs to offset one another, as if they are in what he calls a “conversation.” His focus has been on the likeness of the Buddha and how, as a Westerner, he enters a relationship with the deified religious teacher. One series of photographs documents his performative works, a series of quiet interventions in museum spaces, based, in part, on the recommendation of a teacher at a Korean temple. There, a priest told him, “every time you see an image of the Buddha, and it doesn’t matter if it’s on a calendar or in the Dharma hall, you bow to it in recognition that it is an important teacher.” From 2005 onward Henderson’s respect for the Buddha has become a transgressive ritual outside the standard codes of the Museum to which he’s become conditioned. A series of life-sized photographic self-portraits document Henderson prostrated in front of different sculptures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the Art Institute of Chicago’s stylized Eastern galleries. He is typically photographed from the back, his arms/hands outstretched, totally absorbed in the darkness of meditation. His is a static body, selfless, a form of humility personified. It is simultaneously the frozen and visually extended moment of the photograph that moves us.

Henderson’s relationship with Zen studies and the Buddha figure does not come without challenges that have impacted on his work. It was not long ago that an Asian-Canadian colleague of his, in a fit of frustration, suggested Henderson could never “know” what it is to be a Buddhist because he wasn’t Asian. A racial division had been drawn. Henderson’s artistic subject matter abruptly changed course. He adopted a strategy of quiet humour to address his sense of dismay. He began photographing various Buddha figurines, each attired in a coloured condom as a visual reaction to the imposed, racialized colour and its supposed spiritual barriers. Henderson saw the permeability of the protection going both ways — protecting us from the Buddha’s influence but also protecting the Buddha from our own influence. The “protected” Buddhas came in various shapes and sizes and not without a dose of spiritually restorative humour. The smaller ones from Korea are seen as popular toys doing strange things. One miniature Buddha is crying and another is lifting up his shirt, each slightly irreverent.
The other motif that enters Henderson's photographic lexicon is the hovering or bowing wasp, close up, suspended on a biologist's pin in direct contact with a Buddha statue, like an elaborate, coded *memento mori*. It is an odd but not extreme perspectival juxtapositioning for contemporary art. The combination of ancient forms, Buddha and wasp, questions the illusory unity of the visible, the coherence and division of space, the decoupage and partitioning of forms and even colours (if the condom co-exists within an extended frame). Each harkens back to the most archaic of forms and, just as one colour or form may 'awaken' another, more importantly they awaken the frameworks and the themes. Based on an association that is not arbitrary for Henderson (both Buddha and wasp are ancient, virtuous entities) and more or less justified (in humour alone the W.A.S.P. artist pun segue into the absurdity of a wasp-waisted Buddha!), the assemblage turns Henderson into a kind of demiurge seeking to align the mysteries of a religion with a material Nature. Henderson gives himself over to creative liberty, to make material the dynamics of the unconscious, regardless of the threat of loss or multiplication of identities.

Enlightenment through photography? Henderson's juxtapositions of suspended wasps and deities contain some of the basic ideas and driving forces in 21st century aesthetics. What has he uncovered? Space—the medium of contamination, and papery thin walls between inside and outside (for human, wasp, and Buddha); the locus of chance encounters (for the spiritually and materially curious); the reveler of hidden meanings. And space emerges as the vital dimension that drives relations, establishing a sense of continuity and discontinuity. Henderson's approach to assemblage offers an affirmation of fusion between objects, forms, actions and underlying foundations, and the visual prompting to have them interact. It is photography that is Henderson's instrument capable of restoring a sense of circularity in meaning, by breaking down racial and spiritual barriers, recognizing the totality and the indissoluble unity of space.

—Wayne Baerwaldt, 2009
becomes a hybrid of ancient and contemporariness forms resulting in a complex pattern of photographic works.

Is an investigation comprised of collecting the ideas and symbols of ancient wisdom. This investigation directs himself to find a universal tradition in past cultures. His Buddhist religious studies are an on-going project. He immersed himself in the eastern cultures and their regional customs, temple and found himself throughout Asia, immersing himself in the eastern cultures and their regional customs. Henderson has studied in Korea, China, and particular space weighted with religious meanings and values. Henderson's focus is rooted in a concrete space viewers are weighed with religious meanings and values. Henderson's focus is rooted in a concrete and placed in an environment of the work. Embossed as it is in a surrounding and conditioned and to the spatial environment of the work. Henderson's starting point is a fascination with the heterogeneity of material. The importance of architectural space in a concrete and placed in an environment of the work. Henderson's focus is rooted in a concrete space weighted with religious meanings and values.

Lee Henderson: Phantom Space

by Wayne Dowdell