

Theta

Elizabeth Englander

Mister Pogany nibbana

September 5 - October 25, 2025

“It is the responsibility of free men to trust and celebrate what is constant—birth, struggle, and death are constant, and so is love, though we may not always think so—and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change.”¹

-James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

“Buddhas and ancestors of old were as we; we in the future shall be buddhas and ancestors.”

-Dogen, “Eihei Kosu Hotsuganmon”

On the first day of ninth grade printmaking class, my teacher, Mr. Pogany, told us to close our eyes and draw a cat. My cat ended up with a severed head. I cut the pieces out and inked them up in an ugly combination of red, green, and tan, placed them on a plexiglass plate, and we printed it. Pogany, delighted, praised my print. My sense of what art could be expanded instantly. Art could be improvised, accidental, absurd, clumsy, whimsical, disturbing. It could be funny. It could be liberatory.

In the summer of 2022, I learned that Pogany had died in an email from Victoria Munroe Fine Art, which was holding an exhibition of his work at the time. It was Victoria who informed me that he had been a Buddhist. In hindsight, there was definitely incense and a gong in the classroom, but I don't think he ever talked about Buddhism. At the time of his death, I was reading and making work about Buddhism but I had not started practicing. When I joined a Zen sangha, I came to appreciate that Mr. Pogany had been not only my first real art teacher, but also my first Buddhist teacher, the critical archetype in a tradition founded by a great teacher, Siddhartha Gautama.

In 2024 I began researching Miklos Pogany, the artist, tracking down his publications and making appointments to view his prints in some of the institutions that house them. He is best known for a series of monotypes from the 1980s that feature a semi-abstract, semi-figural motif that looks to me like a woman in profile—either face and breasts, or perhaps head and pregnant belly. Several of these prints are named *Klarika* or *Ghost of Klarika*. The catalogue essay for Pogany's 1984 show at the Phillips Collection relays the claim that this title had no particular significance, but a later essay reveals that Klara, or Klarika, was the name of a sister who died when she was sixteen.² Learning of this in the Watson Library at the Met, I cried. Apparently for Miklos as for me, art could also be a way to grieve.

I rented space at a printshop for a month and made a series of studies of his *Klarika* prints. While I largely failed to reproduce the subtlety of his method and its effects, I felt his presence in the studio in the many small gestures and rhythms of the process that he had taught me. Two of these prints, *Ghost of Miklos (monk)*, and *Ghost of Miklos (pink)*, are hanging at Theta.

¹ I have to thank my Zen teacher, Sarah Dojin Emerson, for sharing this quote with us.

² Richard S. Field, *Miklos Pogany: Collage Monotypes 1980-1989* (New York: Associated American Artists, 1989).

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At the library, I also learned that Miklos was the grandson of Margit Pogany, a Hungarian artist who studied in Paris. A friend and perhaps lover of Constantin Brancusi, in 1910 she commissioned a portrait bust from him, the iconic *Mlle Pogany*: a round egg head with big alien eyes, chin tucked, hands to cheek. I produced a number of papier-mâché studies of the different versions of *Mlle Pogany*; several of these are on view at From the Desk of Lucy Bull.

Like many of his peers, Brancusi was interested in Asian art, and he was a big fan of the Tibetan Buddhist monk Milarepa, whose songs may have inspired some of Brancusi's mystical truisms. Rotated on its side, *Mlle Pogany* resembles the head and arms of a *parinirvana*, a depiction of the dead or dying Buddha. Two monumental buddhas at Theta expand upon this morphological resonance.

In the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, a text from the Pali canon which recounts the end of the Buddha's life, celestial flowers fall from the sky at the time of his death, covering the town "even to the dust heaps and rubbish heaps." People must wade through flowers up to their knees.³ Theta is likewise carpeted in flowers, although not knee deep. We cut them out of mylar balloons that I have gathered on camping trips in the wilderness area of Fire Island. I have also collaged scraps of cut up balloons onto the sculptures. The transparently painted surfaces of the monumental buddhas mute but do not conceal the Wall Street Journals they are made of, while metallic fragments shine in the shadowed areas. Newspaper and mylar balloons are emblematic of different registers of daily life: the former index historical, horizontal time, whereas the latter index cyclical, vertical, intimate time, punctuated as it is by Baldwin's "birth, struggle, [...] death," and "love."

Once I had decided to work on the *parinirvana*, I visited Thailand for the first time, making a pilgrimage to eight colossal reclining buddhas. Traveling around, I was fascinated by the widespread Thai practice of maintaining spirit houses, miniature structures at which things like incense, food and drink, small figurines, and other items are offered to various spirits. Outside the door of Theta there is a tiny rack of doll-sized sweaters made out of old socks. I am not sure what the spirits of Tribeca want or need, but sweaters are always cozy. They are offerings to the spirits of the place; the place being a gallery, they are also for sale. Sometimes art must also be commercial.

**THIS EXHIBITION EXTENDS ACROSS TWO SPACES SIMULTANEOUSLY:
THETA, WHICH IS OPEN TO THE PUBLIC IN TRIBECA TUESDAY THROUGH SATURDAY, 12-6,
AND FROM THE DESK OF LUCY BULL, WHICH IS ACCESSIBLE BY APPOINTMENT IN THE EAST VILLAGE. TO MAKE
AN APPOINTMENT PLEASE CONTACT FROMTHEDESKOFLUCYBULL@GMAIL.COM.**

Elizabeth Englander (b. 1988, Boston) lives and works in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include Englander's first institutional exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT (2024); House of Gaga, Guadalajara, MX; Liste Art Fair Basel, solo presentation with Theta (both 2023); Theta, New York (2022); Smart Objects, Los Angeles (2021); From the Desk of Lucy Bull, Los Angeles (2019). Selected Group exhibitions have been held at: By Art Matters, Hangzhou, CN; Company Gallery, New York; Bel Ami, Los Angeles (all 2024); White Columns, New York (2023); Lomex, New York; What Pipeline, Detroit (both 2022); Theta, New York; Smart Objects, Los Angeles; Night Gallery, Los Angeles (all 2021). She received her BFA from The Rhode Island School of Design in 2011 and her MFA from Hunter College in 2019.

³ Sister Vajira and Francis Story, trans. *Last Days of the Buddha: The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (Kandy: BPS Pariyatti Editions, [1964] 2022), 84.