

Theta

Elizabeth Englander

Eminem Buddhism

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In grade school, my little brother Thomas wrote stories about an imagined friendship between Buddha and Eminem. When they meet, Buddha has already heard good things about Eminem from my brother. He observes that Eminem has no religion and invites him to join his religion, assuming the role of spiritual teacher and guide in their subsequent adventures.

Thomas also liked to play with the cheap wooden nutcrackers that we used as Christmas decorations. Mass-produced folk art, the pink-skinned, white-bearded soldiers function as ersatz guardian/ancestor figures. In addition to our family collection, I acquired many more nutcrackers on Craigslist. After systematically dismembering them, I joined the body parts to small stools and children's chairs using dowels and other inherited and salvaged wood elements. The formerly living, psychically charged materials have been reincarnated as spindly seated figures.

The sculptures draw on images of the goddess Chamunda and from the Yogini temples of medieval India. Decorated with snakes and garlands of severed heads, these ferocious divinities hold weapons and skull cups. In keeping with the Tantric logic of transgression as a path to transcendence, these attributes symbolize the destruction of ignorance, hatred, fear, and desire.

My figures are also derived from iconographically related bronzes of the sixth-century Shaivite poet-saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar. After her husband left her because she was too divine, Shiva answered her prayer to be transformed into

a female ghoulish withered breasts, bulging veins,
hollow eyes, white teeth, shriveled stomach,
red hair, two fangs,
bony ankles, and elongated shins,
stay[ing] in th[e] cemetery, howling angrily.¹¹

These traits identify her with the demonic companions of Shiva in his ascetic form. He is associated with cremation grounds like the one where she lived out her days in worship. There, the impermanence of life is unavoidable. For Karaikkal and others like her, this setting offered a unique path to spiritual liberation through confrontation with mortality.

Dwelling in the cremation ground and rejoicing in her frightening, prematurely aged body, Karaikkal embodied death while living. Her abject self-deification is mimicked in the grotesque transformations that have yielded my icons. Adopting her ghoulish physique and yogic pose, they employ the logic of Eminem Buddhism in the sculptural encounter of an aspirational spiritual model with angst-ridden proxies. For me as for my brother, artistic play is an opportunity to reconcile aggressive and peaceable drives and examples. Like contemporary yoga practitioners, my *Yoginis* are posers in pursuit of transcendence.

– Elizabeth Englander

¹ Karaikkal Ammaiyar, “Tiruvālaṅkāṭṭu Mūṭta Tiruppatikam” translated by Elaine Craddock, *Śiva’s demon devotee: Karaikkal Ammaiyar* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 138.

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Elizabeth Englander (b. 1988, Boston, MA) lives and works in New York, NY. She received her BFA from The Rhode Island School of Design in 2011 and her MFA from Hunter College in 2019. Recent solo exhibitions include: HEADMASTER, Smart Objects, Los Angeles (2021); Toteboat, From the Desk of Lucy Bull, Los Angeles (2019). Group exhibitions include: Farah Al Qasimi, Elizabeth Englander, Bruno Zhu, What Pipeline, Detroit (2022); Deathbound and Sexed, Theta, New York (2021); Quickening, Smart Objects, Los Angeles (2021); Delusionarium 5 (Adaptation), Night Gallery, Los Angeles (2021); Bone Meal, Motel, Brooklyn (2019); An eye that tried so hard to see one particular thing that it forgot everything else, Safe Gallery, Brooklyn (2019); and Fool's Prophecy, Muzeum Ikon, Warsaw, PL (2018).