



ARTWALK | BY JOHN THOMASON

Crystal Clear

Glitz, spirituality and rebellion coexist in Metis Atash's sparkling sculptures

AT FIRST BLUSH, Metis Atash's career appears to have swung from one end of the spectrum to the other. She forged her career in finance, working in private equity for 15 years, mostly in her native Germany. It was exhausting, right-brain labor—consulting, preparing documents, filing annual reports—and it consumed her for up to 80 hours a week.

While traveling during a yearlong sabbatical from her job in 2004, Atash experienced something like an epiphany. "I stayed six months in Bali and met my business partner," she recalls. "We became friends, not really thinking much, just realizing there was more to my life than what I've lived."

Her future business partner was a furniture exporter, and Atash began to create art on his inventory, applying paint, lacquer and Swarovski crystals. Around the same time, Atash, a practicing Buddhist, imported Balinese Buddha heads, and painted and crystallized those as well.

These formative experiments became the preamble to Atash's signature series, the PunkBuddha, which she developed in 2013 from an 18-inch clay Buddha mold she designed. She painted the sculpture in various colors, created a yin/yang symbol on its back, then applied a layer of more than 20,000 individual Swarovski crystals. Lastly, she added "spikes" to its head, simulating a mohawk haircut—the "punk" part of the PunkBuddha.

For Atash, crystals have spiritual resonance, representing light and self-reflection. They are also attention-grabbers, gleaming from across a crowded gallery, and within a month she sold her first three PunkBuddhas.

Today, she runs a motley production line of PunkBuddhas, which now come in six sizes, and she has expanded it to include painted, crystallized elephants,



Metis Atash

skulls and Buddhist deities as well. With a team of 22 artisans in New York and 10 at her Miami studio, Atash produces 450 pieces a year, each one hand-painted and emblazoned with art-historical tributes—she pays homage to artists from Seurat to Warhol to Banksy on the Buddhas' backs—or spiritual symbolism or fashion references. At Art Miami in December 2019, she'll debut her largest PunkBuddha yet, a 6-foot giant studded with half a million crystals.

Atash, whose sculptures are on display at the Beach Club as well as the Sponder Gallery in the Boca Resort's Cloister lobby, may have transitioned into a full-time artist, but as she explains to *Mizner's Dream*, lessons from her corporate life are still paying off: the business yin to her creative yang.

How does punk rock influence your work?

I used to be punk rock when I was a teenager. Every generation has its own music direction, its own vibe, and for me it was punk rock in the early '90s. That's what I grew up with—Misfits, Sex Pistols, Ramones.

The PunkBuddha is the freedom seeker, the rebel part, the one that wants to believe in everything that is pure and good and grounded, but at the same time is his own rebellious, selfish little person that believes it's important for oneself to be happy first before we can make other people happy.

At first glance, the punk movement and Buddhism seem like opposites, but it sounds like you're tapping into connections between them.

Punk rock for me has a lot to do with going against society. Does this imply that there's a freedom-seeking, rebellious standing for what I believe? I would say so, but it's always

peaceful. Punk rock is not a music that ever claimed for violence or for war. It was always a get-together, and a celebration. I think it goes exactly into what Buddhism is about now.

I think the misconception about Buddhism is that it's a religion, and everything that is religious ought to be within a structure, within the conservative view. But when you study Buddhism and when you go on this path and meet true Buddhists that have embraced that way of living their whole life, then you realize there are no rules, there is no judgment, there is no living in the past. There is just the moment, and it's the joy and the happiness. I don't see anything that would go against the punk rock movement.

With so many assistants working under you, what do you still do in terms of the hands-on creation of your work?

I design the molds. The first step is always the clay mold. Once it goes into production, it's being taken over by other hands. Then the pieces arrive, and I paint everything, together with two assistants here. Every piece is hand-painted. I taught everybody how to do the crystallization, but they do 90 percent of it. At the end of the day it's me, myself and I. If I have to survive on my own again, I'll do everything on my own. If for some reason the world changes into a direction where the luxury business is not that successful anymore, and I only sell two Buddhas a month, then I will be able to do these two Buddhas myself.

They must be expensive to produce, given that each of them has tens of thousands of Swarovski crystals.

They are. People and galleries often forget that when you deal with sculptures, you deal with somebody who has put a lot of money into

creations before a cent is turned over. It's not like a photographer that takes a picture, the piece is done, and you give it to the framer. The process of creation, and the time you invest in it—and time is money, at the end of the day—is expensive, but what benefits me is that I come from a finance world. I know how these companies are structured, and I know what I have to do in order to bring an idea to a business. That helped me in the development more than anything. Yes, you have to be creative, and always push the envelope, and come up with something that has not been done. But at the same time, if the process is not in place, if the right people are not in place, if it doesn't come together based on steps that are defined in order to grow a business, then it is not sustainable.

You pay homage to Warhol in some of your sculptures. Can we read a Warhol influence in the production of the Punkbuddha series, given that the Buddhas begin with an identical base, like a lot of Warhol's silkscreens began with an identical image, and then differentiate themselves from there?

Once I started painting Warhol, I realized what a genius he was. I don't think when people see the cans, the portraits, the flowers, they see what he has created and revolutionized. Basquiat is very in right now, but street art in general has a huge influence as well, but Warhol in himself is the most unique Pop artist.

Do your works comment on things like materialism and branding?

As far as materialism goes, I believe money is just energy. To some people it might sound arrogant, but I never paid attention to money. I never had a longing for money. But money was always there, because I always worked, and always believed that what I wanted I could have, because I believe in the power of thoughts, and the law of attraction. Money does not have the meaning that most people would think when they see the pieces. It's about being able to look within the material world, and enjoy the material world without becoming dependent on the material world.

You could look at the sculptures through two different lenses. The crystals have spiritual resonance for you, but for some people, they can just be bling.

It ties into everything we do in life. It's a matter of perspective. You can decide to go with the left end of the stick or the right end of the stick. That's what life is

SCULPTURE TOURS AND MORE

In addition to visiting Sponder Gallery in the Resort lobby, guests and members can enjoy a self-guided sculpture tour, where works by artists including Manolo Valdes, Boaz Vaadia, Bernar Venet, Mauro Perucchetti, Ernest Trova and others tower like sentinels throughout the property. These tours are supplemented with a text panel at each sculpture, and guided tours are available by appointment for collectors.

For still more artistic nourishment, Resort guests are invited to visit Sponder Gallery's flagship location at 413 E. Palmetto Park Road—walking distance from the main Resort. As an extension of its exhibition program, Sponder Gallery participates in major art fairs throughout the country. For complimentary VIP passes, email info@spondergallery.com or call 561/350-0004.

about. You can look at everything through two lenses—happy/sad, good/bad, ugliness/beauty. It's all about the feeling.

So is there value if someone wants to buy your work just because it will look pretty on a shelf?

Here's the thing with the law of attraction. It says to maneuver your thoughts into whatever makes you happy, because happy attracts happy attracts happy. It's cause and effect. If you buy a Buddha, and this Buddha makes you smile, or makes you feel that you achieved something in life, or you like it as a totem that stands for something else, that's wonderful. Whatever the reason is for them is good for me. ❖

