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Bekhbaatar Enkhtur Resurrects the Past

At Matèria, Rome, the artist's beeswax sculpture of a key figure in Buddhism reflects a significant moment in Mongolian history

A BY [ANA VUKADIN](#) IN [EU REVIEWS](#), [EXHIBITION REVIEWS](#) | 15 MAR 23

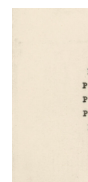


A delicate whiff of honey hits visitors as they step inside Matèria, leading them past several pencil drawings towards the exhibition's main piece: a larger than life, prone sculpture of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of infinite compassion and mercy – a key figure in Buddhism (*Untitled*, 2023). Measuring more than four metres in length, its head resting gently on a pillow, the sculpture is covered in beeswax and, as with the rest of the works in 'Imagining for Real', was made entirely in situ by Turin-based Mongolian artist Bekhbaatar Enkhtur over the course of five intense days leading up to the show's opening.

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Bekhbaatar Enkhtur, 'Imagining for Real', 2023, exhibition view, Matèria, Roma. Courtesy: the artist and Matèria, Rome; Photo: Roberto Apa

Manually kneaded, the figure's body appears at once divine and grotesque, as though ravaged by time: its jutting ribs, eerily thin limbs and peeling frame contrast with its exquisite diadem featuring delicately sculpted lotus flowers and lions, resting atop stylized rows of matted curls tied into a top knot. The core of the sculpture is made of straw bound together with rope, on top of which beeswax has been applied in copious quantities and moulded. Enkhtur's process is reminiscent of the ancient Central Asian sculpture method whereby the artists would build up forms with crude wooden armatures, covering them with layers of clay and leaving them to dry in the arid climate before adding colour. Despite the fragility of the pieces it produced, this technique was widely used for centuries and was practiced as far as Northern China and Japan.



Bekhbaatar Enkhtur, *Untitled* (detail), 2023, straw, rope, beeswax, variable dimensions. Courtesy: the artist and Matèria, Rome; Photo: Roberto Apa

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Fragility and transience are key themes in Enkhtur's practice. His frequent use of organic materials like clay and beeswax – easy to shape but also mutable if left raw – questions the nature of sculpture, understood here, according to the exhibition literature, as the 'representation of matter'. What remains once the artist's works deteriorate, exposed to air, light and time? Is there an essence, a soul even, that endures when the piece eventually disappears, or is everything destined to be forgotten?



Bekhbaatar Enkhtur, *Untitled* (detail), 2023, straw, rope, beeswax, variable dimensions. Courtesy: the artist and Matèria, Rome; Photo: Roberto Apa

Untitled references a specific event in Mongolian history, when a 26-metre statue of Avalokiteśvara (known as Migjid Janraisig) – which had originally been erected in 1913 to commemorate the country's political independence from China – was dismantled by Soviet troops in 1938 as part of broader, Stalinist purges of all things Buddhist. In 1996, the statue was rebuilt and the Gandantegchinlen Monastery complex housing it revitalized, rendering it a popular tourist destination in Ulaanbaatar. As with virtually every war or changing of the guard, the past is seemingly erased, only to be resurrected again once the tide shifts – perhaps in a different syncretic form but there, nonetheless.



Bekhbaatar Enkhtur, 'Imagining for Real', 2023, exhibition view, Matèria, Roma. Courtesy: the artist and Matèria, Rome; Photo: Roberto Apa

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The artist's interest in temporality extends beyond *Untitled* to the exhibition's curation, with each remaining piece purposely installed atop traces of the gallery's previous show. The contours of a removed temporary wall, for instance, are placed along one of the arches and highlighted in beeswax (*Untitled*, 2023), creating a delicately scented entryway. Elsewhere, several wall drawings (*Sisma #1-9*, 2023) – depicting rapidly sketched, playful scenes of a popular Mongolian childhood game similar to Red Light, Green Light – are positioned over unsealed nail holes.



Bekhbaatar Enkhtur, *Sisima #1* (detail), 2023, wall pencil drawing, beeswax, 35 × 25 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Matèria, Rome; Photo: Roberto Apa

Enkhtur's investigations into transience, his search for an energy which may no longer be self-evident, deftly woven into a historical and cultural context, strongly resonate with my own experience as a first-generation immigrant in Italy. I was reminded of a recent episode of the FT Weekend podcast, in which Daniel Kwan, co-director of the Oscar-winning *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), compared the immigrant experience to living in a multiverse comprised of the country we moved to, the one we left behind and the hybrid world occupied by our second-generation children. While change may be inevitable, we can but hope some essential traces of where we've been and what we've lived through will remain.

Bekhbaatar Enkhtur's ***Imagining for Real*** is on view at Matèria, Rome, until 22 April.

Main image: Bekhbaatar Enkhtur, *Untitled* (detail), 2023, straw, rope, beeswax, variable dimensions. Courtesy: the artist and Matèria, Rome; Photo: Roberto Apa

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