Damchö (Michelle Tonkin)

Artist-researcher and writer | Naarm/Melbourne, Australia
damcho.org | Portfolio | Contact

Earlier works and publications may appear under Michelle Tonkin, Damchö Dyson or Damchö Drolma.

PROFILE

Damchö (Michelle Tonkin) is an artist-researcher and writer whose performance, installation and site-responsive practice spans three decades. She is a practice-based PhD candidate at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney. Her research, *Unexpecting Enlightenment: Fashioning, Performing, and Documenting Intent*, investigates ritual, embodiment, and attention by treating intention itself as artistic material. Her work has been exhibited and performed internationally and draws on two decades of Buddhist training, including ten years as an ordained Vajrayana nun.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS AND PERFORMANCES

Solo projects, performances and collaborations

2026 *Intent; outer, inner, secret*, River Studios, Naarm/Melbourne.

2025 *Unbreaking Samaya*, Morgan's Walk, Deakin University, Burwood, Naarm/Melbourne;
Unbreaking the Land: Letters to the Silver City Mines, Abbotsford, Vic / Broken Hill, NSW.

2024 *Lore & Order*, George Paton Gallery, Naarm/Melbourne (with Sankar Nadeson);
Sacrosanction, Masonic lodges in Victoria, NSW and South Australia (with Sankar Nadeson).

2023 *Formless Intimacies*, VCA Graduate Exhibition, Naarm/Melbourne (five-channel video and sound installation);
Puckering Sky, VCA Stables Project Space, Naarm/Melbourne.

2022 *Subscendence* (scent-art); *Earth Jars*, Kallista and online; *Subscendental Birth*, VCA Stables, Naarm/Melbourne.

2021 *Thus Come One's Robes*, VCA Stables Project Space, Naarm/Melbourne; *Soma Om*, The Octagon, Southbank, Naarm/Melbourne; *Latex Lotus*, Byron Street Studios, Collingwood, Naarm/Melbourne; *Ahmed, AI and I*, Naarm/Melbourne and online.

2020 *Bandaid Buddha*, Shamrock East Wing pop-up Gallery, Naarm/Melbourne; *People, We Leak*, Desiderium Gallery (online).

2019 *Sky Mirror Rites*, Lake Tyrell, Victoria; *Sky Basin Rites*, Lake Mungo, NSW.

2018 *Ritual Retrievals*, ICA Project Space, London; *Memory-al (Bodhi Unbound)*, Kingston University, London;
Bodhi Unbound, London; *Littoral Rituals*, San Remo Foreshore, Victoria.

2017 *Bodhi Unbound*, Foks Space and RCA Gallery, London; *Bodhi Unbound: From Institutionalised Fetish to Sexualised Religion*, Université Sorbonne Paris Nord, France.

2012–2016 *Bloody Bodhi,* Foks Space, London; *Crucible*, RCA Shoppe, London; *Uncommon Being*, Wimbledon Common, London; *Unseeing and Unknowing,* Dyson Art, London.

2001–2011 *One Moon*, Australian Experimental Art Foundation, Tarntanya/Adelaide (2011); *The Path of Unbecoming*, India (2010); *Sculpting Formless Intent*, Lerab Ling, France (durational performance, 2001–2010).

1994–2000 *Waive*, Mass Gallery, Naarm/Melbourne; *unexpect!,* Melbourne International Arts Festival / 'Probe', Herring Island, Naarm/Melbourne; solo exhibition, *Sky Drawings* and *Sky Dialogue*, George Hotel Gallery, St Kilda, Naarm/Melbourne; *Emptiness*, VCA Graduate Show, Naarm/Melbourne; *Horizon Mapping* and *Finding the Copper Coloured Mountain*, Central Australia; *Neonate,* VCA Artspace, Naarm/Melbourne; *The Landing*, Southbank, Naarm/Melbourne; *The Rose Enigma*, PIT Space, Naarm/Melbourne; *Indwelling* Temple Studios, Naarm/Melbourne.

Group exhibitions

2026 *Bodhi Unbound*, 'Fashion–Faith: Rituals and Dialogues', Arnold and Sheila Aronson Gallery, Parsons School of Design, The New School, New York.
Reading Unravelling the Intent Sutra, 'B-Side', Blindside, Naarm/Melbourne.
litoralis, 'Stablemates', Mycelium Studios, Naarm/Melbourne.

2025 *Make Love Your Practise*, Plans for the Planet: Olaf Breuning for Kids, National Gallery of Victoria, Naarm/Melbourne.

2024 *Make Love Your Practise,* RCA Alumni Exhibition, Royal College of Art, London.

2023 *DEBUT XIX*, Blindside, Naarm/Melbourne (curated by Priya Namana and Nina Sanadze).

2022 *Make Love Your Practise*, 'Radical Self Care and Sustainable Art Making', George Paton Gallery, Naarm/Melbourne; *Subscendental Birth*, 'Slow Burn', VCA Artspace, Naarm/Melbourne; *untitled (kinesis)*, 'Portals & Parallels', Dirty Dozen, Naarm/Melbourne; *What I Wish I'd Told You*, with Claire Bridge and Chelle Destefano, collaboration with Deaf Community, West Space / Footscray Community Arts Gallery, Roslyn Smorgon Gallery and touring nationally (supported by Creative Vic, City of Melbourne and Australia Council for the Arts)

2021 *Soft Soma*, 'New Abnormal', VCA Artspace, Naarm/Melbourne

1997–1998 *Slumber*, University of Melbourne, Naarm/Melbourne; *Talking Pictures,* Glen Eira Arts Complex,Naarm/Melbourne

EDUCATION

2026–present Practice-based PhD, *Unexpecting Enlightenment: Fashioning, Performing, and Documenting Intent*, Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney (commenced March 2026).

2021–2024 Master of Contemporary Art (First Class Honours), Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.

2017–2018 MPhil/PhD in Fine Art and Material Cultures, Kingston University, London (not completed).

1997–1998 Bachelor of Fine Arts (First Class Honours), Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.

1993–1994 Bachelor of Fine Arts (1.5 years) Philip Institute of Technology/RMIT, Naarm/Melbourne

1991 North Adelaide School of Art, Tarntanya/Adelaide

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS AND WRITING

2022 Damchö and Otto von Busch, "Interview with Damchö," in *Silhouettes of the Soul: Meditations on Fashion, Religion and Subjectivity*, eds Otto von Busch and Jeanine Viau, Bloomsbury, pp. 188–193. link
DOI:10.5040/9781350179936.0020.

Unpublished research writing

2024 *Breathing Between Earth and Sky* (Master of Contemporary Art thesis essay); *Questions and Exclamations: Punctuating Montien Boonma's Life and Art Where Words Could Not*; *The Invisible Nature of Air*, a commentary on Nic Brunsdon's (This Is) Air.

2021 *Love, The Practise; How do I consider aesthetics and form when my primary concern is intent?; Risk and Translation*.

SELECTED RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS AND INVITED TALKS

2026 "Silhouettes in the Soul," invited panel conversation with Otto von Busch, Jeanine Viau and Kodo Nishimura, Fashion–Faith: Rituals and Dialogues symposium, Parsons School of Design, New York (14 February);

DECULT 2026, Christchurch, New Zealand, invited panel "Spiritual Shadow: From Meditation to Manipulation"

2025 "Unbreaking Samaya: The Aesthetics of Survival, Ritual & Healing in a Broken Lineage," Researching Spiritual Harms: Prevention, Protection and Healing, SWell Research Network Roundtable, Deakin University, Naarm/Melbourne

2020 "Sexual Abuse Framed by Faith or Belief: Exploring Boundaries and Contexts," INFORM seminar, King's College London.

2019 "The Heritage of Idolising Violence as a Supreme Method in Tibetan Buddhism," AASR Conference on Religion and Violence, University of Newcastle, NSW; "Personal Reflections on Rigpa and the Aftershocks of the Fall of Sogyal Rinpoche" (with Tahlia Newland and Jacki Wicks), Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women, Blue Mountains, Australia.

2017 Guest lecture, Buddhism and Sexuality, Duke University; "Bodhi Unbound: An Artist's Journey from Institutionalised Fetish to Sexualised Religion," Université Sorbonne Paris Nord.

Research impact: The 2019 Sakyadhita paper and 2020 INFORM seminar have been used as set texts in Religion, Rights and Governance at Deakin University (see Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 37(1), 2021, pp. 141–143).

RESIDENCIES, AWARDS AND GRANTS

2026 City of Melbourne Creative Spaces River Studios residency; Massanutten Residency, Matthews House, Virginia, USA; John Ewan Frazer Bursary, University of Sydney.

2024 Fieldwork, Wilyakali Country, Broken Hill and Silverton, NSW.

2022 Artist residency, Eastern Beach Art House, Geelong.

2021 Graduate Access Bursary Grant, University of Melbourne.

2017 Academic Development Grant, London Alternative Market; Post-Graduate Studies Grant, Nima Buddhist Preservation Services, Shenzhen.

2015 Artist residency, Mestre Carpenedo Villa, Venice.

2012 Artist residency, Workhouse Studios, Dromore West, Ireland.

1992–1998 Lavazza George Gallery Scholarship (residency and solo exhibition); Pratt Foundation Grant (*Emptiness*); VCA Central Australia Desert Artist Communities exchange, S.A & N.T.; Arnhem Land and Kakadu, Box Hill artist tour, N.T; Artist residency ANZSES, Witjira National Park, S.A.

SELECTED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2018–present Public Programs Representative, National Gallery of Victoria, Naarm/Melbourne — audience engagement, learning programs and cultural outreach.

2022–present Creative Producer (part-time), Design Guild London — intercultural and site-responsive contemporary art projects, including The GARLAND and fieldwork in the ACT and Broken Hill.

2015–2018 Royal College of Art, London — Executive Education Course Developer (2016–2018); Central Art & Digital Print Services Coordinator (2015–2018).

2012–2015 Senior Consultant and Workshop Coordinator, Dyson Art, London — artist and gallery liaison, fine-art presentation and framing.

2001–2010 Senior program, ceremonial and administrative roles, Institute for Wisdom and Compassion, Lerab Ling, France — Buddhist education and meditation programs, ceremonial design, artefact archives and international teaching.

1998 Sessional Teacher, School of Music / Centre for Ideas, Victorian College of the Arts.

1992–1994 Artist's Assistant

SELECTED RESEARCH AFFILIATIONS AND COLLABORATIONS

2024–present Contributing scholar and voluntary research collaborator, SWell Research Network, Deakin University; contributor to Researching Spiritual Harms: Prevention, Protection and Healing (2025).

2019–present Australian Association for the Study of Religion (AASR)

2017–present Contributing scholar, INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements), London School of Economics and Political Science.

Affiliate Strother School of Radical Attention, Brooklyn.

2025–present Site Responsive Cultural Production Group (Lana Nguyen cohort, Australia Council Future Leader).

2022–2023 RMIT DERC × Minderoo Centre, University of Cambridge — responsible data science guides.

2006–2009 Collaboration with Christine Longaker on end-of-life care research and practice-based caregiver resources.

2009 Mind and Life Institute: Mind and Life Dialogues between Buddhism and Science XVIII *Attention, Memory and the Mind*

SELECTED CONTEMPLATIVE TRAINING AND ORDINATION

2006–2009 Three-year retreat in Buddhist philosophy and practice, Institute for Wisdom and Compassion, Lerab Ling, France.

2010–2011 Shikshamana ordination, Pu Yi Yuan Nunnery, Taipei, Taiwan.

2001–2010 Getsulma (novice) ordination, Kathmandu, Nepal.

1997–2001 Upāsikā (lay) precept holder.

SELECTED MEDIA AND CRITICAL REFERENCES

Interviews: "This Buddhist Life: Damchö Dyson," Tricycle: The Buddhist Review (Winter 2017) link; "The Art of Being Unbound," HuffPost / Medium (17 March 2017) link. Additional coverage has included BBC World Service, The Telegraph (UK), Süddeutsche Zeitung, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Guardian, ABC TV Compass, WWD.

Catalogue essays and reviews: Xinyu Song, "Witness the Contemporary Relevance of Self-care" (2022); Bryony Marks, Probe (1999); "Probing Works in Disharmony with Nature," The Age (14 September 1999); Artfan, no. 9 (1999); Joseph De Lutiis, The Rose Enigma (1994).