

## 'Last Forbidden Kingdom' on Display at Sunset Center

By CHRIS COUNTS



Kenneth Parker's images depict Tibet's otherworldly landscape and its rich and fascinating culture.  
Photo: Kenneth Parker

WINDSWEPT AND nearly devoid of vegetation, the remote Nepalese district of Mustang is a place where fried yak dung and goat droppings serve as cooking fuel, where sheep horns hang over doorways to chase away evil spirits and where firewood is considered a sign of wealth.

And yet Mustang is also home to a collection of ancient Buddhist art so impressive that Carmel photographer Kenneth Parker has made three trips there since 2003 to capture what he calls "The Last Forbidden Kingdom." An exhibit of Parker's photographs, *Buddhist Earth: Sacred Places / Sacred Work*, opens Friday, May 30, at the Center for Photographic Art. The gallery will host a reception from 6 to 8 p.m.

Surrounded by some of the world's highest mountains and bordering Chinese Tibet, Mustang is home to about 9,000 hardy residents.

"It is very difficult to reach," he explained. "There are no roads. It takes a week to hike in."

On his last trip to Mustang in 2006, Parker was accompanied by a crew of 12 people and 15 horses. The pack animals carried, among other things, large-format cameras, generators, cables and state-of-the-art lighting equipment. The expedition was sponsored by the American Himalayan Foundation, which is funded primarily by private donors.

### Birthplace of Tibetan Buddhism

Much of Tibet's rich artistic culture has been lost under Chinese rule. Yet as the only fully intact piece of their ancient realm on the Tibetan Plateau, Mustang and its still authentic culture has remained virtually untouched by the outside world, preserving a wealth of historic and creative artifacts Parker captured on film.

"The most spectacular tantric frescos ever discovered are in Mustang," Parker said. "Some of them are 50 feet long and 30 feet high. They used mineral pigments, so they'll last forever."

Remarkably, many of the frescos were unknown even in Mustang until the past decade. "These things for centuries were covered by soot from yak butter candles," Parker explained. "Between the soot and the region's low humidity, the frescos were well-preserved. All that really had to be done was clean them."

The birthplace of Tibetan Buddhism, Parkers calls Mustang, "the last vestige of true Tibetan Buddhist culture."

While Mustang's artistic culture is well preserved, Parker isn't sure how long it will stay that way. Specifically, he's worried about China.

Mustang's isolation "Probably isn't going to last long," he suggested. "The Chinese are building a road to it. They'll kill it with tourism and turn it into a theme park like [Tibetan capital] Lhasa."

To focus attention on the need to preserve Mustang's artistic culture, Parker plans to publish an ambitious coffee table book featuring photographs from his three trips to the region. The book will also include images of Buddhist art from Cambodia and Burma. He said the Dalai Lama plans to write a forward to the book.

### Homeless Tibetans Offer Blessing

In addition to Parker's fascinating images, Friday's reception offers an impressive - if somewhat unusual - guest list. The venerable Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, Khenpo Orgyen Thinley Rinpoche and Lama Sonam Tsering Rinpoche, three of America's most prominent Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leaders, will be on hand to offer a blessing.

"These guys are the rock stars of lamas," explained Dennis High, director of the photography center. The two spiritual leaders were living at the Pema Osel Ling Tibetan Center in the Santa Cruz mountains near Watsonville when a devastating wildfire struck last week. The Tibetan center's residents were evacuated, and the wildfire's flames, at one point, surrounded the rural retreat. Its residents still haven't returned.

"They had spot fires on the property," Parker reported. "Two cabins burned."

Thanks to Parker and a group of local residents, the temporarily homeless Tibetans will spend this weekend in luxury. After the reception, they'll stay at Ansel Adams former Carmel Highlands home where they'll be treated to Ken's great wines and the culinary wizardry of local caterer Michael Jones. The following day they'll travel to the Esalen Institute, where presumably they'll enjoy a relaxing soak in the hot tubs. Then they'll overnight at a spectacular private residence just south of Esalen.

The exhibit continues through October 1. The Center for Photographic Art is located at Sunset Center in Suites 1 and 2. For more information, call (831) 625-5181 or visit [www.photography.org](http://www.photography.org).



The monasteries of Tibetan Mustang reveal an extraordinary artistic culture.  
Photo: Kenneth Parker