

Ferrari

360° TALENT

TALENT

FREE SPIRIT

DUBBED THE 'CHINESE ANDY WARHOL', ZHANG HUAN IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST INTRIGUING ARTISTS. IN THIS EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW, HE DRAWS PARALLELS BETWEEN THE CONTEMPORARY ART WORLD AND THE 'DESIGN EXQUISITENESS' OF THE PRANCING HORSE

WORDS: LISA MOVIES
PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMES WASSERMAN



Not many of the world's leading artists maintain a blog about a pig. However, Zhang Huan is not most artists. Zhang, 45 and based in Shanghai and New York, with roots in Henan Province and Beijing, is best known for his massive sculptures and ash paintings, but there are few formats he has not shied away from. He studied traditional painting, launched his career as a body performance artist, and then solidified it as a sculptor.

Of his artistic adaptability, Zhang claims that his multiple media 'are just the same. If a person is outstanding in their field, they are an artist. It does not matter whether they are an entrepreneur, or a politician, or a scientist or anything else. The only difference is in what people called them and in the content of what they did. The level of thought and consideration reach the same height.'

The big comparisons come from an artist with a big vision. The succinct and contemplative, intense and humorous Zhang Huan spoke to *The Official Ferrari Magazine* from his studio in the Shanghai suburbs, which in just five years has become the stuff of art legend. The multi-acre compound encompasses several massive converted factories where Zhang's visions are mid-wifed by a staff of over 100 assistants and technicians. In perhaps accidental evocation of Zhang's seminal 1997 performance and photograph *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond*, his workers sometimes cool in the complex moat, scattering the family of ducks. Other resident fauna include Zhu Gangqiang (*Cast-Iron Pig*), which survived buried under the rubble of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake before being adopted by Zhang Huan and appearing in some of his work as a reminder of that tragedy. Wenchuan is also commemorated in his current superstar show at Beijing's Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in *Hope Tunnel*, an entire crushed train Zhang excavated from a tunnel that collapsed in the Sichuan quake.

Zhang Huan's production scale, swarming staff, stylistic flexibility, unapologetic self-promotion and outsizedchutzpah have established him as the Andy Warhol of China. Yet he is also a Buddhist who can deadpan, 'All along I have not made any interesting art. Things done by humans cannot be interesting, because the longer humanity exists, the less they are happy.'

If so, Zhang seems to be an exception to his rule. He started as a founder of the early 1990s Beijing avant-garde that foreran the thriving contemporary Chinese art scene of today and then, along with a handful of other expatriate Chinese artists, Zhang's presence in New York from 1998 to 2006 helped to first attract Western attention to that scene.

After graduating from Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1993, Zhang Huan joined the city's East Village artist group, and quickly became synonymous with controversy and censorship with *Angel*, a gory performance with a fake blood-covered dismembered doll. He followed the next year with *12 Square Meters*, in which he sat covered in honey and insects in an unkempt public lavatory for an hour. In *65 Kilograms*, Zhang suspended himself in chains as his blood drizzled and sizzled into a hot pan. In the US Zhang immediately generated attention with performances

'If a person is outstanding in their field, they are an artist. The level of thought reaches the same height'



Man at work: Zhang Huan in his studio in the Shanghai suburbs, in front of his 2008 work *Taiwan Buddha*, and a very special sculpture - the Ferrari California

This page:
right: *My New York*,
a 2002 performance at
the Whitney Museum,
New York. Below: *Hope
Tunnel*, 2010, created
in copper, iron, steel,
aluminium and wood



that saw him strolling down New York streets in a suit made of meat and lying naked, face down, on a bed of ice. Images of these works have become classics of the Chinese contemporary art canon.

In 2006, Zhang Huan decided to return to China, this time to Shanghai. 'At that time in New York, that city was losing its inspiration for me; I had started feeling bored, things were old and similar and unchanging,' Zhang recalls. He describes himself as feeling strongly a part of China's living art and tradition, which contributed to his return, 'because you know the ground you are stepping on is your own dirt. Your blood cannot separate from this land. If you leave this land you feel without a foundation, like you are flowing.'

However, the Chinese art scene changes quickly and was unrecognisable from the one he left, and the Shanghai milieu distinct from Beijing's. Moreover, in the changed China, Zhang was no longer the precocious provocateur, but now something of a big-ticket representative of the international art establishment, with representation by the prestigious Pace Gallery. He has remained largely an art scene all of his own, removed and reclusive, but Zhang's work has become more generally Chinese and Buddhist on his return, while shaped by his memories of foreign shores.

'I feel that when you are on the other side of the world you can see your homeland more vividly and clearly. Belonging to that big country on this earth, you can see that certain situations are already insane, but countries on this side of the world are still unconscious that the insanity is already beyond control,' Zhang muses. Nonetheless, 'Life in China is blissful apart from the air and water unfit for human consumption. Personal connections and bonds are strong. You can say that it is a passionate country with a basic passion for a better life. You don't see that in other countries. Today, the Chinese stay up 24 hours, while Europeans

'The Chinese stay up for 24 hours, while Europeans are always sleeping and Americans can't wake up'

are always sleeping, Americans can't wake up and Taiwanese are always sleepwalking.'

Zhang's first solo show in China's Mainland after his return was scheduled in early 2008 at the Shanghai Art Museum, a stodgy, state-owned space for rent. However, *Blessing* was cancelled by the authorities without explanation; scene speculation proffered the show's coincidence with a party congress and the upcoming Beijing Olympics, both times of heightened caution by the conservative Shanghai Cultural Bureau. The problem could have been the Communist symbolism of a praying mantis made from sickles, the religious imagery of statues formed of ash from Buddhist temples, or the deformity of his cowhide *Giant* series – all potentially taboo in China – or Zhang Huan's firebrand history itself. Some even speculated that Zhang staged the censorship as a publicity stunt.

Eventually the Shanghai Art Museum rescheduled Zhang's solo showcase for February of this year. *Dawn of Time* was no less daring; along with new *Giants* it included *Pagoda* with a representation of Zhang's *Cast-Iron Pig* of the now-taboo earthquake, and the



This page:
clockwise from above:
Three Heads Six Arms,
2008, a monumental work
inspired by religious
sculptures destroyed
during the Cultural
Revolution; *Family Tree*,
2000, a performance art
study which features the
face of Zhang Huan with
the physical trace of
his lineage transcribed
in ink; *Canal Building*,
2008, a work created
out of temple ash,
reflecting how people's
dreams and hopes are
infused in incense ash

Shanghai Expo year of 2010 has been as delicate on cultural censorship fronts as 2008, but the exhibition proceeded without incident.

Perhaps, after five years in China, Zhang Huan has learned to navigate the country's odd cultural environment, where oversight is erratic and often related to connections and status. Zhang spoke with us from his office, cluttered with a collection of native sculptures, and attended by several assistants. Neatly in the middle of the table were chilled rows of petite bottles of Pepsi emblazoned with Zhang's already iconic pair of silver pandas, *Hehe*, *Xixie*. The special edition sodas commemorate the USA Pavilion at the Shanghai World Expo, where the panda statues are crowd pleasers and a souvenir photo favourite. They have also drawn criticism, for their cynical lowest denomination appeal and their political pandering: with names that combine into *hexie* (meaning "harmony" in Mandarin), they were donations by a Taiwanese property group active on the Mainland and sit strategically next to Taiwan's pavilion in celebration of closer cross-strait ties.

Since 2006, Zhang, with his wife Hu Chang Guan, has also built goodwill through his Gaoan Foundation, which builds new Zhang Huan Elementary Schools around rural China and contributes to arts institutions and Buddhist temples and associations. Buddhism is one of Zhang's strongest artistic influences and expressions, from Buddha statues to temple ash as his



Bear necessities: Zhang Huan's playful side is revealed in his celebrated panda sculptures, created in mirror-finished stainless steel.

'Italy is a very beautiful country, with beautiful cars, and has had a huge cultural impact'

signature medium. 'The ash materials that we use are collected from Buddhist temples,' Zhang describes. 'Banknotes, written prayers, and Buddhist classic texts all mingled in their burning. We transform these ashes into ash art, the first in the history of art to do so. We make ash paintings, ash sculpture, ash installation, even ash performance art. That is to say this kind of material is different from oil and traditional Chinese painting and other formats in that it contains spiritual essence. It is not only a form of material but contains many wishes and dreams inside. It is not simply ashes.'

As to Buddhism's precise influence, 'you cannot say what percentage, because it is just part of your life. The influence is just like speaking a language, when you enter a linguistic system; it infuses into your entire body.' Zhang declares that he is Buddhist, 'but I view every god and religious figure, such as



Muhammad, Jesus, Sakayamuni and Confucius as being just like us humans.'

In explaining Buddhism, Zhang Huan references his July trip to Italy at Milan's Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, something which allowed him to re-examine Renaissance Italian masterpieces as well as to visit a small village near Florence. He explains the trip's significance: 'In religious ages, artists created for religion. In political ages, they served politics and the nation. It is the same for all Western countries... In Chinese traditional art, the concept of Chinese culture is that the human is an integral part of nature. The Chinese tradition is to put the human into the nature as a harmonic being. Western and European culture is a rectangular system which emphasizes science, accuracy and mathematics. They prioritise the human individual ahead of all else.'

'Italy is a very beautiful country, with immensely beautiful cars and that has had a huge historical and cultural impact on the rest of the world,' Zhang continued. 'It is very impressive how they protect the old culture while developing the new. The things there that merit China's study are numerous, but China must also incessantly learn from its own ancestral heritage. Every European country is unique. I also like Rome and Florence, and they are both very different: Rome is more like a man, while Florence instead is like a woman, beautiful.'

However, I once worked on a project in Rome, and to me Rome is like a marble, its civilisation is strong to the point of unyielding. Living in such a city you lose all the imagination under the constriction of the classical culture. Nonetheless, Italy is a happy place. Young people exercise to be more beautiful,



to attract beautiful boys and girls. Without Italy, trends today would be totally different. Of all the European countries, I like England most for its temperament. For manufacturing and craftsmanship I find Italy to be the most badass. It resembles China's small village industries and craft associations but with that European sort of feeling.'

Zhang praises Ferrari's 'influence and design exquisiteness, as race cars as well as sports cars'. He tells of a friend who visits his compound in a Ferrari. 'When he drove from the city to the village, its voice to me was like sound of heavy machines, very loud but what the maniacs love. Ferrari has a unique sound that somehow resembles an artist's. It is like shouting, "I am coming! I am leaving!"'

That resembles his original Beijing debut, he adds. 'When entering the world of art, you have to shout

powerfully and strongly. "I am here!" It is just like a Ferrari. In the aspect of quality, I think my art is of a very high standard just like Ferrari's cars.'

Zhang envisions a Ferrari he has transformed into a Chinese war vehicle that can traverse sea and air as well as land to establish a new world of equality and freedom while upholding justice and safeguarding world peace. He has also considered beautifying his studio's lunch cart ('which smells bad'), 'with materials I like, such as cowhide leather. Then I could wrap the car with the leather, adding a head, tail and horns onto it and make it a cowhide car.'

Finally he imagines a Ferrari as a piece of performance art, road-tripping one to Paris for a Versailles dinner party. 'You won't have any chances if you don't think big enough: just imagine a badass artist driving a Ferrari from China to Paris to open an exhibition...'