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A Hallucinatory Blaze, via Tibetan Ritual

In yet another shift, Zhang Huan paints vibrant skulls.

By BARBARA POLLACK

Damien Hirst once encrusted a skull with diamonds, and Takashi Murakami has turned out canvases with cartoon versions of skulls. But when the artist Zhang Huan addresses similar iconography, he creates paintings in a style all their own. Sitting in his Shanghai studio one day recently amid dozens of Tibetan death masks, he was busy preparing for the opening on Friday of "Poppy Fields," an exhibition of new works at the Pace Gallery in Chelsea.

"Poppy Fields" is a fresh direction for an artist whose studio is much like a factory, with over 100 assistants churning out monumental copper sculptures of Buddhas, paintings made of ash collected at temples, doors carved with scenes from the Cultural Revolution, stainless-steel pandas, stuffed cows and horses and, on one occasion, a version of a Handel opera. His notion is that he can produce anything he imagines without regard for consistency.

"Unlike Western masters, who will stick with one style their entire life until they reach maturity, I am in a constant state of transformation," said Mr. Zhang, interviewed via Skype with the aid of a translator. "I am constantly abandoning old things for new ones, but there is always a thread behind these changes, and that is my DNA."

His latest transformation may be the biggest one to date: turning himself into an oil painter with a keen sense of color after a career that has so far been mostly black, white and gray. The new "Poppy Field" works are a striking departure, for example, from those shown in a retrospective at Asia Society in 2007, two years after he moved back to China after almost a decade in New York.

In the new paintings, the canvas's surface is covered with hundreds of skulls modeled after Tibetan masks that look like grinning faces with bulging eyes and

Cheshire cat smiles. From a distance, the canvases blur into misty fields of color, in white, pink and blue in one instance, and black, red and gold in another. Yet up close, you can see each face in the crowd, as if zooming into a packed stadium from outer space. "The paintings represent the hallucination of happiness and the hallucination of fear and loneliness in this life as well as the hallucination of happiness in the next life," Mr. Zhang said.

Asked about his bright hues, he said, "If there's no color in your hallucination, it won't be heaven. It would be hell."

Arne Glimcher, Pace's founder, recalls a conversation two years ago in which Mr. Zhang told him that he was working on oil paintings. "I thought it was such a conventional medium for him," he said. "But he told me, 'I will make oil paintings that look different from any other oil paintings.'"

It was nearly as big a surprise as when Mr. Glimcher first visited the artist's Shanghai studio in 2006. Mr. Zhang was primarily known then for his visceral performances of the late 1990s, first in the bohemian enclave of Beijing East Village and later, in museums around the United States. (One of his better-known works required him to sit motionless in a public latrine for 10 hours, covered in fish oil and honey, as flies gathered on his body.)

Mr. Glimcher was astounded to discover the scale of Mr. Zhang's production line in a studio teeming with sculptures, paintings and installations. This time around, he was equally surprised that the artist could pull off the new paintings with minimal support from his assistants.

According to the dealer, Mr. Zhang started each work by creating a computer drawing, planning out the placement of

each mask. Given that approach, the paintings look remarkably spontaneous, as if they had evolved organically.

Buddhism and death rituals have been abiding subjects for Mr. Zhang, who was ordained as a Buddhist monk eight years ago. During the antireligious oppression of the Cultural Revolution, Mr. Zhang, born in 1965, remembers watching his grandmother go to the temple and burn incense before a statue of a Buddha. In his adulthood, he went regularly to temples; even after moving to New York in 1998, he studied every weekend with the venerated monk Sheng Yen at the Dharma Drum Mountain Center in Queens and later donated statues to the Chuang Yen Monastery, designed by I.M. Pei, in Kent, N.Y.

In her catalog essay for "Altered States," the 2007 retrospective at Asia Society, Melissa Chiu, the museum's director, wrote, "Zhang Huan's works from the past 15 years reflect one artist's search for an artistic voice, first in Beijing, then in New York, and finally in Shanghai."

Mr. Zhang has placed "a progressive emphasis on Chinese sources with which he finds great inspiration in the shared memory of symbols, stories, and materials of his homeland," she noted. Yet it is his embrace of Tibetan Buddhism, a rare choice in Chinese contemporary art, that distinguishes him from other artists.

In 2005, a trip to Tibet irrevocably altered Mr. Zhang's thinking and his art making. "One day in Lhasa, I got up at 4 a.m. and went to the Jokhang Temple, the biggest one in Tibet, and I saw men and women already lining up for miles," Mr. Zhang said. He said he was amazed by the sight of pilgrims crawling to the site in the middle of traffic, in a seeming clash between modernity and ancient tradition. "I



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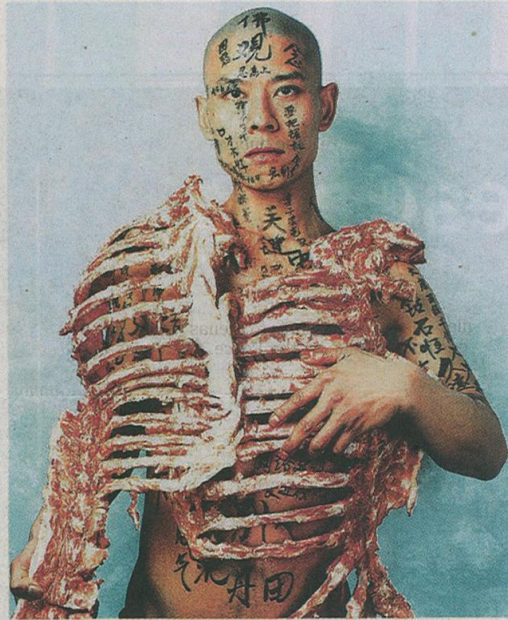


CHUCK CLOSE, COURTESY PACE GALLERY

Leaping from copper sculptures of Buddhas or somber paintings made of ash to an eye-popping style.

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

A look at works by Zhang Huan:
nytimes.com/design



ZHANG HUAN GALLERY, COURTESY OF PACE GALLERY

Top left and right, Zhang Huan's paintings "Poppy Field No. 5" (2011) and "Poppy Field No. 16" (2013); above, a detail from the latter painting; far left, the artist; 1/2 (Meat + Text), chromogenic color from 1998.

have been to the most famous museums in the world, and I have never seen a sight as striking as this," he said.

He also witnessed the Tibetan Sky burial, in which a monk eviscerates the human corpse, leaving the flesh as food for vultures and smashing the bones into a grainy dust. The process is supposed to liberate the spirit from the body for peaceful transport into the next life. "Most people, when they see this ceremony, think it is gross

and they cannot bear to watch," Mr. Zhang said. "But, when I watch the ceremony, I feel this hallucination of happiness, and I feel free."

He promises that at his death, the ritual will constitute his last performance piece.

Asked whether Americans would understand his "Poppy Field" paintings, Mr. Zhang said: "If they are alive, they will love these works. But if they are dead, they will buy them."