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How it Appears



Semele

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Théâtre Royal de la

Monnaie, Brussels,

Belgium,

Performance

documentation

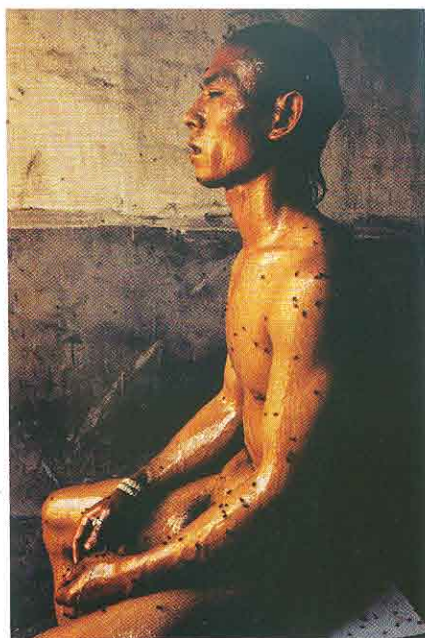
From performance, sculpture and painting to staging and directing an opera, **Zhang Huan** explores his interests in transience, Buddhism and the revitalization of traditional Chinese craftsmanship *by Carol Yinghua Lu*



Shortly before a major retrospective of his work was due to open at the Shanghai Art Museum in February 2008, Zhang Huan received an email informing him that the show had been cancelled. Zhang, who was born in 1965, is a pioneer of performance art in Beijing, and one of the youngest of only a handful of Chinese artists – including Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing – to have made a name for themselves on the international art scene. After eight years of living and working in New York, Zhang returned to China in 2005 with a slew of museum shows and biennials under his belt. In Shanghai, he established his first studio: a massive centre of artistic production with a 100-strong workforce and a team of managers, located in a factory complex on the outskirts of the city.

In the eyes of the Chinese authorities, however, none of these accomplishments weighed in Zhang's favour when it came to being eligible for a retrospective. Most Chinese art museums run on minimal state funding and rely on hiring out their exhibition spaces to boost revenue; they also often lack curatorial expertise. While the government has gradually come to terms with the popular and marketable image of contemporary art, budgetary concerns, censorship issues and the universal problem of having connections in the right places all remain barriers to an artist being granted an exhibition in a Chinese museum. As Zhang's case proved, it would still be some time before the difficult images of the naked, self-harming, blood-dripping, anarchistic performances given by the artist and his peers, which were banned more than a decade ago, could finally be accepted as part of official Chinese art history.

How Zhang's work is received internationally, however, is another story. Last September he both designed the set and directed a production of George Frideric Handel's opera *Semele* (1743–4) at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels. Zhang used his theatrical début to introduce many elements of Chinese culture to a Western audience. For the backdrop to this Baroque opera (which is based on the Greek myth of Semele, lover of Zeus and mother of Dionysus), he imported a 450-year-old, ancestral wooden temple from a small town several hours from Shanghai; he also invited a descendant of the original owner of the temple to play a central role in the performance, and to re-enact her family history in a storyline running parallel to the original plot. A Mongolian vocal ensemble was incorporated into the primary score of the opera. Despite the risk of such ambitious cultural amalgamation going awry, Zhang's offering was a



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dynamic and sophisticated juxtaposition of scenarios and musical influences.

At first sight, Zhang's more recent, object-based works – including huge sculptures made from cowhide, incense ash and metal; paintings made from ash and carvings on antique wooden doors – are a far cry from his formidable body of site-specific, ephemeral performances. Some of the most controversial of these include *12m²* (1994), for which Zhang sat naked in a public toilet in Beijing covered in fish sauce and honey, attracting flies that eventually swathed his whole body; and *65KG* (1994), for which the artist was tied to the ceiling, while a doctor inserted a catheter into one of his veins to allow his blood to drip onto a hot plate beneath him.

Zhang stopped doing performances in 2005, claiming he was tired. Now, the only works in the artist's vast studio are the sculptures, paintings and carvings that embody some of his closest concerns in life

and art: Buddhism and the revitalization and reinterpretation of traditional craftsmanship, such as the woodcarving techniques from the city of Dongyang in Zhejiang Province. But, as he has stated: 'The deciding factor as to whether a work succeeds or not is that it produces meaning and that it has not been done before. I really want to continuously bring something new to the table.'

On his frequent visits to Buddhist temples, Zhang has been fascinated both by the symbolic and spiritual nature of incense ash as a vestige of human existence and as a conduit of prayer, and by its potential as an innovative artistic medium. Since 2007, the artist has been collecting incense ash from different temples, sorting it according to its colour and the degree to which it was burned; he then incorporates it into paintings based on historic images sourced from Chinese periodicals of the last few decades. The ash's grainy texture and varying shades of grey lend solemnity and depth to these

images, whether depictions of major events (*Great Leap Forward – Canal Building*, 2007)² or portraits of historic figures (*Master Sheng Yen*, 2008). In 2007, he also created Buddhist statues, portrait busts and diminutive skulls, which highlighted the transient character of the ash. In *Berlin Buddha* (2007), for instance, a huge Buddha made from ash was installed facing an equally huge aluminium Buddha. During the course of the exhibition, the ash Buddha gradually dissolved until it eventually disintegrated – a reference to the Buddhist meditation of life and its passing.

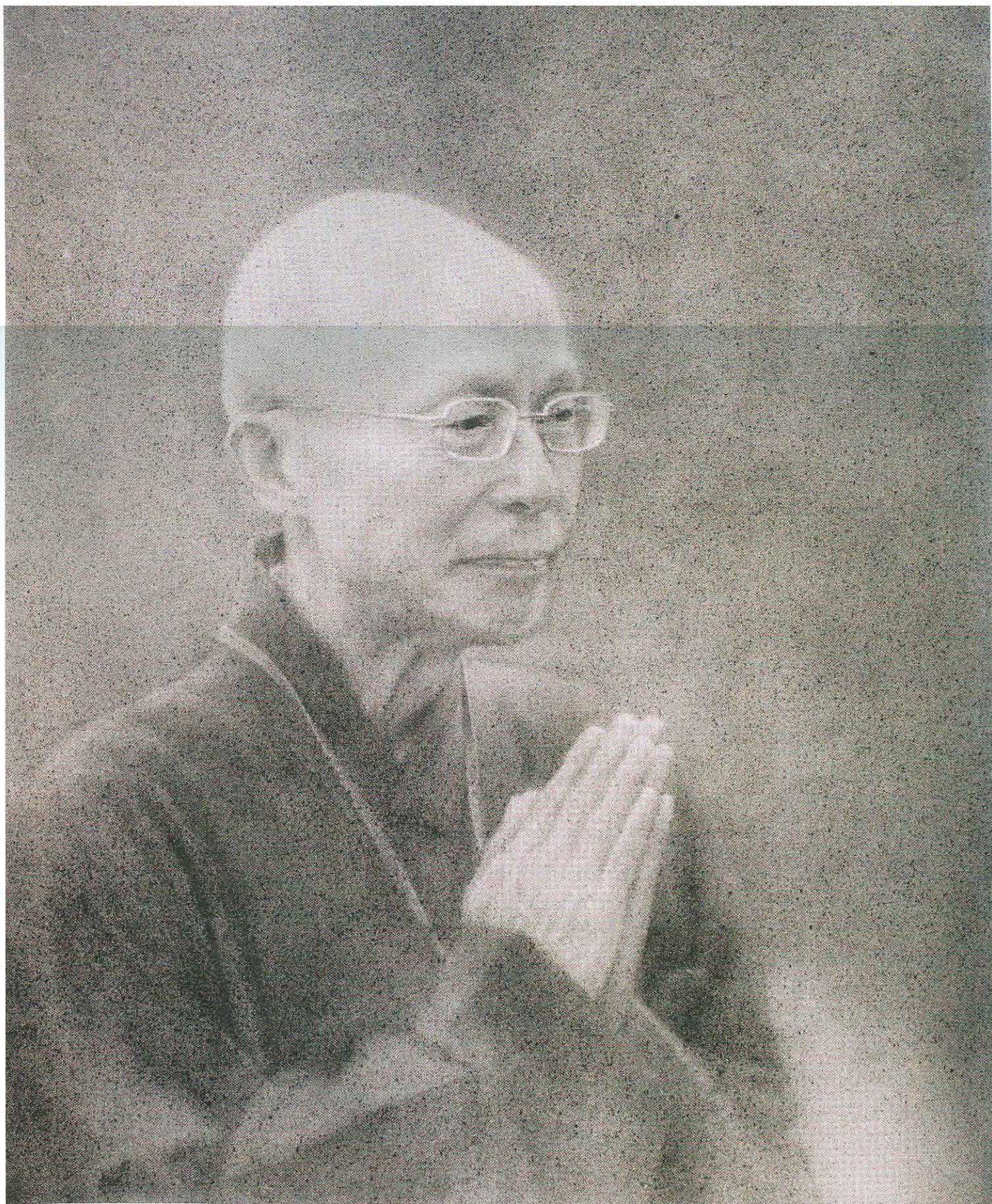
Zhang has created Buddhas not only from ash but also from steel, copper and wood. Sometimes, they appear as they might in temples – as towering figures of great serenity and majesty. In 2006, Zhang made a series of enormous copper sculptures of a hand, foot, fingers and legs of a Buddha, all of which appeared to have sprung from super-beings. For *Buddha of Steel Life* (2009), a shiny copper Buddha was placed on a sheet



Top left:
12m²
Beijing, 1994
Performance
documentation

Top right:
65KG
Beijing, 1994
Performance
documentation

Left:
Reflection
2007
From the 'Memory Door'
series (2007 – ongoing)
Silkscreen mounted
on carved antique
wooden door
150×330 cm



Master Sheng Yen
2008
Ash on linen
2.5×2 m



of steel, against a wall of steel that mirrored its surface: the figure's spirituality was magnified by the blinding glow of the materials. This work also brought out the sculptural elasticity, delicacy and metallic sheen of the copper in the graceful folds of the Buddha's robe. In an earlier incarnation, Zhang's Buddha took the form of an enormous wooden skeleton sitting on a block of rusty steel, holding a stone man (*Big Buddha*, 2002).

Zhang's Buddhist convictions are not only manifested through his use of incense ash or in his representations of Buddhas, but also in the philosophy of his practice, including his belief in fate, natural forces, moderation, discipline and the dispersal of blessings. Among his many other activities, Zhang established the Gaoan Foundation in 2006 to support educational, Buddhist and cultural projects, and to build and provide financial assistance to his Zhang Huan Elementary Schools located in provinces including Guangxi, Guizhou, Sichuan, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Shandong, Yunnan and Tibet.

In his recent practice, Zhang has mastered a variety of materials and disciplines. He relies on the help of skilled assistants, who live and work in his factory complex and who he encourages to offer both technical and creative input. He has brought to his studio most of the few remaining Dongyang woodcarvers, whose craft has been so diminished as to be more a technique than an artistic practice. While taking advantage of their technical skills, Zhang challenged the workers to carve the

uneven, nail-filled surfaces of second-hand wooden doors from Shanxi Province, instead of the flat wooden boards they usually work on; in response they sculpted images depicting historical and everyday Chinese scenes based on silkscreen prints, which also partly cover the doors. ('Memory Door' series, 2007-ongoing). Unlike the regular decorative patterns that the workers are



used to carving, these complex depictions of news events and historical scenarios are chosen for their storylines or their striking visual effects. This marriage of traditional craftsmanship and contemporary sensibility has inspired creative impulses in the woodworkers, some of whom plan to investigate the possibility of revitalizing this ancient craft when they return to their hometown. It is Zhang, however, who retains ultimate control over the outcomes of these works. 'When I see a piece, I know if it's time to stop. Knowing when to stop is the most important indication of an artist's talent. This is the surprise in the process. To judge a work only takes a second.'³

While many commentators tend to view and interpret Zhang's current and past works as social and political critiques, the artist himself describes the continuity between his earlier and more recent practices slightly differently: 'To me, the objects that I am making now are still very theatrical. I see them as motionless performance art. They are part of the continuity of performing. I see them as conceptual performance installations. There are many elements to each work and, like any theatrical interpretation, it takes many people to translate the initial ideas into a "staging".'⁴

It's sad that in his native country Zhang's 'stagings' largely remain within the confines of his studio. It seems that the appreciation of Zhang's energy and potential as an artist and creative force in China hasn't grown in proportion to the international recognition

Opposite page:
Hero No. 1

2009
Cowhide, steel, wood
and polystyrene foam
5×10×6 m

Opposite page below:
Big Buddha

2002
Wood, steel and stone
6×4×3 m

Right:
Berlin Buddha

2007
Ash, iron and
aluminium
(background)
3.7×3×2.6 m
(foreground)
5×3.5×3 m

Below:
*To Raise the Water Level
in a Fishpond*
Beijing, 1997
Performance
documentation



**Zhang's Buddhist convictions
are not only manifested through
his use of incense ash, but in the
philosophy of his practice.**

he has received. That said, China sets the stage for Zhang's vast 'performances' by making it possible for him to develop such an expansive practice – from affordable space and labour to the rich resources in terms of both materials and inspiration.

As his early performances revealed, the artist's capacity to endure physical and psychological extremes were maximized by radical conditions – such as his confinement in a 12-metre-square public toilet – that would inevitably undermine his aspirations.

Conversely, the very system that facilitates Zhang's current works also has the power to refuse to show or acknowledge them in its public museums, thus effectively limiting the artist's potential to inspire. Zhang's description of his performance *To Add One Meter to An Anonymous Mountain* (1995) – for which he and nine other artists climbed a mountain near Beijing, stripped and lay down on top of one another in the descending order of their physical weights to create a metre-high mini-peak – was almost prophetic: 'What

I wanted to express in the work was the traditional Chinese saying: "There are always higher mountains and more talented people." Sometimes our efforts are limited, in vain and useless. When we left, the mountain was still the same mountain, without any change. We tried to raise its height, but our efforts would forever be in vain.⁵ Ultimately, however, Zhang remains an optimist. For his performance *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997), the artist lined up a group of 40 immigrant workers in a pool, as an extension of his mountain project. 'It's about changing the natural state of things, about the idea of possibilities,' he said.⁶ Perhaps, therefore, it should have come as no great surprise that 'Zhang Huan: Dawn of Time' opened at the Shanghai Art Museum in early February.

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1 RoseLee Goldberg in conversation with Zhang Huan, in *Zhang Huan*, Phaidon Press, London 2009, p.30

2 An unrealistic and unsuccessful economic and social programme promoted by Mao Zedong between 1958 to 1961, which aimed to speed up China's transformation from an agrarian economy to a modern society through the processes of 'agriculturalization' and industrialization. It led to widespread famine and tens of millions of deaths.

3 Zhang Huan, 'Artist's Writings', in *Zhang Huan*, Ibid., p.126

4 RoseLee Goldberg in conversation with Zhang Huan, in *Zhang Huan*, Ibid., p.29

5 Zhang Huan, 'Artist's Writings', in *Zhang Huan*, Ibid., p.117

6 RoseLee Goldberg in conversation with Zhang Huan, in *Zhang Huan*, Ibid., p.21