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Ashes to Ashes

THE ART OF ZHANG HUAN

The international appetite for contemporary Chinese artists is as complex as it is insatiable. Often their work is detached from its roots by western critics and collectors ignorant of the history from which it has sprung. Zhang Huan has experienced the poverty of a performance artist and now the warm embrace of the global art world, and in his new works he seeks to not to abandon the past of Chinese culture but re-imagine it.

Text by Philip Dodd, images © Zhang Huan, courtesy Haunch of Venison





A major American gallery owner sank to his knees when he first entered Zhang Huan's studio; and the fashionable, award-winning US writer, Nell Freudenberger, fictionalised part of the artist's life in her recent novel *The Dissident*.

These are just two of the rumours that swirl around this Shanghai-based artist – and such rumours are one of the signs of his standing in the art world; the voracious appetite of collectors to buy his work is another. But Huan is going to be even better known over the next few months, by which time three shows will have opened: a much lauded exhibition in New York at the prestigious Asia Society; and shows at Haunch of Venison's London and Berlin galleries. If the world needs an iconic artist from the new powerhouse of the world, then it may be Huan's fate to be that artist, whatever his own preferences. In a short time he has come such a long way. As recently as 1994, Huan was sat on a Beijing public toilet, a performance artist covered in fish oil and honey, and attracting the attention of more flies than galleries. Now he is the observed of all observers.

FRAGMENTS OF THE PAST

I've met Huan several times, mostly in his studio, as large as an abandoned aircraft hangar, on the edge of Shanghai, far from the glamorous splendour of the Bund. He's a gaunt man with a compelling sculptural face, who dresses with an unstudied casualness that must come, at least in part, from the poverty in which he lived for many years. The first time I visit, I'm taken on a tour of the studio but the phrase 'studio' doesn't quite answer to what I'm shown. 'Factory' would be more accurate if Warhol hadn't effectively copyrighted it years ago. But factory is what it is – or rather a 'factory' full of artisans rather than industrial workers – a place where tradition and modernity meet. It's as if Huan is working collaboratively with some of the extraordinary skills that Chinese culture has traditionally provided.

I'm taken through a series of huge and smaller spaces, almost all lit by an ethereal, natural light. In all of them, there is something compelling – one room has a number of Shanxi woodcarvers working to instruction on a series of old doors, carving exquisite images; in another, there's a small number of young men rubbing away at a series of insect woodcuts; and in yet another, incense ash is smouldering, having arrived fresh from the temple. In one particularly mesmerising space, I see Huan's enormous copper fragments of Buddha, a hand, a foot; both next to a hallucinatory large Tibetan trumpet. I feel as if I have stumbled on some place where fragments of the past have been rescued from possible destruction.

GRASP THE AUDACITY

Huan and I sit in the middle of one of the large spaces to talk; we're dwarfed by the surroundings. He smokes as we talk and slowly relaxes, mentioning in passing that he was very poor during the time he was doing performances in the early 90s in the now legendary artists' quarter of the East Village of Beijing. 'Then I never imagined there would be such interest in my work.' For once this doesn't feel like mock modesty.

For much of his life, Huan has been a performance artist or one who used his own face and body in photographic works. As I look at him, I see in his face what I think is the note of his artworks: endurance, not something to be confused with resignation. But I've come to the studio not see his old work, but to see his new painting and sculptures, which are staged theatrically on the walls and floor of the enormous studio. It's a testament to their power that they feel as if they fill the cavernous space. Both the paintings and sculptures are made from incense ash. Into the ash of the paintings are set a series of tiny por-

Previous spread:
Berlin Buddha, 2007

Below:
Ash Heads, 2007

Opposite page:
Top from left to right:
Bags of incense ash

Dil Barrel No.6

Filtering ash

Middle left:
Zhang Huan in his studio

Middle right:
The artist working on the Smoking Buddha

Below, left:
Ash Head No.13 and Childhood (in the background)

Below, right:
Selecting ash

Bottom, left:
Ash painting studio

Below, right:
Ash painting





Top:
Buddha Leg facing Ash Head No. 1

Above, from left to right:
Making ash paintings

Carving on Memory Door

Memory Door: Slaughter

Facing page, from top to bottom:
Smoking Buddha

Model of the Long Ear Ash Head

trait photographs; while the sculptures are a series of large, compelling grey heads. It's hard for someone from the west to grasp the audacity of using incense ash as material – its resonance in Chinese culture. Huan himself knows its power and tells me he couldn't sleep for days when he first had the ash delivered to his studio. He was so excited. 'As far as I'm concerned, no other Chinese or even international artist has ever used incense ash before.'

ELEGIAC QUALITY

Huan was born in 1965 in one of China's poorer provinces, Henan. When he was seven and living in the countryside, he remembers his grandmother dying. 'After that, every Chinese New Year we would bring the ash back to the house, put it on the table with food and fruit, and pray for her. So from my childhood I was familiar with ash but it was only more recently, after living in Beijing and then New York, and coming to live in Shanghai, that its possibilities took hold of me'. He went to a Buddhist temple where the incense smoke was so dense that that he could hardly see the people. I was touched and moved he tells me. 'The hundreds and thousands of burning incense sticks planted in the incense pot were the hopes and wishes of all those people.'

I don't have to say anything. Huan just keeps talking. He has forgotten he is the artist being interviewed. 'When the incense ash was first brought to the studio, I even went down on my knees to pray,' he says. We are as far away as possible from the cigarette ash from which the British artist Sarah Lucas has made artworks. I say to Huan after listening to his rhapsody on ash that I feel that all these ash works have an elegiac quality. It may be because I fear death he tells me. 'When I was in Beijing I always had the same dream – that I was sentenced to death in a trial. Now every lunchtime, I have a nap and I wake up sad, wondering what the point of everything is. Then it goes away.'



MEMORY MAN

It's not easy to find a role as an artist in China – this is a country propelling itself pell-mell into the future, planning to move more than 50 million people into the cities over the next 10 years. In a country practising a calculated amnesia, the role of the artist comes to be that of a memory man. 'Nowadays, great changes are taking place in China, people have destroyed more and more but the new things haven't been established yet. Once in a temple, I saw a middle-aged woman – like a mother from the countryside. She was moaning to a stone Buddha. First, I just thought she was insane, hysterical. But then I began to ponder over why people are so attracted to old things, to traditional things. My wife converted to Buddhism four years ago and I became one two years ago.'

Zhang Huan is a reclamation artist of sorts. In the country where all eyes are on the future, the artist, contrary as ever, looks back. When we talk briefly about his early 'endurance' performance work, I ask him which western artists he'd taken inspiration from. He smiles and tells me the story of 'Xuan Liang Ci Gu'. 'When Chinese intellectuals prepared for the Mandarin examination, they would hang their long hair over the roof beam and put an awl [knife] on their chairs to keep them awake.' And he mentions Tibetan Buddhism: 'people face a blank wall for hours or put themselves in a cave to test their endurance.' Zhang Huan was telling me gently that Chinese history has its own resources for a Chinese contemporary artist, something Chinese artists don't forget, but something about which western critics are simply ignorant.

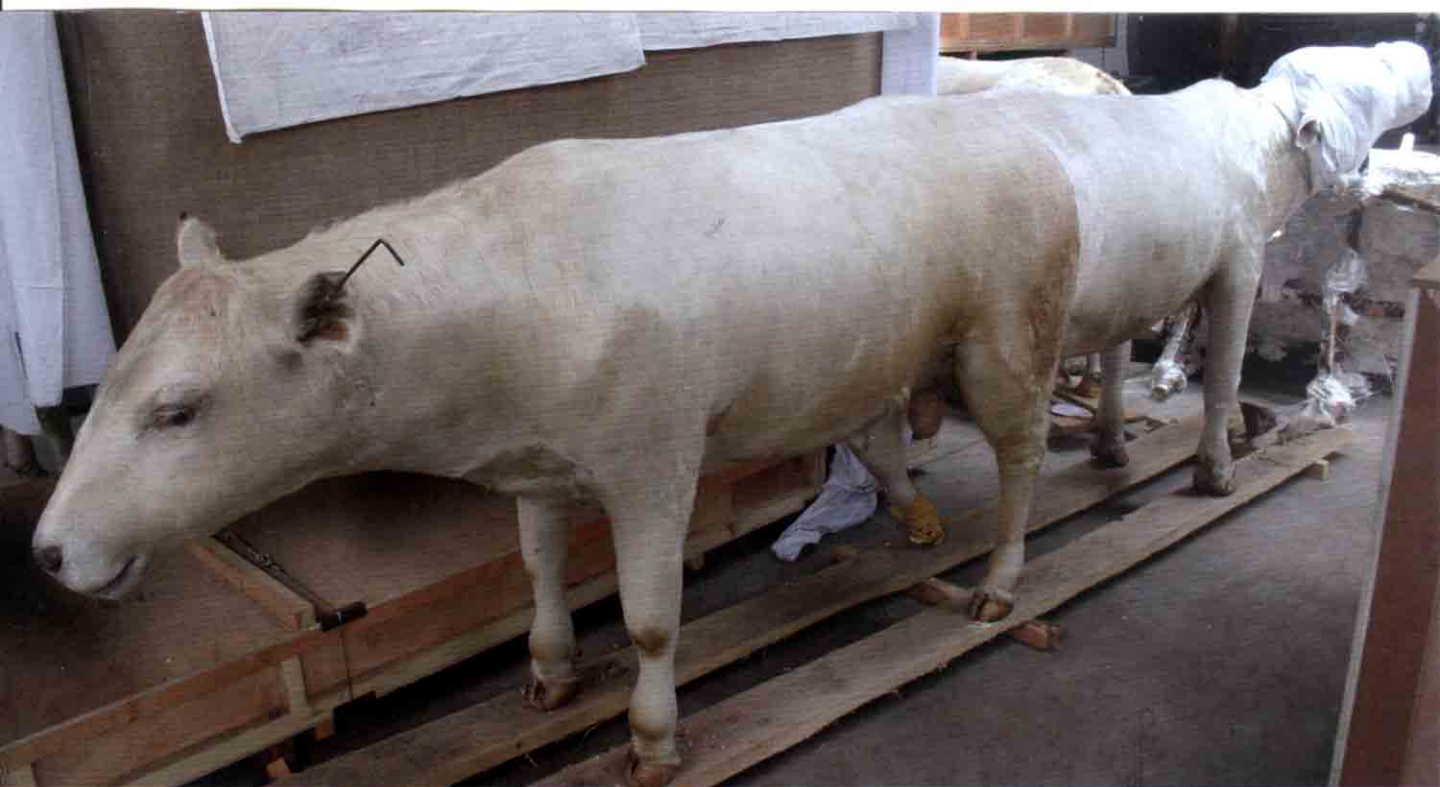
SHOCK OF THE NEW

But for a time, and especially in the mid and late 90s, Huan for all his immersion in Chinese life, felt there was no home for him in Beijing, despite the earlier vibrancy of the underground art scene. He simply couldn't make enough money to live. So in 1998 he decided to go to New York. His friend, Ai weiwei, another Chinese artist who had lived in New York told him not to go. 'You are already in your 30s and you don't speak much English,' he told me. Other friends told him he was crazy – that he'd be sitting in a classroom, surrounded by the young, 'looking like a donkey'. But he was determined to go. 'I had already prepared myself for the worst case – that I'd have to carry the dead body in the hospital to make enough money.'

In the end he began to make his way in the New York art world – although that isn't what we talk about. Instead he tells me about going out to buy some food for his pregnant wife. On Eighth Avenue, two people passed and gave him bread, thinking that he was homeless. 'I wanted to cry,' he said. In 2006 Zhang Huan, his wife and children moved back to China, but to Shanghai rather than Beijing. It's as if he seeks

Zhang Huan in his studio amongst his Ash Heads





out the shock of the new, if only to test the strength of his memory and old loyalties. The young man from the countryside goes to Beijing to study, then to New York and then to Shanghai. He laughs when I say that he loves shock and immediately tells me of his first trip to London to see the gallery where he'll show. It's the job of the artist, always to surpass himself, he says. 'When I was in London in a taxi or hotel I taught my son to sing an old revolutionary song – with lyrics like "hacking the head off the Japanese invader with a sabre." Then I would change the lyrics to "hacking at my own head" and tell my son that you always have to create a new self.' Maybe Zhang Huan offers a model for the wider Chinese culture: making Chinese culture new, not by abandoning the past, but by re-imagining it.

TRADITION AND MODERNITY

It's possible to see this act of re-imagination everywhere in China, even if western commentators are often blind to it. In the world of brands, it can be seen in the Sen shops that are imaginatively repackaging and rebranding traditional Chinese medicine to help make it make sense to foreigners; and it can be seen in the environmental movement in China which knows that there are traditions within Chinese culture that do not speak of 'man's domination of nature' but our collaboration with it.

The art world will make of Huan what it will. And as an artist he is as interesting and ambitious as any artist working anywhere today. But he is something more: an image of a China that does not have to choose between tradition and modernity; an image of a China devoutly to be wished. #

Zhang Huan: Altered States, Asia Society, New York, until 20 January 2008; Berlin Buddha, Haunch of Venison, Berlin, until 8 December; Zhang Huan: Ash, Haunch of Venison, London, until 10 November, www.haunchofvenison.com

With thanks to translators, Belinda Chen and Alicia Liu

Top:
Henan Bull No. 4

Above, from left to right:
Henan Bull No. 5, Henan Bull No. 3,
Henan Bull No. 1