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The Labors of Narcissus

A show at New York's Asia Society recaps the galvanizing performances and current industrial-scale art production of China's pioneering Zhang Huan.

BY RICHARD VINE

The legend of Zhang Huan, as endorsed by the current retrospective at New York's Asia Society, goes like this. In 1994, abjectly poor and disdained by China's cultural officialdom, the 29-year-old artist made his landmark performance piece *12 Square Meters* by sitting motionless for one hour in a sweltering, stench-ridden communal outhouse in Beijing, his naked body coated with fish oil and honey and speckled with flies.¹ Today, just 13 years later, he is an international art star overseeing a vast workshop in Shanghai, where scores of assistants fabricate his large, much-in-demand

prints, paintings, woodcarvings and sculptures [see sidebar]. In between, he lived in New York and developed a performance-art career that took him to major galleries and museums around the world. Zhang's global success, and his return to his own cultural roots, is in many ways emblematic of his artistic generation's collective odyssey. . . . True enough, yet there is also something deeper and more primal—a discovery of self, or perhaps of selfhood per se—evinced by this remarkable trajectory.

"Zhang Huan: Altered States," curated by Asia Society museum director Melissa Chiu, is divided into three sections corresponding to Zhang's cities of residence during the three major phases of his career to date: Beijing (1991-98), New York (1998-2005) and Shanghai (2006-present). The first two sections consist of striking black-and-white and color photographs documenting various performances. The third contains carved-wood wall works, paintings and sculptures. Accompanying videos, on view in a lobby area between galleries, depict the artist orchestrating several of his early group



Zhang Huan: Ash Head No. 3, 2006, ash, iron and wood, 18 by 17 by 17 inches.



1/2, 1998, color photograph, 50 by 40 inches.

Left, view of Fresh Open Buddha Hand with Head from Buddha Foot in background, both 2007, copper; at the Asia Society, New York.



Symbolically, Zhang's early performances implied that independent Chinese artists, like the poor, had only their own bodies to work with.



65 Kilograms, 1994, performance, Beijing, color photograph (not in show).

projects, performing in other key works and supervising the current Shanghai operation. Remarkably, almost every one of the show's 20 works features Zhang's own compelling likeness—a fact at odds with the dearth of self-portraiture in his nation's earlier art and contrary to stereotypical notions of self-effacing "Chineseness."

Zhang was born in 1965, one year before the beginning of the decade-long Cultural Revolution, and raised by his grandmother in a rural village in Henan Province.² In 1988, he took an undergraduate degree from the art department of Henan University, and later taught art and Western art history at the province's Zhengzhou College of Education. Only in 1991, at the age of 26, did he gain entrance to the highly selective Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

His performance work began in 1993, when he had himself photographed sprawled on the floor wearing nothing but some found mannequin parts that made him look like a sexy three-legged man holding a post-coital cigarette. Later that year, he presented his first public action in the courtyard of the National Art Museum of China. For *Angel*, which he describes as a meditation on abortion, Zhang assembled various discarded doll parts into a whole figure, doused the "baby" and himself in blood-red paint, and tied the doll to a rope.

His student-artist existence was hand-to-mouth. Of the 13 places he lived during his years in Beijing, his most memorable abode (apart, perhaps, from a leaky covered space between two buildings) was in the city's now fabled East Village. There he rented a

high-ceilinged room, his first real studio, in the garbage-strewn migrant-worker area for \$16 a month. (Around the same time, he paid \$120 for a Matisse book published abroad.)

Among the artists residing in the enclave was the willowy, long-haired, effeminate Ma Liuming, noted for sometimes appearing in drag as the beautiful Fen (roughly "Scent of a Woman") Ma Liuming and for frequently performing nude: walking on the Great Wall, cooking outdoors, sitting and waiting quietly for viewers to pose next to him.³ The two artists had a close working relationship—East Village chronicler Rong Rong photographed them lying side by side in a bed and reclining, eyes closed, at opposite ends of a bathtub—and Zhang developed a persona that is, in effect, yang to Ma's yin. Thus the Zhang Huan of record is bald, meaty, pronouncedly masculine and charged with a tight-lipped Yul Brynner smolder.⁴ While his smooth head suggests, on one level, a monklike devotion to art, it also echoes the thuggish caricatures that certain peers, like Cynical Realist painter Fang Lijun and graffiti artist Zhang Dali, were then deploying as emblems of noncompliance with authority and tradition.

Chinese performance art, regarded (like installation) with suspicion by cultural bureaucrats at the time, was about a decade old by 1994 and sometimes extreme.⁵ East Village denizen Zhu Ming, for instance, one month before Zhang performed *12 Square Meters*, had himself buried alive in mud for two hours, breathing through a tube. And more distant influences came to bear, too. Zhang, stuck in bohemian squalor, absorbed Kurt Cobain's music and read news accounts of the Hong Kong-born Tseng Kwong Chi [see *A.i.A.*, Mar. '97], traveling the world in a Mao suit and photographing himself in front of countless clichéd tourist sites.

Whatever the impetus, Zhang engaged over the next four years in a number of nude, endurance-based actions of galvanizing psychological effect: hanging in chains from the ceiling of his studio for an hour while a doctor extracted 250cc of his blood and dribbled it onto



25mm Threading Steel, 1995, performance, Beijing, color photograph (not in show).



Pilgrimage—Wind and Water in New York, 1998, performance at P.S.1, Long Island City.

a hot steel pan (*65 Kilograms*, 1994);⁶ lying under a highway overpass on his 30th birthday with earthworms jammed into his mouth (*Original Sound*, 1995); stretching supine in a basement for an hour as sparks from a steel-cutting tool shot over his body and face (*25mm Threading Steel*, 1995); locking himself in an iron box with one narrow breathing slit (*Cage*, 1996); lashing himself to an old

horse-carriage axle and attempting to pull down the Watari Museum in Tokyo (*3006 Cubic Meters/65 Kilograms*, 1997).⁷

Although they appear in the catalogue, none of these discomfiting labors (except *12 Square Meters*) are documented in the Asia Society show itself, which opts for Zhang's more benign, audience-friendly performances. The now famous *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995), for example, consisted of a meter-high body pile of 10 naked artists (eight men and two women) on the summit of Miaofengshan Mountain west of Beijing.⁸ For *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997), Zhang recruited some 40 migrant workers, aged 20 to 60, to parade around an urban fishpond in their swim trunks before wading in to accomplish the titular task. The artist took part as well, with the pond owner's five-year-old son on his shoulders.⁹ Symbolically (despite more complicated sociological facts), such works imply that independent Chinese artists in those days had, like the poor, only their own bodies with which to make a small but measurable difference in the world.



My New York, 2002, performance at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, color photograph, 41½ by 61 inches.

In 1998, Zhang traveled to New York to perform at "Inside Out," the multivenue exhibition, curated by Harvard scholar Guo Minglu, that belatedly opened American eyes to the full range of contemporary Chinese art. On Oct. 23 in the courtyard of P.S.1, the nude artist lay prone for 10 minutes on slabs of ice that rested on a Ming-style daybed with seven dogs tethered to its frame (*Pilgrimage—Wind and Water in New York*). Zhang's intention was to remain in place until the ice melted, gradually putting him in contact with a familiar cultural artifact, but the intense cold soon dissuaded him. The dogs, a late

A discovery of self—or perhaps of selfhood per se—is evinced by Zhang's career trajectory from East to West and back again.

addition to the work, were Zhang's comment on the (to him) strangely intimate rapport New Yorkers have with their pets—one seemingly stronger than their human bonds with each other.

Zhang's sense of baffled suspension between two cultures would stay with him throughout his nearly eight-year sojourn in the West, as is evident in a work seen in one of the lobby videos at the Asia Society. *My America (Hard to Assimilate)*, first performed in 1999 at the Seattle Art Museum, featured 60 unclothed volunteers standing on a three-level scaffold and hurling pieces of bread at the seated artist (who was once, in New York,

shocked to be mistaken for a homeless man and offered bread). *Pilgrimage to Santiago* (2001), omitted from the show, had Zhang swinging spread-eagle in a globular red-metal cage in front of the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, with a giant wall-relief cross looming behind him.

During this period, Zhang also undertook a number of high-intensity actions-for-the-camera, well represented in the Asia Society show. The Naumanesque *Skin* (1997) consists of 20 separate black-and-white close-ups of his visage. The viewer becomes, in effect, the artist's mirror, as he pokes, prods and pulls at his own features like an overgrown adolescent making faces in a glass and asking "who am I really?" This, one could say, is what pure ego looks like. The show's three images from 1/2 (1998)—suggesting, perhaps, half Chinese or half human—present his face and torso spotted with black calligraphy and/or bedecked with the meat-flecked ribcage of a recently slaughtered pig.

This half-and-half impulse seems to have split into two later works, one language-based, the other carnal. *Family Tree* (2000) consists of

Inside Zhang Huan's New Art Factory

Way out in Shanghai's western suburbs, tucked behind a stretch of noodle joints, shady massage parlors and stores that sell plastic gewgaws, lies Zhang Huan's 75,000-square-foot art production complex. As you enter the east studio, workers, sitting cross-legged on palettes, rock back and forth while rubbing huge sheets of handmade paper with stones. The resulting 14-by-20-foot woodblock prints, laden with images culled from old medicinal texts, line the walls. In the next room, amid flying woodchips and a symphony of chainsaws and chisels, crews of carvers fashion everything from reliefs to freestanding sculptures.

Down the back alley are two oil-painting studios. Inside, recent art school graduates, some on scaffolding, meticulously render insects onto mammoth canvases. According to Zhang, these swarms of flies, representing

contemporary man's misguided busyness, link back to his seminal 12 *Square Meters* performance. Another building houses an office where the studio's accounts keep company with an array of Buddha figurines Zhang has collected on visits to Tibet. Nearby are stacks of heavy-metal CDs and, lodged under a table, a bed where the boss takes his daily afternoon nap.

In between the east and west studios is a second space dedicated to printmaking. The workshop's operation—with reams of silkscreens and etchings issuing from an unusually large, custom-made press—has been likened by one visitor to a bank printing its own money.

Down a dusty road, past another line of shacks and a towering pink apartment complex, gates open onto the west studio. Inside a hangarlike structure lit by spot-welders, workers piece together enormous (up to 33 feet high or 85 feet long) copper sculptures. These body fragments are modeled after the limbs of broken Buddha statues, relics from China's torturous Cultural Revolution. Under a cloud of sawdust, workers in an attached woodshop busily produce the stretchers, scaffolding and crates necessary for the art compound's operation.

In a building next door, crew members wearing dust masks

craft everything from paintings to tremendous head sculptures out of the artist's newly favorite material, incense ash. Zhang has contracted local Buddhist temples to supply him with their burnt offerings. The ash, Zhang claims, is imbued with millions of people's dreams and wishes—certainly good stuff for the art world. Shipments arrive weekly as workers sift, sort and invent more uses for the sacred substance. A showroom, larger than most venues the artist actually exhibits in, is where works are documented and displayed for potential clients. After this, the works go to their last stop, which is oddly where others begin. The crating and shipping warehouse also doubles as storage. Here piles of Styrofoam fight for space with Ming furniture, ancient barn doors and other raw materials that await their destiny as art objects.

Zhang's labyrinth now employs anywhere from 80 to 100 people from all over China. Additional specialists are sometimes utilized for particular tasks. For instance, earlier this year, after Zhang visited a slaughterhouse, China's premiere taxidermist was called in on a project that juxtaposes the artist's own sculpted figure with the stuffed bodies of cows. A Yi Jing (I Ching) master was recently hired to consult on the studio's plans. Such hocus-pocus and the intuitive nature of art-making aside, however, the enterprise runs like a factory. It keeps normal business hours (with each employee punching in and out), houses the workers in dormitories and has a canteen

that serves three meals a day.

This is an endeavor that requires strong leadership and business skills. Zhang, along with his confidant and studio director, Fang Wei, works tirelessly. Not only do the two drum up new creative possibilities and refine existing ones, but they also resolve arguments, hire and fire workers (due to the diverse appetites of the staff, the studio has seen three chefs come and go in the last year) and oversee the maintenance of the hulking industrial buildings. Meanwhile, behind the scenes in Shanghai's old French Concession, Zhang's wife and business partner, Hu Junjun, coordinates the studio's sales, exhibitions and commissions as well as a philanthropic organization (funded by studio profits) that helps renovate rural schoolhouses.

It is only here, Fang Wei says, "in China's marketplace of cheap migrant labor and low-cost real estate and materials, that a phenomenon like this could happen." Theater projects, feature films and animation works are on the horizon. But for now, as the studio's Buddhist objects keep selling, the metal-work and incense crews will remain on the job. After all, as the founder of an earlier art Factory once said, "good business is the best art."

—Mathieu Borysevicz

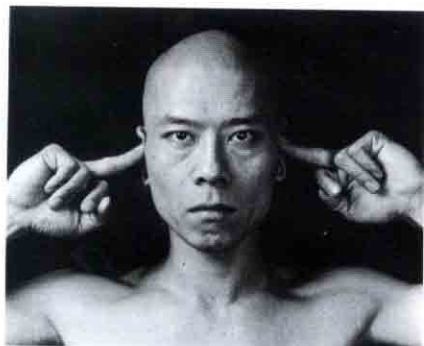


Woodcarving section of Zhang Huan's studio complex in Shanghai.

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Partial view of Long Ear Ash Head, 2007, ash and steel, 146 by 133 by 158 inches.



Left, top and bottom, two black-and-white photographs from the suite Skin, 1997, 16 by 20 inches each. All photos this article courtesy the artist.



nine color close-ups, shot in changing light over the course of a day in Amherst, Mass., showing Zhang's face progressively covered with calligraphic proverbs and folklore until his features meld at last into a Chinese version of blackface.¹⁰ Is the artist's selfhood obscured or affirmed by his cultural identity? It's a question repeatedly raised—and never definitively answered—by Zhang's slyly ambiguous work.

My New York, a performance conducted at the 2002 Whitney Biennial just seven months after the 9/11 attacks, found Zhang posing in a superhero suit of raw meat, then releasing white doves on the streets of the Upper East Side. The vulnerability of even the strongest flesh, or empire, was later reiterated in *My Rome* (2005), performed at the Capitoline Museum and represented in "Altered States" by a sequence of photographs in which the artist, wearing only a white sarong, drapes and balances himself—in an implicit dialogue with Western classicism—on large-scale Roman sculptures.¹¹

Zhang's involvement with sculpture dates from at least 2000, when he made a gilt cast of himself, festooned with disconnected hands, for the performance *Rubens in Ghent. Peace* (2001), commissioned by New York's Creative Time, included a bronze bell, covered with calligraphy, for which another gilt cast of the artist served as the striker [see cover *A.I.A.*, June/July 2004]. But with Zhang's

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return to China in 2006, a giant leap in scale took place. Intrigued by the fragments of Buddhist statuary that he found in the markets during his travels to Tibet, he began to create monumental hollow-copper versions of the holy sage's body parts. Two examples are in the show: a 21-foot-long forearm and hand and an 18¾-foot-long leg with an effigy of Zhang's head protruding from the foot. These impressive works share a gallery with selections from his mundane "Memory Doors" series: old photos, collaged and transferred to antique wooden doors that are then partially incised with scenes relating to the artist's provincial upbringing in China's pre-capitalist era. Much more arresting is the room's *Ash Head No. 3* (2006), an 18-inch-high bust of Zhang in wood and iron covered with ash gathered from incense burners in Buddhist temples.

Dominating the last gallery stands the over-12-foot-high *Long Ear Ash Head* (2007). Made of ash-covered steel in several sections, like the slightly separated plates of a skull that houses an outsized brain, the work bears Zhang's facial features, along with the long earlobes associated with the Buddha's origins as an earring-wearing young noble, and a baby figure clambering on the gargantuan forehead. Bracketing the sculpture on the gallery walls are two ash-on-linen paintings—one depicting the Chinese flag, one the American. Here Zhang's self-identification as a spiritual messenger between two cultures, a task combining the determination of a Hercules and the self-absorption of a Narcissus, seems at last explicit and complete. □

1. The title specifies the size of the latrine, 129 square feet.

2. Biographical information in this article is drawn primarily from the artist's firsthand account, "A Piece of Nothing," in *Zhang Huan: Altered States*, ed. Melissa Chiu, New York, Asia Society, and Milan, Edizioni Charta, 2007, pp. 51-97.

3. According to Thomas J. Berghuis, "*fen*, or incense, is a girl's name, but it is also a homophone for *separation*." In one performance as *Fen*, Ma masturbated and drank his own semen. In 1994, his "indecent" activities cost him three months in jail. See Berghuis's *Performance Art in China*, Hong Kong, Timezone 8 Limited, 2006, pp. 103-04.

4. In China as in the West—think Hannah Wilke, Marina Abramović, Carolee Schneemann, Karen Finley, Tim Miller—nude performance artists tend to be individuals with attractive bodies to display and charges of titillation to refute.

5. Cultural-political group actions, essential to the birth of the post-Mao avant-garde, were increasingly supplemented by individualized performances following the publication of a Chinese translation of Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theater* in 1986. In an impromptu cross-cultural exchange, Gilbert & George, visiting Beijing's East Village in 1993, were confronted by a bare-chested, paint-smeared Ma Liuming, who vainly attempted to break their signature unflappability and prompt a reaction to his Chinese colleagues' work.

6. The title refers to the artist's weight at the time, 143 lbs.

7. This work was very similar to *Pulling the National Art Museum Away*, a rejected proposal made by Huang Yong Ping and others for the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in 1989.

8. Although primary authorship of this collaborative piece has long been in dispute, one of the videos shown at the Asia Society offers persuasive evidence that Zhang was the principal organizer and director of the event. "Altered States" omits *Nine Holes*, performed later the same day on a nearby peak, where nine members of the group sexually humped the earth for 10 minutes.

9. The action was part of "Wildlife," a year-long, seven-city, 27-artist project organized by Beijing artist Song Dong.

10. A likely influence was Qiu Zhijie's ink-on-paper performance *Writing the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" One Thousand Times* (1986) and his painted-body work *Tattoo I* (1997), in which his torso was partially obscured by the character meaning "no."

11. Not included in the show is the more peculiar *Window* (2004), shot in Shanghai, where the marmoreal gods have been replaced by a live donkey.

"Zhang Huan: Altered States" is currently on view at the Asia Society, New York [Sept. 6, 2007-Jan. 20, 2008]. It is accompanied by a 178-page catalogue with essays by Melissa Chiu, Kong Bu, Eleanor Heartney and Zhang. Ash paintings and woodcarvings by the artist will appear this spring, along with demonstrations of his workshop process, at the two PaceWildenstein galleries in Chelsea, New York [May 9-June 21, 2008].