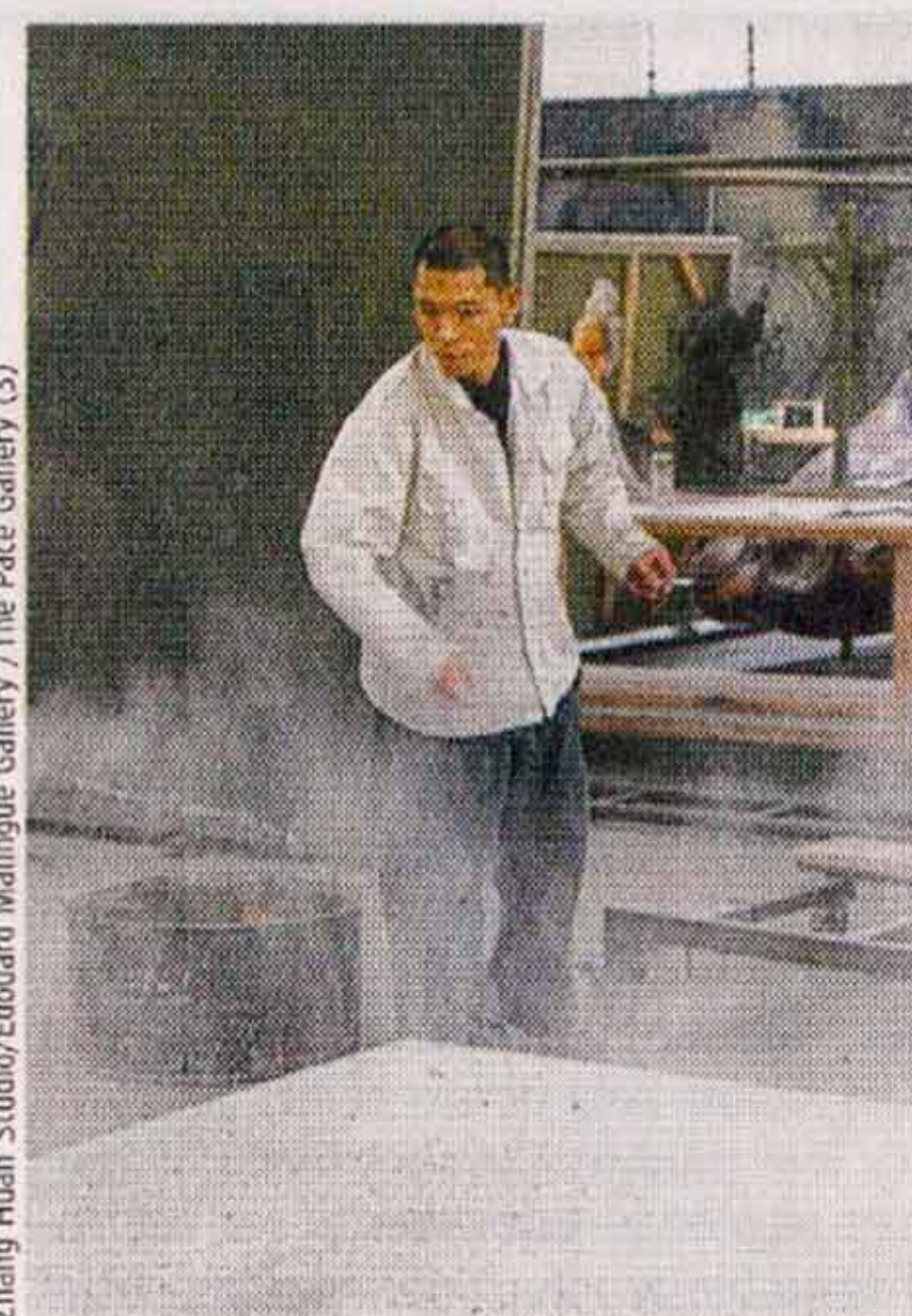
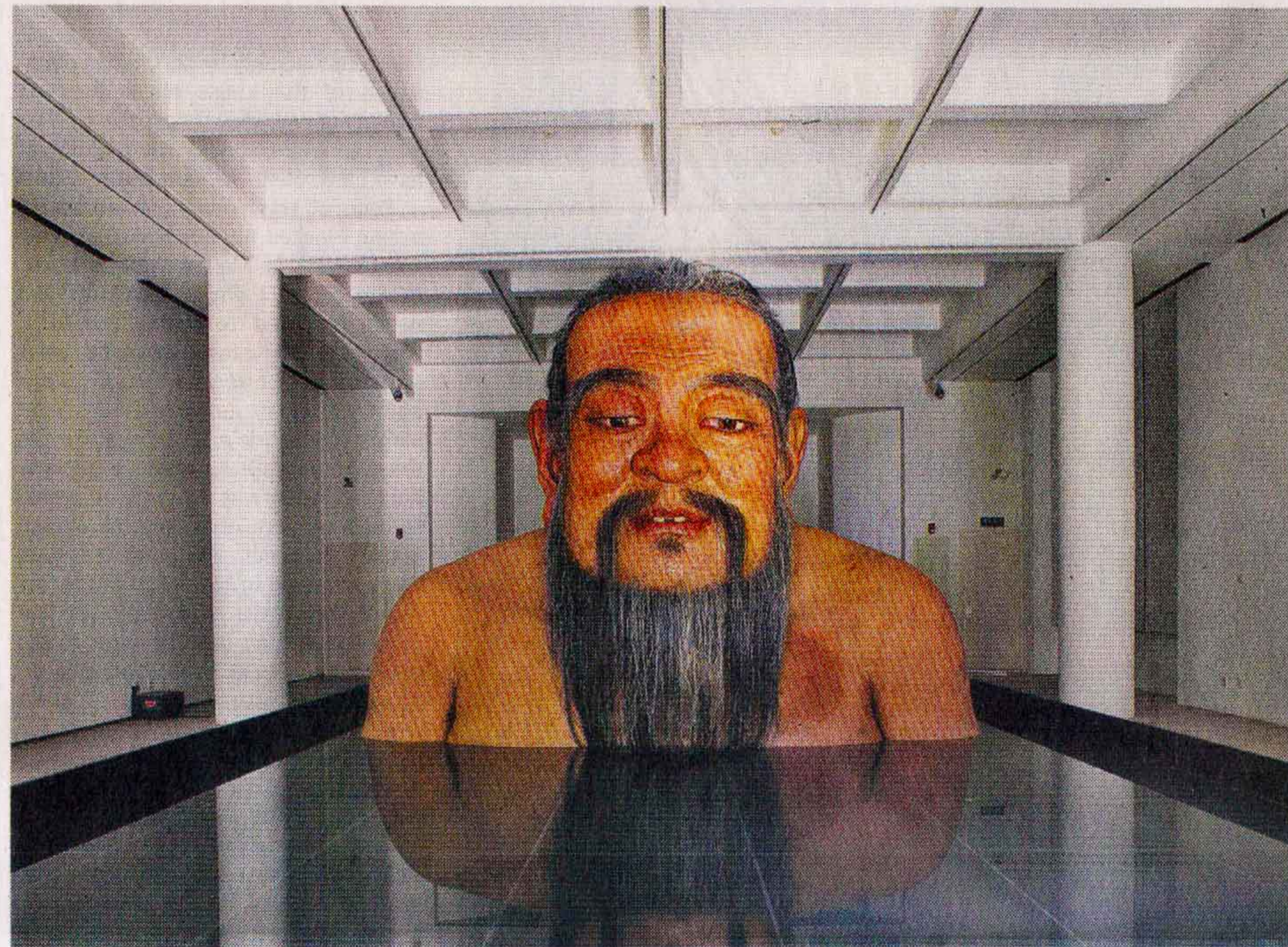


## ICONS

# China's Zhang Turns Ash Into Spectacle

BY ALEXANDRA A. SENO



ZHANG HUAN'S 'Q-Confucius No. 2,' top, at Shanghai's Rockbund museum; above left, the artist creating an ash painting in his studio; above right, Zhang's 'Three Heads, Six Arms' (2008) as installed in front of San Francisco's City Hall.

**CHINESE INTERNATIONAL** art star Zhang Huan sounds wistful when he says in an interview, "It is my dream for my art to be accessible to all. But reality is cruel."

Every day, the 46-year-old Mr. Zhang and more than 100 assistants keep busy on increasingly ambitious projects: from creating paintings and sculptures from incense ash, to fabricating giant metal statues, to planning multiple public events and installations. He's among a handful of the most recognized Chinese artists. Most of them, "like most Western artists, developed an immediately recognizable style," says Arne Glimcher, chairman of the Pace Gallery, the artist's principal representative world-wide. "But Zhang Huan can be a chameleon."

On Oct. 15, "Q Confucius," a collection of new works and his biggest one-man exhibit to date in China, made its debut as Shanghai's privately run Rockbund Art Museum reopened. The show ends Jan. 29.

In the spring, some of the big events on Mr. Zhang's schedule will be in the West. Besides presenting new works at New York's Pace, he'll stage "Semele," the 18th-century opera by George Frideric Handel, in Toronto. Mr. Zhang's version, which has already played in Brussels and Beijing, transposes the Greek myth into a Buddhist context set in ancient China.

The Rockbund exhibit features some of Mr. Zhang's ash paintings and sculptures. Since returning to China, he has made his name with these works. His staff makes contracts with temples around Shanghai and buys what's left of incense offerings. At a show earlier this year at a Louis Vuitton store in Macau, Mr. Zhang showed a larger-than-life pair of ash sculptures of likenesses of Buddha and Jesus Christ.

Mr. Zhang first attracted attention as a young performance artist in Beijing. In 1994, in one of his breakthrough works, "12 M<sup>2</sup>," he sat naked in a public toilet (about 12 square meters, or 129 square feet), attracting flies to his fish-oil-and-honey-covered body, to protest the

squalid conditions of his neighborhood. In this early phase of his career, authorities often reprimanded him.

Soon after, Mr. Zhang and his wife moved to New York with \$200. In his second year there, trend-setting Florida collectors Don and Mera Rubell bought up all of his work in his dealer's inventory. After nearly 10 years working in the U.S., Mr. Zhang returned to China in 2005, setting up a studio outside of Shanghai, and he embraced Buddhism.

His more recent "paintings" portray images based on photographs: old portraits and government propaganda pictures. But, unlike such controversial

Mr. Zhang says he's never been concerned with politics, adding that he's 'too afraid of the backlash.'

artists as Ai Weiwei, that's as far as Mr. Zhang delves into politics: "I am concerned with human life and people's interactions with the environment," he says. "I have never been concerned with politics; besides, I am too afraid of the backlash."

Earlier this year, at the Los Angeles gallery Blum & Poe, Mr. Zhang used bricks made from ash to create a tower where he installed taxidermied pigs. The work was inspired by a porcine pet that had become a media sensation after it survived for many weeks under the rubble of the deadly 2008 Sichuan quake. In 2010, San Francisco installed Mr. Zhang's giant "Three Heads, Six Arms" in the plaza in front of City Hall.

By his reckoning, 30% of those who buy his art are in Europe, 10% in Asia and 60% in the U.S., where the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum own pieces by him. "Chinese museums go for traditional oil paintings and inks," he says. "I know where they are coming from. My things are hard for them to accept as art, and [Chinese collectors also find it difficult] because of my bad reputation in China in the past."