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THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: ZHANG HUAN STUDIO



# MEDICINE MAN



With his newest work,  
Zhang Huan contemplates  
how to cure life's  
ills and save our souls

BY ADELINE CHIA



CHINESE HERBOLOGY, A COMPLEX SYSTEM HARNESSING animal, vegetable, and mineral elements to treat illnesses, has been the backbone of Chinese traditional medicine for thousands of years. In artist Zhang Huan's latest series of work, to be shown at Pace Gallery in New York in spring 2014, it is the medium with which he creates textured paintings about "physical birth, senility, illness, and death."

Offering a sneak peek, Zhang, who is one of China's most prominent contemporary artists, reveals a series that draws on both personal and political history—with implications of hysteria and a slow-spreading sickness. There are dark scenes of ritual shaming from the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Communist propaganda images, and, interestingly, portraits of British royalty, including the back of

a white bouffant head that is unmistakably the queen's, though Zhang is coy about the implications of the British subject matter, saying only that "British royalty has a special relationship with modern Britain and the rest of the world."

He wants his paintings, like the herbal materials used to make them, to be ultimately healing. "We can draw lessons from history, *dui zheng xia yao*," he says, repeating an aphorism that means one must identify the illness and treat it with the right medicine, "and give China the right prescription for the future."

The Chinese medical herbs are dried, colored, and affixed to the surface of the canvas—a process not unlike what he has done with his famous monochrome ash paintings, where burned incense is used like paint.

Ash is a trademark of Zhang's work. In recent years, it has been used in his most iconic pieces, such as the monumental ash statues of Buddha and other works that reference his recurring themes of life, death, and rebirth. Ash has also been used in a series of "historical" paintings, impastoed works depicting scenes from China's Cultural Revolution, Chinese leaders, and anonymous family portraits. Here, it embodies a sense of the past,

captured imperfectly in these scented, dusty remains, and is also a symbol of prayer and hope.

As to how the Chinese medicine paintings are a continuation of his previous ideas, he says both Chinese herbs and ash have curative properties. "While Chinese medicine is used to cure cancers in human bodies, ash is used for mankind's mental illness." To him, ash, made from joss sticks that Chinese Buddhists and Taoists offer to the gods for blessings and deliverance, is a therapeutic substance. "It is our collective soul, our memories, our hope, and our blessings," he says. This "living, breathing substance" is meticulously collected by his staff from temples around Shanghai, Suzhou and Hangzhou every month.

At age 48, Zhang is one of China's biggest art stars; his installations and sculptures are exhibited in top museums worldwide and internationally collected. Currently, he has a major solo exhibition on view at the Palazzo Vecchio, an ancient town hall in Florence, Italy. The exhibition, titled "Soul and Spirit," is a far-ranging showcase that runs through several parts of the historic building and around it, extending to Fort Belvedere and the Boboli Gardens.

But despite his artistic preoccupation with the spiritual, Zhang, who converses in Mandarin, is a straight shooter

This page: *Eternal Crown*, 2012. Says Zhang, "I'd like to make a prescription for the queen of the U.K." Opposite page: "Ordinary people are the foundation of the era and the society," says Zhang describing *Wang Yufeng*, 2012. "I can see myself in this painting." Previous spread: *Prescription No. 1*, 2012, depicts Mao Zedong in his later years. At left, Zhang in his studio in 2009.





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*Bloodstained Garment*, 2012, is based on an oil painting showing a scene from China's Land Revolution. "Borrowing the classic image as an allegory of the present is full of thought-provoking practical significance," says Zhang.



with an impish air. A joke is never far away. He says his two children, a son aged 13 and a daughter aged 11, are not good at their studies. "You can't run away from DNA," he adds with a chuckle. "Their father's is too strong."

It has often been pointed out that his recent work—meditative, calm, concerned with mortality—is a lifetime away from the hell-raising performance pieces that established his career in the early 1990s. One of the youngest members of experimental Beijing East Village group, he did several seminal works where he used his body in extreme, potentially self-destructive exercises.

Among the most famous is *12 Square Meters*, 1994, where he sat naked in a public toilet, covered in fish oil and honey, while flies engulfed him. It was inspired by the small, filthy bathrooms in rural villages and the exploration of the tension between disgust and attraction.

Later, after an eight-year sojourn in New York, Buddhism became a recurring theme in his work (he officially became a Buddhist in 2005), but he says he is not making Buddhist art. "I'm using Buddhism to talk about being human, about being in the world."

From physical transgression in ephemeral acts to a Buddhist-inspired quest for enlightenment—looking back, what does he think of his journey so far? "To be honest, I've been fighting for so long so that I can make a living through my art. Back in my Beijing days, I often wondered, 'When will the day come that I can make money from this?' Now there's no need to think about these things, and I'm happy to be able to provide employment to others." He hires about 100 assistants for his 50,000-square-meter studio-cum-factory space.

Then he grows ruminative and says mysteriously, "But





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we all need a bigger perspective, right?” He pauses. “Sometimes for the big institutions and their big retrospectives of my work, I don’t even go to the opening. You reach the point where you are concerned with the big questions: Where are we going? Where do we come from? These are problems we can’t solve. Problems of life and death. How do we end the cycle? How do we spend the next 10 to 20 years?”

Well, in the not-so-distant future, Zhang himself hopes to become a movie director and has two ideas: the first is a love story set in Tibet, for which he already has the story line figured out; the second is a film about Chairman Mao Zedong. Asked if he’s planning a documentary on Mao, he says, “No, a fictional film.” His impish side slips back into the conversation again. Poking fun at his own bald pate, he says, “I’ll play Chiang Kai-shek!” 田

## 8 QUESTIONS FOR ZHANG HUAN

### **When did you know you wanted to be an artist?**

When I was 14 years old. I always loved sketching, and all I wanted then was to draw a portrait realistically. Academically, I was a poor student with poor concentration skills. I was very mischievous and was always punished for talking or for playing the fool.

### **Do you hope that your children become artists?**

No. It’s a difficult career, and they must be prepared to be beggars. You have to be exceptionally good in order to feed yourself.

### **How did your interest in Buddhism start?**

When I was a young artist in Beijing, I listened to two types of music: rock ‘n’ roll and Buddhist music. I liked Western rock ‘n’ roll, bands such as Nirvana, Pink Floyd, and U2. The music made me feel alive, but at the same time, you can’t constantly be living in a state of climax, because you will die. So I listened to Buddhist music to rest and to be quiet.

### **In your 2011 exhibition “Q Confucius,” you placed the influential scholar in a series of ambiguous settings, including as a gigantic statue in water and as a robot in a cage with monkeys. What is your view of Confucian philosophy?**

Confucius has more than 2,500 years of influence on China. He is involved in Chinese history every step of the way. With this exhibition, I wanted to ask: At this point, are his philosophies good for China’s development in the future? Or are there better principles or foundations?

### **Why did you return to China after eight years in New York?**

America wasn’t changing. There was no life. I was numb and tired. So I came back. And China was just the

opposite of America. There were opportunities everywhere. It was like a grand experiment—you could find the good and the bad, the old and the new, the nice and the nasty, the sexy and unsexy. There were no rules.

### **What are the difficulties of working as an artist in China today?**

Whether you work in China or outside of China, artists must bear in mind who they are and what they do. If they lose the spirit of exploration and the ability to express themselves, they will meet with great difficulties. The difference between the past and now is that because of commercialization, many artists have lost their creativity, judgment, and faith and their soul.

### **You said earlier: “You reach a point where you are concerned with the big questions: Where are we going? Where do we come from?” How do you see your work evolving to address these questions?**

My works show humankind’s memory, happiness, birth and death, faith, and our brutish nature. We live in an era full of loneliness, anxiety, and hopelessness now. Humankind may evolve, but it is helpless against this. I hope to make people pay attention to themselves and their environments.

### **You have a factory that stretches across 20 buildings in Shanghai’s outskirts, employing about 100 assistants to help realize your works. Are you an artist or a businessman?**

Did Michelangelo paint the Sistine Chapel himself? An artist is like a temple abbot, an architect, a president. You can’t expect the architect to do everything, lay down every tile in the building. What they have to do is to come up with ideas and the soul of the design. That’s enough.