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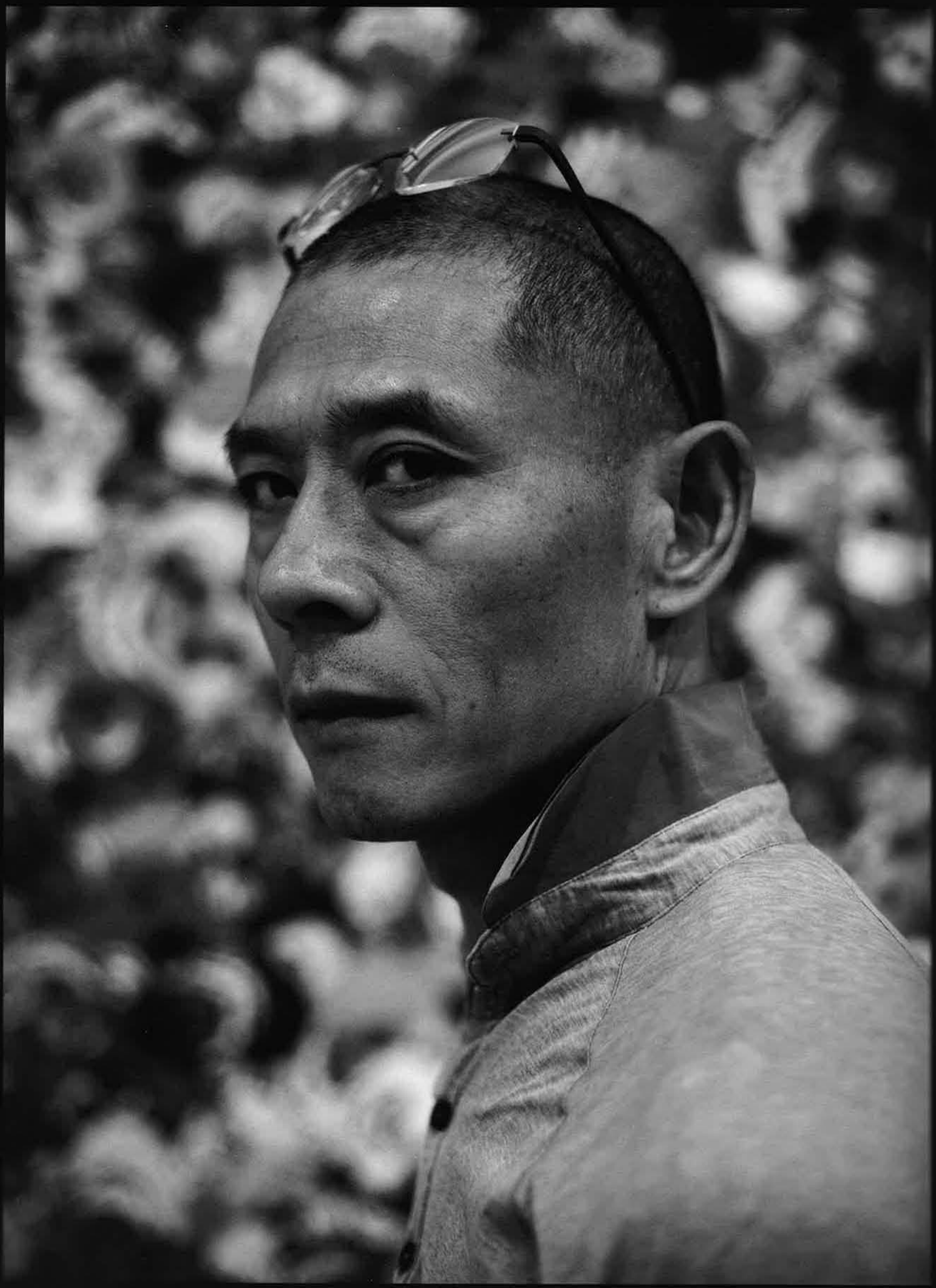
THE NEW LUXURY

BARRY McGEE - ZHANG HUAN - JULIA CHIANG - KELLY WEARSTLER



ZHANG HUAN

BY JULIE BAUMGARDNER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHAWN BRACKBILL

Opposite page:
Zhang Huan
Poppy Field No. 8
2010
Oil on linen
31 x 23 inches
Photo courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery
© Zhang Huan Studio, courtesy of Pace Gallery

It's 1994. You're Zhang Huan, you're 29, and you're about to become not only one of China's most formative artists, one who ushers the Middle Kingdom into the contemporary art market, but a game-changing practitioner of performance art. His quiet-but-gruesome protest—*12 Square Meters*—is his first major work. Its title refers to the size of the public latrine into which Zhang locks himself, slathered in honey and awaiting attacking flies and other vermin. To a mid-nineties Prozac-hazed audience this work feels full of steely resolve, masking a lurking anger. It echoes throughout the world, through institutions, the press, and word-of-mouth, and Zhang quickly becomes a symbol of a complex China, not simply made up of eager capitalists or struggling communists, but one where millennial concerns—identity politics and individual selfishness—guide the society's goals.

It's been nearly twenty years since Zhang's harrowing antics crystallized a cultural transition, and his performance works have landed him in the collections of nearly every institution any artist dreams of being included in (MoMA? Check. Saatchi? Yup. Guggenheim. Metropolitan. Storm King. Pompidou, Louis Vuitton, and Inhotim? Naturally). He also is represented by Pace, a gallery that is in constant competition for slots 1 and 2, much like the rivalry between Harvard, Princeton, and Yale (the last of which has a piece of his in its collection, too). Remarkably, Zhang isn't even 50.

With his sharp features and an angular face unfettered by signs of age, Zhang in passing looks severe. Standing in front of his most recent body of work, "Poppy Fields," inside the main gallery of Pace's Chelsea outpost, Zhang lithely pulls out a cigarette. It's 24 hours before his blockbuster show of paintings is set to open, in the coveted September slot, and gallery assistants, art handlers, and other Pace staff are buzzing about. Zhang begins to smoke, inside. Everyone furtively glances at each other in disbelief—yes, this is really happening. Zhang doesn't even notice. Being a renegade and an art star means he likely never hears no, and culturally the Chinese don't have the same hang-ups about tobacco as westerners. But then, Zhang realizes that as comfortable as he is, in his gallery, in front of his newest artworks, in front of a reporter, in this moment of life, that maybe he has overstepped. He runs outside.

As he returns with a grin on his face, we are about to resume the interview when Andrea Glimcher, who rules the roost at Pace, tiptoes through the gallery. Zhang spots her and rushes over to bear hug her and gush in his broken English about how honored he is to have his monumental canvases hanging on Pace's near-30-foot walls. The scene isn't wildly surprising—many remark on how "normal" or "accessible" artists are up close, a reaction often unlike the experience of meeting celebrities. While there is nothing "normal" about Zhang, and his artistic vision may be as searing as his eyes, his temperament is calm and crafty. He understands timing, and is not anxious. "For me, if I can use a Chinese expression," says Zhang, "in order for you to really live, you need to reach the point of a near-death experience."

In the West, poppies often stick in our imagination as war mementos—whether in regard to the First World War, and its Flanders Fields metaphors, or the heroin trade recalling the U.S.-Afghanistan conflict that continues to rage on. "I actually didn't know that, this connotation and this connection," Zhang says, "but I do want to give the viewer the sense that they're floating; they're in the state of hallucination even though the true reality is there, but then I want you to feel that you can somehow remove yourself from it in a state of high." In Zhang's world, "Poppy Fields," for those unable to see them up close, are 23 canvases, many extending past six and nine feet in length and width. For the record, that "high" he cares to evoke is like the poppy byproduct opium, a narcotic that Zhang, for anyone who is curious, has experimented with in the past.

Gloppy in texture, lush and tropical in color, the "Poppy" series catalogued by mere numbers is not quite what one would expect from an artist whose previous material has mainly been his body. (In the last decade, Zhang, however, has ventured into large-scale figurative sculpture, object installations, and ash-on-canvas works, with color not a formative focus.) "Oil painting is something I actually studied," Zhang says. "I never actually stopped doing oil painting. I still try to make myself better and to make it perfect." Death and destruction often find their way into Zhang's work. These bombastic works show signs of meticulous calculation, and eerie, ambiguous emoticon-esque faces. In fact, they are Tibetan skulls.

Zhang's current artistic preoccupation arrived about four or five years ago. A fervent Buddhist, he first went to Tibet in 2005, which he pinpoints as a life-changing event. He has long practiced Tibetan Buddhism, cites it as his greatest influence, and strongly believes his fate is meant to be in Tibet (although he has yet to peruse the Lhasa real estate scene). He is quick to add that the stuffs of contemporary art are deep within Tibetan life, ritual, and imagery. Monk pilgrimages to quotidian scripture chants contain the motivation to work toward the next life, which Zhang reveals as wheels on his own path. "You cannot challenge or fight your destiny," he says. "It doesn't matter whether or not you can destroy Syria or you run for president: if it's not yours, it's not yours." To the Tibetan mind, a skull is a constant reminder of the infinite cycle of life. It's a sidekick, an emblem, a living memento. To Zhang, "It's a way to free myself when my body's been devoured by the vultures and the vulture would take my body anywhere."

"I THINK EVERYONE HAS THIS LONGING FOR HAPPINESS, FOR FREEDOM AND A REJECTION OF PAIN, LONELINESS, AND ANY DISASTERS THAT YOU HAVE TO DEAL WITH IN REAL LIFE, THAT'S THE STATE OF MIND I SORT OF WANT TO EVOKE WITH THESE PAINTINGS"

Speaking in mantras and Confucian parables, Zhang might sound more like a lama than the rural worker's son that he is. Born in Anyang, Henan province, an ancient capital of China 3,000 years ago that feels the five-and-a-half hours away from Beijing to the north as Buffalo does to New York, Zhang didn't have much taste for his surroundings, including school. But even in the working-class primary schools of his formative years, he was eagerly recognized as having artistic talent, a trait not often rewarded in those parts. He went on to his native city's art school (after two failed audition attempts) to study painting, and eventually landed at Central Academy of Fine Arts, in Beijing, where he studied the classical (western) tradition. His penchant for perfection manifested in his work as allusions to the French academic and Russian realist painters. He lived famously in Beijing's East Village, an artists' colony, and embraced the city in its post-Tiananmen period.

Then Zhang turned 27. Neither friends, nor dealers, nor curators, nor the man himself offer a grand explanation for why he dropped the brush and picked up his own flesh as a tool. Perhaps the first rule of the western "27 Club" isn't simply dying at that age—to a Buddhist, it's merely transformation. In 1993 Zhang created his first performance work, *Weeping*

Zhang Huan
Rulai
2008–2009
Ash, steel and wood
216 x 178 x 131 inches
Photo by G.R. Christmas
© Zhang Huan Studio,
courtesy of Pace Gallery

Angels, in which an urn holding baby doll parts and bloodlike liquid broke over his naked body and scattered to the ground. It bewildered its witnesses and cemented his direction for the next decade. What followed was *12 Square Meters* and then a series of works that involved Zhang, usually nude, using himself as a vessel of sacrifice, such as ½ (1998), in which he enshrined himself in pig meat. He became an international sensation, moving to New York City to be in the midst of the action as everyone grasped for his attention. There, Zhang's violence softened, and his work remained poignant but commercially friendly. There was *Family Tree* (2000), now again on view at the Met, where in its Chinese galleries for three weeks calligraphers will recreate the 13-year-old series of photographs in which religious texts are scribed all over his body, eventually slathering him in ink. Then, after eight years in New York, in 2005 he abandoned both the city and performance—the same year as his fated Tibet trip. He staged his last performance pieces to date, and from then on, integrated his Buddhist beliefs into his focus on the sculpture, installation, and paintings.

But where Zhang was in 2005 is not where he is now. He moved to Shanghai (on the behest of a fortune-teller), still his current city of residence, and he built a studio with around 100 assistants. Zhang showed at Haunch of Venison, both in London and Berlin, and eventually landed at Pace in 2008. A Rothschild, MoMA director Glenn Lowry, and Melissa Chu, doyenne of the Asia society, all paid Zhang a visit. Retrospectives popped up, as did solo gallery shows and single-artist fair booths. Zhang became a bona-fide living master.

In the midst of all these immediate lifestyle changes, Zhang's character, too, began to shift. His forties, as he puts it, are when he became wiser, more prudent, so that his fifties, which approach in 2015, will be the period where he starts to understand his destiny and to allow his rebellious spirit, the one that resists his intended fate, to just destroy his immediate quality of life. Shedding the self for ideas voiced by others, Zhang's dharma calculates, is the act of middle age. But Zhang's work isn't Zen or somatic, as any whiff of the "Poppy Fields" reinforces. "I do think that, in my worldview, humans, all of us, we are animals," says Zhang. For as spiritually connected to nirvana as Zhang is, he is tethered to reality, not just his own, but humanity as we all experience it. "In my studio, I have monkeys. You wind up observing the ecology they created for themselves. Of course, you have your leader, who, when he was in his physical prime, will be the first one to eat." His studio mates, performing their theater of Darwinism, serve Zhang's appetite for fate. "Then another monkey took his place as leader and then he suddenly became almost the beggar of the colony. So this cycle of survival of the fittest, it will happen in another 5,000 years, because we are animals."

But animals, as PETA would have us believe, are sentient beyond the crude reflexes of functioning. "I think everyone has this longing for happiness, for freedom and a rejection of pain, loneliness, and any disasters that you have to deal with in real life," Zhang says. "That's the state of mind I sort of want to evoke with these paintings." The works in the current series, as much as they are a testament to his deeply rooted versatility, are the evidence of his predicted maturity. Zhang has given up subverting the nebulous and the literal man, but by no means is his mission complete or complacent. "If you look back on our history, all the masters sometimes plateau and can't produce on the same level," Zhang says. "Even if that's the case, when you reach a certain level, it will be remembered and cherished by the future generations. It doesn't matter that later on maybe you didn't do great work that you have done before." Zhang is rather content to see the "Poppy Fields" grow as a series. As he puts it, "It's almost like it's infinite and limitless—that sort of immortality and this idea of perpetual state of mind." But can the artist who didn't predict his ascent and success tell what's next? "I know my destiny. I'm not fighting it," he says with a smile.

Opposite page:
Zhang Huan
Poppy Field No. 16
Detail
2013
Oil on linen
78 x 98 inches
Photo courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery
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