CANADIANART

June 7, 2012

Zhang Huan: Synchronicity Rising
Various locations, Toronto Spring 2012

Gillian MacKay

Until recently, Toronto had been underexposed to the international sensation generated by contemporary Chinese art over the past 30 years. The one artist we heard about on a regular basis was Ai Weiwei, whose social-justice crusades and 81-day incarceration in 2011 have won him an ardent following in the West. The existence of a booming Chinese art market with wealthy, sophisticated and, for the most part, apolitical players who are equally at home in London, New York and Basel seemed to come as news in a city where dealers, collectors and museums largely ignored the phenomenon. Not surprisingly, when downtown Toronto saw a lot of one Chinese artist in particular in May, people did not quite know what to make of him.

Zhang Huan, 47, made his name as a performance artist with such epoch-defining works as 1994's *12m2*, in which he sat for 40 minutes in a putrid public toilet in Beijing's East Village artists' community. His naked body was smeared in fish oil and honey to attract insects, a display of meditative endurance and a mute protest against the living conditions experienced by millions of poor Chinese. Fast-forward nearly 20 years, and the same artist stood, fully clothed, on the sidewalk of University Avenue, lighting 18 sticks of incense to mark the unveiling of a gleaming, fantastical, dragon-like sculpture he had created for the 66-storey Shangri-La tower. A few days later, his sumptuous, controversial production of the opera *Semele* by George Frideric Handel made its North American debut at the Canadian Opera Company (COC). At the same time, a dozen of his celebrated ash paintings and carved wooden doors were on view at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), the first solo show for a Chinese artist at that institution. The AGO's director Matthew Teitelbaum, speaking amidst a cloud of fragrant smoke at the sculpture's unveiling, called it Toronto's "Zhang Huan moment."

At the AGO opening later that afternoon, where Zhang Huan was besieged by Chinese-language media and well-wishers, he circulated graciously, offering a ready smile and handshake. Although his bony, ascetic face is instantly recognizable to art lovers from photographs of his early performances, he does not stand out in a crowd. A slight, trim man, he wore a pale grey outfit resembling a mechanic's uniform and sported a pair of glasses atop a frayed MoMA cap. Accompanied by a small entourage that included a translator and his New York dealer Arne Glimcher, founder of the powerful Pace Gallery, Zhang projected an air of watchful, coiled intensity. In a short discussion conducted with *Canadian Art* through a translator, the artist was at best enigmatic, at worst impossible to read. The lost-in-translation factor cropped up again and again. Whether it was the Buddhist theme of *Semele* or the historical context of the ash paintings or the artist's elusive take on Chinese politics, it was not uncommon during the "Zhang Huan moment" to hear critics complain and people confess that they didn't get it. And that, of course, was what made it interesting.

Jane Archibald in the title role in the Canadian Opera Company production of *Semele* that was directed and set designed by Zhang Huan / photo Michael Cooper

The synchronicity of these events was no accident. Teitelbaum was a key advisor on the sculpture commission to Westbank Development and the Peterson Group, the team behind the Shangri-La. A complementary exhibition at the AGO was a logical next move. News of these projects dovetailed with COC director Alexander Neef's plans for a Toronto run for *Semele*; the production had already attracted Neef's interest when it opened at Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels in 2009, as it complemented his ambition to engage visual artists in opera and to shake up staid interpretations of the classics. Coming from Europe, where the arts are largely funded and managed by the state, Neef also believes Toronto cultural organizations could do better job of coordinating their programming: "Whenever possible, we should all profit from having an important artist here, and enhance the impact on the city." In heft and bulk, the impact was considerable. The opera set—a beautiful 450-year-old Ming temple salvaged from a Chinese village—weighed 17 tonnes, shipped by giant cargo containers from China. The stainless steel public artwork, also shipped in pieces, is 22 tonnes. The largest of the 12 compelling artworks at the AGO, *Great Leap Forward* (2007), a depiction of the Herculean struggle on the part of thousands of workers in Mao's China to dig a 71-kilometre canal by hand, measures roughly 3 by 10 metres and covers an entire gallery wall.

The cultural impact, of course, was harder to measure. As neither the Shangri-La tower nor the sculpture is finished, critical judgment is necessarily on hold. At the moment, the artwork is an intriguing, slightly bizarre presence on a stolid stretch of University Avenue lined with law buildings, hospitals and war memorials. The spiky, shape-shifting creature—tree trunks appear to morph into a long-necked dragon that has been mobbed by a flock of pigeons—is called *Rising*, a reference to a breakaway cluster of birds which soar skyward. Clearly, this is not a kid-friendly climbing toy along the lines of the beloved Henry Moore at the AGO. Work-in-progress photos taken in the artist's warehouse-sized studio suggest a fiery and disquieting magnificence, but, in Toronto, it is too soon to say if *Rising* will register primarily as an eccentric, beautifully wrought adornment for the luxury hotel and condominium complex or rather assume a forceful, independent presence on the avenue.

Zhang Huan *Airplanes* 2007 Courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery © Zhang Huan Studio

As for the opera, it is fair to say that Zhang Huan challenged Toronto and it challenged him back. *Semele* was the first production in the COC's history in which a visual artist was given full rein not just as a designer, but also as a director. Artists from Anselm Kiefer to David Hockney have tried their hand at opera; at best, artists bring fresh, compelling perspectives, as with William Kentridge's lauded production of Shostakovich's *The Nose* at the Metropolitan Opera in 2010. Yet a visual artist is likely to privilege the eye over the ear, and may not understand the composer's musical arguments. Zhang, in fact, had seen very few Western operas when Linda Wong Davies, patron of *Semele* through the KT Wong Foundation, began to engage him in the project, and he is by no means a convert to the genre. When *Semele* played in Beijing in 2010—with cuts demanded by government censors—it was the first Baroque opera ever performed in China to be directed and designed by a Chinese artist.

Not surprisingly, Zhang approached Handel's oratorio as a point of departure rather than an end in itself. The 1744 opera is based on a classical myth about a vain, lovely and lustful mortal named *Semele* who is burned alive when she forgets her place and aspires to become a god, like her lover Jupiter (Lady Davies once called *Semele* "the original 'material girl'"). Treating the original as a sort of readymade, Zhang cut and spliced it with interpolations that included a real-life Chinese story, a Tibetan singer, a pair of sumo wrestlers, and a chorus of fornicating monks and nuns. Handel's original has a jubilant finale in which Augustan order is restored; Zhang cut the happy ending (the most serious violence done to the music which was otherwise glorious in the COC production) and concluded with *Semele*'s death to reflect Buddhist ideas of impermanence and the laws of karma.

Although the production's overdone bawdiness and zany gimmickry might suggest otherwise, Zhang was nothing if not serious in purpose. His radical aim was to take a conservative—one might even say Confucian—tale of universal order violated and restored, and turn it into a Buddhist reflection on the absurdity and pathos of the human condition. Responding to the criticism that hiring celebrity artists to direct opera is often no more than a publicity stunt, Lady Davies explained to the *Financial Times* in 2010: "In China there's a very long tradition of 'the artist' who writes poetry, paints, practises calligraphy, sculpts and all sorts of things. We're certainly not out to create a ruckus for the sake of it. We're trying to create meaningful and long-lasting links."

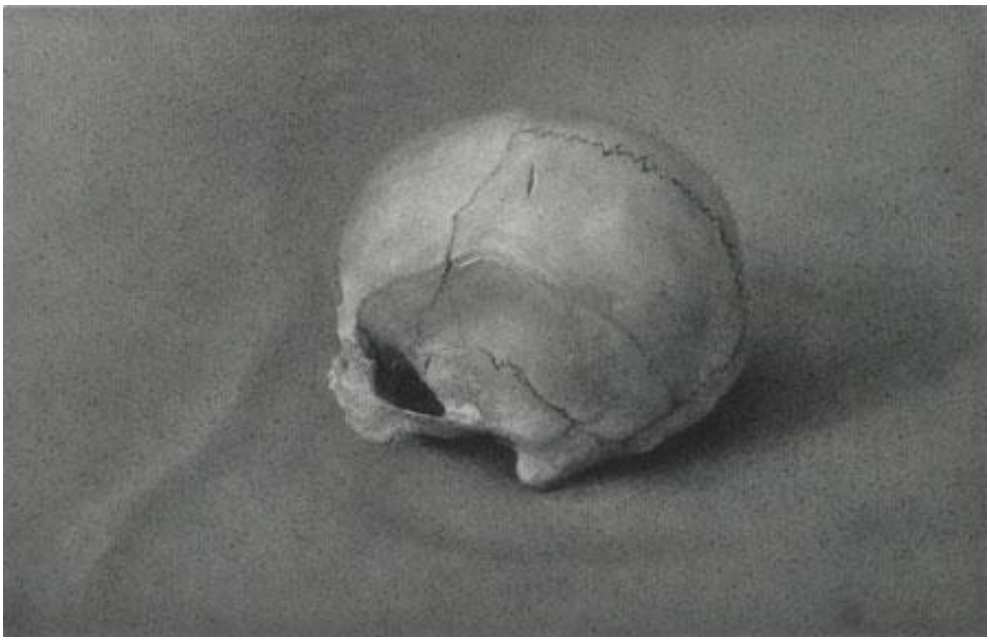
Zhang's boldest move was to frame the opera with the true story of a Chinese peasant woman, Ruan Jinmei, whose personal downfall through adultery overlapped in certain respects with that of *Semele*. The opera opens with a video in which we learn that the imposing Ming temple that appears on stage was once home to Ruan and her husband. Near the close of the opera, we see a portrait of her once-beautiful face projected briefly on a drop-down video screen; next, streams of water pour down and obliterate the image. In the final scene, Ruan herself appears alone on stage, sweeping the temple in the rain. Although these images are highly resonant, the story was not as well integrated as it might have been. To grasp the thematic connection between the real Chinese woman and the mythic *Semele*, it was necessary to read the program notes.

In Toronto, there were cultural barriers as well. The Chinese-born friend who accompanied me to the opera was puzzled but electrified to hear the chorus humming the socialist anthem "The Internationale" at *Semele*'s funeral; Westerners were merely puzzled.

COC director Alexander Neef defends Zhang's iconoclastic and challenging revisions. "We have to find a way to tell old stories in a way that makes them relevant," he said. "It can be challenging for the public, but our objective as an arts organization is to show people things that they haven't seen." Toronto author Katherine Govier, posting on Twitter, agreed: "I loved @CanadianOpera's *Semele*, weirdness and all. Yoking of very different traditions, but somehow it worked." Among its more vehement detractors was the *Toronto Star*'s John Terauds, who loved the music and loathed the interpretation: "Imagine someone taking the concept of bad fusion cuisine to opera, and you get the gist of the mess that the Canadian Opera Company calls *Semele*."

Love or loathing for Zhang's production might depend, to some extent, on one's taste for dissonant strategies familiar in the visual arts where, as often as not, it is up to the viewer, armed with artist's statement or curator's explanation, to connect the dots. Decoding demands time, patience and a degree of tolerance for ambiguity. The challenge is even greater when the work is an opera unfolding in real time. Also, the blurring of boundaries between reality and artifice is pro forma in contemporary art, but less so in opera. One does not expect to attend a performance of *Don Giovanni* in which a real-life womanizer makes an appearance, and his bachelor pad becomes the set. Yet for Zhang's view, the power of the Ruan Jinmei story trumped that of the mythic *Semele*, just as the real Ming temple outclassed a replica from the opera workshop. This contradicts a classical premise of Western drama, namely that art is a superior amplification of reality—just one of many oppositions that made his *Semele* so provocative, vexing and engaging.

The AGO exhibition, by contrast, presents the artist in a somewhat more accessible vein. On display are a dozen works: eight of his evocative, signature paintings made from incense ash and four from the somewhat less successful *Memory Doors* series of carved wooden doors printed with silkscreens. By way of background, the first phase of Zhang's career was devoted to now-iconic performances which encompassed raw, visceral feats of endurance (*12m2*); poetic tributes to human dignity (in 1997's *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond*, he and a group of marginalized Chinese migrant workers were photographed standing chest-deep in water); and explorations of ethnic identity (in 2000's *Family Tree* he allowed Chinese calligraphers to write in ink on his face until it was totally black). In 2005, after living in New York for several years and establishing an international reputation, Zhang returned to China with his family. He ceased to perform, and he pursued a more conventional, object-based practice that included paintings, sculptures, installations and multi-media works. He purchased a compound of studio buildings in Shanghai where he employs up to 100 workers. The ash paintings, for example, which sell in the six-figure price range, are crafted by studio assistants according to his instructions. (As the so-called "factory" model of art production has been much vilified, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the model is ubiquitous among artists from Jeff Koons to Ai Weiwei.)



Zhang Huan *Felicity No. 1* 2008 Courtesy Pace Gallery © Zhang Huan Studio / photo G. R. Christmas

In 2005, he converted to Buddhism. One day, at a temple in Shanghai, it struck him that the large quantities of ash that accumulate daily from burned incense and offerings carried enormous potential for artistic expression. Since then, it has become his signature material. Collected from temples around Shanghai, the ash is treated and graded into a range of tones from bone white to coal black; the fine textured particles are used to produce grisaille paintings and the coarser materials end up in sculptures and installations, often Buddhist in subject. As Zhang has written, “For me, incense ash is not ash; nor is it any kind of material. It’s a collective soul, memory and prayer. In front of a Buddha in a temple, nobody would ever curse anybody. They only make wishes and pray.”

Zhang’s performances are considered his most groundbreaking work, but the AGO exhibition shows the beauty and expressive range of which he is capable in the paintings. (His enormous and, at times, magnificent ash sculptures are not on display.) The powder-soft imprint of the ash and the delicacy of the modelling in *Felicity No. 1* (2008) combine to elevate this stock *vanitas* still life of a human skull into a moving reflection on the fragility of existence. The remaining large-scale paintings in the exhibition, based on Maoist propaganda photographs taken from old magazines and newspaper clippings, explore the collective myths of the recent past in a spirit that is elegiac and nuanced rather than ironic or denunciatory. The sombre palette and rough, flayed texture of *The Great Leap Forward* inevitably bring to mind the drastic human toll of Mao’s failed economic experiment, yet there is a note of nostalgia for the collective idealism of that period. Zhang, a staunch environmentalist, noted that such massive assaults on the landscape—in the painting, the canal is depicted as a black, sinister, diagonal gash—invariably carry a huge cost. As he has said, “When man does not respect nature, nature fights back.” At the opening, one Chinese viewer spoke of the pain she felt viewing *The Great Leap Forward*. But those without historical background or experience of China sometimes felt at a loss, pointing up the gap in understanding that still divides East and West. As one sophisticated viewer admitted, “I have no context to understand this work.”

Another source of debate was Zhang’s professed detachment from politics. The prominent media attention given to human rights cases, such as those of Ai Weiwei and the blind, dissident lawyer Chen Guangcheng, might lead one to imagine that Chinese artists are leading the charge for freedom and democracy, which is far from the case. Among the ranks of the disappointed was *Toronto Star* art critic Murray Whyte. He lamented the absence in Zhang’s mature work of the “deeply moving physicality” and the radical fire that animated his early performances and occasionally got him into trouble with the authorities. Calling Zhang’s Toronto projects tame and “bloodless,” Whyte also wondered at his failure to speak up on behalf of Ai Weiwei, Tibetan monks and freedom of speech. During Ai’s imprisonment in 2011, Zhang, like many other senior Chinese artists, failed to defend the dissident in public.

Steven Humes as Somnus in the Canadian Opera Company production of *Semele* that was directed and set designed by Zhang Huan / photo Michael Cooper

This silence strikes some Western critics as cowardly, yet we need to ask if it is fair to expect heroics in China today. In a rare, candid remark to the *Wall Street Journal* last year, Zhang admitted that he feared the repercussions of dissent. "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." He argues that there are other ways to advance the cause of humanity. “An artist is not a politician,” he told me in Toronto. “But perhaps through my work I can suggest ways to make a better society.”

Zhang was asked recently how he reconciles the grandiosity of his art with the Buddhist spiritual ideal of egolessness. His reply, to the effect that monumentality is a way to convey the scope of his compassion and devotion, recalls historical Chinese Buddhist artworks ranging back to the 5th-century Yungang Grottoes. Several astute observers have likened the difference between Zhang and Ai to the gulf that separates the two titans of German painting, Anselm Kiefer and Gerhard Richter. While the former are concerned with metaphysics and myth-making, the latter are doing battle on the ground. All of them, arguably, are fighting on the side of the angels. For a short time, at least, Toronto had a front seat at the ring.

http://www.canadianart.ca/online/reviews/2012/06/07/zhang-huan-ago-shangri-la-coc/