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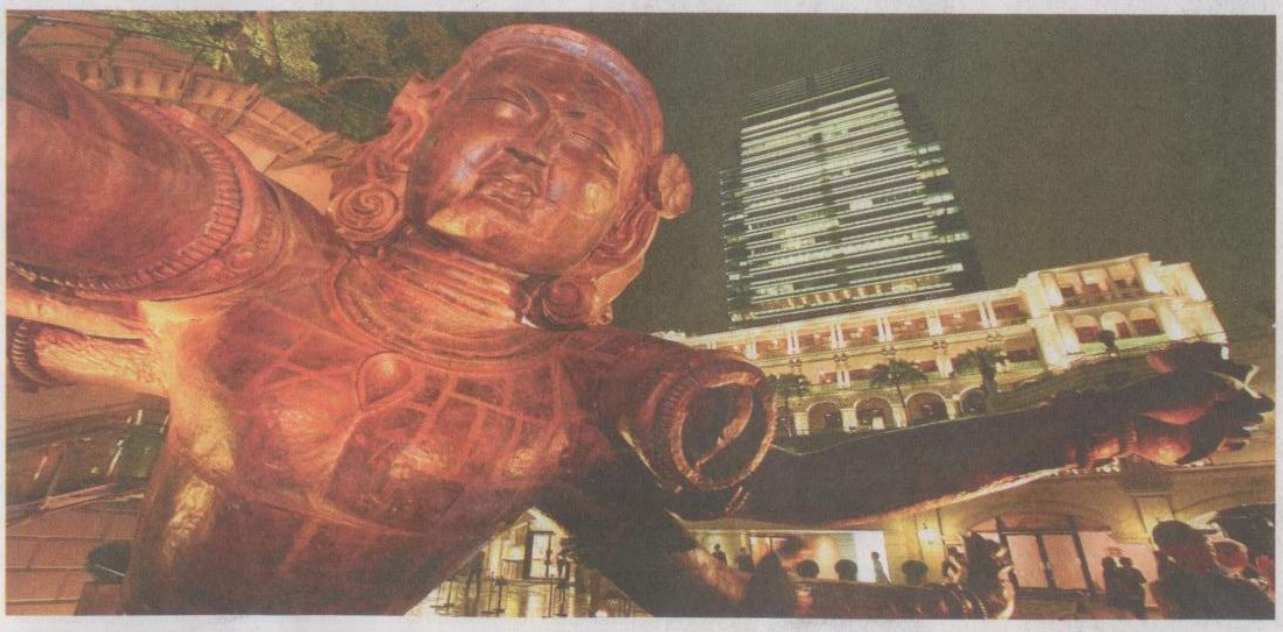
Grand gesture



Centre of attention. The copper sculpture *Three Heads Six Arms* by mainland conceptual and performance artist Zhang Huan dominates a display by the Edouard Malingue Gallery in the Grand Piazza of the "1881 Heritage" shopping centre in Tsim Sha Tsui. The sculpture, on display until June 30, was inspired by fragments of Buddhist statues Zhang found in a market and weighs 15 tonnes. Photo: Dickson Lee

Artist Zhang Huan stands within the embrace of his huge copper sculpture *Three Heads Six Arms* at 1881 Heritage. Photo: Dickson Lee

PORTRAIT OF A CITY AS A BLANK CANVAS

Zhang Huan's work is in the world's great galleries but his dream to exhibit in Hong Kong has only just come true. He hopes it might just spark something

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Hong Kong has the infrastructure to become a world cultural capital, says mainland artist Zhang Huan. What it needs now is more homegrown artists.

"Hong Kong is gradually moving away from being known as a cultural desert," said the co-founder of the Beijing East Village avant garde arts community, who has just launched his first solo exhibition in Hong Kong. "Everyone from the government and the arts world wants Hong Kong to do well, to become a true arts city, a cultural capital and a hub for Asia."

The artist was speaking after arriving to unveil his monumental copper sculpture, *Three Heads Six Arms*, at Tsim Sha Tsui's 1881 Heritage as part his "Aura of Disappearance" exhibition.

"The government's low-tax policy has made the city a friendly place for art dealing ... but for the culture, it's about the kind of people living here," said Zhang.

"People from the art world, from artists to collectors, all gather here now. The next step is about what's happening in the city. I hope my *Three Heads Six Arms* will become one of the important cultural happenings here."

The main exhibition at the Edouard Malingue Gallery in Central is a collaboration with The Pace Gallery in New York, featuring a selection of his ash paintings and sculptures created between 2007 and 2010.

"It has been my dream [to show my art in Hong Kong] for years," says Zhang, sitting on a white couch by the window overlooking buzzing Queen's Road Central and referring to a lost opportunity from 10 years ago.

"It didn't work out," said the artist without giving out too many details. "In future, I hope to do more art in Hong Kong. There's a close connection between mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and Hong Kong is a free city. Now my dream has finally come true."

Born in 1965 – the year before the Cultural Revolution started – in Anyang (安陽), Henan (河南) province, Zhang mastered both Chinese ink painting and art history at Henan University between 1984 and 1988. He furthered his studies in old painting techniques at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, graduating with a master's degree in 1993.

Upon graduation, he founded the Beijing East Village with artists including Ma Liuming and Zhang Yang, making a series of controversial performance works. These include his 1994 work *12 Square Metres*, in which the naked Zhang, covered with fish oil and honey, sat on an outdoor public toilet for an hour attracting a coating of flies all over his body.

In 1998, he left China for New York, returning to his home country in 2006. His works feature in the collections of some of the world's most famous museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

Speaking at an ART HK talk that also featured Charles Saumarez Smith, the chief executive of London's Royal Academy of Arts. Zhang said that he was not politically sensitive. Rather, it was life and the environment that he cared about. His art was a reflection not just traditional of Chinese values but also his concern for society.

> **Low-tax policy has made the city a friendly place for art dealing ... the next step is about what's happening**
>
> MAINLAND ARTIST ZHANG HUAN

He says his belief in Buddhism has had a great impact on him.

"When I was young, I was very self-centred. All I could think of was just me. But now I have learned to extend this concern to my children, my family, my studio and the people of my country," he said.

"In Buddhism, one moves from the greater self to the smaller self, and then non-self. I have yet to achieve that but my works reflect on my concern over society – humans and the environment," said Zhang, adding his fear of death kept him "too far from the state of a real Buddhist".

Zhang also revealed that recently he has adopted new pets – 100 million termites. "I've been researching termites for five years, and two months ago I began to raise them," the artist said. With the help of specialists, he moved five termite nests from Jiangxi to his studio in Shanghai, making a home, and dinner, for them out of some wood intended for an artwork that never materialised.

"Why am I studying them? You know, there are a lot of similarities between termites and humans. They both exist to destroy," said the artist.

"Look at those big cities in China: they speed up construction by chopping down big trees that took years to grow. The Sichuan earthquake in 2008 and the tsunami in Japan this year are merely the tip of an iceberg. There will be more to come."

Aura of Disappearance runs until June 30. *Three Heads Six Arms* is at 1881 Heritage until July 3.