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NAUGHTY BUT NICE

ZHANG HUAN once made jaws drop with his shocking performance art. As a new, gentler side to his work emerges, PAYAL UTTAM asks, has this wild child gone mild?

THE DOOR SLIDES open, exposing the sleek back office of Edouard Malingue Gallery. Inside, one of China's most provocative artists is lounging on a sofa with a cigarette poised in hand. His shaved head and sharp features are instantly recognisable – it's the same face that was once slathered in honey and fish oil, infested with flies in a Beijing outhouse. The same face that poked out of a raw meat body suit in New York. And the same face that was left to the mercy of hungry birds in Hamburg. At age 46, Zhang Huan doesn't look much different than he did 18 years ago, when he began shocking the world with his radical performances.

Casting his gaze towards the doorway, Zhang smiles and offers me a seat. He is in town for the unveiling of his public sculpture *Three Heads Six Arms* (2008), and an exhibition featuring new paintings. The gallery's PR team has warned that Zhang is in a hurry (his opening reception is due to begin), yet he appears perfectly at ease. Crossing his legs, he folds himself into the sofa with an air of nonchalance.

Once known as the bad boy of Chinese contemporary art, Zhang shot to fame in the late 1990s. His body became an icon of sorts as he regularly performed unclothed. "The artist is an animal," explains Zhang, his eyes widening. "We need food, we need a lover, we need fresh air. We need to smoke, to drink. But we should do more. Artists should ask questions and let people know about problems [in society]." Indeed, since his fledgling days in the Beijing East Village commune, Zhang has grappled with difficult questions.

Among his earliest performances was a work titled *Angel* (1993), which called attention to the issue of forced abortion. Spreading a white sheet on the ground outside the National Art Museum of China, Zhang stripped down to his underwear and lifted a jar containing blood-red liquid and a dismembered doll above his head before smashing it. The museum director immediately shut down the show, but Zhang was undeterred. Joining forces with other artists, he continued to stage performances underground.

In 1998, Zhang moved to New York City, where his work quickly resurfaced in the public sphere. Winning the respect of major museums, he began a series of site-specific performances worldwide. For each work, he created a performance in response to a different country or city. Among the most theatrical works was *My America* (1999), in which the artist sat undressed below a sea of nude Caucasian Americans perched on scaffolding throwing loaves of bread at him. The work was a commentary on his difficulty in acclimatising and adjusting to American culture. "When I moved [to New York], I found I lost my place. I was a traveller so I thought I should do 'glocal art.' My body and my soul are the centre [local] but I moved to different cities [global] so it was 'glocal.'" Following this idea, Zhang went on to perform works including *My Japan*, *My Switzerland* and *My Rome*.

Asked what kind of performance he would do for Hong Kong, he responds with a mischievous grin. "What is my Hong Kong? What is my Hong Kong?" he repeats, his voice rising excitedly. "My Hong Kong is the *Three Heads Six Arms* sculpture. I hope the six arms can make Hong Kong art and culture stronger." Zhang pauses, looking out the window (ironically, at the Gucci storefront across the street). "I hope to show people that they can do what they want with culture. That is my dream for Hong Kong."

And what a grand vision it is. Soaring eight metres in height, *Three Heads Six Arms* is Zhang's largest sculpture to date. Composed of copper, it depicts the torso of a three-

RIGHT: SEAN LEE DAVIES; TOP LEFT: SONG ZHENGPING / XINHUA / CORBIS



ZHANG HUAN AND THE THREE HEADS SIX ARMS SCULPTURE



"In the sculpture, I come together with Buddha. I hope that I myself will disappear – from the big self to small self to nothing"

headed Buddha with multiple arms. Arriving from San Francisco, the work was installed outside 1881 Heritage to much fanfare. It is a majestic figure, emblematic of a major shift in Zhang's life and work. In 2005, the artist became a Buddhist convert and grew increasingly spiritual. That year, he began travelling through Tibet. While exploring the markets, he came across broken fragments of Buddhist sculptures. Inspired by the scattered limbs, he began to create his series of massive Buddha sculptures.

One year later, Zhang left the United States and returned to China, where he established a studio in Shanghai. By then he had made the decision to stop performing. Only occasionally did traces of his presence arise in his new work – in *Three Heads Six Arms*, for instance, he replaced one of the Buddha heads with a self-portrait. "I put my face close to Buddha's so I can transform my mind. Because in life, I can't do it. But in the sculpture, I come together with Buddha. I hope that I myself will disappear – from the big self to small self to nothing." So diminishing your ego? "Yes," he confirms.

The theory appears to be working. Zhang's demeanor is humble and even his clothes are self-effacing: baggy trousers, a simple shirt and a baseball cap. Throughout our conversation, he speaks with a Zen-like demeanour. His calm expression almost mirrors that of the figure in a portrait hanging on the wall behind him. Titled *Youth Leader* (2008), the painting shows a woman with a meditative gaze emerging from a velvet background. Composed of ash affixed on linen, the work is part of his recent



series of paintings displayed in the front gallery.

"I found the ash in a Shanghai temple six years ago," recalls Zhang, his words soft and measured. "No one had used this material before in Eastern or Western art history." Mesmerised by the number of temple-goers converging to burn incense sticks, he returned to the temple to collect the fallen ash. For Zhang, these powdery remains symbolise the memory and soul of China. "I don't know what happened," he says. "Looking at the fire, the ash and the smoke, suddenly I understood that these people wanted to change their lives – they had dreams and wishes."

Entering Zhang's exhibition of ash paintings feels like being plunged into a dream or slipping into a thick fog. At once both hazy and lucid, the images appear as if they would crumble at one touch. The works are renditions of black-and-white photographs – portraits and landscapes – from official magazines such as *China Pictorial* and *PLA Pictorial*, dating back to the 1950s and continuing through the days of the Cultural Revolution. By resurrecting images of historical figures, military life and everyday routine from the early years of the People's Republic of China, the artist brings to life collective memories shared by his compatriots.

Looking at Zhang's delicate paintings, I can't help but wonder whether the enfant terrible of Chinese contemporary art has settled down. Has the swagger of his youth disappeared? As we reach the end of the interview, I work up the nerve to share my observation. Breaking into a smile, Zhang assures me otherwise: "I'm like a duck on the water. The feeling is peaceful, but under the water it's really busy." ■

THREE LEGGED BUDDHA: JEFFREY M. HARRIS; MY SWITZERLAND: JEFFREY M. HARRIS; SKIN (IN TWENTY PARTS): JEFFREY M. HARRIS



ZHANG AT WORK IN HIS SHANGHAI STUDIO



SPRING, 2008, ASH ON LINEN



SHANGHAI BRIDEGROOM, 2008, ASH ON LINEN

TOP: HINCHETTE / LUPRIN