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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



THREE LEGGED BUDDHA IN LONDON'S ROYAL ACADEMY COURT YARD, 2007



ZHANG PERFORMS MY SWITZERLAND IN FRONT OF THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS IN BERNE, 2005

"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



SKIN (IN TWENTY PARTS)

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." ■

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GATE GILLON / GETTY IMAGES; YOSHIKO KUSANO / EPA, MIKE CLARKE / AFP / GETTY IMAGES



TOP: RYAN FOLEY / LOMBIS

26 May 2011
International Herald Tribune
'The Hong Kong art fair reaches out to the wider world'

The Hong Kong art fair reaches out to the wider world



The Buddhist-inspired work "Three Heads Six Arms" by the Chinese artist Zhang Huan is on display along the harbor through June.

HONG KONG

The annual event is now under the umbrella of the Art Basel group

BY JOYCE HOR-CHUNG LAU

It's no surprise that Hong Kong's art fair has taken another bound forward, given its quick growth since it began in 2008. But the rising number of galleries taking part — now at 260 — is not the only reason that 2011 is turning out to be a watershed year.

Internationally, the owners of Art Basel are now majority stakeholders in the Hong Kong event, it was announced at the start of May, a turn that promises to give the fair more prominence.

Locally, ART HK, which opened to the public on Thursday, has spread beyond the confines of the exhibition and convention center. The large number of outside events has created for a first time what feels like a real citywide art week. The fair has already succeeded in

pulling in top galleries and orchestrating million-dollar sales of works by celebrity artists like Damien Hirst. The Hong Kong market is awash in cash, particularly that of newly moneyed collectors from China and other parts of Asia. Auction houses are getting into the act too.

Christie's is the most prominent among them, and has a casual partnership with ART HK to hold its spring auctions in the same venue, at about the same time. From now until June 1 at the convention center, Christie's will have

Galleries and auction houses flock to a market awash in cash.

13 sales of art, antiques, wines, watches and jewels. Other companies, particularly smaller Asian auction houses, are following suit, with sales planned at hotels around town.

Local galleries also have waited for this week to open new spaces or major shows.

Hanart TZ Gallery — run since 1983 by Johnson Chang, an established deal-

er of contemporary Chinese art — opened its new space on Tuesday with a ribbon cutting by David Tang, the founder of Shanghai Tang, the luxury goods chain, who has been a busy man. The day before, Mr. Tang had opened a show for 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary. Both galleries are participating in the fair.

New galleries are also using this week to raise their profiles.

The most booked man in town seems to be David LaChapelle. This week, Mr. LaChapelle, the New York fashion and art photographer, unveiled a 3-meter, or about 10-foot, collage inspired by Géricault's "Raft of the Medusa" for his first Hong Kong solo show at de Sarthe Fine Arts, which opened in March. Mr. LaChapelle then held a private film screening, served as host for a party at a nightclub called Privé, and showed up at a Champagne breakfast a few hours later. On Friday, he will be debating whether art must be beautiful at Intelligence Squared, a British debating association.

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Some 260 galleries are represented at the Hong Kong fair, which opened on Thursday.

Hong Kong art fair reaches out into the world

ART FAIR, FROM PAGE 12

Edouard Malingue Gallery, which opened late last year, worked with the Pace Gallery of New York this month to install a massive Buddhist-inspired sculpture by the Chinese artist Zhang Huan at a harborside hotel and shopping complex. "Three Heads Six Arms" will be showing in the courtyard outside the complex, Hullett House, a renovated 18th-century colonial building, through the end of June.

But the main buzz has been over the buyout of Asian Art Fairs, ART HK's owners, by the MCH Swiss Exhibition Group, though the deal will not be official until July. The Basel-based company said that it would keep the local management basically intact through 2012. The only immediate change will be moving ART HK from its May slot to February, to fit in nicely between Art Basel's events in Miami Beach, usually each December, and in Basel, Switzer-

land, each June.

Marc Spiegler, a co-director of the two Art Basel events, said by telephone from Switzerland that the goal was to have "three events on the arts calendar covering four continents, with Art Basel Miami Beach representing both North and Latin America."

"We are not interesting in just copying and pasting the same fair in three locations," he said. "Along with greater interest from China, we are looking at many rising art markets from Australia and New Zealand, to Singapore and Indonesia." Mr. Spiegler said. "The Asian market is developing so quickly, it's hard to say what it's going to look like in five years."

Annette Schönholzer, another co-director, added that the Hong Kong fair would eventually be rebranded as an Art Basel event.

"Art Basel's involvement will bring unparalleled expertise and contacts

that will take ART HK to a new level," said Magnus Renfrew, ART HK's director. "It will make us the third most important art fair in the world."

There was unprecedented interest in ART HK, even before the Art Basel announcement, he said. "We were inundated with about 500 gallery applications and only accepted about half," Mr. Renfrew said. "And while there are big

The main buzz is the buyout of the Asian fair by Art Basel.

names from New York and London, we've made sure to preserve the Asian flavor of the fair."

One new feature at the fair this year will be the Asia One section, with 47 galleries representing a dozen nations, from the Turkey to India, Japan to New Zealand. "Because Asia One will consist of solo shows, it will give viewers, par-

ticularly collectors from the West, a more in-depth view of what is on offer," Mr. Renfrew said.

Corporate interest has not lagged, either. DeutscheBank, a longtime sponsor, continues to be involved with the fair. Then there are quirkier offerings from companies like BMW, which is bringing in a Jeff Koons-decorated "art car," or the Mandarin Oriental, which has afternoon tea cakes co-designed by the Chinese artist Zhou Tiehai.

G.O.D., the upscale local retail chain that specializes in homewares and interiors, created the fair's V.I.P. lounge. And if you can't afford the minimum entrance fee of 7,500 Hong Kong dollars, or \$960, for a group of five, you can hang out with the plebeians at the Veuve Clicquot Champagne bar next door.

ONLINE: IN NEW YORK, AN ISLAMIC DELIGHT
A botanical garden pays homage to those of Alhambra. global.nytimes.com/arts