

VISUAL ARTS

Breaking down a Chinese wall

Artists such as sculptor Zhang Dali are in the forefront of a new wave of culture in China – but the climate is still fragile, says Michael Gover

Most of the new sculptures by the Harbin-born artist Zhang Dali hang upside-down from the ceiling of the gallery. Just one crouches, on the floor beside the wall, looking up interrogatively. The sculptures are body casts made from resin, over-painted in the palest of skin colours. Their ankles are tethered with ropes. There is some thin, red over-painting down the backs, and around the genital areas; other figures clasp their hands behind their heads. All are painfully thin, suspended in this white gallery space like carcasses in an old-fashioned butcher's shop. Their collective title is *Chinese Offspring*.

These are body casts made from some of China's marginalised people: migrant workers who come into the cities in pursuit of a living; prostitutes. "I would say that of all the younger Chinese artists alive today," says Julia Coleman, an art historian, "Zhang Dali's work perhaps comes the closest to being an attack on [the] official policy of rebuilding Beijing and the disintegration of the welfare system that has allowed the creation of the migrant welfare class."

How have artists who live in China responded to the tumultuous eradication of the past? Zhang first came to notice in the late 1990s when walls of buildings all over Beijing began to be covered with a human profile in graffiti, simplified, close to cartooning. This was the artist's own profile, his mark of protest. In the process he became Beijing's leading graffiti artist – and perhaps its first. He made his mark in the old *hutong*, ancient alleys or lanes, just before they were flattened by the bulldozers; then he turned his attention to the new high-rises. It was at this moment that the authorities came after him and he disappeared from view for a while.

"The changes are too quick," he wrote in 2002. "The Chinese environment is like a meat-mincer, crushing policy, economy and culture." Now Zhang is tolerated but he is not exactly embraced – some of his hanging-body sculptures



Face of modern art: Zhang Dali's sculptures, on show in London, include resin casts of China's marginalised people: migrant workers and prostitutes

were first shown on the fringe of the first Beijing Biennial last year. The point is this: they were on the fringe.

Zhang's response is one way into an understanding of what has happened to the visual arts in China since the death of Mao in 1976. The closing years of Mao's China, with the benefit of hindsight, now seem like a time between times. The years from 1966 until his death saw the temporary death of culture. Only official art, an art of empty exhortation, bereft of the personal touch, was permitted to exist. Artists were reduced to being banner-makers. Then, within three or four years of Mao's death, artists were bringing back their stamp of the personal.

The crucial year was 1979. The universities reopened. Western avant-garde art was

seen at last. But how were artists to reconcile what they were now seeing for the first time with that burdensome legacy of socialist realism? Some, such as Zhang Xiaogang and Zhou Chunya, mixed realism with tinges of surrealism. Perhaps artists could coexist with the state after all. Then, in 1989, another blow fell: Tiananmen Square. There were many artists in that crowd. In the early 1990s came the movement called Cynical Realism, extraordinary images of rebels with gaping (or perhaps yawning) mouths and shaven heads. Its best-known exponent was Fang Lijun. The 1990s was the decade in which performance art took hold in China for the first time. "Most of the performance pieces dealt with the body and the body under duress as a parallel to the extreme

living conditions," says Coleman. But it was painting that became the leading medium of the 1990s. A brand of political pop art came into being that wittily combined western icons from popular culture with a style of presentation that harked back to the old socialist realism of the banner-maker. Wang Guangyi's *Coca Cola Great Criticism* series of 1993, for example, shows a triumphant trio of muscular workers brandishing a red banner beside a giant Coca Cola symbol. Who will be the victor in the end?, the painting seems to ask.

Now new museums are opening in Shanghai (The Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art), Beijing (The Millennium Art Museum in Beijing) and elsewhere. Younger Chinese curators with international experi-

ence are taking over from the old guard. Gao Minglu of the Millennium Art Museum, for example, divides his time between Beijing and New York.

Perhaps one of the most vital clues to what is happening to art now is in a complex of buildings 15 minutes from Beijing's international airport. Factory 798 is a huge industrial complex from the Mao era, created with some assistance from the fraternal government of the former East Germany. The buildings, once used to make munitions, are in the Bauhaus style. At the end of the 1990s the complex was in decline. Soon afterwards, artists, dealers and others began to colonise it. Lofts, studios and retail spaces were carved out of the sprawling complex. Now it is where Galliano may go to launch his latest collection,

where you can buy international art books and where you can eat well. About 30 artists have studios there; galleries from London, Singapore, Germany and Japan have opened, including Zhang's London dealer, Chinese Contemporary. But nothing is simple in China. The complex is threatened with demolition. This new vibrant cultural colony, the SoHo of Beijing, may be destroyed. "There is no margin of discussion between the citizen and the state," says Zhang. Perhaps the very fact that he has said so, and that he can now show his art across the world, may help to bring such discussions about for art, humanity and China's sake.

'Zhang Dali – Chinese Offspring'. Chinese Contemporary, London W1. Tel 020 7499 8898. Until July 17