

Beijing Boogie-Woogie

Yang Jinsong, The Gao Brothers,
Cui Xiuwen, Feng Jyali,
Xu Yong, Cui Guotai,
Zhang Dali, & Zhao Liang



Cui Xiuwen 2007

curated and catalogue by Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky
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Union, and then it was nationalized in 1949. When the massive structure was abandoned in 2001, its innumerable workers were laid off, and millions of tons of equipment turned into scrap metal. Cui documents the life of this building which lasted nearly three-quarters of a century of Chinese's tumultuous modern history, and its continuous deterioration until it was destroyed to make way for a Korean car showroom.

The most popular and most sought after of Cui's works are his series of trains. Oversize canvases present the oncoming locomotive. In "Onward" a work from 2004, the train is placed on a shallow diagonal, in rapid motion. Huge blocks of black and grey paint recreate the surface of the iron horse. Unrelieved horizontal bands of grey suggest its velocity. The small red sign at top proclaims its name, Onward, and elsewhere touches of red define the lower front area and one of the wheels. As if splattered by the momentum of the train, viscous drips of black paint are flung at the canvas, to create a kind of corona around the great train. Slower drips of pigment fall over the lower area of the wheels forming a vertical grid over the horizontal thrust. Here too Cui takes a powerfully evocative image of a lost technology, makes it loom large on the canvas, and using a muscular, seemingly spontaneous application of thick paint conveys the emotion of its demise. The mighty object is boldly delineated to suggest its size, weight and speed, but upon close examination small areas bear delicate



Cui Guotai, *The Pagoda at Yan'an*, 2007, propylene on canvas, 180 x 290 cm

patches of flung and dripped pigment that ironically signal its vulnerability. In some way it alludes to Charley Chaplin's "Modern Times", looking at the great machinery of modernism as a quaint antiquity. The work in the show is a portrayal of the pagoda at Yan'an, the birthplace of Mao Zedong's Communist Party. Here the rendering of the decrepit structure achieves a multivalent symbolism: the pagoda is a relic of Buddhism, long surpassed by Maoist ideology, and now with the demise of that faith, there is a slow return back to popular beliefs geared to

hopes for wealth and prosperity. Standing majestically on the left of the work, and reaching from the base to the upper reaches of the canvas, the tower has a kind of ghostly majesty. To the right the river emerges from the distant background, and the manner in which it is painted, with the water rushing into the foreground, metaphorically alludes to time implacably moving on course. The stark monochromatic palette of tones of grey applies in layers creates the brooding dark skies and distant mountains. Manipulation of the pigment on the brush creates the illusion of a light, a dismal light that reflects off of the faces of some of the buildings, facets of the octagonal tower, and the surface of the river's water, dynamically bifurcating the painting. This, one of Cui's more recent works, is increasingly abstract, and the block like arrangement of rectangles of pigment create a grid like pictorial structure that has weight and solemnity. Encrustations of pigment suggest the decay of objects in the material world, and the dissolution of its now ephemeral ideologies.

ZHANG DALI

Famous for his work as a graffiti artist in the 80-90s Zhang Dali has consistently protested the destruction of China's monuments and cultural institutions. The graffiti works comprised a profile self-portrait of the artist executed in spray paint. The areas that Zhang selected for his work were buildings that were slated to be condemned and bore the government's "Jue" mark, or were already in the process of being torn down. Zhang might create multiple renderings of the profile scrawl, or excavate his profile to create a window revealing the process of demolition. For these activities Zhang drew the ire of the government whose hopeless attempts to capture him were reported in the daily newspapers. Finally Zhang ceased, but proudly acknowledged that they never caught him in the act.

In an exploration of the human counterpart to these violent environmental changes, Zhang is concerned with the problem of itinerant workers, who outside the social system, sell their bodies for meager pay and live without the security net of social services like health care. In a series of sculptural works Zhang has made casts of the workers. In "100 Chinese" he made resin models of their heads. The masks are not colored, and bits of the mould are left, so that the heads look unfinished, and though there are many similarities in the appearance of the heads, mounted as a horizontal installation on the gallery wall, the uniqueness is apparent in the details of their idiosyncratic physiognomies and facial expressions. The installation, which presents the mass population of China as well as the particularity of its people, is like an archaeological

exhibit of a lost society, the sad character of their life inscribed on their faces. Mounted on the wall in pristine white, the heads have a dignity that they surely lack in life.



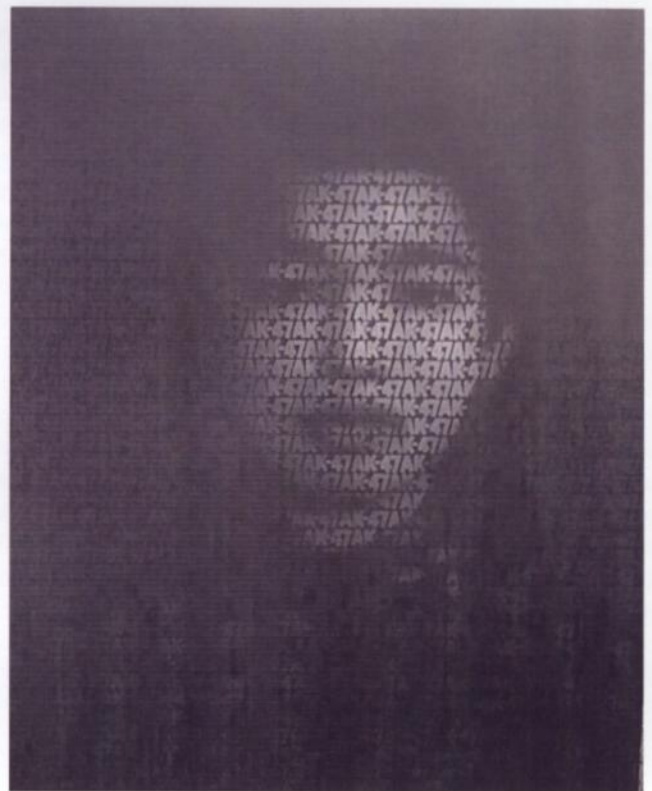
Zhang Dali, *100 Chinese* 2001, resin casts

Next Zhang made dozens of full-body casts of the workers, and stamped each one with the title "Race" and their identifying information. But in these works Zhang has included the thousands of women, stranded in the city, who are forced to do hard labor or more frequently sex work. Their miserable lives are the focus of other artists in this exhibition, notably Xu Yong and the Gao Brothers. Zhang's casts display naked bodies, and nakedness is traditionally considered a humiliation. No artistic traditions condoned it, as in Renaissance Europe, and so nude figures are entirely absent from Chinese art; even in pornography, the body is clothed. These pallid naked resin bodies are displayed as commodities sold in the open market. For a show in Contemporary China, Zhang suspended the figures from the ceiling, or set them in crouching positions to suggest their inhumane treatment. Further intensifying the emotional quality of the sculptures, he delicately splashed red paint on the casts to indicate the degradation and violence to which they are subject.

In a recent series of life-size bronze sculptures, Zhang combines animal and figural pieces. In one a man lies flat on his back, from his navel a tree branch emerges on which a bird alights. Another resembles a strange sad street narrative of those who are left out of the urban thrall. The sculpture comprises a naked figure lying absolutely supine, and an alert and muscular dog seated on top of him. The situation is ambiguous—the man is down, inactive, and the dog mounts in a posture of aggression. But perhaps the man is dead and this is his pet, or the dog is a predator; in all of these interpretations it seems the vulnerability of the man is consistent.

For the show, Zhang has provided a painting entitled *Ak-47*. This is a series he started years ago, at

that time he found itinerant workers and painted their portrait in a very realistic manner. Over the image he lay a painted net of the expression AK-47, the name of the assault rifle favored by guerrilla fighters and terrorists. In this juxtaposition of a portrait and the name of a weapon, the violence that plagues the world and its victims are simultaneously produced. Moreover, the unrelentingly repetitive pattern of AK-47 suggests the rat-ta-tat of the machine gun's explosive fire. Asked why he still continues to create images in the series, he responded:



Zhang Dali, *AK-47 a-48*, 2007 150 x 180 cm.

I have been painting the faces of these people for many years. At the beginning I was painting migrant workers, but afterwards I thought to amplify the theme and that all kinds of people should be included in the work, including people from 50 years ago and people of the present. I believe the problem in China is not only the problem of migrant workers; we all are migrant workers. We all (migrant workers, intellectuals, students, white collar workers, etc) are exposed and have to bear the same kind of pressure, nobody is excluded. Thus, this person in the painting is a common person. I still paint these images because I feel I have not finished what I want to say with this work. I hope that more people will have the chance to see these faces, to see different types of faces.