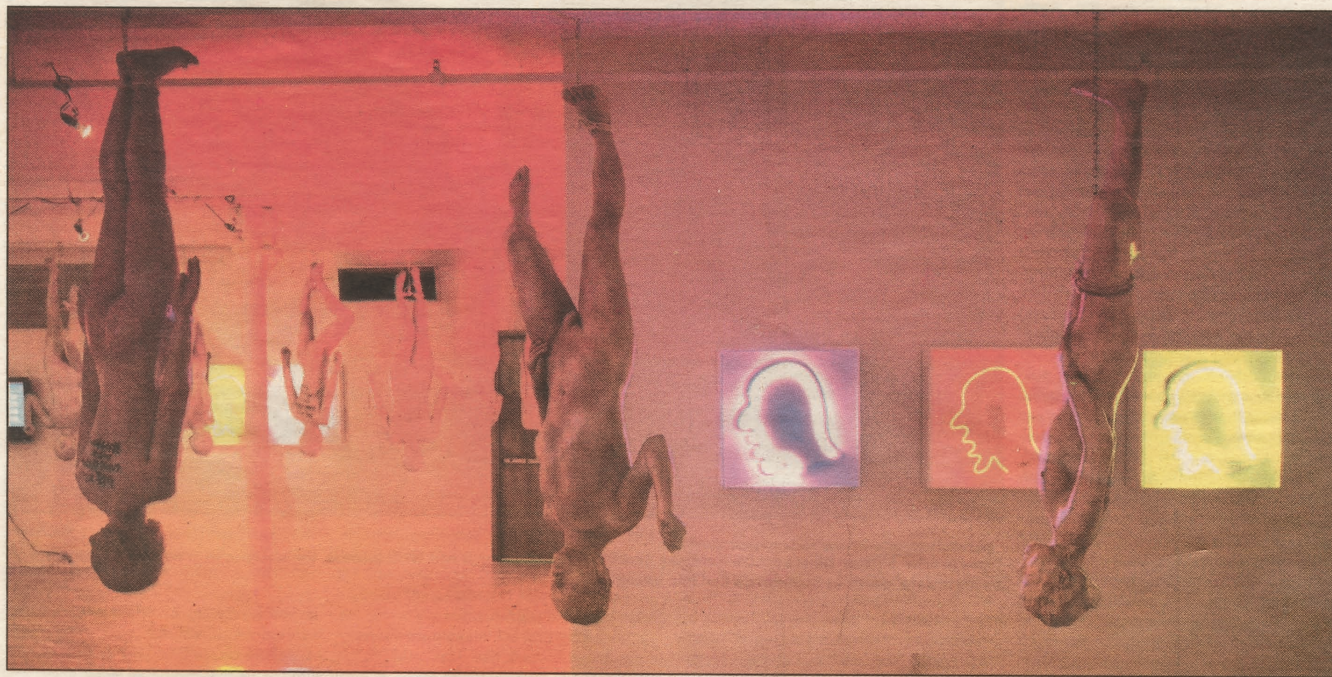


# GALLERYSEEN



Ranard's Picture Show for ChelseaNow

Top: The gallery with body casts bound with rope and hung upside down with Zhang Dali's neon self-portraits tags on the wall. Middle: The body casts identified by number, with AK-47 portraits in the background. Bottom: Video of Zhang Dali at work.

## C MULTIMEDIA

### ZHANG DALI,

Sculpture – Painting – Neon

Chinese Contemporary, 535 W.24th St.

Until April 14, 2007

#### BY JOHN RANARD

It is one of the ironies of Chinese communist history that the current economic "miracle," limited largely to urban centers, is carried on the backs of rural Chinese migrant workers. The Chinese household registration system hukou, introduced in the 1950s to prevent large geographic migrations of rural agricultural workers to metropolitan cities, is still a legal reality. Without proper registration documents, the migrant Chinese citizen is not entitled access to decent housing and healthcare, and their children are not allowed admittance to public education.

Amnesty International estimates that 150 to 200 million rural migrants are building China's new modern cities, erasing historic neighborhoods to make way for blocks of glass and steel that pierce the Chinese night sky, lit by the aberrant hues of florescent light. Most of the migrant workers' labor is given without legal contract; their payment for construction work depends largely on the honesty of the employer. They have little legal recourse to address unpaid wages in court. This is a problem expected to get worse, a Chinese powder keg with the threat of instigating dynamic social upheaval such as we have seen before.

This is the fuel that inspires much of Chinese contemporary art. Among the crew of Chinese artists that have gained recent international attention, few are as consistent yet fluid as Zhang Dali, first introduced to New York audiences at the International Center for Photography two years ago, with his photographic documentation of his early graffiti work. What makes contemporary Chinese art interesting is the convergence of its modern vocabulary with the past; what makes it compelling is the historical depth of human suffering addressed.

Dali began working in the '90s with a black spraycan, tagging his profile in his neighborhood slated for destruction on the outskirts of Beijing. He became more aggressive when he etched his iconic profile surrounding the holes punched through walls by a wrecking ball. His tag changed to AK-47, the early Russian model of the automatic assault weapon used by revolutionary armies globally.

This show includes plaster body casts made from the migrant workers lining up for work on the street outside Dali's warehouse studio in Beijing every morning. Their eyes are closed; the bodies hang upside down, like slaughter hung on a rack for consumption. Each is given a number, while only their genitals and pubic hair give a hint these were once people capable of love and dreams. Portraits of the workers, as individuals with personalities are painted with the soft, modulated tonalities of the letters AK-47. Neon tubes shaped to mimic his first graffiti self-portrait tags light the gallery, their florescent color mixing together to form a weird soft-pastel sheen. It is as if they are advertising the slogan "Everything is Hip" when we know it is not.

