



Zhang Dali first shocked his native China with graffiti.

Tension propels his art

Success hasn't mellowed Zhang

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Beijing — When Zhang Dali sits at the desk in his office, a self-portrait bronze bust with a gun pointed at his head is directly in his line of sight.

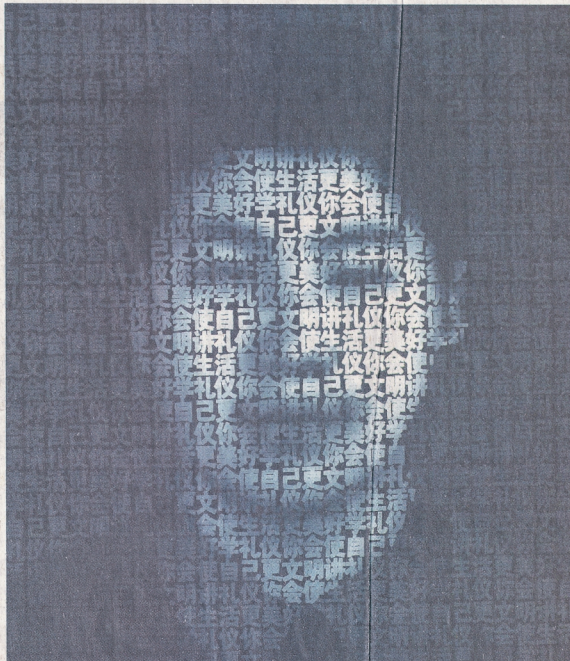
It's been 15 years since he shocked Beijing with its first graffiti art. Now he makes paintings and sculptures in a spacious former granary that are shown in Beijing's hip and hopping art district and in galleries and museums around the world. Atlanta's Kiang Gallery opens a solo show Friday.

Yet, as the prominence of his sculpture might suggest, mainstream success has not mellowed the 45-year-old artist.

As graffiti artist AK-47, Zhang had targeted buildings coming down for the high-rises that now crowd the skyline. His mission was to call attention to the people, places and history that China was sweeping aside in its warp-speed urbanization.

And to make a political statement. The wall, normally covered with government slogans telling citizens what to think and how to live, was, he says, "a tool of the state."

"Slogans," the series of recent paintings at Kiang, reveals the tension between the individual and the power of the state continues to propel his art.



Zhang's portraits illustrate the power of the state over the individual.

Seen from a distance, the paintings are monumental portraits pixellated with a grid of Chinese characters.

The people are anonymous, images taken from official documents. The characters spell out the government slogans still found on city walls.

When you look at the paintings up close, the individual faces dissolve, overcome, as it were, by the slogans.

"You can hide inside your studio and make pretty pictures," he says, through his wife Patrizia, who acts as interpreter. "That's not me."

Closing his hand in a fist, the otherwise cool artist adds, "If your work [is to have] strength, you must have strength."

That fighting spirit surfaced early, in his determined pursuit of art in the cultural backwater of his northern China home.

"My parents were common workers," he explains. "They had never walked inside an art museum."

"I grew up during the Cultural Revolution, and there was not much art to look at except propaganda and comic books. I studied by myself."

As a new graduate of Beijing's prestigious National Academy of Fine Art and Design in 1987, he refused his govern-

ment assignment to go teach in the hinterlands.

"I wanted to stay in Beijing," he says. "The dream of being an artist would die. It was the only thing I could do... I was also against the idea that the government decided your life."

Zhang has also mounted something of a crusade against the treatment of the rural poor who flood the cities looking for work and eke out a meager existence as they quite literally build the new China.

In the startling 2004 installation "Chinese Offspring," he dramatized their powerlessness by hanging 15 naked life-casts of actual workers on hooks, like meat in a butcher shop. Adding to this effect is the traditional view that exposing one's body is a humiliation.

To Zhang, the figures have a larger meaning. "I'm a migrant worker," he says. "In China we're all migrant workers."

By way of explanation, he brings up "Wind, Horse Flag," a life-size tableau of a group of figures (also casts of migrant workers, but clothed) on the horseback that was displayed in a Beijing gallery during the Olympics.

Zhang allows that Olympics-sensitive officials had nixed his original title, "Road to Freedom."

With a pointed look, he says, "We're all in a net."



Zhang's graffiti art was drawn on buildings being razed to build Beijing's skyscrapers.



The outline of one of his characters remains as the wall it was on is knocked down.

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