

WSJ BLOG/China Real Time Report: Airbrush Art Gets Airbrushed

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In Shanghai, Chinese artist Zhang Dali has hit a snag in his effort to demonstrate truth-twisting by the Communist Party.

With a series of installations that has received world-wide attention, Zhang presents decades worth of before-and-after photos to illustrate how some of the most famous images of Mao Zedong, as well as ordinary Chinese, were altered to send political messages.

In a retouched 1936 photo, Mao's face glows after wrinkles are removed and double eyelids added; a white shirtsleeve is airbrushed away from a 1960s photo of the ideal Communist Lei Feng for appearing too bourgeois; and when Mao's body lies in state, national newspapers in 1976 print gaps in the semicircle of mourners where the politically discredited "Gang of Four" actually stood.

Fast forward to 2010: Shanghai authorities erase traces of Zhang's show.

Days after Zhang offered the Foreign Correspondents Club Shanghai a sneak preview of his works in the "Re-Visioning History" show at the Oriental Vista Gallery, the Shanghai Municipal Cultural Bureau ordered the gallery to remove them.

The bureau didn't respond to a request for comment.

"I've just got the news from the art gallery owner," said Zhang. "What a surprise."

Indeed. Various versions of Zhang's show have appeared in China since it debuted in 2005 at Beijing Commune Gallery. The propaganda works have received international attention and were displayed publicly in China as recently as April at the Guangdong Museum of Art.

Many of the images demonstrate fairly conclusively how the ruling Communist Party propaganda contained not just idealism but straight lies, with its foes erased and its "friends" bolstered in stature.

Yet judged from the prism of history, what Zhang presents often lays bare silly weavings by propagandists: The Nationalist star on a little boy's hat gets brushed over since it clashed with the image of his brother being packed off to the People's Liberation Army, a plant is removed from the step of a house so as not to compete for attention with Mao, cigarettes disappear from fingers, a sitting man becomes a pair of legs for the person behind him, while a window gets painted in place of a worker to brighten a factory. "Some alterations might be quite meaningless," Zhang says.

At the gallery, Cultural Bureau officers cited as their concern its sale of a 239-page book of the works, according to a person familiar with the matter. The book, "Zhang Dali: A Second History," was printed in China and published for the artist's 2006 show at Chicago's Walsh Gallery. (Officers apparently said the Shanghai gallery lacked a permit to sell the book, which is true. Also, for some reason the book cost \$44 in Shanghai but only \$15 in Chicago.)

In the OV Gallery's "Re-Visioning" show, officers also removed a piece by American artist Ben Houge as they on May 25 instructed that most other works, including Zhang's, be taken down. Zhang's works were priced between \$3,000 and \$8,000.

A notice on the gallery website says it is "TEMPORARILY CLOSED FOR 'RENOVATIONS.'"

The context of course is the ongoing Shanghai World Expo, during which the government appears determined to hide anything deemed sensitive, a scrub-down that has coincided with the installation of secret-door entrances at DVD shops, the closure of Muslim restaurants and the disappearance of brothels. OV Gallery itself earlier presented "Makeover," a show that offered critical commentary on the city's transformation.

Zhang, most famous for using outlines of his own skull on condemned Beijing buildings, spent seven years on his propaganda work, parsing archives, museums and old magazines in China and overseas.

The artist says he was initially angry about the widespread airbrushing. "I thought it was a matter of real and fake," he told the FCC.

But Zhang says he came to realize that altered works aren't unique to China, noting, for instance, how one of the most enduring images of Abraham Lincoln is actually the 16th U.S. president's head on someone else's body.

"Now I think it's about power," says Zhang. "They had power, so they wanted to control history."
