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BEIJING'S GREAT LEAP

“It’s great being able to brew beer at the foot of one of the Wonders of the World, you know? Life’s Good!”

— Great Leap Brewing Founder Carl Setzer

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The latest from artist Zhang Dali
Itzhak Perlman & Akon

Beijing Oktoberfest Preview

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Artist Zhang Dali's *July (4)* will be exhibited with his *World's Shadows* works at Pékin Fine Arts gallery beginning Oct. 22

ZHANG DALI

BY JANINE COUGHLIN AND ANGUS NING

When he first began trying to procure large volumes of ammonium iron (III) citrate and potassium ferricyanide for his latest artworks Zhang

Dali got suspicious looks from suppliers. They likely did not recognize Zhang, who became well known in the Chinese art world in the 1990s for scrawling and carving out giant silhouettes of his bald head on the side of Beijing buildings that had been marked for demolition. Since that time he has created an eclectic body of graphic and sculptural works which have been exhibited at notable venues around the world including the Saatchi Gallery in London. This summer a selection of his *The Second History* works was exhibited in the Danish National Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Some were also included in a group show that opened last month at the Museum of Modern Art in New York entitled *New Photography 2011*.

Zhang's newest works, *World's Shadows*, which will be on exhibit at Pékin Fine Arts gallery beginning October 22, utilize a process invented more than 150 years ago called cyanotype – a precursor to photography in which fabric is soaked in a combination of chemicals and then dried. Images placed in front of the fabric are captured in silhouette when it is exposed to sunlight for several minutes.

"Cyanotype is interesting because it doesn't just record people, it can record anything," Zhang explains. "I once went into the mountains in Changping District where there were some old towers from the Liao dynasty, and I recorded the

silhouettes of the towers. The result was incredibly beautiful. Just magical. In the winter I could capture the silhouettes of the towers and the dried tree branches, it's a very natural scene. It's a lot more interesting than shooting a picture with your camera.

"I think way too many young artists' works are purely based on digital technology . . . Of course I'm not against this method, but too much of it is also not good. One must seek a balance."

Zhang said he spent about three years experimenting with the cyanotype technique, figuring out the right ratio of chemicals to use and the best time of day and exposure to get the images he wanted. The resulting work is unusual to say the least. Besides the Changping images he describes, he's also recorded vegetable sellers, bicyclists, and others – their crisp white, life-sized silhouettes frozen in time against a blue background.

"The main theme of my work is our daily life and its numerous aspects, seen from a very realistic perspective," he says. "They're essentially the shadows of reality. I want to record all the impressions from a person's life.

"Photographer Henri Cartier Bresson once said something along the lines of 'time is history'. But in fact it is not. After studying so many photographs, I realized that it's impossible. Even if we retell the details of an event, suppose the three of us all saw it at the same time, then what we retell will be different. What you tell others is already a second representation [of reality].

"You could say that art exists in a



China's first graffiti artist tackles a new medium with a show this month at Pékin Fine Arts gallery

spiritual realm, but in my work I do my best to display a physical phenomenon. I don't work on the computer. This gives my works a uniqueness. They cannot be duplicated like pictures can. It is defined in a single, unique space: 3:20 pm that day, the flag happened to move in such a way, in such a location. It is irreproducible," he says, referring to one of his works entitled *July* that uses the cyanotype technique.

"My works are all drawn from reality. They're all ordinary events that take place around you, but you don't notice them. Once you re-inject value into them, they become powerful."

Zhang was born in Harbin, and came to Beijing for university. "There have been a couple of significant moments in my life. The first was applying for university with the *gaokao* in 1983. At that time getting into university meant a new life," he says. "People in China back then did not move around much, most of them died in the town where they were born. To get into university means you can come to the city, to the capital, and you can change your identity."

He then moved to Italy in 1989, which is where he discovered graffiti art. He's been back in China for just over 15 years and Beijing is clearly an inspiration for his work. "I think art should return to reality and go outside of the studio," he says. "You could even think of the entire city as your studio. All of my past works were done on the streets. I would ride my bike out to the city and look, and then transfer what I saw to my studio."

"For the last 15 years I've had a real thing for places that were marked for

destruction, or anywhere that had changed. The places I used to be most familiar with have gradually disappeared, like Ping'an Avenue [which stretches from Dongsishitiao metro station to Chegongzhuang station] which used to be called Dongsishitiao. Also Qianmen, which looks like a movie set now."

But while he is nostalgic for the past, Zhang also sees the positive side of change. "I was born in 1962 so I essentially grew up as China was evolving. If the government had not [reinstated the *gaokao*] I'd be in a small factory now, doing what my father did, being an average worker," he says.

"True change in China started with Deng Xiaoping in 1992. Since then, China's made a lot of progress, in terms of infrastructure, science, income levels and living standards. But we have to look at the spirit of the Chinese people, which I think has hardly changed. We've won countless Olympic medals during this time, this is a measure of our ability and performance, as well as our wealth. . . . You've got 100,000 Olympic champions, but not one philosopher. Of course the majority of Chinese people don't think this way because it's more important [for them] to obtain something you can see."

"Many things cannot be measured by money. Some things exist just to bring you happiness. Like philosophy; does it really achieve anything to study and think about it for a lifetime? You can't even ask this question because it's a study of your mind and spirit," he says. "After 30 years of reform, I think Chinese people should really think about this, the mind and spirit are really very important." ☉