

SILENT VOICES

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As the first Chinese artist featured on the cover of *Time* magazine and one of the few to have their works on the front of *Newsweek*, Zhang Dali has become a renowned figure in the art world.

Born into a family of workers in 1963, he graduated from Beijing's Central Academy of Arts and Design in 1987. Moving abroad for seven years to live with his Italian wife in her native land, it was after Zhang returned to China that he began to develop a reputation for himself via his politically-motivated artwork.

In the late 90s, as a silent protest against Beijing's haphazard demolition of old structures, he painted and carved over 2,000 giant profiles of his own head on walls daubed by the authorities with the character '拆' (chai, meaning 'to be demolished'). This series, entitled *Dialogue*, led to the Harbin native's recognition as China's only graffiti artist.

“I am from the generation that has been through two totally different eras,” says the 50-year-old, reflecting on his life. “I’ ve been through the absurdity and suppression of humanity and thought in Mao Zedong’ s era; now I’ m surrounded by the indulgence of desires and obsession with profit.

“All my works are inspired by the social reality in China and my personal experiences. I believe it’ s artists’ responsibility to observe the world around them and remain sensitive to the reality of their own times.”

Zhang set himself up as the wordless voice of the mute masses unable to make their own sufferings heard. From 2000 to 2008, he concerned himself with the plight of migrant workers. In *Pigskin Jelly Migrant Workers*, he constructed models of their heads out of meat aspic and noodles to emphasize the pathetic subsistence on which they survive.

He later sculpted 13 actual migrant workers using silica gel in *Wind/Horse/Flag*; each held aloft a red banner while sat astride the back of a real, dead horse, machines buffeting them with air - a commentary on the appearance of vitality juxtaposed against the moribund reality.

Prompting the public to think about the role of migrant workers in the fast-paced city, these series gave rise to questions about the societal imbalance between those born in modern metropolises and those in countryside towns.

But Zhang’ s thoughts do not rest solely on the obviously disenfranchised, but also with the public at large.

“I don’ t observe the migrant laborers from the side; I always feel we Chinese all belong to the same group. We are all second-rate citizens. We don’ t have many rights and we’ ve never been the master. We have to endure the deficiencies forced upon us by the system.”

This opinion is perhaps best expressed visually in the 2007 *Man and Beast* bronze sculptures, which show how political powers have tamed and silenced individuals by presenting naked, numb-faced men and women submitting to the violence of a dragon, a leopard or even a deer.

“As Confucius put it, ‘Tyranny is even more to be dreaded than tigers.’ The bestial side of human beings often turns out to be crueler than beasts themselves. We can be even more ruthless to our own kind.”

Not an artist to limit himself to one medium of expression, Zhang’ s career has seen him explore ink and oil painting, installation and performance art, in addition to his graffiti and sculptures.

Since 2003, he’ s spent nearly a decade collecting different versions of photos of Chinese leaders, showing how propaganda reinvents history by adding or erasing certain details in the images of different decades.

“I’ m still experimenting more and more with methods of presentation,” says Zhang. “I feel it’ s artists’ duty to provide the world with more art forms. Actually, we might have used less

than one percent of all the possible ways to express our abundant feelings. There are more ways around us, which we can't yet see or imagine because of the limitation of conception.

“The representations should be in pace with the times. Progress in technology has opened our mind so much; and we couldn't possibly return to the way that the Hemudu people used to do art.”

// Zhang Dali's work is appearing from Feb 2-March 9 as part of a joint exhibition with Gaël Davrinche entitled *The Nature of Things*.



Magda Danysz Gallery

- 188 Linqing Lu, by Pingliang Lu
临青路 188 号, 近平凉路
- Gallery run by Frenchwoman Magda Danysz featuring international contemporary art shows.