

Square by Zhang Dali at Klein Sun Gallery

BY [DANIEL GAUSS](#) ON 06/29/2014 [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Although Tiananmen Square is referenced in the notes for the show “Square” by [Zhang Dali](#) (at [Klein Sun Gallery](#)), I think it is referenced quite loosely. There is, on a literal level, basically nothing that directly refers to the history, function or structure of Tiananmen Square here. Instead, Tiananmen, as the world’s largest public gathering space, might be used figuratively as a concept for what might be called the potential for the perfect or ideal public space – the type of space the sociologist Juergen Habermas dreamed of: a meeting place for meaningful and effective discussion in which common moral and social goals can be hammered out and, ultimately, effected. The ideal square would be the intellectual and emotional meeting place where people of goodwill gather to ensure humane and positive change for all.

In “Square” we see fiberglass casts of migrant workers who are surrounded by casts of doves which are either perched on the workers or floating above them. It looks as if China has more than 250 million migrant workers (they often leave their rural homes for work in the cities). They work long, tedious hours for little pay, suffer various forms of discrimination and often live far from their families in large cities where they feel lonely and isolated. Studies indicate that over half of them suffer from depression and/or anxiety disorders and many live with the thought of suicide constantly on their minds. In 2010, you might recall, there were a number of suicides at the plant where Apple products are made in China. Many workers literally jumped from the roof of the factory to their deaths. So, basically, we are brought face to face with the folks who are suffering and being exploited during this amazing globalization boom.





Each migrant worker had to sit for some time with his/her face covered with a fibreglass mixture in order for these casts to be made, so the process itself of sitting for the casting has, to my eyes, left a look of grim resolve on some of the faces of the sitters. I'm guessing it's hard to relax with all that stuff on your face and it sometimes shows on the faces of the sitters in these castings. So although the eyes of each worker in the show are closed, the facial expression does not always imply a peaceful, unagitated slumber. This seems, however, to work within the context of the show. If these workers are depicted as sleeping, it should, perhaps, be considered to be a troubled sleep and the doves can be thought to be calming agents or agents of a higher love demonstrating concern and compassion for these abandoned and hard-working people.

The doves can also represent the dreams of freedom by the migrant workers from this kind of thankless and soul-destroying toil. They might be self-medicating dreams of a better life. Looking at the casts of these folks one has to ask himself/herself whether people have to be treated like this and how this is possible and even accepted – there is no possible economic or social system where we can generate wealth for all without destroying precious human life? Workers have to jump from roofs at a factory affiliated with Apple and this is absorbed and accepted by everyone? It is news for a couple days and then forgotten instead of the basis for a long-term social conversation? I think, more than anything, the show invites us to enter the 'square' – to enter the space where there is meaningful and honest debate about world society and economics and the debate should be centered around the folks who are depicted in this exhibit. These are the current 'other half' and they are dismissed and

disregarded globally. They are the victims of human sacrifice in a world of haves and have-nots where squares exist to determine whether we need this type of world, but the squares do not seem to have become the places of meaningful debate that they should be. Greed has encircled and linked the world, but meaningful, critical discourse on international relationships and the welfare of all is lacking.



Also in the show are pieces from 'Square – Sketch'. These pieces contain blue backgrounds revealing figures with decapitated heads, surrounded by birds. I was actually reminded of the ancient paintings at Catal Huyuk of ceremonies involving vultures which picked the flesh off of decapitated corpses as part of the ancient funerary ceremonies there (the skulls were decorated and preserved). The vultures were meant to assist the soul of the departed to ascend skyward as, perhaps, these birds might be able to do. Perhaps the decapitated person is finally liberated from the harshness of life and, optimistically, the soul finally ascends.

Additionally, in the very back of the gallery, do not miss the casts Zhang made of migrant workers which are literally hanging upside down, as if in a butcher's shop.