

# Art in America



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EXHIBITION REVIEWS



View of Zhang Dali's exhibition "Square," 2014; at Klein Sun.

## ZHANG DALI

Klein Sun

In the mid- to late 1990s, Zhang Dali spray-painted his own profile on the walls of condemned buildings in Beijing, drawing attention to the architectural and human victims of China's campaign to modernize. His recent show at Klein Sun, titled "Square," in reference to the now infamous Tiananmen Square, evinced a conceptual and technical evolution in the artist's fierce commitment to social issues.

As a stark reminder of Zhang's previous approach, a cluster of life-size resin figures from his "Chinese Offspring" series (2003-14) dangled in a brick-lined industrial stairwell beyond the second gallery. Each naked, flesh-colored, upside-down body is inscribed (in Chinese and English) with a number, a date, the words "Chinese Offspring" and the artist's signature.

In the main gallery were 10 new figural sculptures, each corresponding to an actual individual. Zhang hired migrant workers to sit for him, covering them in plaster to create a mold. The subsequent all-white fiberglass casts capture creases in clothing, expressions of discomfort, wrinkles and frown lines.

In his statement for the show, Zhang—a 1987 graduate of Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) who spent several years in Italy before returning to China in 1993—explained that the installation posits a Tiananmen Square far different from the official one. Sundry migrants and a host of equally pestilential cast birds occupy his version of the vast public space, openly contradicting the Chinese government's desire for order. The whiteness of the birds imparts an intriguing ambiguity. Are they mildly annoying pigeons, or are they doves, universally associated with peace and freedom? The Chinese character that Zhang cleverly uses in titling the works

can refer to either subfamily.

Equally powerful were several paintings of headless figures overwhelmed by birds and several large-scale cyanotype photograms of pigeons/doves in apparent flight against a rich blue background. Zhang made the latter by coating rice paper with a light-sensitive solution, placing stuffed birds and various objects on the surface and exposing the sheets to sunlight. Splashes of Chinese ink interrupt the forms, making the photograms look like a hybrid between photography and painting—an oblique reference to the artist's CAFA training in traditional ink painting.

Both the fiberglass figures and the cyanotype photograms evoke an eerie state between mundane reality and a shadow existence. The models had to close their eyes in order for Zhang to execute his castings, which produced figures that are physically tangible but ghostlike. The stiffness and frayed wings of the bird forms, meanwhile, reveal their origin in taxidermy. They are symbols of freedom caught in limbo between life and death.

"Square" was, then, a show concerned not only with positive and negative space, but also with presence and absence in the larger sense. Zhang has imagined a square that does not exist in his city, populating it with those whom officials and mainstream residents would prefer to ignore. In this, as in other projects, he compels his audience to acknowledge those who are damaged and marginalized, in hopes of expanding civic awareness and empathy. Perhaps it is now time for the Western media, recently so eager to lionize Ai Weiwei as an activist artist, to accord Zhang recognition for his powerful, courageous artworks, which speak up for those who cannot freely speak for themselves.

—Aileen June Wang