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ZHANG DALI: SQUARE

Klein Sun Gallery - New York

By Taliesin Thomas



"Zhang Dali: Square" installation view. Courtesy Klein Sun Gallery, New York. © Zhang Dali, 2014.

The Buddha taught that life is suffering. This definitive council was not intended as pessimism, but rather as a realistic assessment of the human condition, that all beings must experience pain. Contemporary Chinese artist Zhang Dali's recent solo exhibition at Klein Sun Gallery in New York presents a graceful encounter with cultural anguish. *Square*—a reference to Beijing's Tiananmen Square—embodies hardship, tempered and transposed into holiness.

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1989 protests in China, when student-led demonstrations in the capital ended in massacre. The Chinese government condemned the uprising and has since prohibited all forms of its remembrance. Many facts about the Tiananmen tragedy remain unconfirmed, leaving the Chinese people in a state of speculation and suspended grief. Zhang's show, comprised of sculptures, cyanotypes and paintings, provides a thoughtful reflection on the specters that still populate this significant public landmark.

Born in Harbin in 1963, Zhang has exhibited regularly since 1987. Early in his career he traveled to Italy, where he discovered graffiti, which had a major impact on his style. During the 1990s he was the only artist in Beijing practicing street art, and a large baldheaded profile became his signature tag as demonstrated in hundreds of colorful photographs documenting Zhang's encounters with buildings slated for demolition. While Zhang's older works reflect his commentary on Chinese society, his current exhibit offers an even sharper focus on cultural inheritance, devastation, and the observation of loss.

Zhang's white sculptures of human figures and flying doves graciously populate the gallery space while cyan prints of overlapping, fluttering birds adorn the walls, and together they create a dream-

like ambience. The sculptures—a nod to the work of George Segal—are stern yet serene; the doves nest on and above their frozen bodies. On the one hand the interplay between the birds and figures suggests a divine encounter with the precarious nature of peace, and on the other, the muted silence between both sentient beings alludes to the acquiescence that has taken place in Chinese society, Tiananmen being the strongest example of censorship in recent history. Yet in Zhang's work both man and animal appear to be in state of meditation, existing somewhere beyond the uncertainty of this temporal life—the interplay between them conveys transcendent serenity in the face of heartache.

Klein Sun Gallery (formerly Eli Klein Fine Art) remains committed to contemporary Chinese art, and this exhibition is another fine example of its dedication to presenting cutting-edge visions from this complex field. Despite the Chinese government's continued suppression of the "June Fourth Incident," artists such as Zhang Dali still honor the memory of its victims, this exhibition providing an elegant homage to their collective spirit and the power of reshaping grief into grace. ■

(June 26 – August 30, 2014)

Taliesin Thomas has worked in the field of contemporary Chinese art since 2001 after living two years in rural Hubei Province, China. She is the founding director of AW Asia, New York, a private organization that promotes contemporary Chinese art. Thomas has an MA in East Asian Studies from Columbia University and is currently a PhD candidate in art theory and philosophy with the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts.