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Shadow Tracing: Zhang Dali at Eli Klein



Installation view, Zhang Dali: Suffocation at Eli Klein Gallery.

By MIKE MAIZELS, July 2023

Now on view at the Eli Klein Gallery, Zhang Dali's *Suffocation* is a striking presentation of the artist's latest body of cyanotype images. Because the medium works by solar contact printing, cyanotype images are most often associated with a kind of layered collage aesthetic popularized by Robert Rauschenberg's collaborations with Susan Weil. Dali's works, printed on cotton and up to 100 inches across, read differently—almost as monochrome paintings. Fields of silhouetted objects, which typically sit at surface depth, are carefully manipulated so as to introduce painterly effects of nocturnal light and receding space. Novel pigments introduce rust and ochre toned images, which supplement the expected, electric-blue hues. The effect is equal parts somber Rothko and Whistler nocturne, but bearing out a backstory beyond what meets the eye.

Though his name may not be familiar to some readers, Dali is in fact one of the most significant contemporary Chinese artists, with the claim to history as the first (and for years, only) street artist tagging in Beijing. After coming into contact with the genre form in Italy in the early 1990s, Dali spent the better part of that decade scrawling the profile outlines of his bald head on city buildings in a riff on the frequent announcement of architectural demolition. The works avoid overt commentary, but skirt its edges. The silhouette of the artist recalls little more than the ubiquitous portraits of Mao, but turned into an absence. Into the void floods the vitality of life, unplanned.



Zhang Dali, Dialogue and Demolition, 1998.

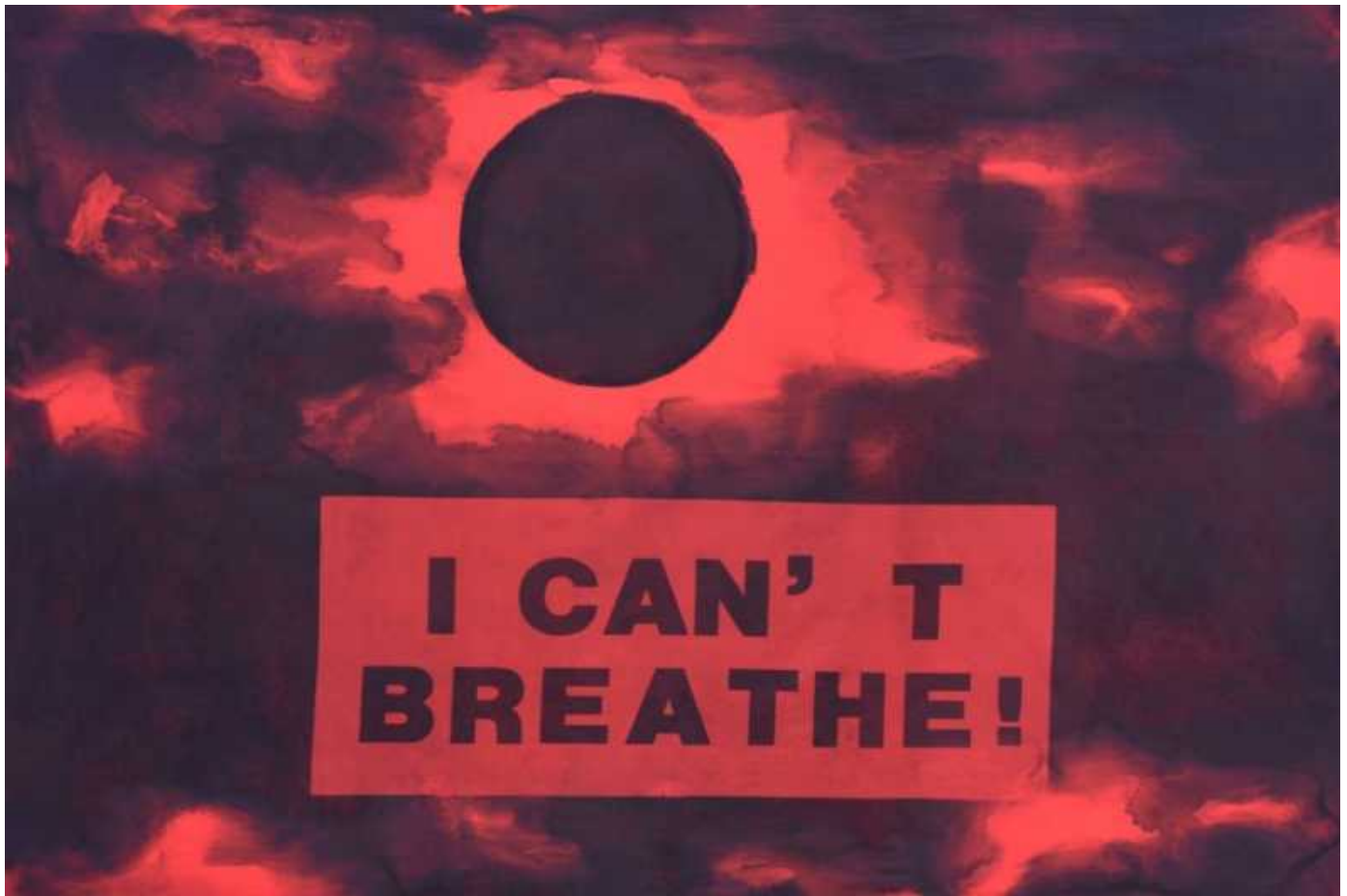
Even after the artist's work moved primarily inside, the themes of razing and re-wilding would continue to animate his practice. In 2009, Dali began to work with the cyanotype process after a chance encounter with a pamphlet on the British scientist John Herschel, who invented cyanotype printing in the 1840s. The timing was fortuitous, coinciding with the announcement of the impending demolition of the Heiqiao Art District where Dali maintained his studio. The technique suggested a kind of poetic reversal of the previous poles of his prior work on the top-down civic transformation and its aftereffects. What had been confrontational in public became contemplative in private. What had been marked for destruction became etched with permanence. What had been a crumbling absence became a fully constituted shadow.

The shadow here is a loaded construct. In an early statement on the cyanotype works, Dali emphasized how these cast outlines constitute a type of “anti matter;” one that constituted not a zone of nothingness, but a passive, fleeting presence that could be captured as history. His earlier, well known explorations of the medium plumb these depths; fixing the transient forms of China's rapid transformations as

seen from the bottom up. Birds and delivery bicycles are rendered as specimens; the organized chaos of flocking behavior frozen in electric blue. Central planning may be just, correct, or cultural consistent. But it isn't omnipotent.

It here that the oblique, coded, polyvalent commentary of Dali's latest comes into flickering focus. The works on view at Eli Klein were executed with during COVID lockdowns and with material drawn from the razed buildings to the west of Dali's new studio, a wasteland *cum* restored prairie grassland Dali regards as a "garden paradise." Noting the Taoist symmetry of life balancing itself in the wake of destruction, Dali suggests that the grand circles of history can be seen playing out in the cycles of ruination and rejuvenation. But more acute commentary lurks like a snake in the tall grass. Juxtaposed amidst the weeds and wild grasses are figured caged behind barbed wire. Such fences were suddenly ubiquitous with the onset of COVID lockdowns, the severity of which Westerners have a difficult time comprehending. Dali notes he was effectively trapped in his studio for three years.

The most vexing work in the show appears in this vein. While Dali is well known for his adroit use of text—which often riffs on the public rhetoric of Party propaganda—rarely has the artist been as overt with verbal imagery as in the cadmium-hued *Slogan (22)*, which repurposes the "I Can't Breathe" of the George Floyd tragedy that reignited the American Black Lives Matter movement of the present moment.



Zhang Dali, I Can't Breathe.

Boxed in under a glowering black sun, it's nearly impossible to read the phrase as anything but a cry of protest. It slips all too easily into a rebellious scream; fed up with tyranny, the oppressed peoples Eastern and Western have been pushed to their limits, and ought to find common cause with one another. The long history, within China, of referring to the weather as a euphemism for Party corruption supports this interpretation. One can declaim the seriousness, but even the CCP can't deny the gathering smog. Breathing under paralysis becomes impossible.

But the work opens a line subtler, and more troubling than that. In response to external criticism of what Westerners call "human rights abuses," the Chinese Communist Party frequently issues statements decrying the treatment of subject peoples by the American government. This tactic, which the Chinese share with the Russians, came into sharp focus during the overlapping "dual pandemic" discussion [COVID + racism] in the fevered summer of 2020. Hua Chunying, then Director of the Foreign Ministry Information Department, tweeted out Floyd's plea from her official account as events unfolded from Minneapolis to nearly every major American city.

Which is not to accuse Dali of toeing a party line. No more than one can assume his work aligns in a straightforward way with the politics of the American Left. Rather, like many of the spraypaint pieces through which the artist broke onto the international scene, confrontation dissolves quickly into ambiguity. Like shifting daylight casting evanescent shadows through the cracks in a crumbling wall. **WM**



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Michael Maizels, PhD is an historian and theorist whose work brings the visual arts into productive collision with a broad range of disciplinary histories and potential futures. He is the author of four books, the most recent of which analyzes the history of postwar American art through the lens of business model evolution. He has also published widely on topics ranging from musicology and tax law to the philosophy of mathematics.

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