

Aura of Disappearance

Recent Works by Zhang Huan

by Robert C. Morgan

Over the past two decades, Zhang Huan has become a global phenomenon. Through his impeccable momentum, he has offered a renewed energy to contemporary art based on traditional Chinese values. Upon returning to China in 2005 after an eight-year residency in New York, Zhang became a Buddhist convert. In the process, he began developing an unprecedented amount of work, ranging from his carved *Memory Doors* to the copper appendages of Buddha, from his Ash Paintings and Heads to the cowhide imprints of Buddha's face. Some would argue that Zhang never left Buddhism, that he was born in the modest cradle of Shakyamuni, while awaiting the moment to rediscover his untapped potential. Others take his claim to Buddhism as a form of ironic displacement as if to dissuade audiences by reading his earlier performance works as replications that mirror the quest for fame in the Western world. Yet to mistake his choreographies, such as *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997) and *My America -- Hard to Acclimatize* (1999), or his endurance pieces, *My New York* (1992) and *Seeds of Hamburg* (2002) as Ego-driven, severely misses the point. In each of these works, Zhang Huan has revealed symbolic forms of personal acculturation while confronting the vicissitudes of errant communication in the Western hemisphere. If Zhang has appropriated the concept of Ego -- an essential Western concept -- then he has done so on the basis of artistic merit while striving to make a powerful series of performances that communicate his isolation and sense of difference in a foreign culture. In effect, he spends his time asking: What does it mean to exist as a human being alive in the twenty-first century?

In moving his vision of art into the future, Zhang's work has paradoxically returned to a cultural past, suspended from reach for many artists who were suppressed during the years of the Cultural Revolution. In doing so, he has shown that the future can only emerge when we account for the past, and that memory is inextricably bound to history. Born in Henan Province in 1965 (the year before the Cultural Revolution), after years of family hardship and deprivation, Zhang eventually found a way to become an artist by paying attention to the aspects of life that did not require a rarified medium or extensive art school training. This included his early, often controversial performance works in Beijing's "East Village," such as two major early works by Zhang, both in 1994. In *12 Square Meters*, the artist sat naked on an outdoor public toilet for an hour covered with

fish oil and honey, which attracted a hoard of flies, while in *65 Kilograms* he had himself chained and strapped to the roof beams of his studio, again naked, while emitting drops of blood through a puncture wound into a pan on the floor below. In pushing the artist's body beyond the limits of conventional aesthetic expectation, Zhang was interested in moving his concept of art beyond the all-too-predictable academic standards of what constituted a legitimate practice. Although performances in the early seventies by such figures as Vito Acconci, Gina Pane, and Chris Burden can be cited in the West, one cannot easily dismiss the cultural isolation and sustained impoverishment that served as the instigation (if not sublimation) for the intrepid works of Chinese artists, such as Zhang, in the early nineties. This point is often underrated, denied, or misunderstood for the following reason. Since the arrival of "postmodernity"-- concurrent with the global marketing of advanced information communications in the final quarter of the previous century-- some theorists proposed that more attention should be given to the political, economic, and cultural contexts as contributing to the meaning of significant works of art. This further implied the necessity of a re-definition of criteria on an activist level in dealing with works of art, which offered further aesthetic challenges that as yet have not been meant. For artists in New York and Milan in the early seventies, China was for the most part inaccessible and therefore not relevant to the art world at the time. Generally, the East was locked-out, so to speak, meaning that the West was strangely oblivious to the possibility of a potential avant-garde in China that might prove as significant at the end of the twentieth century as Dada was at the beginning.

In a manner that reveals elegance without pretention, energy without force, and reflection without quotation, Zhang has emerged as one of the three or four major figures who has rearranged the criteria for making art and brought it to a new level of understanding and inadvertently revived the notion of connoisseurship. (Having said this, one might consider that qualitative distinctions in the East cannot be measured with the exact same terms applied in the West. There are several concepts involving "immaterial" properties in Chinese landscape or ink brush painting that simply do not translate easily into Western criteria, the latter being more concerned with "materiality" or "visuality" in a work of art. However, there is evidence that the history of connoisseurship in China as a method of qualitative appraisal in ink brush painting reaches back to the Han Dynasty, centuries before it flourished in the courts of the Tang Dynasty from the sixth to the early tenth centuries.)

The current exhibition focuses to a large extent on the Ash Paintings and sculptures of Zhang Huan, which began as a series within two years after the artist's return to China and the founding of his new factory/studio in Shanghai in 2005. Although Zhang has used ash in a work earlier that year, the concept of producing a series of paintings and sculptures using the remains of temple incense

began shortly after completing the hand-carved *Memory Doors* (2006). The ash paintings are based on old black and white photographs mostly taken from magazines, such as the "PLA Pictorial" or the "National Pictorial," that were published during the founding years of the Republic in 1940s and then later during the last stage of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s. While Zhang has been interviewed about his use of ash at some length, the fertile ideas behind these works continue to resonate. For Zhang, ash is a medium that functions like ink, yet transmits meaning on a different level. The ash is gathered from incense burned in Buddhist temples around the district of Shanghai. Eventually the artist and his helpers will go to the temples and sweep up the remains, which are then placed in oil barrels and delivered in a truck to the studio. "To me," says Zhang "incense ash is not just ash, nor is it just material, but a collective soul, of our collective memories and good wishes." This suggests a certain spiritual power latent within the medium of ash that, for the artist, must be dealt with in a moral, seemingly Confucian manner, as noted: "Incense ash can be a person's rebirth, or their destruction! Thinking about the ash keeps me awake at night, it really gets to me. Everyday I work together with the countless souls comprised in the ashes." Clearly Zhang accepts the material aspect of the burning incense as being inseparable from the inevitable immaterial ash. The two forms are irrevocably united, as is the concept of life and death in Buddhist practice.

With Zhang, the use of temple ash in painting holds a complex reading as it relates to an aura of disappearance that exists in the conflict between a lingering repressive history and the desire to restore freedom of expression, whether in art, politics, religion, or everyday life. In addition, one may see the ash paintings as a kind of mirror where the suspension of the material (incense) and immaterial (ash) have become a reflection of the present that perpetually disappears and renews itself. Layered within these paintings, the desires of the past have been rekindled. So how do we unravel the complex puzzle that Zhang Huan has provided us? From a Western point of view, we might return to the year 1968, a year that was a turning-point for both the United States and Europe on many levels -- social and political, including a heightened awareness concerning the function of art. With this turn of events, a phenomenon was emerging primarily in New York, called Conceptual Art. The artists associated with this phenomenon rejected the authority of the material object in favor of a concept or idea, which was often represented through the use of language. They were in search of a dematerialized form of art -- a newly found freedom, an art without traditional objects -- that would reflect the kinds of social, political, and aesthetic content they wanted to express. For example, the French conceptual artist, Christian Boltanski, began collecting anonymous photographs of children that he would rephotograph and hang in a darkened space with small lights hovering in front of each face. One aspect of this work was to communicate the tragic loss of

human life that occurred in Europe during the Second World War. In some ways, this work suggests an indirect connection with the Ash Paintings.

Today it appears variations on Conceptual Art have recently come into China, and one clear example can be found in the ash paintings of Zhang Huan. In looking at these paintings based on reconfigured photographic documents and portraits, we are invited to reflect on their meaning. Why are they painted with temple ash instead of ink or pigment? What is the source of the ash in terms of a collective consciousness that still permeates within China today? Zhang, of course, has spoken about the feelings and the prayers that the ash represents, just as the suspension of immaterial energy has been the basis of ink painting in China for centuries. This would suggest that what we are seeing in these paintings -- whether or not we can readily identify the subject matter -- is nevertheless embedded in the artist's concept of personal liberation, even as the images may have been buried under the deceit of their mediated past. As Zhang Huan makes clear, the content of his work is about freedom. Even as it is expressed through immaterial ashes, the presiding overall reality behind these paintings is that the fulfillment of reasonable desires, both ordinary and intellectual within the social order, is both necessary and important in the lives of human beings. In this context, one good reason for his art to exist is to transmit the significance of these most critical desires.

Note: Quotations from the interview with the artist are from Elena Guena, "Reflections on Ash: A Collective Soul: in Zhang Huan: Ashman. Milano: 24 Ore Cultura, 2010.

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消失的氛圍

作者：羅拔·摩根

在過去二十載，張洄已成為席捲全球的非凡人物。憑著一股無懈可擊的動力，張洄為當代藝術注入了以中國傳統價值為基礎的新動力。2005年，他結束紐約八年的旅居生活，回到中國，並皈依佛教。在此過程中，他開展了史無前例的大量創作，當中包括雕刻而成的《記憶之門》，為佛像添加肢體的銅像，香灰繪畫與頭像，以至牛皮壓印的佛臉等。有人認為張洄從未離開佛教，指他誕生在釋迦牟尼慈愛的搖籃，只是靜待時機，重新發掘其尚未開發的潛能。其他人則視張洄的佛教主張為一種諷刺的代替品，取代其早期反映西方社會競逐名利的行為藝術來勸阻觀眾。不過，若將張洄的編導作品如《為魚塘增高水位》（1997）與《我的美國（水土不服）》（1999），以及其展示堅毅忍耐的《我的紐約》（1992）與《漢堡種子》（2002）誤解為由「自我」所驅動的，結果將會嚴重錯過張洄作品的重點。在每一件創作中，張洄均象徵化地反映他在西方社會一方面接受著個人文化改觀，另一方面則不停受著錯誤溝通而帶來的起伏浮沉。即使張洄確實挪用過「自我」這個西方的根本概念，他亦是為了藝術價值而使用，並從中努力製作一連串震撼的表演，表達他置身國外文化的孤獨與格格不入。實際上，張洄將時間用在發問之上：「作為一個生存於二十一世紀的人，到底意義何在？」

張洄將藝術的視野移向未來，但在過程中，其作品卻反常地回到文化的過去。對於一群在文化大革命年代飽受抑壓的藝術家而言，這「過去」遙不可及。由此，張洄表明了只有正視過去，未來方能出現，而記憶亦無可避免地與歷史緊緊相連。

1965年生於河南（即文化大革命前一年）的張洄，隨後經歷了多年家境貧困的日子，最終他卻找到只要留心生活不同層面，而不用高深媒介、亦無需接受正規藝術學校訓練也能成為藝術家之方法。這包括他早期在北京東村惹人爭議的表演藝術，例如1994年的代表作《12平方米》與《65公斤》。張洄在《12平方米》中裸體坐在戶外公廁達一小時，他的身體塗滿魚油與蜂蜜，惹來無數蒼蠅；而在《65公斤》中他同樣赤裸身體，一邊用鐵索將自己吊在工作室的天花板上，身上傷口的鮮血一邊滴到放在地上的熱鍋中。張洄將身體推

向傳統對美學所能期望的極限，希望藉此將其藝術概念突破一般就「合理做法」所定下的尋常學術準則。雖然西方社會在七十年代早期便有維托·阿肯錫、吉娜·潘思、基斯·波頓等藝術家之表演可供引證參考，但對於一群九十年代的中國藝術家如張洄來說，長期的文化孤立與貧困實際是一種煽動（若然不是昇華），讓他們創作出大無畏的作品，這是我們不可輕易忽略的一點。這一點經常被人低估、否定或誤解，究其原因，是「後現代」來臨之後（與之同步而至的是先進資訊溝通於上世紀最後一個季度之全球性推廣），部分理論家便指出在理解一件重要藝術品時，應將重點放於政治、經濟與文化等層面。這亦意味我們有需要更積極地為藝術品重新釐定準則，從而帶出一種在當時社會仍未面臨的美學挑戰。對於七十年代早期身處紐約與米蘭的藝術家，中國很大程度上是遙不可及的，也因此對當時的藝術世界意義不大。東方世界彷彿被關在大門之外，對於二十世紀末中國有機會出現如二十世紀初達達主義般深具影響力的前衛藝術，西方社會顯得不以為意。

在一種流露優雅而不虛偽、具力量而不帶侵略性、不需語錄而能反省的姿態下，張洄成為三、四位重組藝術創作條件的主要人物之一，他將藝術創作的理解帶到一個新層次，並在無意中復興鑒賞的概念。（儘管如此，我們應注意不能以西方慣常的用語來衡量東方社會性質上的差異。在中國山水、水墨畫中經常涉及「無形」的特質，這種特質根本難以套入西方的準則之中。西方的標準更關注一件作品的「實質」或「形式感」。不過有證據顯示，在中國，鑒賞作為評估水墨畫定本質的方法可遠追至漢朝，比水墨畫於六至十世紀初唐代宮廷真正興盛時早幾個世紀。）

本次展覽的焦點是張洄回國後兩年間、於 2005 年在上海成立工作室/工廠後正式開展的一系列香灰繪畫與雕塑。雖然在當年初期張洄已在作品中加入香灰，但利用廟宇焚香的殘餘灰燼創作一系列繪畫與雕塑的概念，則在完成《記憶之門》（2006）後才出現。香灰繪畫的意念源自 1940 年代中國建國之初、以及七十年代文化大革命後期《解放軍畫報》與《中國畫報》等雜誌內的黑白圖片。就一系列香灰創作，張洄在不少訪問中已作過詳盡講解，但其創作背後的豐富意念仍繼續引起共鳴。對張洄來說，香灰的功用與墨相似，卻有能力傳達另一個層次的意思。香灰搜集自上海市內的廟宇，藝術家與助手將香灰收集到油桶裏，再經貨車送抵工作室。張洄表示：「對我來說，香灰並非單純的灰，亦非單純的物料，而是靈魂的共同體，包含了我們共有的回憶與祝願。」這暗示了於對我而言，香灰裏潛藏著某種靈性力量，他必須以道德、近乎儒家的態度來處理。張洄說：「香灰可以是一

個人的輪迴重生，或他們的毀滅！想著這些香灰使我晚上失眠，它真正能夠觸動我。我每天都在與香灰裏的無數靈魂一起工作。」張洄顯然接受了焚香本身的物質層面，在焚香化作香灰時必然出現的去除實質形式之過程關係密不可分；兩者不可避免地互相連繫，正如佛教裏的生死概念。

張洄在繪畫中加入寺廟香灰，對他來說帶有一種複雜的意義，它關係到一種消失的氛圍。這種氛圍存在於持久不散的壓抑歷史，與重拾藝術、政治、宗教以至日常生活表達自由之慾望這兩者的衝突鬥爭之中。此外，我們可以將香灰繪畫看成一面鏡子，在當中懸浮的有形（香）與無形（灰）變成一種不停消失與自我再生的現狀。在作品的層次之中，過去的渴望得以重燃。那麼，我們應該怎樣解開張洄設下的難題？從一個西方角度出發，我們可以回想 1968 年。在社會、政治以及對藝術功能意識之提高等不同層面上，那一年對美國與歐洲等地而言，都是一次轉捩點。在一連串的改變下，以紐約為主的地區出現了一種被稱為概念藝術的新現象。與此現象相關的藝術家抗拒有形實物的權威，提倡向來多被語言方式表達的意念或概念。他們尋找一種去除實質形式的藝術，藉此反映他們心中想要表達的社會、政治，與美學等內容，就尤如一種剛獲得的自由、一種不含傳統物件的藝術。舉例說，法國概念藝術家基斯頓·波坦斯基重新拍攝一批他收集得來的匿名兒童照片，並將作品掛在黑暗的空間裏，再用小燈投射在照片中的每張臉上。這項作品的其中一個意義，是旨在表達二次大戰歐洲痛失無數生命的悲涼，在某程度上，它亦隱含一種與香灰繪畫的間接關聯。

今天，概念藝術的變體看來已來到中國，而其中一個明顯的例子，正是張洄的香灰繪畫。看著這些建立於重組圖文與肖像的繪畫，我們被邀請思考當中的意義。為何作品要用廟宇的香灰繪製，而非水墨或顏料？在仍然充斥著集體意識的現代中國，香灰的來源是什麼？張洄當然講解過香灰所代表的感覺與禱告，就好像懸浮的無形力量在過往數千年一直作為中國水墨畫的基礎一樣。這暗示了不管能否確切認清作品的主題，我們從這些繪畫所看到的，乃植根在藝術家對個人解放的理解中，儘管這些影像在過去遭受調解的歷史中，可能被塵封於欺瞞之中。張洄曾清楚表示，其作品的內容關乎自由，一個 2,500 年來均與中國文化，特別是儒家道德所相違背的概念。即使香灰體現了這種道德情操，作品背後的主流現實乃是對理性渴望的實現。在合乎社會秩序下，不論是平凡還是學術性的渴望，均是大眾日常生活不可缺少的。逗留在張洄作品中的力量，正是儒家價值觀與自由此一現代概念

的長久對立。細心研究香灰繪畫，預示著佛教的憐憫終可跟人類的慾望和諧共處，而非敵對。在這個意義上，張洄的藝術支持自由，一種經過我們對自身存在真實之覺醒而達至的自由。他的藝術也因而反對任何企圖阻礙人們追求個人生活的權威，內在理由、健康、社群與快樂將在這樣的生活中並存。

注：藝術家訪問引文源自《Zhang Huan: Ashman》中之 Elena Guena 《Reflections on Ash: A Collective Soul》，Milano: 24 Ore Cultura，2010

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