

Wanxin Zhang

The Seattle Times

Review: Terra-cotta warrior meets American pop art in 'Wanxin Zhang: A Ten Year Survey'

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Bellevue Arts Museum exhibits "Wanxin Zhang: A Ten Year Survey," in which Zhang explores his fascination with the famous Chinese terra-cotta warriors, through Aug. 9.

By Michael Upchurch
March 30, 2011

Serious fun — that's what's on offer with "Wanxin Zhang: A Ten Year Survey" at Bellevue Arts Museum.

Zhang's medium is clay, and his inspiration is a mash-up of Chinese tradition and American pop art. The army of terra-cotta warriors discovered in Xi'an in 1974 are an influence, as is California's "Funk Ceramics" movement of the 1960s.

Born in 1961 in China, Zhang moved in 1992 to San Francisco, where he soon started mixing his native and adoptive cultures in his work. The 19 pieces at BAM are mostly larger-than-life male figures. A few from a decade ago are smaller in scale and tidier in craftsmanship. But around 2005, his clay started getting seriously slab-happy: stacked and bulky in form, rough rather than refined in surface.

The figures are monumental. Their hands resemble swollen oven mitts, with the fingers often indistinguishable. Their legs are like chunky pedestals.

How, you wonder, does he get these things into a kiln?

The answer: Each sculpture is built up slab by slab, then allowed to dry to a "leather-hard" state. It's then sliced into sections for repeated firings, with glazes added at interim stages. Once the firings are completed, the pieces are glued back together.

There's a strapping grace to many of them, even when there's some satirical bite. A few are downright tender or transcendent, and Zhang's jazz-free way with glazes continually creates startling, energizing effects.

In "Warhol/Mao," the tunic worn by Zhang's regal-looking, Andy Warhol-inspired Chairman Mao is a bedlam of smeared colors. In "Fatherhood," Zhang uses powder-blue and magenta glazes on the father figure (on both his face and clothes) to set him off from the child peering out of a gold-colored baby sling. The kid, wearing a Mickey Mouse hat, clearly inhabits a different world from the father — yet they're linked, torso-tight, to each other.

Elsewhere, Zhang is quietly humorous. In "Who Is Calling?" a warrior figure glances down at the blue cellphone he's holding, rendered as simply as a bar of soap. Things take a surreal turn with "Wind Mark (Mask Man)," in which a disembodied hand descends from the air to impose a porcelain-white mask over the face of a clownlike figure.

Zhang occasionally comments on his new country in wistful ways. "Impossible III," one of his rare nonhuman pieces, depicts the U.S. Capitol melting like an ice-cream cake left out in the sun. You can sense the artist both admiring the American ideal and resigning himself to its flawed realization.

The pivotal piece in the show may be "Wintergreen (Traveler)." It depicts a man in tan and jade-green "armor," a bedroll tucked into the top of his knapsack, his arm raised to his chest as though in admiration of unseen vistas. It's one of several pieces with word or sentence fragments scratched into them. One message, deliberately scrambled in its grammar, reads: "I thought I was have been lost. Who wasn't?"

Losing your way through Zhang's ceramic melting pot couldn't be more delightful.



Chinese-born artist Wanxin Zhang's fired-clay sculpture "Inauguration Day" is on display at Bellevue Arts Museum. He moved to San Francisco in 1992, and his work shows a blend of two cultures.