

Wanxin Zhang



Sculptor Wanxin Zhang pushes clay's boundaries



"Tomorrow Will Be Fine II" reflects Wanxin Zhang's humor and spirituality. (Courtesy Wanxin Zhang)

By Jackie Lee on March 10, 2019 12:01 am

Inspired by the late Robert Arneson and his friend Ai Weiwei, internationally celebrated and exhibited Bay Area sculptor Wanxin Zhang is a truly creative force.

But the artist, the subject of an exhibition at the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art in Sonoma through April 7 and "Wanxin Zhang: The Long Journey," opening Saturday at San Francisco's Museum of Craft and Design, didn't find success overnight.

Born in China, Zhang had no exposure to Western art during school years before graduating from the prestigious LuXun Academy of Fine Arts. Encouraged by artistically inclined parents, he moved to San Francisco in 1992 and earned a master's of fine arts degree from the Academy of Art University.

Reveling in a new freedom of expression he found after naturally navigating to clay, Zhang laughingly recalls his peers at the time classifying California artists as being different from others. He often would say "I'm one too"; that led to a sculpture of himself wearing sunglasses, a determined expression and a bomber jacket. Inscribed on the back: "California Artist Too."

Zhang, who taught at AAU and is now on adjunct faculty at San Francisco Art Institute, challenges himself to push the boundaries of clay by incorporating social and political messages and reflections on the spirit of humanity in his work.

A recent visit to his studio in the Bayview — where music reverberates off concrete walls and floors and heavy-duty apparatus, rolling pallets and the massive kiln compete for space — finds the slender, soft-spoken, thoughtful artist amid several large works in various forms of completion.

The size of most of the pieces dictates that only one section at a time can be in the kiln. Heavy parts then are hoisted into place, stacked from the ground up to assemble the final works.

The in-process sculptures display the care and concentration required to create them. Their meanings — alluding to Zhang's cultural history and redolent with his strong conviction of purpose — become clear after they're in final form.

Most reveal Zhang's sensibilities of the metaphysical world and how he engages viewers in a spiritual dialogue: "Art is not the only motivation in my sculptures; the true source is the spirit and content of our society," he says, adding that some subjects that are difficult to verbalize can be understood visually.

He proves the point in "Unbelievable Promise," which depicts two people in an embrace, one schooled in an Eastern religion, the other in a Western religion. While disparate, both may be honored equally and without criticism if society's biases are eliminated.

Humor is sprinkled throughout his work. "Untitled Warrior," which alludes to Terra Cotta Army excavations, is a tall, imposing Chinese Qin warrior in thickly-layered battle regalia wearing a 20th century gas mask.

The giant panda in "How Are We Gonna Live?" contemplates a chocolate bar.

"Tomorrow Will Be Fine II" is a sculpture of a Buddha with six arms ending in fingers cleverly forming different modern gestures rather than traditional Buddhist mudras. Chinese opera masks are referenced in the application of color on the face, conveying how there are mixed messages of truth and secrecy behind the masks humans show to the world.

Gallery owner Catharine Clark, who represents Zhang, says, "Many people ask what it is to be American. Wanxin's work asks this question in myriad ways, and his responses in clay are not simplistic. Their hybrid cultural references reflect the dual identity many immigrants experience [and] will resonate with a wide audience."

IF YOU GO

Wanxin Zhang: The Long Journey

Where: Museum of Craft and Design, 2569 Third St., S.F.

When: Opens March 16; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, noon to 5 p.m. Sundays; closes July 24

Admission: \$6 to \$8, free for children under 12

Contact: (415) 773-0303, www.sfmcd.org

Note: "Richard Shaw and Wanxin Zhang" in on view at Sonoma Valley Museum of Art in Sonoma through April 7.