

Wanxin Zhang



SV Museum's new exhibition

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By Jackie Lee | Visual Arts Editor

The [Sonoma Valley Museum of Art](#) presents two exhibitions, *Richard Shaw and Wanxin Zhang*, and *Portals: A Space for Color* by Phillip K. Smith III, now through through April 7. Richard Shaw and Wanxin Zhang, says SVMA Executive Director Linda Keaton, have been producing revolutionary works in clay, often packing a serious punch under a comic façade.

“The new work in this exhibition will explore the cultural dialogue between China and the West with the artists’ characteristic wit and satire,” Keaton explains. “Both artists are well known pioneers in Bay Area clay and this show will be a great opportunity to see their new works.”



Richard Shaw

There's nothing more enriching than spending time with artists in the personal sanctuaries where they create their magic. Already familiar with Richard Shaw's sculptures, I visited him in his studio nestled in the hamlet of Fairfax, a town the same two-square-mile size as Sonoma but with less population. It has been a well-known artistic enclave for many years, notably as part of the Beat Generation of the 1960s, a moment in time he recalls fondly.

Richard's home is 100 years old; he and his wife Martha, a painter, have lived there for 41 of those years. He says, "We bought it because the downstairs had a great space for a studio, but the upstairs was pretty small for two adults and two kids... so we had three more."

Both Richard and Martha come from a family of artists, and their grown children are also in the arts. Richard's father worked for Disney as a cartoonist and was one of the developers of Mr. Magoo. "I told my father I didn't want to be a cartoonist," Richard said. "I wanted to go to art school and become a painter, and I did."

Asked what made him decide to leave painting as a career and devote his full attention to his humorous assemblage style, he said he had always been interested in clay sculpture even though he started out as a painter. In collaboration with buddy Robert Hudson in 1971, he found new ways to work with plaster molds, decals, and glazes, as well as natural and shiny surfaces.



“At the time, we played with making porcelain teapots, cups, jars and bottles resembling no other traditional vessels. We made things of daily life, not confined to sculpture,” he said. “To me, that’s intimate.”

He adds, “I’ve always liked the humor involved in *trompe l’oeil*, and I like Chinese and Japanese art too. Objects tell about people’s lives, who they are, what they eat and stuff. It all seems so honest.”

Richard’s large studio space is simultaneously cluttered and orderly. There’s a lot of stuff in there, but everything is in its place, and he knows exactly where to retrieve an item to punctuate a story. “If I don’t like a piece for whatever reason, I just keep working on it until I do. I call it continuous resuscitation!”

The studio slowly reveals itself as a magical place, full of curious items and hundreds of molds carefully cataloged and stacked on floor-to-ceiling shelves. The sculptures may be whimsical, but there’s an undeniable elegance of line and evidence of mastery.

It’s not readily apparent which items are real, and which are clay. You can’t pick up the wayward pencil — it’s clay and built into the walkway. The cigar ash isn’t really glowing in a real ashtray, it’s all clay. The playing cards in a sculpture are not going to collapse in a breeze, and if you take a bite of a cracker, you’d better have your dentist on speed-dial.

On the way out, I joked that his studio is a visual artist’s version of Disneyland, minus the hoopla—a place Pinocchio should live. He laughed and led me back to a high shelf in a dark corner under the ceiling joist, turned on a spotlight and directed it to a mold of ... Pinocchio! No lie.



Wanxin Zhang

Wanxin Zhang's studio is located within San Francisco's celebrated artistic community, where he produces his internationally acclaimed sculptures evidencing the humanity, spirit and content of society. That's his goal, he says, and he achieves it with every creation, pushing the boundaries of what clay can express.

Born in Jilin, China, Wanxin attended art school when he turned 16, and later the LuXun Academy of Fine arts in Shenyang. He moved to the USA in 1992 to attend the Academy of Art University, received his MFA in 1996, then went on to join the faculty of Academy of Art's Department of Art Practice, UC Berkeley, and California College of the Arts in Oakland. He is currently adjunct faculty of San Francisco Art Institute.



Wanxin offered a warm and friendly greeting one rainy day when we talked about his forthcoming exhibition with Richard Shaw. He recalls his good friend Richard and the personal influence he had over Wanxin's earlier artistic career. "He was an important mentor to me, and while there's a generational difference it doesn't apply to art; we have a lot in common," he said. "We've both had individual exhibitions over the years, but this is the first time we have shown together in one place and I'm really looking forward to it."

The juxtaposition of the two bodies of work provokes an interesting conversation about the two disparate styles, even though there's humor to be discovered in both. Wanxin will exhibit ten of his highly textural sculptures of all sizes, three of which are around 80" tall.

One just happens to be a 26” tall sculpture of his friend Richard Shaw he created six years ago.

One of the pieces, “Unbelievable Promise,” 78” tall, portrayed on the front cover of the catalog of the event, was created as a spiritual dialog, a theoretical conversation between Eastern and Western religion. While it’s not about individual people, the facial structure of the two figures is clearly defined, one as an Eastern warrior and one like a Western holy figure, symbolically embracing their individuality as well as their differences.



An effective counterpoint is the full-size 46” tall sculpture of a panda bear, eating a chocolate bar.

It takes a lot of physical labor to sculpt clay in large sizes, Wanxin says, but he often prepares maquettes in advance to get an idea where’s he’s heading. Each piece can take several months to complete, including the waiting time necessary for complicated firing time and glazing processes. “When I make a piece that isn’t quite good enough in my opinion, and I don’t want to share it in that state, I put it aside and go back to it at a later time. I tell my art students to do that too, because after a while they will have new ideas to complete their work. Never give up!”

As engaging and open as he is, and despite the humor in some of the pieces, there’s a serious undercurrent in Wanxin’s works that can’t be ignored. Most of all, though, his works are highly personal and direct from the heart.