

Wanxin Zhang

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Wanxin Zhang @ Museum of Craft and Design

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by Mark Van Proyen



Each of Wanxin Zhang's ceramic sculptures give the viewer something old and something new, reminding us of Jasper Johns' famous injunction "take a thing, do something to it, do something else to it." But here, the thing in question is the ancient tradition of Asian ceramic sculpture, and the doing something lies in his treatment of those traditions with additional elaborations derived from other sources, most obviously the long legacy of

Northern California ceramic sculpture reaching back to the 1960s. At first glance, their forms seem familiar, but we soon discover subtle mischief, oftentimes located in several distinct layers of visibility.

If the installation of 22 of Zhang's works at the Museum of Craft and Design seems over-crowded, there is a good reason. The clear reference point for their array is the famous assembly of terracotta warriors dating back to the third century BCE, the ones that were excavated in 1974 in Xi'an, central China. There are over 8,000 of these figures, all part of a vast necropolis devoted to Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China. The army that was supposed to guard the buried remains of the Emperor in the afterlife, and their uncovering has been said by some to signal the beginning point where the murderous "reforms" of Mao Zedong would begin their rollback, because as magical thinking would have it, the ancient ghosts of imperial culture had been awakened from their long slumber to return proper order to the land.



Blue Warrior, 2004, 78 x 18 x 24 inches

A large portion of the works in Zhang's exhibition are standing figures, many life-sized and clearly based on the older warrior figures mentioned above—with some important omissions and elaborations, the most notable being that they do not brandish weapons. In some cases, such as *Blue Warrior*(2004), we see, first, a luscious blue-turquoise glaze applied to the stoneware figure, making it look as if it had been drenched in a blue-green waterfall. Then we note that his hair is tied up in what appears to be a manbun, a comic effect that is made even more humorous by the fact that the figure's face looks as if it belonged to some under-nourished relative of Teddy Roosevelt, complete with circular goggle-style eyeglasses. Another of the larger works, *Made in China* (2014) takes the same figure and drenches it in a garish, Pepto-Bismol pink, while yet another figure, *Warrior with Color Face*(2009), is made of minimally surfaced stoneware, with the strategic application of multiple colors to the face, making it look like the loser in a pie-throwing contest.

Other works depart from the warrior motif in the humorous direction of what we might associate with the Bay Area Funk style of ceramics. One of the more recent examples, *A Story From Uncle Tom* (2017), is a full ten feet tall. A black figure that resembling the Stature of Liberty, sporting four pair of breasts, it recalls the *Diana of Ephesus*, a proto-feminist deity that was worshiped throughout Europe before and during the Roman Empire. The idea — that America should be able to give succor to the entire world — is clear enough; but that idea is blighted by a long history of racism, underscored by the white torch-bearing forearm that seems to have been broken off the figure. Another work in a comic vein is titled *California Artist, Too*(2006), a clear homage to Robert Arneson's canonical self-portrait from 1982, *California Artist*. Zhang's version shows someone other than Arneson, but I suspect it is a not a self-portrait. Like the original, it shows the upper half of a denim-clad figure with arms folded at the chest, perched atop a pedestal, sporting dark sunglasses and flashing a hipster smirk. But the newer pedestal no longer reveals the painted cannabis plant and three-dimensional beer bottles of the original; this one depicts several bamboo sprouts.



A Story from Uncle Tom, 2017, high-fired Cassius Basaltic with oil-painted steel base. Arm: high-fired stoneware with glazes, 120 x 24 x 20 inches

A smaller work, *Refluent Tide*(2009), uses the theme of the Pieta, showing a male figure lying prostrate across the lap of a Madonna. A close look reveals that the shroud partially covering the two figures is treated in such a way to indicate a melting landscape, or to be more precise, a melted painting of a Chinese landscape harking back to the Literati style, or at least a Ming dynasty copy of one. It is not too hard to imagine that the tears of the Madonna figure creating the liquefaction that melts the landscape. This effect is also visible in *Disciple #7* (2017), a smaller piece that shows a seated figure (a Bodisattva?) covered with the same geomantic surfaces, upon which appears a decal of a fiery red-and-yellow dragon. Another small work titled *Melting Landscape II* (2012), sports a

similar surface on what looks to be a disembodied heart impaled with a quintet of acupuncture needles.

In addition to the 22 works on view, there are several clusters of ceramic bricks—about 20 in all. These are very different from one another in terms of size and surface treatment, and, like the other works in the exhibition, they speak in bifurcated terms about an ancient subject—the Great Wall of China that now hosts miles of anti-government graffiti—and a contemporary one, that being President Trump’s proposed border wall. Both were and will be an ineffective solution for keeping unwanted visitors at bay, and the varied surfacing of these bricks provides a kind of *mélange* of what we might consider to be sketches for other works, or ideas for surfacing other works. We might also want to think of them in the light provided by an old Pink Floyd anthem, representing a brick-by-brick disassembly of the walls that foreclose human possibility in the name of state security.



Bricks, 2008-Present, high-fired stoneware with underglazes, glazes and decals

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Wanxin Zhang, “The Long Journey” @ [Museum of Craft and Design](#) through July 14.

About the Author:

Mark Van Proyen's visual work and written commentaries focus on satirizing the tragic consequences of blind faith placed in economies of narcissistic reward. Since 2003, he has been a corresponding editor for Art in America. His recent publications include: Facing Innocence: The Art of Gottfried Helnwein (2011) and Cirian Logic and the Painting of Preconstruction (2010). To learn more about Mark Van Proyen, read Alex Mak's December 9, 2014 interview, published on Broke Ass Stuart's Goddamn Website.