

Wanxin Zhang

sculpture

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Wanxin Zhang, installation view of “Witness,” 2022. Photo: John Janca

Wanxin Zhang

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San Francisco

Catharine Clark Gallery

The more than two dozen works presented by Chinese-American artist Wanxin Zhang in “Witness” ([on view](#) through April 16, 2022) suggest poetic as well as political interpretations of the exhibition title. While figuration still dominates Zhang’s approach to ceramic sculpture, there is also a shift toward abstraction, both in his handling of the material and in the objects themselves.

The dark, smoky blue of the gallery walls serves as a perfect foil for Zhang’s white and polychrome works. In the thoughtfully designed installation, many of the standing and seated figures face away from viewers and each other, suggesting a kind of quiet introspection. Their positioning forces inquisitive visitors to slow down and do what is required for truly viewing sculpture—walk around each one in order to see it from all sides. Yet, even if they are considered only from the back, the artist’s intent is clear. In *Twilight* (2020), the figure raises two fingers on each hand in peace sign Vs, suggesting a kind of calm surrender. In contrast, *Waiting* (2021)—the most recent of Zhang’s annual tributes to the man who, astonishingly, blocked the forward progress of a line of tanks in Beijing in 1989—embodies resistance. With bags hanging from both hands, the figure is headless, like a relic from an ancient civilization (or, perhaps, a statue decapitated by those who oppose what it represents, a practice that dates back at least to the French Revolution). Modest in size and rapidly rendered—Zhang’s thumbprints in the clay are clearly visible—this version of the Tiananmen “Tank Man” is haunting.

A giant, handle-less celadon teapot installed nearby (*Teapot Without a Handle #2—COVID Teapot*, 2020) seems to be covered with a complex texture. Up close, the agitated surface resolves into partial figures and objects: crosses, broken cell phones, agonized faces, skulls, limbs, and buttocks. As in Rodin’s *Gates of Hell*, the details here are less important than the overall impression of roiling chaos. Zhang’s omission of the handle emphatically asserts non-functionality, suggesting the separation between the useful and the sculptural in the ceramic world, as well as China’s near-incalculable contribution to global material culture through the export of millions of pieces of porcelain beginning in the 16th century. (Little areas of blue-and-white patterning are almost buried among the body parts and objects covering the teapot.)

A mountain of colorful cargo containers on the deck of a ship also addresses China’s continuing role in trade. Both the non-descriptive title (*Aircraft Carrier*) and the ring of tiny warrior figures surrounding the containers suggest that such trade could be part of a complex strategy that deploys culture and commerce as tools and weapons in a struggle for world dominance.

A grouping of Zhang’s colorful versions of scholars’ rocks and seated, cross-legged figures seems almost familial. This reading is reinforced by the eight-foot-tall female figure (*My Mandarin Tutor*, 2020) that stands at the back of the gallery as a presiding presence. She cradles a panda—one of China’s most familiar symbols—in one arm and holds up a cell phone in her other hand, her serene, distant gaze focused on neither: a goddess of trade, perhaps, rather than of democracy or freedom. Still, the two pink protuberances on her head allude to the idiosyncratic shape of the pink “pussy hats” worn by demonstrators in the annual Women’s Marches against former President Trump.

As an immigrant who has spent half his life in the U.S., Zhang braids together his past and present in his work. Following in the footsteps of Robert Arneson, Stephen De Staebler, and Viola Frey, Zhang has clearly become part of the Bay Area's hallowed tradition of figurative ceramics while continuing to draw on thousands of years of Chinese ceramic history. In the end, this may be the most profound thing that can be said about the "melting pot" of American art. It incorporates makers from all over the world, and their creativity contributes to a compelling mixture of histories and traditions.

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