

Wanxin Zhang

## Wanxin Zhang @ Catharine Clark

MARCH 18, 2022

by Renny Pritikin

When Wanxin Zhang arrived in the U.S. 30 years ago, steeped in the rigors of Chinese fine art, his skills were well-honed. Yet none of that traditional academic training prepared him for the freedoms of scale and innovation afforded to American contemporary artists. After he encountered the work of Peter Voulkos, Robert Arneson, Viola Frey and Manuel Neri – artists who greatly expanded the parameters of ceramic sculpture – Zhang embraced the possibilities they enabled. *Witness*, his current exhibition, marks a pivotal moment in his career as he masterfully reconciles themes from his Chinese heritage and his American milieu in a terrific mash-up of an exhibition.



Teapot Without a Handle #2 -COVID Teapot,  
2020, stoneware, glaze, 45 x 60 x 36"

His treatment of teapots, a touchstone for traditional potters, is a case in point. Though Zhang renounced decorative and functional approaches long ago, he offers several versions of the form, one of which is *Teapot Without a Handle #2 – Covid Teapot*, a near-human-scale vessel. Its elegant swan's neck of a spout establishes his technical skill. But the lumpy surface — comprised of bumps and bruises made of skulls, heads, feet and a big nude butt — counterbalances the object's inherent beauty, signaling its status as a nonfunctional work of art with a dark subtext: Under China's authoritarian government, when the police want to talk to you, they request a meeting and ask you to prepare "a cup of tea," a bitter ploy not unlike placing a coin in the palm of your executioner. The artist evokes this state of affairs powerfully with *Waiting*, a full-scale figure of the man who famously stood before a column of tanks during the Tiananmen Square protests. Here, he's shown headless, clutching his two famous plastic shopping bags.



Several half-sized figures stationed throughout the show recall the ancient Chinese terracotta warriors. These Zhang renders with a technique often associated with Manuel Neri in which bodies are made abstract with distressed surfaces and small splashes of color, especially around the face (an apparent stand-in for Zhang's own countenance). The exhibition features several such references to Bay Area teachers and artists associated with the influential UC Davis faculty over several decades starting in the early 1960s. A *Census Taker with His Buddy*, for example, recalls Arneson's final tortured self-portraits. A diptych, it is paired with another sculpture of a pup that recalls those painted by Roy de Forest. *Brick Study #1* and *#2*, with letters impressed into bases spelling out the artist's name, are direct homages to Arneson's brick sculptures.

Zhang's most ambitious works evoke his mother by way of Michelangelo's *Moses* and Viola Frey's imposing women. *Mandarin Code*, at over eight feet in height, dominates the gallery. One arm cradles a panda, the other a cell phone; she wears a pinch-waist, floor-length, layered Victorian dress splotted with black. The only color (red) —again in the face—appears on her lips along with a few stabs of blue that suggest tears, indicating the sadness of being separated from a son whose visage she can only see via the cellphone in her hand. She also sports a pair of horns in the same stubby configuration as seen in *Moses*, the difference being that Michelangelo's version indicated two beams of light descending from heaven. Zhang's version nods, tongue-in-cheek, to the Chinese tradition of filial piety. Zhang stakes a claim not only to that lineage, but to all monumental figuration, from ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and Renaissance Italy on up to its Northern California counterparts.

*Gongshi*, otherwise known as scholar's rocks, are used in Chinese gardens to inspire meditation. *Witness* concludes with a group of eleven such small floor works, some of which are recognizable as seated buddhas (also in the tradition), others of which are artist-made abstract ceramic simulations. They range in color from neutral shades to deep Chinese reds and yellows. Each is pierced by winding passageways that, when viewed from different vantage points, shift in appearance and invite contemplation. Zhang, in this suite, subtly unites contemporary sculpture with traditional culture.



In the video screening room, two short films, *May 35* and *HK Uprising* by the Japanese-American artist TT Takemoto, depict related subject matter via colorful abstract collages accompanied by a percussive soundtrack. Both resolve suddenly with images of Chinese participants at pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square and Hong Kong.

*Twilight*, another female figure, has its hands raised in Nixon-like V gestures. That 1970s political event, marking the reopening of relations between the United States and China, eventually changed Zhang's life, leading him to the Bay Area and the challenges and adjustments necessary to thrive as an immigrant and an artist inhabiting one world physically and another in memory. *Witness* embodies that quintessential American duality.

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**About the author:**

Renny Pritikin was the chief curator at The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco from 2014 to 2018. Before that, he was the director of the Richard Nelson Gallery at UC Davis and the founding chief curator at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts beginning in 1992. For 11 years, he was also a senior adjunct professor at California College of the Arts, where he taught in the graduate program in Curatorial

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Practice. Pritikin has given lecture tours in museums in Japan as a guest of the State Department, and in New Zealand as a Fulbright Scholar, and visited Israel as a Koret Israel Prize winner. The Prelinger Library published his new book of poems, *Westerns and Dramas*, in 2020.

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