

Warriors with a difference

Wanxin Zhang, Independent Record (Helena, MT) - Thursday, January 19, 2012

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Inspired by the 1974 discovery of 8,000 terracotta life-size warriors buried at the Tomb of Qin Shi Huang Di (259-210 B.C.), the first emperor of China, artist Wanxin Zhang created his own series of contemporary, everyman life-size warriors. An exhibit of his works, "Wanxin Zhang: A Ten Year Survey," opens 7 p.m. Friday, Jan. 20, at the Holter Museum of Art with a reception for five new exhibits (see related stories), launching the Holter's 25th Anniversary year.

Zhang will also give a gallery talk at 10 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 21, and an illustrated lecture, "China and Other Influences," at 7 p.m. Friday, Jan. 27. He will be a guest artist for a two-week Cultural Crossroads series of workshops at the Holter.

Born in China in 1961, Zhang was a child during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. "People worshiped Mao like God," said Zhang in an IR phone interview from San Francisco. In fact, it was the omnipresent statues of Mao that first inspired Zhang to take up a career in art. While a student at the LuXan Art Institute in China, he traveled to Xian in 1983 and viewed the terracotta warriors that had been unearthed in four pits.

Thus was born the idea for Zhang's contemporary "warriors," who are part of what he calls "Pit # 5," his ongoing life's work. You'll encounter 17 statues grouped in the High Gallery, some life-size, some smaller. Among them is the "Poet of Battlefield," eyes concealed by John Lennon glasses, gazing skyward, his clothing a blend of traditional Chinese military armature and tunic, topped by a modern necktie.

Nearby stands, "Fatherhood," a man with a front pack carrying a toddler, sporting Micky Mouse ears; the dad dressed in a traditional Chinese tunic, hair in a topknot and eyes concealed behind dude glasses.

Central in the gallery stands a benign, gently smiling Mao Zedong — "Warhol/Mao" no longer a god or bogeyman, just a pop-version, Warhol-esque everyman.

Further in, you meet "Imperfect Square II," a defiant youth standing in a shiny pool of blood, a headband tied around his head.

"This is based on the young man standing in front of the tanks in Tiananmen Square," said Zhang. The picture of that youth has been imprinted in his memory for years. "He disappeared from the face of the Earth," said Zhang. This is his tribute to him. Everyday people are warriors, Zhang said. He hopes when you encounter his sculptures, it creates a personal dialog — sometimes thought-provoking and serious, sometimes not.

"My sculptures have a lot of sense of humor," he adds.

Many are collages of ancient Chinese history and culture juxtaposed with contemporary politics and pop culture, and more than a touch of Funk Ceramics and Abstract Expressionism.

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Zhang builds them using the coil and slab method from the ground up, hollowing out the clay, cutting the piece into sections, firing the sections multiple times and then gluing them back together. At times the surfaces are ornately decorated with ancient Chinese motifs, other times they have more slashing, slab-like surfaces.

Coincidentally, Zhang's career and direction as an artist were strongly influenced by two acclaimed artists with Montana ties — Deborah Butterfield, who has a studio in Bozeman, and Peter Voulkos, who was an early resident director of the Archie Bray Foundation and a 20th century pioneer in ceramics. Zhang, who'd grown bored with the classical clay sculpture he'd been taught in art school in China discovered Butterfield's works in an Art in America magazine in his school library.

"I wrote a letter to her expressing my interest and wish to one day become an inspiring artist like her," Zhang wrote in a January 2011 article in Ceramics Monthly. A short time later he received a package from her with a letter and a catalog.

"This particular interaction became one of the most significant reasons leading up to my move to the United States," he said.

Some of Butterfield's iconic horses are also on display as part of the Holter's 25th Anniversary exhibits, starting Friday night (see related sidebar). Already an established artist in China, Zhang came to the United States around 1985 on a student visa. He wrote that when he stepped onto the plane he knew "I had given up all my professional achievements up to that point in order to enter a whole new world, both in lifestyle and in art." It would be just one of many instances when "I put all my eggs in one basket" to pursue his passion in art. In 1992 he relocated his family to San Francisco.

Although Zhang had started out working in clay, he was known in China for his cutting-edge metal sculptures. In 1996 he earned an M.F.A. in sculpture at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco. Somewhere along the way, he rediscovered his love of clay.

"This love developed even further during a short period of working under Peter Voulkos," he wrote. "I discovered that clay is the best medium for me to express my thoughts and ideas. My current series of warriors is the product of a combination of my past experiences and this newfound love for clay. It combines my feelings from, and reactions to, visiting the tombs of Emperor Qin and seeing his Terracotta Warriors, and the inspiration I received from the California Funk Art movement. My pieces are about finding my personal identity while sparking a contemporary dialog about social, historical and political issues."

"To enter the world of Wanxin Zhang is to witness the dawning of the 'Age of the Individual' in all its patchwork splendor," writes Germaine Shames in Ceramics Monthly. "Poignant, humbled, haunting, his warriors embody every battle ever fought, every thwarted dream, and yet at once — herein lies their genius — humankind's singular and defining quest for freedom."

As an individual, Zhang sometimes feels powerless on a political issue, he said, but his warriors are powerful and dynamic. "My art can deliver a message from my yin spirit."