

Wanxin Zhang



'Totem' - Wanxin Zhang at Catharine Clark Gallery

By Greg Flood, November 19, 2014

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Wanxin Zhang, 'Impossible II', 2009, High-fired clay with glaze, (30 x 17 x 18 inches)

It doesn't happen often that the world seems to tilt slightly walking into an art gallery, but that is certainly the case entering the current show of Wanxin Zhang at Catharine Clark Gallery. Wanxin has presented in his first solo with the gallery a series of clay figures, ranging from life size down to just a couple of feet tall, which explore the tensions of cross cultural assimilation while also reflecting on the existential state of our time. Standing throughout the gallery are Buddhas, military figures, and iconic sculptures from western culture whose have an appearance riddled with wear, distress, and disintegration. The surfaces of their clothes and bodies are riddled with pock marks, cracks, crags, and the spare use of colored glazing on most of them that highlights only selected areas, leaving the rest a shell white that reveals the battered reality of their existence.



Wanxin Zhang, 'I Love Panda, I Mean It', 2013, High-fired clay with glaze, (55 x 22 x 24 inches)

Wanxin grew up in Maoist China and later immigrated to Southern California in the early 1990s. The level of disillusionment and struggle he has gone through in distancing himself from his upbringing and assimilating into the American version of western culture, while also looking back to reflect upon his upbringing and choosing what to let go of, is very much evident in the works presented. Each figure is a hybrid, drawing from the sculptural traditions of China for the pose of a figure, but using the legacy of post-war West Coast ceramics – with its rougher forms, the visible use of the hand, vibrant colors, and monumental scale – to execute the finished form. Likewise, Wanxin has also drawn figures from the western classical tradition (notably Michelangelo's Pieta and a Greco-Roman figure reminiscent of Athena Nike to name two instances) and then imbued them with symbols of China – specifically pandas in the case of Athena and, more subtly, the Han blue on the Pieta.

What is especially important in Wanxin's work, and keeps it interesting, is that he does not fall into the dichotomy of winner and loser. Both East and West have their best and worst on display. His two moments of overt political statements include a small sculpture of a Chinese temple leaning on the dome of the US Capital, crumbling it while also crumbling itself. The other is the figure of Athena Nike carrying four pandas as she steps forward. The metaphor is at once obvious, but there is more to this work. Athena is covered in green and yellow glaze resembling the color of mold. The pandas she is carrying, while colored correctly, have extremely sad expressions on their faces. It's as if Wanxin is showing us that both systems have failed – communist and capitalist – and in the absence of another alternative they must struggle on together and move to something else, with the west carrying the east.



Wanxin Zhang, 'The Refluent Tide (Pieta)', 2008-2014, High-fired clay with glaze (24 x 24 x 32 inches)

This brings me to the current feeling that I mentioned previously. Wanxin's figures are all off balance in some way, leaning, tilting, embodying the ethos of world around us. Things are falling apart, not working, exhausted, lop-sided, uneven, worn around the whole like his figures. From the environment, to economic and political imbalances, to the rampant loss of privacy, life is out of balance in a way that it has not been for humanity before. Knowledge of this, conscious or not, pervades our culture today and is reflected in our decisions. Wanxin's figures pull the wool back from our eyes to point out these imbalances.

Wanxin Zhang – Totem is on view at Catharine Clark Gallery until January 3, 2015. 248 Utah Street, San Francisco, CA, 94103; 415.399.1439.