

Wanxin Zhang

**Tyranny Meets Irreverence in *Pit #5*, Art Beatus Gallery, Hong Kong, 2008**

Wanxin Zhang's sculptures are born of the collision of disparate social movements and their attendant aesthetic innovations, brought together by the happenstance of the artist's life and personal inclinations. Colliding elements include the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and its ubiquitous propaganda, the harsh dictatorship of Qin Shi Huang (259-210 BCE) which produced the famous life-sized terracotta army, and the 1960s and 1970s American counter-culture movement, one of whose products was Funk Art. Such an unlikely combination of influences coalesced in Zhang's oeuvre not long after his 1992 move from his native China to San Francisco. The result was a highly individualistic body of works that employ sly humor to undercut imperatives to conformity, whether dictated by historical megalomaniacs, or by modern culture.

As a student in the Department of Sculpture at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in Shenyang, Wanxin Zhang followed a rigorous five-year course of study that focused on figural realism, emphasizing the use of clay. Following graduation, Zhang favored working with metal, but he returned to clay upon arriving in San Francisco and being exposed to the works of such clay artists as Peter Voulkos (1924-2002) and Robert Arneson (1930-1992). The former founded the California clay movement with his large-scale, rough, obviously hand-shaped works, and is credited with giving clay, "previously regarded as restricted to the realm of craft, a working vocabulary for use in freestanding sculpture."<sup>1</sup> Arneson, a leading light of the Bay Area Funk Art movement, imparted a funky twist to clay, producing works that were humorously anti-establishment—not only in terms of their overt subject matter, but also in their irreverent stance against the art establishment which favored "serious" modes such as abstract expressionism. The result was that "when Funk merged with Arneson's brand of narrative it catapulted the sculptor outside the framework of the other clay practitioners."<sup>2</sup> The Bay Area Funk clay movement inspired Zhang to return to clay and experiment with expressing his personal experiences of historical forces in brash, large-scale works infused with humor.

As his career has matured, Wanxin Zhang has developed an ongoing major series of works that fall under the umbrella title of *Pit #5*. The signature image from this series is that of a standing figure modeled after the terracotta warriors that were discovered buried in pits adjacent to the burial mound of Qin Shi Huang, near Xi'an. Four pits had been constructed to house the emperor's army: Zhang's *Pit #5* follows on from there. While free-standing clay sculpture may have been a novelty in terms of later twentieth-century art, the discovery of Qin Shi Huang's terracotta army showed that it had flourished two thousand years ago in China. The tomb

---

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Schear, "The Genesis of Clay Figurative Sculpture in California, 1955-1974: Potter and Pot, an Intersubjective Encounter in the Work of Peter Voulkos," in *Metamorphosis: Creative Imagination in Fine Arts Between Life-Projects and Human Aesthetic Aspirations, Analecta Husserliana 81*, ed. by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), p. 205.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

**SF**

248 Utah Street  
SF, CA 94103  
+ 415 399 1439

**NY**

313 W 14th Street 2F  
New York, NY  
By appointment only

**WEB**

[www.cclarkgallery.com](http://www.cclarkgallery.com)

sculptures were discovered in 1974; Zhang visited the site in 1983, catalyzing for him the revelation that the first emperor of Qin, as a dictator who employed art as propaganda, was a historical precedent to Mao Zedong. Zhang compared the megalomania of a tyrant who would divert untold labor (that of up to 700,000 men) to the creation of a tomb complex that would glorify him in the afterlife, with that of Mao, whose image was ubiquitous during the Cultural Revolution: literally billions of his portraits were produced in the form of sculptures, paintings, posters, buttons, tapestries, and so on. Qin Shi Huang is credited with destroying knowledge through the execution of intellectuals and destruction of books that were counter to his interests; Mao Zedong was responsible for death and destruction on an even grander scale, and Wanxin Zhang finally fully understood this upon viewing the terracotta army.<sup>3</sup>

The works presented in the current exhibition include the artist's familiar riffs on the terracotta army, as well as figures emerging from a red wall symbolic of Chinese culture, and sculptures referencing iconic Cultural Revolution objects. Among the latter are discs featuring silhouettes of Mao's face, referring to the Mao buttons whose large-scale production consumed so much metal that Mao once quipped the metal should perhaps be diverted to the manufacture of airplanes. In comparison to the original small, mass-produced shiny red and gold Mao buttons, Zhang has created larger, obviously hand-hewn discs where the absence of Mao's facial features is an obliteration equivalent to the destruction of "feudal," "rightist," and "anti-revolutionary" elements under Mao—which in real terms meant the destruction of individuals whose thinking was not in line with the policies of Mao or his representatives. Notable among Mao's supposed representatives were the Red Guards, young people excited by the idea of creating ongoing revolution, who in an unchecked frenzy performed widespread acts of destruction of cultural property, and violent persecution of anyone they considered anti-revolutionary. Zhang has fashioned clay versions of the armbands worn by the Red Guards, inscribed with their identifying title, *Hongweibing* (Red Guard), but making subversive puns by substituting characters pronounced similarly but having different meanings (for example, inserting *wei* characters that mean tiny, flavor, and tail). Zhang also has created a few models of the site most strongly associated with Mao's power, Tiananmen, from where he made proclamations and addressed millions. Sunflowers adorn two of the Tiananmen sculptures: Zhang has commented, "When I was young, there was a song called 'The [Communist] Party is the Sun, I am the Flower' to convince the people that the government is all powerful and nurturing. However, as I think back now from an artist's perspective, I realize that that period is actually very dark, and the crude sun and the upside down flowers represent that. . . . The period was definitely not as beautiful or 'shiny' as it was made out to be."<sup>4</sup>

Three sculptures in the exhibition depict figures emerging from a red slab background which may be a wall, but also suggests an imperial door adorned with bosses. One figure is still embedded in the wall; a second has emerged and wears the blue of the Mao era or of the pre-Maoist scholar; and a third—whose features are most fully realized—sits at his ease clad in contemporary business attire. According to the artist the wall represents Chinese culture, and the fact that different figures emerge from the same wall reflects the fact that some aspects of Chinese culture, notably central control, seem never to change. Another figure is inscribed with numbers on his chest and stands against a white background: he is standing in front of a

---

<sup>3</sup> Emily J. Sano, "Tradition and Transformation: The Figural Sculpture of Wanxin Zhang," *Clay Art International Yearbook 07-08* (Athens, Greece: Clay Art International, 2008), p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> E-mail from the artist to the author, 6 June 2008.

shooting range target. Zhang explains “The figure is a combination of Terra Cotta Warriors and Red Guards and demonstrates how they were being used by the government/dictator of their times and how they had no thoughts of their own. Their full acceptance of the government is a hereditary slave-kind of thinking that was nurtured by the imposing government.”<sup>5</sup>

Like the figure standing against a target, Zhang’s freestanding figures also merge Red Guard with terracotta warrior. They have left youth behind, and their demeanors suggest disillusionment. They are ready to fight for neither the protection of Qin Shi Huang in the afterlife, nor for Mao’s ongoing revolution: the expectations placed upon them seem to have exhausted them. In a sense this is heartening. Unlike the terracotta warriors, who may appear to represent individuals but were assembled from endlessly recombined molded variants of different body parts, and unlike the Red Guards, who surrendered their individualism in favor of mass hysteria, these men appear to be individuals shaped by time and experience. If society can learn from experience, too, then there is hope for the future. That Wanxin Zhang serves up these complex ideas surrounding societal control with a touch of irreverent humor renders them all the more powerful. He leads his viewers to the realization that past, present, and future are interrelated, and the legacy of the past must be understood for the sake of an unencumbered future.

Britta Erickson\*  
June 11, 2008

(Note: Catalogue essay funds were donated to the Red Cross for Sichuan earthquake relief.)

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

\* **Britta Erickson**, Ph.D. is an independent scholar and curator living in Palo Alto, California. Her doctoral dissertation investigated patronage modes in the career of the mid-nineteenth century Shanghai School artist, Ren Xiong. She has taught at Stanford University and has curated major exhibitions at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, D.C. (Word Play: Contemporary Art by Xu Bing) and the Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford (On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West). She is on the advisory board for the Ink Society (Hong Kong), Asia Art Archive (Hong Kong) and Three Shadows Photography Art Centre (Beijing), as well as the editorial board of *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* and *ART Asia Pacific*. In 2006 she was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to conduct research in Beijing on the Chinese contemporary art market. She was co-curator of the 2007 Chengdu Biennial.