

Wanxin Zhang



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Wanxin Zhang: *Totem*

Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco

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Over the past twenty years, San Francisco-based artist Wanxin Zhang has been creating his signature body of work entitled *Pit #5*, much of which consists of life-sized clay figures that combine the influences of Qin dynasty sculpture (221–206 B.C.), Abstract Expressionism, the American Clay Revolution, and *shanshui hua* ("mountain-water" painting). The result is a style distinctly his own. Drawing on a unique iconographic language and process of making, Wanxin Zhang charts a deeply personal journey of self-reflection while questioning the past, the present, and the future. *Totem* is Wanxin Zhang's first solo show at the Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, and includes works dating from 2009 to 2014.

As the starting point for much of his work, Wanxin Zhang's sculpture takes its cue, formally and informally, from historical references that include global political monuments, Greco-Roman and Renaissance sculpture, and Eastern religious icons. It is a journey that expands outward from his own cultural heritage to embrace collective and personal narratives that encourage us to re-examine ourselves, our history, and our place in the world.

Wanxin Zhang was born in Changchun, Jilin, China, where his work was informed by a childhood growing up in the 1960s and 70s under the dictatorship of Mao Zedong. Basic freedoms were violently suppressed, and propaganda pushed a political agenda designed to shape a "collective" world view. This upbringing led him to examine and become suspicious of political power and structures. After the Cultural Revolution ended, in 1976, Wanxin Zhang attended the sculpture program at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, Shenyang, as one of the first generation of post-Cultural Revolution students to receive formal training in art. In sculpture, clay was the primary material for practicing both the foundational and technical skills of artistic expression. At the Academy, Wanxin Zhang became a consummate practitioner of the arts but had little or no opportunity for personal artistic expression, which was not encouraged even after the Cultural Revolution. After graduating in 1985, Wanxin Zhang joined the Young Artists Group in north China, which represented a form of revolution in art for many young artists. At this time he stopped working with clay and began experimenting with metal and mixed media.

Many of the sculptures in *Totem* draw attention to the influence of the terracotta warriors of the Qin Dynasty. The artist was first exposed to the

warriors, which were discovered near Xi'an by farmers in 1974, decades ago during a school field trip. He was immediately drawn to their scale and stature and questioned the implications of so monumental an exercise in the mass production of sculpture. In an interview with Richard Whittaker in 2012, Wanxin Zhang remarked that, "It's easy to think that the emperor's army was a glorious thing, but the power of that emperor, how was it used?"

¹ Qin Shihuang (259–210 B.C.), China's first emperor, employed the labour of over 700,000 men in building a tomb complex that was organized among four large pits, that together contain thousands of life-sized terracotta warriors, chariots, and horses, all of which were deemed necessary to guard the emperor in the afterlife. The emperor destroyed those aspects of culture that threatened his authority, burning books and killing thinkers who did not share his point of view. Narratives such as this have resurfaced again and again across centuries and continents and have been fundamental in the formation of Wanxin Zhang's view of the world.

Wanxin Zhang relocated from Changchun to San Francisco in 1992 to attend the Academy of Art University, earning an M.F.A. in sculpture. Upon moving to California, he returned to clay after being exposed to the American Clay Revolution and the work of the Bay Area Figurative and Funk art movements as represented by artists Peter Voulkos, Robert Arneson, Stephen De Staebler, and Manuel Neri, among others. These movements emerged in the 1950s and 60s primarily in the northern California art scene and elevated work in clay from "craft" to "art." Voulkos preached spontaneity and encouraged emphatic evidence of the artist's hand in the work. Arneson's work was more refined than that of Voulkos, which took the form of high-energy sculptures that often incorporated self-deprecating or self-reflective humour. De Staebler achieved monumentality of form with clay in his life-sized figures, while Neri, by contrast, dwelt on relatively fragile figuration. For Wanxin Zhang, at this point in his career, and given the powerful influences at work in the San Francisco Bay Area, the selection of clay as a primary medium was not a choice but a necessity. This was a material with unmatched expressive potential that could be physically, emotionally, and spiritually manipulated and transformed.

When one enters the Catharine Clark Gallery, one is met with a fairly minimal installation, yet there is little opportunity for visual rest as the viewer is immediately assaulted by a need for engagement, a powerful and alluring element present in Wanxin Zhang's work. This is in part due to the scale of the sculptures, some of which are larger than life. Through the orientation of the figures, many of which face opposite directions, each piece competes for attention while operating independently of the others. The juxtaposition of opposing and contradictory forms and relationships among pieces is visually compelling and prompts the viewer to examine the work ever more closely. The title of the exhibition, *Totem*, suggests ambiguity in that it could be understood to allude to the totemic pole sculptures of the Pacific Northwest. Animals, characters, and objects are assembled in Wanxin Zhang's work to generate a larger narrative that may only be decipherable if one understands the symbolic meaning of each element.



Wanxin Zhang, *Totem*, installation view. Left to right: *Warrior with Color Face*, 2009; *Solo Roamer*, 2013; *Special Ambassador*, 2011, fired clay with glaze. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

During an interview I conducted with Wanxin Zhang, the artist discussed the influence on his work of the aforementioned *shanshui*, a form of Chinese Expressionist landscape painting that rose to prominence during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 A.D.). This style of painting is composed via a two-dimensional technique of multiple vanishing points that Wanxin Zhang manages to capture in three-dimensional sculpture, thus stressing competing focal points and forcing the viewer's focus to zig-zag from point to point within the room as well as within each piece.

From an initial drawing, Wanxin Zhang begins each work by creating a personal structural vocabulary that is used to build out surface details. The artist explores where and how to leave and create textures on the overall form, including hand marks such as fingertip impressions, traces of pinched and pushed clay, or marks left by various tools that carve, incise, and stamp. The texture on the figures maps the texture of the artist's experience in the process of creation and instills a visceral connection with the viewer that permits one to trace the movement involved in the making of the work. *Solo Roamer* (2013), a towering figure that stands seven feet tall, is a strong example of how Wanxin Zhang builds surfaces in this way.

Special Ambassador (2011) is another impressive larger-than-life sculpture. Half panda, half man, this ominous figure fills the viewer with a sense of foreboding while at the same time conveying exhaustion and defeat. The figure's mouth is a bloodied open gash, and its eyes are tightly swollen shut, yet they still seem to track the viewer's presence and movement in the gallery. Wanxin Zhang is a master at creating figures that look simultaneously powerful and powerless; the intensity of this juxtaposition is again amplified by the surface treatment of the work. The size and structure of the pieces is domineering and strong, yet the texture—cracks, scarring, imperfections—suggests fragility. This speaks to the strength and vulnerability of human nature while reflecting the emotional intensity of the artist. Wanxin Zhang has alluded to some of his works as self-portraits. That being said, at times it is uncertain whether the artist is merely

Left and right: Wanxin Zhang, *Special Ambassador*, 2011, fired clay with glaze, 198.1 x 60.9 x 53.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.



commenting openly about himself or examining, in some personal way, larger issues such as the human condition in the context of globalization, politics, and culture.

The tension that is evident in his process is essential to the experience of Wanxin Zhang's work. The surfaces are relentlessly manipulated, and the choice of colour for the glazes, the application of Chinese decals and characters, the graffiti and mark-making, and the adding or removing of layers of clay all produce a surface that makes palpable Wanxin Zhang's memories and life experiences, as if he is charting a personal journey from East to West. Prior to his departure from China, Wanxin Zhang was asked by a major newspaper what kind of art he would create after arriving to the United States? He responded, "Wherever I go, whatever I end up working with, will be guided by my Chinese roots with the pure intention of expressing who I am."²

Wanxin Zhang, *Tomorrow will be fine!*, 2012–13, fired clay with glaze, 134.6 x 43.1 x 38.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.



There are moments throughout the exhibition that showcase Wanxin Zhang's humour. *Tomorrow will be fine!* (2012–13), a white sculpture measuring over four feet tall and modeled after Guanyin, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, is rooted in history yet executed in a contemporary style. Her right hand gestures a sign of peace, while her other seeks a replacement, an exposed dowel hole highlighting her missing forearm. The figure's face is brushed with muted tones of primary colours that cover a somber expression.



Spring Whistling (2014), slightly smaller in stature, is a white monochromatic figure with Chinese snowscape decal details that have been highlighted in shimmering silver paint and punctuated occasionally with bright colour. The figure is male and at first glance looks quite normal, as if he is out for a walk. Upon closer inspection, however, the viewer notices a giant bulge in the crotch area that is shocking and humorous and alludes to a Chinese story about what

Wanxin Zhang, *Spring Whistling*, 2014, fired clay with glaze, 121.9 x 38.1 x 45.7 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

really exists under monks' robes. This sculpture, among others, gives the viewer a place for respite from the looming gravity of the other works.

Wanxin Zhang is skilled at employing glazes and textures that mimic metals, dripped wax, or hard candy. Often firing his figures half a dozen times, the artist uses underglazes as stains to emphasize the rich surface texture. He creates layers of colour and textures that drip, pour, and splash, and that connect his aesthetic to the spontaneity and gestural excitement of Abstract Expressionist and action painters of the 1950s and 60s such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline—an influence that became embedded in Wanxin Zhang's work primarily through the examples of Peter Voulkos and Robert Arneson.



In *The Refluent Tide* (2009), Wanxin Zhang recalls Michelangelo's *Pieta* with surfaces that are, in contrast to the work of Michelangelo, informed by a heavy hand. In Michelangelo's version, Mary cradles her son Christ as he lay dying in her arms. In Wanxin Zhang's version, the sculpture is heavily imbued with sensuality. The mother, representing the West, holds her son to her exposed bosom and provides a soft receptiveness and forgiving presence that could be seen as contrasting with

Wanxin Zhang, *The Refluent Tide (Pieta)*, 2009, fired clay with glaze, 60.9 x 60.9 x 81.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

Wanxin Zhang's childhood experience in Mao's China. The influence of the East is further exemplified by the blue-and-white patterned glaze that alludes to the *Qinghua ci* variety of Chinese porcelain, which originated in the Yuan dynasty during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Here, a landscape suggesting oceans and mountains melts into pools of patterns derived from dripping glaze, merging the second and third dimension into one powerful expression. The female figure cradles the male figure and offers comfort while the surface dissolves as if fading from memory.

Twin Peaks (2014) represents something of a departure from Wanxin Zhang's earlier work. Colour preferences have shifted to ones that are

Wanxin Zhang, *Twin Peaks* (detail), 2014, fired clay with glaze and decals, 71.1 x 35.5 x 30.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.



heightened in tone, surfaces are covered in painterly Chinese decals with images and calligraphy, and bodies have become truncated. Two men stand intimately beside one another, largely occupying the same space and seemingly becoming one. The surface of their forms beams in a bright yellow glaze and intricate decals that, together, create forceful textures that compete with the flashes of bold primary colours. The title of the piece alludes to a scenic drive above San Francisco's gay

Castro district, where men meet. The surface is thoughtfully composed of crimson mountainous landscapes, bright foliage with summer blooms, butterflies, and rabbits, accompanied by deconstructed text from which only one legible word emerges—"hi."

Wanxin Zhang, *Pink Warrior*, 2013, fired clay with glaze, 144.7 x 53.3 x 58.4 cm, installed with *Bricks*, 2014, fired clay, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.



Pink Warrior (2013), cleverly installed in proximity to the non-figurative work *Bricks* (2013), is a life-sized sculpture coated in shiny, bubble gum-pink glaze. The colour of the figure is contemporary, yet the style of dress is traditional, with the hair tied in a topknot. *Pink Warrior* seems to be in a state of halting motion with his body largely in a state of decay. The figure is missing his hands while the entire surface area of the piece is again worn and textured with punctures, cracks, and graffiti. The head and face

are only partially formed, suggesting uncertainty as to whether the figure is in a state of formation or losing its form. The heavy working of the clay and shiny glaze suggests a liquid state, and the figure overall seems to be melting away, taking with it its culture and traditions. At a recent interview at the Catharine Clark Gallery, Wanxin Zhang shared that *Pink Warrior* is a comment on contemporary culture and consumer attitudes. He sees global consumerism as a threat to culture and freedom of choice both now and in the future. It is not surprising then, that the elements of *Bricks*, some of which bear Western graffiti, lie strewn behind the figure's feet like debris, remnants of monuments to a past of great consequence such as the Great Wall or the Berlin Wall, each for sale at a price. This paradox, offering for sale things that ought not to have been for sale in the first place, again showcases Wanxin Zhang's sense of dark, ironic humour—an aspect of his work that helps make his more difficult narratives more digestible.

Notes

1. Richard Whittaker, "Portfolio: Wanxin Zhang," *Works and Conversations* (December 2012), 42.
2. Wanxin Zhang, e-mail correspondence with the author, January 5, 2015.