

Art in Review: "Wanxin Zhang: Warriors of Soul"

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Wanxin Zhang sculptures

Wanxin Zhang: left to right, General (detail), 2010, fired clay and pigment; Panda Warrior, 2010, fired clay and pigment; First Step, 2012, fired clay with glaze

A genogram is a family tree illustration that can be used to trace ancestral patterns of behavior, similarities of appearance, and medical, psychological, and religious factors, revealing our predecessors' legacy — good and bad — for us. Creating a personal genogram can lead to major breakthroughs in self-awareness — for example, the recognition that alcoholism, red hair, diabetes, musical talent, divorce, or faith seem to run in one's family. China-born artist Wanxin Zhang's figurative sculptures, based on the terra-cotta funerary army created for the first Chinese emperor, speak to the issues of ancestry and heritage in a similarly powerful way.

Zhang, who has been working in the United States for about 20 years, has integrated the weight of Chinese history and contemporary culture into his hand-built, slab-based figures, which range from about 2 feet tall to life-size. Constructed of the same materials as the Qin Dynasty warriors that were discovered in 1974, the abstracted figures are glazed in

strong hues; their shiny surfaces feature cracks, deep fissures, pebbling, and layered drips of multiple colors. They wear garments that approximate the ancient warriors' heavy tiered robes, and their hair is drawn up into topknots. Some bear Chinese characters and carefully wrought clay buttons, loops, and other clothing notions on their surfaces.

If Zhang had stopped there in his attempt to create what he calls "a new genre of warriors," we would be disappointed. Instead he has explored who they might be today, if they were the descendants of the third-century B.C. army. It's a dual narrative: one, it raises questions about the people upon whom the warriors were modeled, and two, it juxtaposes the art techniques and style of third-century B.C. China with those of today. Headly but accessible stuff.

Zhang has been influenced by the contemporary American ceramics movement, most obviously by California clay pioneer Peter Voulkos, whose macho abstract-expressionist sculptures were among the first to be labeled as fine art rather than craft in the United States. Likewise the Funk Art movement of the 1960s and '70s, with its absurdist commentary, shows up in Zhang's work. Half of the 10 figures in the exhibit wear tiny round wire-framed glasses à la John Lennon, and Zhang's palette is decidedly pop. The bespectacled figure in *Purple Trip* wears an orange-streaked puce garment and has an odd stance that suggests his mind is definitely elsewhere. The prominent bulge in the region of his crotch is definitely Funk-y. *Skateboarder*, another cool dude wearing wire-frames, boasts a glassy black and green surface and rides a board marbled in psychedelic hues.

But Zhang's work is not all whimsical. *General*, the largest of the works, has those little round opaque glasses, but he's also got an enormous pair of binoculars around his neck, suggesting he has been spying on someone or something. The figure's structure and surface is the most symmetrical, balanced, and detailed of all those in the exhibit. The kiln can no doubt be credited for the deep cracks in his forehead that add to his mysterious presence. He is serious, heavy, and imposing — but his pants and shoes are color-spattered like a painter's. Is the *General* but a worker in disguise?

Another piece brings politics more blatantly into the exhibit. *Big Hand Mao* depicts Chairman Mao Zedong holding a tiny red bloblike infant, perhaps referencing his creation — the People's Republic of China or Red China. The baby is only partly articulated, just as Mao's grand idea came to be seen as imperfect, even ugly.

Two works include a giant panda, the pop icon-ambassador of China: *Panda Warrior* is a two-sided figure, human on one side, pandalike on the other, with surfaces that seem to be melting. Is one morphing into the other, or are we to see their similar struggles for viability? In *Who's Better?*, a warrior looks down from his pedestal onto a much smaller panda, which appears to be attempting to run away — but the panda's foot is pinned beneath the man's heel. Perhaps in both of these pieces the panda represents China and the human the West, or more specifically, the U.S. *Who's Better?* suggests the absurdity of positing such a question.

As provocative as the panda pieces are, an untitled work situated as the centerpiece of the show is most powerful. From the front, the warrior is glazed a Ming Dynasty blue, and bears the same topknot and mustache as most of the figures in the exhibit. But part of his garment — in the area of his left chest — has melted away, revealing his vulnerable inner self, his heart. From behind, one can see that the figure was split, cut from head to toe before firing; the clay remainder has fallen down and folded into itself, now looking much like deteriorating or burned human flesh. On the back of the upright human façade the artist drew a skeleton. In English, he scratched words: “them ... his ... her ... mine ... us” and a series of Chinese characters. Though we may appear whole, we are all hiding a brokenness. We are as decrepit as this figure — yet here is sketched evidence that something endures even the worst violence.

Zhang reminds us that we all come with a history, like it or not; only if we acknowledge it can we understand ourselves today. As Carl Jung observed, what we do not bring to consciousness appears in our life as “fate.”

Concurrent with the Zhang exhibit is *Portrait of a Chinese Self*, an exhibit of new oils by Bay Area artist Hung Liu, who recently had a retrospective exhibition on display at the Oakland Museum of California. An exhibit of Liu's recent work shows through Sept. 29 at the San Jose Museum of Art, and she has work in major museum collections throughout the country. Her painted portraits are based on historical Chinese photographs and have a mythopoetic quality.

In the works at Turner Carroll, Liu depicts herself at various ages in China, ranging from a young girl, perhaps age 5, dressed like Shirley Temple, and as a teenager or 20-

something, painting with smuggled watercolors. Liu lived in China before, during, and after Mao's Cultural Revolution, and her artworks address her personal suffering as well as the collective experience of that time.