

By Richard Whittaker, December 2012

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PORTFOLIO

Wanxin
Zhang

OPPOSITE PAGE: *GOD BLESS YOU*, 2008, FIRED CLAY WITH GLAZE, 79" X 26" X 24"

I first saw Wanxin Zhang's work at an exhibit at the Bedford Gallery in Walnut Creek, California—*Contemporary Warriors*. It was one of those rare experiences, a truly memorable exhibit.

I remember standing in front of one after another of his monumental clay figures, trying to puzzle out the meaning in the artist's giving each figure goggles or sunglasses. Were these figures meant to be poseurs making fashion statements? Warriors only in appearance? Did the glasses mean to say that the inner world of these warriors was hidden from us? Or perhaps we were to





WANXIN ZHANG (UPPER FIGURE), ONE OF THREE ARTISTS COMMISSIONED TO MAKE A MONUMENTAL STATUE OF MAO

understand that each contemporary warrior's capacity to see was occluded or filtered in some way. Naturally this would be true for each of us, warriors or not. But somehow none of my ponderings about his giving his warriors glasses left me feeling satisfied. Instead, this device continued to cast its spell on me. But there was so much more to consider, not only what was conveyed in each figure's body language, but in its scale and surface treatment. There was a heroic quality conveyed in these figures, or maybe dignity is a better word. Perhaps there was an echo in some pieces of the stylized Soviet or Maoist heroic worker (and before he left China, Wanxin worked on commissions of such pieces). But rather than each figure standing for a class of citizen, a warrior in this case, each had the distinctive quality of the individual. And was there something to be defended, a war to be fought? The heroism of these contemporary warriors, it seemed to me, was that of facing our existential condition.

I found it interesting to be involved with these questions and unable to come up with a summarizing judgment. Since that first exposure, I've seen considerably more of this artist's work. It's complex and layered.

And it does what successful art does best. It bypasses the rationalizing part of ourselves and delivers something complex and layered immediately. One receives something directly without talking to oneself.

What is it, I wonder, that's so refreshing about this artist's work? Perhaps it has to do with its power to provide a place where some of our deep questions find resonance. It's as if a space is made available which otherwise is lacking in our day-to-day lives, that is a space for such deep questioning. There is something intimate about that, and something nourishing.

Of course, it's impossible to ignore the fact that Wanxin is Chinese. When he left China to come to the U.S. he was already a well-trained and established sculptor. And clearly, his warrior figures stand in reference to the astonishing archeological find near Xian in Shaanxi Province in China, where thousands of terra cotta warriors dating from the 3rd century BCE were unearthed. In reference to this terra cotta army Wanxin remarked to me, "It's easy to think that the emperor's army was a glorious thing, but the power of that emperor, how was it used?" He added, "Like so many others of my generation, I grew up [cont. p. 42]



WHO AM I? 2000, FIRED CLAY WITH GLAZE, 42" X 13" X 12"



WINTER GREEN, 2006-7, FIRED CLAY WITH GLAZE, 76" X 28" X 24"





What would it be like to come from a culture of Maoist conformity to a culture rooted in freedom for the individual?

thinking Mao was a god."

I've had the pleasure of visiting Wanxin and his wife, painter Diane Ding, a number of times. Both love to talk about art. At one point Wanxin asked me, "Do you think of me as a Chinese artist?" I knew what he was asking.

It's impossible not to be aware that Wanxin is Chinese. And it's also clear that his warrior figures are deeply rooted as works of art in, and draw meaning from, cultural references that are specifically Chinese. And yet it's clear that his work cannot be measured only by these references. The mastery of his handling of the clay and the beauty of his work transcends cultural boundaries. I cannot help thinking of Wanxin as belonging to a new generation of artists who live in a world in which national boundaries have less and less



ABOVE: *THREE FRIENDS*, 2009, FIRED CLAY WITH GLAZE, 25" X 12" X 11"

OPPOSITE PAGE: *SPECIAL AMBASSADOR*, 2011, FIRED CLAY WITH GLAZE, 78" X 24" X 21"
IN THE BACKGROUND IS A PAINTING BY WANXIN'S WIFE, ARTIST DIANE DING

significance. And in Wanxin's case, it seems obvious that an immersion in our culture of individualism has had a profound impact. What would it be like to come from a culture of Maoist conformity to a culture rooted in freedom for the individual? It's hard to imagine, but in thinking about this artist's work, this imponderable fact cannot be overlooked. If anything, the taste of individual freedom is something this artist has taken to heart. As he said to me, "Yes, there's great freedom here. The artist can do anything. But the question is, what?" He laughed. It's a problem for artists in the U.S. But it's not his problem. Coming from a culture of suppression, he has grasped the gift of freedom with a vengeance; Wanxin is prolific.

Here is an artist of real power. Everyone should have the chance to see more of his work and if the trajectory of his career today continues, all of us will have many more chances for that.—R. Whittaker



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IN WANXIN'S STUDIO



SPRING TIDE, 2001, FIRED CLAY WITH GLAZE, 51" X 20" X 14"