PRESS RELEASE

Zhang Huan

14 July – 31 August 2014
Pace Chesa Büsin, Zuoz, Switzerland

Following the success of Carte Blanche, the inaugural exhibition presented at the project space Chesa Büsin, in Zuoz, Switzerland, Pace is delighted to present a retrospective of Zhang Huan’s œuvre from 14 July to 31 August 2014.

Zhang Huan is one of the most influential and provocative contemporary artists working today. Spanning the artist’s twenty-year career, the exhibition will feature some of the artist’s most iconic works and emphasize Zhang Huan’s ability to move fluidly between performance, video, photography, work on paper, painting, sculpture and installation.

The exhibition explores the central themes of Buddhism, existentialism and the limits of the human body that have dominated Zhang Huan’s work. It features works created between 1994 and 2014 in Beijing, New York and Shanghai where the artist respectively lived and worked. “I combine impressions of China, with local culture, what people call glocal. It’s going from one place to another, and bringing what you have to offer to each new place.” Zhang Huan, March 2002.

The expressive potential of the human body and the self-portrait are at the core of Zhang Huan’s performances staged in Beijing in the 1990s. Zhang Huan at Chesa Büsin features a photographic still from his renowned performance 12 Square Meters (1994) in which the artist inflicted extreme conditions upon his naked body, drawing inspiration from performance artists of the 1960s. The artist challenges the vulnerability and durability of the human body by sitting for an hour in a humid public latrine in the ‘East Village’ of Beijing, where he lived at the time, covered in honey, fish sauce and swarming flies. Like many of his performance pieces, 12 Square Meters exemplifies his fascination with his immediate experiences; a situation that allows him to reveal the truth of human nature.

Also on view are photographs from his ‘½ (meat) and ½ (meat + text)’ (1998) performance. Drawing upon Rembrandt’s The Slaughtered Ox (1638) and Francis Bacon’s meat paintings, Huan juxtaposes human and animal flesh alongside Chinese calligraphy, thus bringing together eastern and western traditions. In the first work he stands naked holding an animal carcass, evocative of a Chinese warrior’s suit of armor, and in the second he is covered in Chinese calligraphy. Together these elements reveal two warring sides of human nature, the civilized and rational versus the primitive and animalistic. His body becomes the medium with which he can interrogate such dualistic universal concepts.

Zhang Huan’s intrigue with cultural and personal identity continues through the trajectory of his work, as evident in the photographic series ‘Family Tree’ (2000). Here nine portraits document the artist’s face being gradually covered in Chinese calligraphy slowly obscuring his image and thus his identity. The characters are executed by three calligraphers during the length of a day, mirroring the fading light of the sun as the day comes to a close. As the work progresses and his face disappears so too does his physiognomy.
which the Chinese believe reveals each person’s innate character. What is left in its place is a blackened layering of traditional Chinese stories indicating a cultural heritage that is imposed upon the individual. The self-portrait is therefore lost, “I cannot tell who I am. My identity has disappeared”.\(^2\)

Later in his career, a more contemplative theme emerges within Zhang Huan’s work as indicated by the recurring motif of the Buddha beginning in 2004. ‘Small Three Legged Buddha’ (2007), a highlight of the exhibition is a study for a large-scale installation commissioned for the courtyard of The Royal Academy in London. This piece, where the form of the Buddha has been rearranged, references the natural disappearance of ancient monuments that Zhang Huan experienced whilst travelling through Tibet. Just as his early performances meditated on the mental and physical endurance, so too do these sculptures but with an increased sense of calm. The work highlights what he calls his ‘spiritual development’. For him the image of the Buddha resonates not within a political context but like the rest of his work, as a universal symbol of man’s often fragile existence in nature.

In 2005 Zhang Huan moved from New York to Shanghai. He deliberately retired from the provocative performances that led to his success, and set up a studio to focus on creating paintings, objects and sculptures. The resulting Memory Doors, Ash and Spring Poppy Fields series rose from this new direction and further reference Buddhism and the Cultural Revolution.

The Memory Doors comprise of silkscreen prints of photographs from the 1920s to 1970s mounted on antique wooden doors salvaged from traditional Chinese houses being torn down in the Shanxi Province. The artist enlisted traditional craftsmen to carve portions of the images onto the doors creating a contemporary object using traditional means. The black and white images pasted on the doors relate to key historical events and social changes that have shaped recent Chinese history. Cannon (2008), for instance, features an image of Communist soldiers fighting the Kuomintang during China’s civil war.

Back in his homeland of China, Zhang Huan reconnected with his country’s ancestral traditions too and was struck by the number of Buddhist devotees who would pray and burn incense as offerings. He regularly visited Shanghai’s Longhua Temple and the ash soon became the metaphysical medium for both his paintings and sculpture and led to the Ash series. Zhang Huan has spoken about how, for him “all the dreams, aspirations, all the spiritual longings, all the ideas that people have” are infused into the ash. East Wind No. 6, (2011) presented in the exhibition depicts an elegant but dangerous wave inspired by the Japanese artist Hokusai.

Zhang Huan at Pace Chesa Büsín features several Spring Poppy Fields paintings. Alluding to Buddhist masks and the journey to nirvana, the recent Spring Poppy Fields (2014) series employs an almost pointillist technique that allows the artist to transmute the canvas into a field of psychedelic colours and motifs. Zhang Huan’s recurring use of skulls stems from the artist’s early performances.

Zhang Huan at Pace Chesa Buesin follows the critically-acclaimed Spring Poppy Fields exhibition presented at Pace London from 25 April to 31 May 2014 and continues the gallery’s ongoing commitment to the artist.

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The layers of ideas Zhang Huan (b. 1965, China) explored in his early performance art, conceived of as existential explorations and social commentaries, have carried through to the more traditional studio practice he embraced upon returning to China, after having lived and worked in New York City for eight years.

Zhang Huan attended Henan University, Kaifeng (1984-88) and received an MA from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1993. Zhang Huan gained international recognition for performance pieces such as 12 Square Meters (1994) and To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain (1995) that he developed while living in the artistic community known as the “Beijing East Village.” In 1998, the artist was included in Inside Out: New Chinese Art, organized by Asia Society and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center. During this exhibition he relocated to New York City, and over the course of the following eight years, created 13 performances and exhibited in five solo shows and more than 60 group exhibitions throughout the United States. The artist moved to Shanghai in 2006, where he opened the Zhang Huan Studio and established a Foundation.

In Spring 2014, Zhang Huan was awarded “Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur” by the French government in recognition of his outstanding contributions to the inheritance and communication of Chinese culture and the promotion of French-Chinese cultural and artistic exchanges. The honor was set up by Napoleon in 1802.

Most recently Zhang Huan has been the subject of major solo exhibitions worldwide including Zhang Huan: Soul and Matter, Forte di Belvedere and Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, July 8–October 13, 2013 and Looking East, Facing West: The World of Zhang Huan, Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, Grand Rapids, Michigan, May 24–August 25, 2013. Zhang Huan’s Spring Poppy Fields oil paintings were the subject of his first exhibition at Pace London, from April, 25-May 31, 2014.

Zhang Huan has also completed numerous public commissions worldwide. In 2010, Zhang Huan installed Three Heads, Six Arms, a 15-ton, two-story tall sculpture, considered the artist’s largest to date, in the plaza in front of San Francisco’s City Hall. The artist directed and designed the set for George Frideric Händel’s Semele, Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie de Munt, Brussels in 2009, which traveled to the Poly Theatre, Beijing in October 2010. Notable exhibitions and installations include: Zhang Huan: Altered States (2007-08) at the Asia Society, New York; Zhang Huan: Three-Legged Buddha, Royal Academy of Arts, Annenberg Courtyard, London (2007-8); Zhang Huan: Dawn of Time at Shanghai Art Museum (2010); and Zhang Huan: Hope Tunnel, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2010), his first retrospective at PAC, Milan (2010); among others. In 2009, the artist was the subject of a comprehensive monograph published by Phaidon Press as part of their “Contemporary Artists” series. Yilmaz Dziewior, director of the Kunstverein in Hamburg, and Robert Storr, Dean of the Yale School of Art, contributed essays, and an in-depth interview with the artist was conducted by curator and critic RoseLee Goldberg.

Zhang Huan’s work is part of nearly 50 public collections worldwide, including Center of Contemporary Art, Malaga, Spain; Centre national d’art et de culture Georges Pompidou, Paris; Denver Art Museum; The Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Australia; Philadelphia Museum of Art; S.M.A.K., The Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art Gent, Belgium; Saatchi Collection, London; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art;
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Storm King Art Center, New York; and Yale University Art Gallery, Connecticut, among others.

Zhang Huan lives and works in Shanghai, China.

OPENING TIMES AND CONTACT DETAILS

Pace Chesa Büsin is open from Tuesday through Saturday, 3 pm – 7 pm and / or by appointment. To schedule an appointment, please call +41 (0) 81 850 1103 or email chesabuesin@pacegallery.com

NOTES TO EDITORS

Pace

Pace is a leading contemporary art gallery representing many of the most significant international artists and estates of the 20th and 21st centuries. Founded by Arne Glimcher in Boston in 1960 and led by Marc Glimcher, Pace has been a constant, vital force in the art world and has introduced many renowned artists’ work to the public for the first time. Pace has mounted more than 700 exhibitions, including scholarly exhibitions that have subsequently travelled to museums, and published nearly 400 exhibition catalogues. Today Pace has eight permanent locations worldwide: four in New York; two in London; one in Beijing and one in Hong Kong and two temporary spaces: one in Zuoz, Switzerland and one in Menlo Park, in California.

Over the past two years, Chesa Büsin has been meticulously renovated by renowned Engadin architects Ruch & Partners to create a unique environment combining an underground gallery with two outdoor spaces and a partially exposed barn tower. Chesa Büsin also features private viewing rooms accompanied by traditional, yet modernised, living areas.

Zuoz is considered the most well preserved village in the Engadin valley featuring typical traditional houses. Every August, the town hosts the Engadin Art Talks curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, co-Director of Exhibitions and Programmes and Director of International Projects of the Serpentine Gallery in London and Beatrix Ruf, Director and Curator of the Kunsthalle in Zürich. Other exhibition spaces located in Zuoz include the Castell Hotel.

For press inquiries, please contact:

London: Nicolas Smirnoff, nicolas@pacegallery.com / +44 203 206 7613
NY: Madeline Lieberberg, mlieberberg@pacegallery.com / +1 212 421 8987

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Image: Zhang Huan, East Wind No. 6, 2011, ash on linen, 100 cm x 150 cm (39-1/2 x 59-1/4”) © Zhang Huan, courtesy Pace Gallery