

04/30/2013 04:42 PM

**Chinese Artist Zhao Zhao**

## **'I Try To Resist Being Tamed'**



Maurice Weiss/ DER SPIEGEL

Chinese artist Zhao Zhao is pictured at the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin. The artist currently has a show in the German capital at the Alexander Ochs Gallery. He will also be part of an exhibition at the museum.

**In an interview, Chinese artist Zhao Zhao, who has a new exhibition in Berlin, discusses the state harassment he has experienced, his role as a troublemaker and why, recently, he is spending more time on his art than activism.**

*Of China's young artists, Zhao Zhao, 30, is one of the most provocative. For a long time, he worked together with Ai Weiwei. A new show of his work opened over the weekend at Berlin's Alexander Ochs Gallery. SPIEGEL conducted a brief interview with the artist shortly before the opening of "Zhao Zhao: Nothing Inside II".*

**SPIEGEL:** Herr Zhao, shortly after you gave an [interview](#) to SPIEGEL last summer, you were arrested. Was there a connection between the two events?

**Zhao:** At first glance, no. I had argued with two construction workers who were driving their vehicle toward me in the wrong direction on the motorway. They then hit me with shovels. I called the police, but in the end it was me who ended up in jail.

**SPIEGEL:** What happened to you?

**Zhao:** I was held in investigative custody without any reason for 12 days. In a cell with seven wooden cots for 14 people. During the first days, I didn't have a cot, and I also wasn't permitted to stretch out on the floor. I had to stand or squat. Of course people knew I was a painter. But the only person who really said it was the official who was responsible for the fingerprinting. He told me that he was an artist, too. He probably thought I could be useful to him, and said we should stay in touch.

**SPIEGEL:** During the past year, a large share of your work was seized.

**Zhao:** Yes, I seem to be known to the authorities and sometimes I unfortunately even provoke them - without meaning to.

**SPIEGEL:** What do you mean?

**Zhao:** There was a second arrest.

**SPIEGEL:** What happened?

**Zhao:** It wasn't that long ago and it happened in the village of Dongshigu. The famous blind regime critic Chen Guangcheng, who had campaigned against forced abortions, had lived there under a kind of house arrest until he was able to get to safety last year. Now he lives in the US. I asked his mother to describe to me how at the time he climbed over walls and crossed the courtyards of neighboring houses. I wanted to film this escape path of a blind man. But in one of the courtyards I discovered something living in a dark cement shed.

**SPIEGEL:** What did you see?

**Zhao:** There was a bedraggled man squatting there. Apparently he had been held there for years.

**SPIEGEL:** So it was a coincidence that you discovered him?

**Zhao:** Yes. It appeared to be a case of vigilante justice. He was being housed in a sort of outdoor cell. It had a floor, three walls of concrete, the fourth comprised of steel bars. I was shocked and offered him a cigarette. Then the party functionary responsible for the village found me. My assistants and I were then pursued and I hid somewhere. I was found the next morning and I was held for 16 hours.

**SPIEGEL:** One of your best-known works is a sculpture of a police officer who is lying on a floor that has been broken into large pieces. You are accused because of your art and your friendship with Ai Weiwei ...

**Zhao:** ... Ai Weiwei and I have often been warned, and forbidden, from meeting.



"I live under circumstances of change, of uncertainties," the artist told SPIEGEL. Pictured here is an untitled oil on canvas featured in the show.

**SPIEGEL:** Despite this, you have been permitted to travel to Berlin where you have an exhibition opening and will soon be part of an exhibition at the Museum for Asian Art. How is that possible?

**Zhao:** Perhaps I am creating the impression that I am no longer such a major troublemaker.

**SPIEGEL:** Is that impression correct?

**Zhao:** One or two years ago, it was hardly possible for me to exhibit my work. Since then, I have been trying to be more of an artist and less of an activist. I have my language as an artist. In July I had another show in Beijing, but we didn't know until the last minute whether another ban would be imposed. On the day of the opening, we darkened the gallery rooms and the guests couldn't see my work -- or at least only with the light of their mobile phones.



**SPIEGEL:** Has the Chinese state tamed you to a certain degree?

**Zhao:** There are lines that you can't cross in this state. I try to resist being tamed as an artist.

**SPIEGEL:** In Berlin, you are also showing a painting that shows Ai Weiwei in an interrogation situation. It's astounding that you've been able to take it out of the country.

**Zhao:** I don't know how my art dealer did that.

**SPIEGEL:** You painted your new images at home because you had to give up your studio, thus the smaller formats.

**Zhao:** Yes, I live under the circumstances of change, of uncertainties. One of my paintings shows a piece of flat bread. My parents, innocent people who grew up in exile, are constantly worried that I will wind up in jail again or that I could have other troubles. I could starve. So they send me bread each month.

*Interview conducted by Ulrike Knöfel*

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