The Shape of Art to Come

From independent curators to directors of major institutions, meet the individuals shaping perceptions of art in Hong Kong.
One of China’s most provocative modern artists, Zhao Zhao has emerged from the shadow of his mentor, Ai Weiwei, and is making waves in his own right. Hannah Hodson talks to him ahead of his exhibition Zhao Zhao cut into pieces to resemble a gunshot

How have you developed this theme from past works? Many of my works have an element of event to them. I have always been attracted to sudden events. Events contain the potential for danger, which fits with my current theme of security.

You work in a number of different mediums, from film to paint, what inspires you to move from one to another? Art is not limited to a particular form, and I have an aversion to convention and art styles. Different mediums are not an impediment for me. I can use them all. I am more interested in the development of the artwork itself.

How long did it take to create these pieces and did you have to work with any challenging new materials? I spent a year creating the works I have brought to Hong Kong. There wasn’t really any challenge in the production. I think the only challenge is that the material is figuring out how to transform a real material into something that is at once part of reality and detached from reality.

Your family was exiled to Shihui, Xinjiang, do you think this inspired you in some way to create anti-conformist art? I have never thought about whether art should be against something, and have never seen myself as anti-conformist. I don’t think people in our country are anti-conformist. Our society is not built on rules and order as in the West. There is no order to the various things, big and small, that happen to us every day. Many people break the rules. Since the rules that have been set for our society were not made with people in mind, they aren’t really suited to people’s lives. Perhaps they are suited to the benefits of a particular group. Having always lived in this kind of social structure, people pick up a mentality of admiration for high-speed, for the breaking of rules. They think that whoever can break the rules to get things done is fucking awesome.

How do you see the future of art in China? There is a false sense of security in China. Many of my works are about freedom of expression, so in the West, they are paying attention to what it is like in China.

Security is a central theme in this exhibition, can you tell readers how you reflect this theme in the artwork? When there is a lack of security, it implies there is an impending threat of a crisis. For example, lighters are connected to security. They are flammable and explosive, but they are also very inexpensive, everyday products. Iimaile one with white jade, turning it into a useless object. The ‘safe’ (in the exhibition) is very straightforward—it is a tool of prevention and a cover for security, but I used marble to make a safe that can’t be opened. This is a type of threat.

Audiences, because the relationship between Hong Kong and the mainland just can’t seem to spark a flame. Prior to working with Ai Weiwei, was your art political, or did he inspire you to create anti-authoritarian art? In 1999, right as I was about to enter college, a performance artwork I was doing was stopped by the State Security Bureau. I was taken away for investigation, and placed under surveillance for a year. I didn’t officially enter college until 2000. I began working with Ai Weiwei after I graduated in 2004. In our ten years together, we did a lot of things and encountered many incidents together. These experiences helped me to clearly see my own direction.

What role does art have in politics? The role of art is perhaps to present a more precise ‘extraction’—it extracts from reality, but what you see is still reality.

You relay emotions and events from China which are often not reported by the state, what has been your reaction to your work being like abroad? The West is certainly on the path to democracy and freedom, and many of my works are about freedom of expression, so in the West, they are paying attention to what it is like in China.

Has this ever made you want to stop making political art, or has it made you even more determined? Beyond mere amusement, if you touch on anything solid, you come across the real reason. Their means of dealing with dissenters is to demonize them. How do you see the future of art in Hong Kong? The real reason is that they actually believe they can determine what is art… Oh my god!