

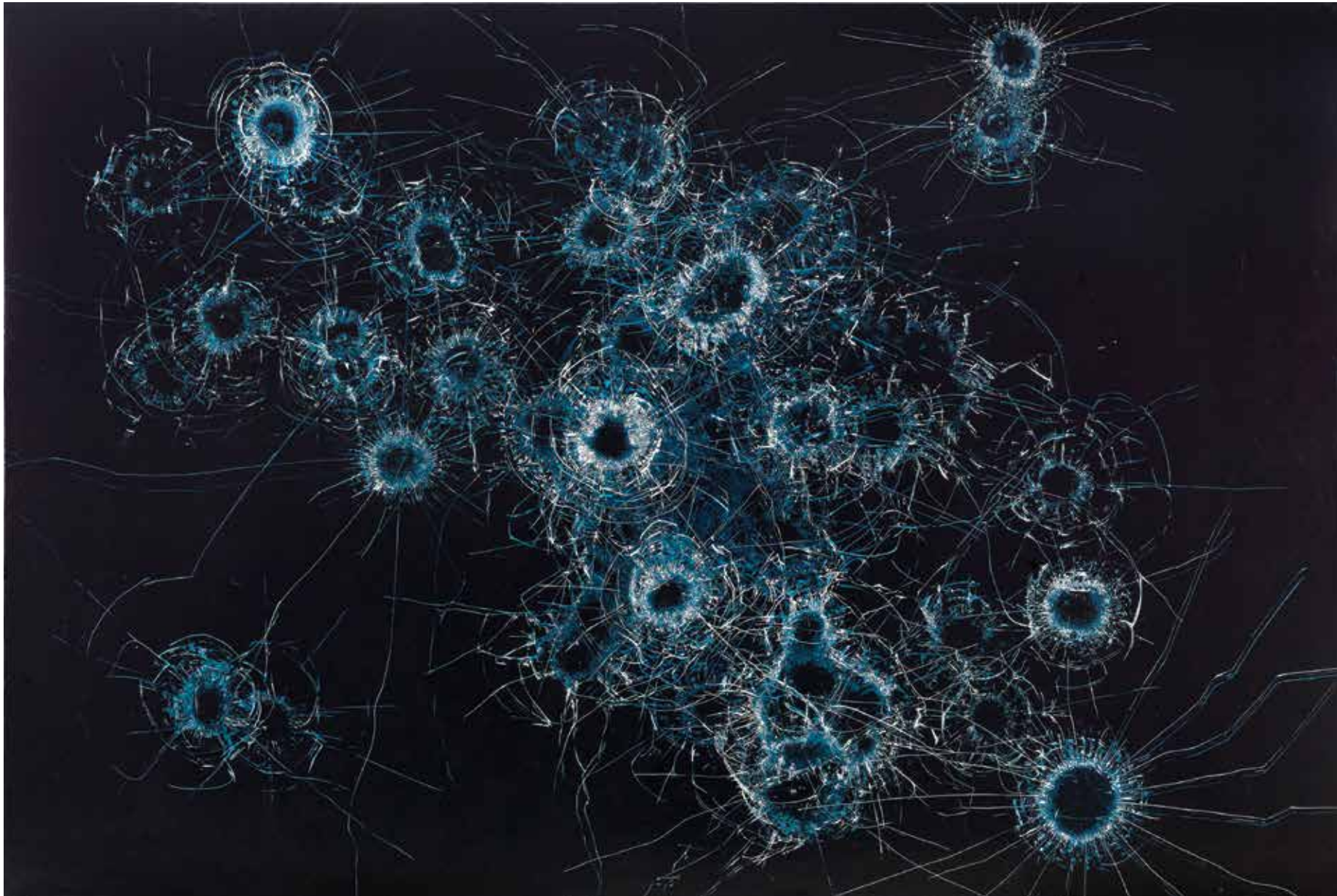


ZHAO

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By Michael Young

UNLIKELY
ACTIVIST



Zhao Zhao

In 1999, contemporary Chinese artist Zhao Zhao was a rebellious 18-year-old planning a performance work to celebrate getting into Xinjiang Institute of Arts (now the Xinjiang Arts University). Inspired by *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995), the performance in which ten young artists of the Beijing East Village (the short-lived avant-garde arts community of the 1990s), including Zhang Huan, gathered on Miaofeng Mountain and stacked their naked bodies on top of each other to add a meter to the mountain's height, Zhao was carefully planning his own foray into public nudity. His intention was to strip naked and run through the streets of Xinjiang, a deliberately incendiary act considering the sensitivity of the province's largely Muslim Uighur population. The police heard about Zhao's plans through local media coverage and hauled the young artist in for questioning. The performance was duly canceled and the artist was kept under surveillance for one year.

More than a decade has passed and Zhao's practice continues to exhibit a similar streak of provocation. The artist—whose work ranges freely across painting, sculpture, installation, performance and photography—was born in Shihezi in Xinjiang in 1982 and grew

up in the remote Uighur Autonomous Region in northwest China. His family, wealthy landowners of Han Chinese descent, had been exiled there in 1952 for political reeducation during the anti-rightist campaigns of the 1950s, which were designed by the government to purge the Communist Party of capitalists and those who resisted collectivization. There in Xinjiang, the indigenous Uighur Muslims resented the influx of Han Chinese, not only for the latter's state-sanctioned displays of racial discrimination, which curbed the former's religious and cultural expression, but also because the Uighurs have always believed that their land was unfairly taken from them. "I always felt like an outsider there," Zhao tells me through an interpreter. Being Han among the largely Uighur population imbued in Zhao a sense of separateness and the feeling that he was part of an unjust colonial system, he said in a 2012 interview published online by Next Media Hong Kong. His family stayed in Xinjiang during the 1960s and '70s and moved to Beijing in the early '80s, as Mao's authoritarianism slowly dissolved during the reign of Deng Xiaoping.

Zhao confesses to having had a nonconformist nature while he was young. It could easily have led him to become a hoodlum, he says, if it were not for an elderly martial arts instructor in Xinjiang—an exiled visual artist who, having seen examples of Zhao's drawing, pushed him toward art. This, along with a chance encounter Zhao

had with a book on Picasso in a local bookstore while seeking inspiration—"The work looked weird," he remembers—helped him channel his delinquent tendencies into that of an artistic agitator.

Now 33 years old, Zhao is tall—his height perhaps attributable to his Shandong ancestry. He wears his hair close-cropped, has a neat goatee and is slow to smile. When we meet in January at his Caochangdi studio—he has two studios in Beijing, the other is in Songzhuang—he seems a touch reserved. My first impression is of a very serious young man, perhaps even shy. There is little evidence in either his demeanor or physical environment of an artist with a reputation for being antiauthoritarian, or one who has on many occasions attracted government scrutiny and police attention since his attempted performance in 1999.

Going the Weiwei Way

Starting in the 1980s, a kind of hooligan culture (*liumang*) was fomenting in China. Noted author-director Wang Shuo has written novels and screenplays that crystallize the feelings of ennui and confusion experienced by the post-Cultural Revolution generation. The countercultural wave was embraced by listless youth—and artists—trying to find their place in the rapidly modernizing nation. This was the milieu Zhao found upon his return to Beijing in 2004, after graduating with a BFA from the Xinjiang Institute of Arts a year earlier. He was able to take up a position at the Beijing Film Academy through an exchange program run by the Institute, to which he applied because, in his words, "I wanted to learn to be a director. I had seen a documentary and it interested me." He spent several months studying film before being invited by artist Ai Weiwei to become his assistant.

Prior to their meeting, there were already links between their two families. Ai had also grown up in Xinjiang with his exiled father, the poet Ai Qing, who had also been accused of being a rightist. "My uncle was Weiwei's teacher at primary school. This is why he and I have a special bond. He invited me to come and work with him at FAKE Design," Zhao says, referring to Ai's architecture studio.

The young artist stayed with Ai Weiwei for seven formative years, working as the cameraman on many of the senior artist's film projects. *Changan Boulevard* (2004) was the first film Zhao shot for Ai: over the course of one month, Zhao walked the 45-kilometer-long road that divides Beijing on an east-west axis and runs past Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City. Every 50 meters, Zhao filmed whatever was in front of the camera for one minute. More than ten hours long, the film is composed of 608 such one-minute

(Previous spread)
FRAGMENTS, 2013, steel, 200 x 300 x 5 cm.

(Opposite page)
CONSTELLATION NO.8, 2014,
oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm.

(This page)
Zhao Zhao in his studio in Caochangdi, Beijing.
Photo by Michael Young for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York/Beijing.



(This page, top)
TOOTHPICKS (detail), 2007, C-print,
set of 3; 100 x 50 cm each.

(This page, bottom)
AGAIN, 2012, white marble, limestone
and other stones, 150 x 150 x 150 cm.

(Opposite page, top)
HAPPENING A-100-12, 2007, ink jet
print on aluminum dibond, documentary
photographs, 33 x 50 cm each. Courtesy
Alexander Ochs Private, Berlin.

(Opposite page, bottom)
SKY NO. 5, 2015, oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm.
Photo by Carl Henrik Tillberg. Courtesy
Carl Kostyál, London/Stockholm.



segments and presents a collage of a city changing under the yoke of rapid development. Other more politically sensitive projects followed, such as Ai's *Disturbing the Peace* (2009). The story chronicles Ai's support for Chinese activist Tan Zuoren, who was imprisoned for highlighting the link between shoddy government-approved school construction and the deaths of students during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Zhao was also the cameraman on *Fairytale* (2007), a documentary about Ai's performance piece for Documenta 12, in which the elder artist invited and transported 1,001 Chinese people to Kassel, Germany.

Ai mentored the young artist and the two established a rapport that exists to this day. But Zhao points out he is no longer Ai's acolyte, but rather a friend. "Ai thinks of me as a little brother," he says.

Working with Ai underscored Zhao's own sense of iconoclasm, and the experience was productive in many other ways too. Ai encouraged him to accumulate his own body of work through repurposing found objects as art. Conceptually outrageous, or simply mischievous, Zhao's response was to swipe fragments from other artists' work and to refashion them into his own. For example, a piece of Qing dynasty wood from Ai's 2005 work *Fragments* was repurposed into 32 toothpicks. A 2007 trip to Europe resulted in Zhao nicking a piece of lead from German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer's massive installation at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum in Berlin titled *Volkszählung* (*Census*) (1991), a bookshelf filled with volumes made with lead. Zhao refashioned the lead into several Euro coins. In an ironic twist, *Euro* (2008) was subsequently acquired by the same museum as the first piece of Asian art in its collection. He repeated this subversion with *Necklace* (2007), created from a piece of basalt broken from one of the columns in *7000 Oaks*, the land art project German artist Joseph Beuys began in 1982 in Kassel, Germany. At the time, Zhao's actions were less a deliberate act of vandalism and more of a naïve young man besotted with the idea of claiming a part of a seminal artist's work as his own.

Against the Grain

We sit in Zhao's Caochangdi studio drinking tea. On one side is a 70-year-old bonsai Banyan tree—"I feed it tea dregs and every two years it drops its leaves"—and on the other is a large headless stone Buddha standing in prayer. "It is from the Ming dynasty," he says. "I like to collect statues. They have a very calming effect on me."

Buddhist statues are one of the found, or purchased, objects he has appropriated and absorbed into his work. The large freestanding cubes from the "Again" and "Repetition" series (both 2012-), whose widths measure 150 and 100 centimeters respectively, involve the repurposing of Buddhist statues that were smashed and buried during the Cultural Revolution in the Party's attempt to purge the country of "feudal" and superstitious tendencies. Zhao had the statues cut into nondescript blocks—an act that returned the meditative icons to plain stone—then reassembled the blocks into perfect cubes. Disguising any visual reference to the blocks' previous incarnation, the artist seems to be suggesting that latent free will and stoicism will find a way to survive any amount of authoritarian suppression. For *How* (2013-14), he bought a 200-year-old two-meter-high wooden Sakyamuni Buddha in Jincheng in Shanxi province and cut it into 258 geometric blocks, which were then covered in gold leaf and offered for auction at Sotheby's Hong Kong in 2014. The performative work—from acquiring the statue to the prospective sale at the auction house—meditates on the nature of transition, temporality and, ultimately, on the gaudy commercialism that is swamping China. It failed to sell. I ask if he is a Buddhist. He is unequivocal and blunt in his reply: "No. I don't believe anything."

Whether through youthful exuberance and naïveté, a subconscious tendency to court controversy or a conscious ploy to mine disturbances for inspiration, the atheist has built the bulk of



his oeuvre out of his continuous brushes—some for his provocative work, others unintentional—with authority. Having attracted his fair share of government scrutiny since his student days, Zhao gleans materials, forms and ideas from these experiences for a number of ongoing painting and sculpture series. For example, filming in 2007 on the streets of Beijing at night resulted in his being attacked by a group of stone-throwing thugs. Zhao fled into a deserted police station where he helped himself to a policeman's hat. Documentary photographs from the event show him with a bloodied face wearing the hat. The incident was then recorded in the large hyperrealist self-portrait triptych, *The Happening* (2012).

Two conceptually similar series are “Fragments” (2007–) and “Constellations” (2013–). The former is a series of sculptures based on the cracking of glass that resulted from a 2005 auto accident, in which Zhao's head smashed against the windshield of a car. The artist kept the shattered glass and two years later began working on the series, which he has iterated in various sizes and materials including gold, bronze and steel. “Constellations,” meanwhile, was inspired by the 1989 Tiananmen Incident in Beijing. The works were originally created by firing a rifle—in violation of China's strict gun-control legislation—at sheets of glass. The composition of the bullet holes and the filigree lines radiating out from them have also seen several iterations in different media: from panes of glass and mirrors to, more recently, canvases painted in oil at monumental scale. Repetition in varying media is the artist's strategy of exploring specific subjects as it teases out the nuances each medium can offer. It also highlights how process for Zhao is as important as the end result. With “Constellations” he is examining how the threat of extreme violence can quell opposition among a population. As he explains, “When you have a gun in your hand, you have power.”

While these aforementioned works are more ruminations on the notion of violence rather than intentionally confrontational gestures, Zhao has engaged in activities and art-making that were explicitly political. In 2012, he photographed the route that blind civil-rights activist Chen Guangcheng used when he escaped from house arrest in Dongshigu and fled to the US Embassy—after serving four years in jail for organizing resistance to China's one-child policy. Chen and his family were eventually granted asylum to New York City where they currently reside.

In March the same year, customs police at a port in Tianjin impounded a whole exhibition of his works as they were about to leave China en route to his solo show at Chambers Fine Art in New York. No reason or explanation was given for the confiscation. Zhao was told by police that he could see the works one final time before their destruction if he paid RMB 300,000 (USD 48,220). He didn't have the money. “I have no idea where the works are now or even if they still exist,” he says, without the slightest flicker of emotion. The works that were seized included 12 canvases from Zhao's pop art “Ping Pong” series (2010–11), several marble sculptures from the “House” series (2010–) and one small iteration of his “Fragments” series. “Over 30 pieces made between 2007 and 2011, including the policeman work, have all gone,” he states. The “policeman” is the now infamous 8-meter-tall, 40-ton, deliberately smashed sculpture of a Chinese policeman titled *Officer* (2011), the face of which is a self-portrait of Zhao. Initially the piece was exhibited at Chambers in Beijing in October 2011 without any police intervention. At the second exhibition of the work at the same site, police ordered its removal, because, in their words, “it was not art.” For *Officer*, Zhao invited a trained sculptor to make a life-size plaster sculpture of himself before smashing it into several pieces. Out of a 10 by 20



(Opposite page)
OFFICER, 2011, limestone, 880 x 180 x 180 cm.

(This page, left)
MOUSE DROPPINGS NO. 12, 2009, oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm.

(This page, right)
UNTITLED, 2013, installation of six old couches from Qing Dynasty, wood block, steel bars and screws, 398 x 306 x 201 cm. Courtesy Platform China, Beijing/Hong Kong.



meter block of limestone, the smashed pieces were replicated on an enormous scale. The work's *cri de coeur* is the date inscribed provocatively on the policeman's uniform—April 3, 2011, the day of Ai's arrest at Beijing Capital International Airport, after which he was detained for 81 days for alleged “economic crimes.”

Somewhere along the way, Zhao has also been making paintings that, he claims, are deliberate attempts to avoid official opprobrium. But a close look at these canvases reveals a failed effort: even these “innocuous” works exhibit a preoccupation with sensitive, even taboo, issues plaguing the Chinese government. His proclivity for dissidence, despite his efforts to dilute or remove, persists in all his work. “Mouse Droppings” (2009–), almost meditative in their hypnotic patterns and lack of representation, are pictures packed with flecks of paint inspired by mice excrement Zhao found on his studio floor. The series is a commentary on the homogeneity of China, where individualism is discouraged. Each composition contains several thousand dots, all painstakingly hand-painted by the artist. Meanwhile, the gestural, semi-abstract “Sky” series (2009–) is about pollution: Zhao paints the notoriously polluted Beijing skies as a swirling soup of iridescent blue smog in a foreboding commentary on the country's dark, grimy future. “[The police] don't pay any attention to me now,” Zhao says. Perhaps they aren't looking closely enough.

Tea at Caochangdi is finished and the artist escorts me to his other, more productive studio in Songzhuang, an arts enclave on the eastern fringe of Beijing. There, a large painting from the “Constellations” series dominates the space and several others from the “Sky” series are stacked against walls. There is a blonde wood bookcase with a display of blue Qing incense bowls and two bird nests complete with pigeon eggs. “I have been collecting the bowls

for years,” he explains. He has several dark-wood armchairs also from the Qing dynasty, and various other pieces of Chinese furniture are randomly scattered about. His passion for Chinese antiques has led to their incorporation in recent large-scale installations in which pieces of Ming and Qing furniture are stacked on top of one another, held firmly in place by steel armatures, screws and wood blocks and encased in crude packing cases. The front of each case is removed for display, allowing the viewer to peer inside. Imbued with the patina of time, the book cabinets, tables, chairs and couches are covered with a steady accretion of dust. This untitled group of readymades transforms once-utilitarian domestic objects into “useless” contemporary artworks, creating a disconnect between acquired historical and contemporary values. Trapped and held rigid by the brutal ligatures, the contents of the cases allude to the Chinese government's cavalier policies toward its national history and culture, which, under Communism, were cast into oblivion in pursuit of a homogenized collectivism.

Zhao Zhao keeps his head down these days. By his own admission he is “trying to be more of an artist and less of an activist.” However, there remains about him a sense of alienation that first surfaced during his early years in Xinjiang. Zhao's practice bridges the gap between art and life. His work considers traditional and contemporary China through a prism of the contradictory values of irreverence and respect for the past, at a time when life and individual freedoms are very much determined by authoritarian diktat and where art, according to General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Xi Jinping, is expected to serve the state. With his personal default settings firmly fixed in opposition to conformity, Zhao's dogged pragmatism seems to steer him through the choppy waters of China today. 