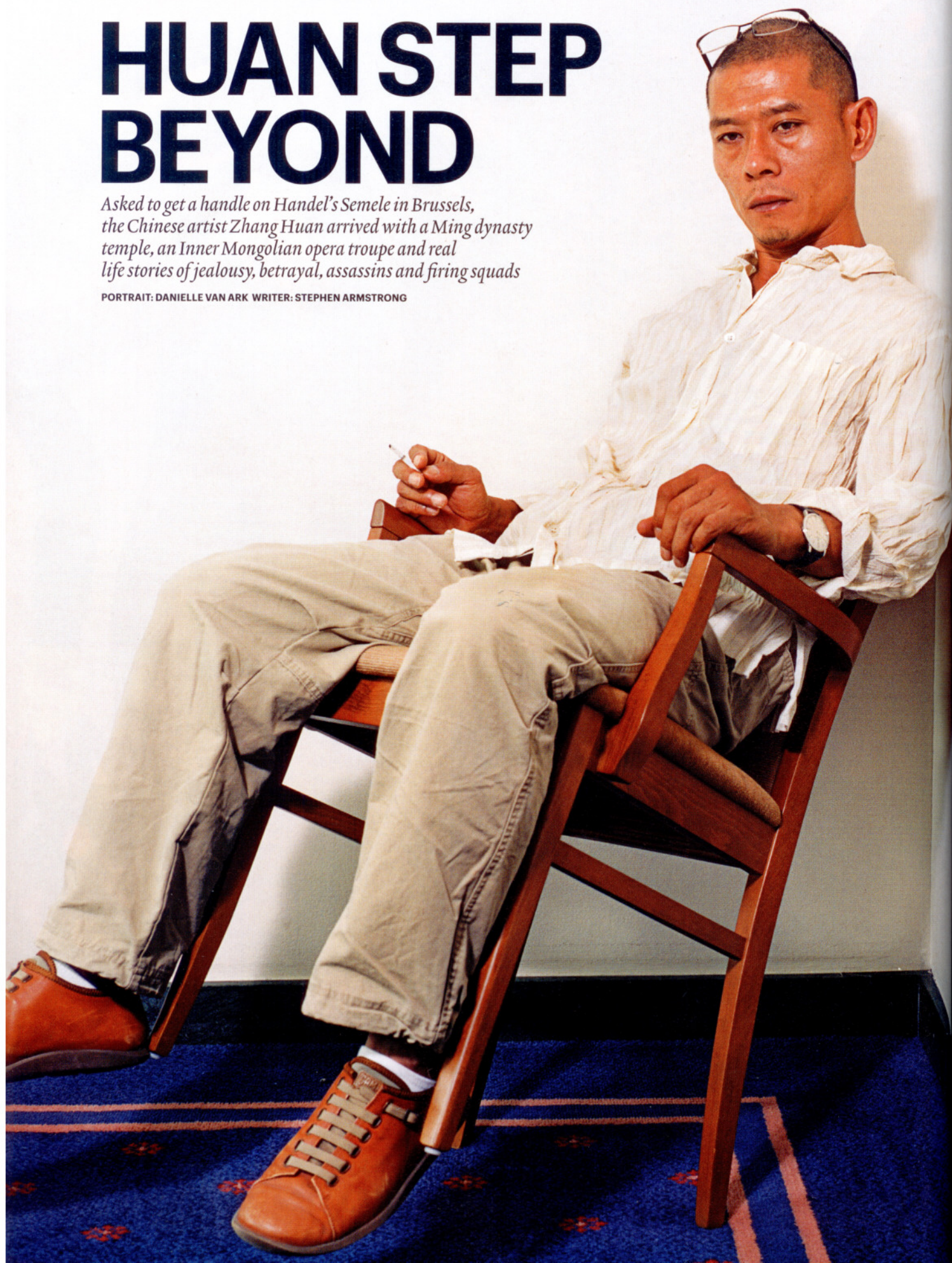


HUAN STEP BEYOND

Asked to get a handle on Handel's Semele in Brussels, the Chinese artist Zhang Huan arrived with a Ming dynasty temple, an Inner Mongolian opera troupe and real life stories of jealousy, betrayal, assassins and firing squads

PORTRAIT: DANIELLE VAN ARK WRITER: STEPHEN ARMSTRONG





ASHES TO ASHES

This ash painting, made with the remains of incense sticks, will be combined with new technology to create a surprise for the opera guests

Opposite, one of China's leading contemporary performance artists, Zhang Huan works across media, from video and photography to sculpture and painting

PHOTOGRAPHY: ZHANG HUAN STUDIO



For those who want to understand the interests, drive and desires of China as it at once flexes its muscles and blinks in the glare of our 21st-century expectations, the artist Zhang Huan is a good place to start. He works out of a vast 15-acre factory in the Minhang District of Shanghai with bridges and streams, hundreds of trees and refitted warehouses holding dorms and cafés for the teams of workers he employs to bring his ideas to life.

It's early summer and the centre of the largest warehouse is packed with people. Teams swarm around vast wooden poles so old that they seem to be made from ash and dust. They are preparing a vast installation using the carved struts and beams of an original Ming dynasty temple, discovered by Zhang in Zhejiang Province. It is an astonishing construction – almost as big as the factory floor – and clearly a work meant to fill us with awe.

Back in the 1990s, Zhang's ambitions were more personal. He focused on performance art and his best-known piece saw him covered with fish oil and honey and sitting, statue-still, in a public toilet in one of Beijing's poorest areas while his body was completely enveloped by insects. He moved into photography and sculpture – in one instance, forging vast bronze Buddha legs that towered over the visitors of the London Royal Academy of Arts. In those days the West saw him as a protest artist, while the Chinese authorities watched him carefully. Today,



BEHIND THE SCENES
Top, Zhang's team in Shanghai pack the carved struts and beams of an original Ming temple that will feature in the production
Above, a rehearsal of the opera in Brussels, where *Semele* will open the winter season at the La Monnaie theatre

however, he is packing up his temple and travelling to Europe to direct that most respectable of art forms, an opera.

It is a perfect example of how the raw edges of young Chinese artists have been smoothed, just as their ambitions have sharpened, and of the degree to which they now compete with the West in the worlds of design, architecture and art.

This month Zhang – who once strode through New York with meat sewn onto his body, beat and twisted his frame in bizarre contortions, and hung naked next to a bronze sculpture in Battery Park – is taking on Handel's opera *Semele* at La Monnaie theatre in Brussels, applying techniques and approaches learned from

his past performance, sculpture and photography experiments to a baroque tale of the ancient Greek gods.

'I'm getting into opera because I didn't really like it or understand it,' he explains in his Brussels hotel room on day three of rehearsals. 'I still don't understand it very well. As an outsider, I felt I could take on opera and not be stifled by the structure. But after working on this project for two years, I am now addicted to it; if I don't have opera on I can't sleep. I can't survive without this music.'

He remains an iconoclast at heart, however, and his production of *Semele* bends every operatic preconception. The Ming dynasty temple, for instance, is >>



CENTRE STAGE

Above, a computer-generated image of the production in the reconstructed Ming temple

Left, Zhang, pictured at work during a rehearsal, is known for his carefully choreographed videos and installations



the centrepiece of his production: ancient architecture as contemporary stage design. He has played with this before – his 2008 installation *100 Sages in a Bamboo Forest* placed the same temple frame in a cage filled with bamboo leaves and scampering monkeys. But in taking on opera, he has allowed the building to infuse him with its own spirits of place.

Thus the staves and supports have become more than their parts; they have inspired a fusion of East and West. Outside the Brussels theatre, an Inner Mongolian opera troupe will perform a re-imagining of *Semele*'s story – the mortal lover of Zeus destroyed after demanding the god reveal himself in his full glory. Artists from Europe and China will wander between the two productions, while the European version will also feature a heartbreaking tale Zhang discovered in the temple.

'This type of structure would have traditionally been used for religious ceremonies, but when I found it, it was a house,' Zhang explains. 'It was bricked over in the Cultural Revolution. When I discovered it, the woman who owned the house was still living in it. I acquired a lot of her possessions, including her dead husband's diary, which told of his love

and then hatred for his wife. He was an alcoholic and she was having an affair, but the two were tied together. He drank because she would leave the house and not come back for months. She'd come home, they'd fight, and it would start again. As soon as she left he would regret everything. It got so bad that he couldn't take it any more and hired someone to kill her lover. Then he was arrested and executed by a firing squad. The diary is just like a movie – a real life movie. So we have the two stories together – one story that took place in China a few decades ago, and the Greek myth that originated several thousand years ago here in Europe. And I have persuaded the woman, now nearly 60, to play the *Semele* part in the Inner Mongolian opera.'

It is this blend of inspiration, coupled with a sense of grandiose construction, that made the opera's producers, the KT Wong Foundation, dial his number when looking for a director two years ago. 'Our aim is to enable a new path of cooperation between East and West, and Zhang's sensibilities make him perfect for that,' explains Linda Wong Davies, founder and chairman. 'I can't think of any other artist working today who has

more elemental power than Zhang. And *Semele* is about greed and redemption, subjects which resonate so powerfully today in a developing nation like China.'

Twinning Ming architecture with baroque music challenged Zhang at the start, but little has cowed this 44-year-old from An Yang City. He began his work as part of the Beijing East Village, a small artists' collective that was often in trouble with the state. He has spent most of this decade in New York, choreographing willing volunteers into elaborate human stunts. There, he also worked with Robert Wilson, the legendary avant-garde stage director, on *Voom Portraits*, a series of carefully choreographed video loops.

'In directing volunteers for the video, performance and photography projects I have learned skills I can apply to the opera,' he explains. 'The rules and the standards of beauty are the same. I respect the traditional standards of opera – the voices, the music, and the forms that you cannot change – but I also think of Chinese calligraphy. I often see it hanging upside down in the houses of foreign friends, and yet it is still beautiful.'

'In China we have a saying, which is roughly "Go with the flow and you will succeed". I have changed that around: those who go with the flow will not succeed. If you just bring something in, it won't work – you have to bring it in with your own style. You have to learn from the tradition, but use it in your own way.'

The towering Ming temple highlights his point. Made of little more than interlocking beams and carvings, it has weathered nearly 500 years of war and social change; it is no wonder Western architects have been learning from these ancestral Chinese building techniques.

This appeals to Zhang. He has a great affection for the West, although he thinks the cities are a problem: 'Cities such as New York and London have evolved to the highest state of everything, including unhappiness. If we use happiness as a measure of quality of life, perhaps the most evolved society is Tibet.' His choice of Tibet as the ultimate happy place raises obvious questions about political intent in his art. Does he feel the weight of expectation on his shoulders? And perhaps fear that having been seen as a political enfant terrible, Western critics will be looking for social comment in this opera?

'When creating a piece of art, I only think about the art I need to do, not what society, government or history is doing, just me,' he smiles. 'And normally, if a critic likes what they see, I feel validated and gain confidence. But if they don't like my work,' he shrugs, 'then I tend not to agree with their opinion.' *

Semele, La Monnaie, Brussels, 8-29 September, www.lamonnaie.be; www.zhanghuan.com