

# ARNE GLIMCHER: A TITAN IN THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

By Ian Driscoll



(Top) *Giant No. 3* (2008) Production still. (Bottom) (DETAIL) *Giant No. 3* (2008) Cow skin, steel and polystyrene foam, 4.6 x 10 x 4.2 m. Sculptures by **Zhang Huan**. (Opposite) **Arne Glimcher** with *Giant No. 3* (2008), at Pace Wildenstein, New York. All images copyright Curtis Hamilton for ArtAsiaPacific.

Standing in one of his capacious Chelsea gallery spaces while a monstrously large, cowhide-covered figure, *Giant No. 3* (2008), is assembled before him by the artist Zhang Huan and several assistants, Arne Glimcher momentarily reflects on how much it cost him to ship another, even more massive Zhang work, *Canal Building* (2007-08), from Shanghai to New York. "Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars," says Glimcher. His smile and body language suggest that the expense was worth it. "I hope we find a home for it," he adds.

Glimcher spends the next few minutes directing the placement of a temporary sign bearing the artist's name. Behind him, the assemblage of steel, wood and animal skins begins to take shape. The taut-featured Zhang directs the process, often joining the workers to pull, lift or secure the installation's various parts. Glimcher and Zhang haven't exchanged words, but the attention to detail and involvement in their separate tasks intimate shared values.

For several years, New York-based dealers at PaceWildenstein Gallery had been watching the burgeoning Chinese art market, albeit from some professional and geographic distance. Then last year, at the encouragement of Peter Boris, the gallery's dealer responsible for Asia, they decided it was time to get the inside view. With introductions from gallerist Jack Tilton, a proponent of contemporary Chinese art since the late 1990s, Boris and Arne Glimcher, PaceWildenstein's chairman, headed to Beijing and Shanghai.

Accompanied by Leng Lin, a Beijing-based curator, the two dealers toured artists' studios. The trip was revelatory in many ways. What first struck Glimcher was the level of awareness of Pace among the art community. The buzz started early. "I could hardly fend off the telephone calls in my hotel room. It was as if the drums were beating," remembers Glimcher of his first morning in the Chinese capital. "I was astonished."

In the Internet era, it is not surprising that the Chinese art community knew of PaceWildenstein or wanted to meet its chairman. The result of a 1993 merger between the contemporary dealer, Pace,

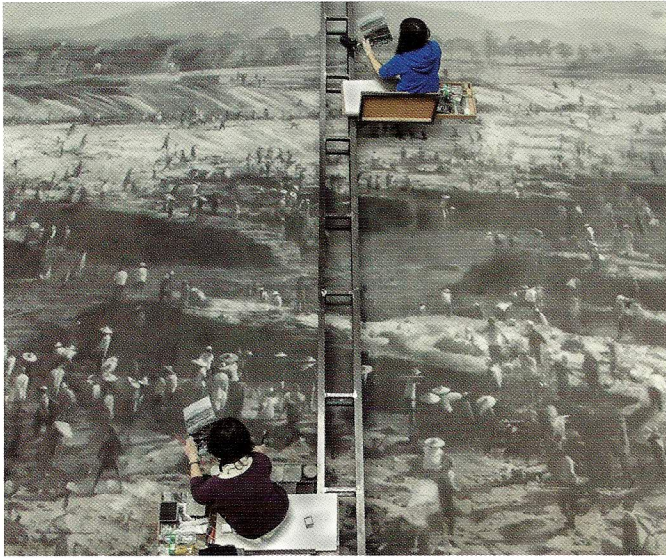












and the venerable Wildenstein & Co., a New York gallery renowned for its expertise in Old Master and Impressionist paintings, the conjoined galleries have an enviable heritage.

But other surprises lay ahead. One was the similarity between Beijing's art scene and the one that kindled such talents as Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer in post-war Germany. Both the Cultural Revolution and World War II, according to Glimcher, allowed a new beginning for artists, albeit at great human cost. "I think there are particular moments in history when cultures have license to create something new. When a culture is leveled, such as it was in the Cultural Revolution, it creates a clean landscape for the artist to react against the immediate past or to begin something not influenced by history," says Glimcher.

Another eye-opener was how invigorated both Glimcher and Boris were by the optimism in Chinese art, a quality they find lacking in some quarters of the West. "Here we're disconnected from the irrational. Western art is more predictable. It's about the fracturing of cultural identity," says Boris. "Asian art is about an emerging identity connected to something deeper and more hopeful."

Before leaving Beijing, the dealers invited Zhang Xiaogang to do a show in New York. In Shanghai, they made a similar offer to Zhang Huan, resulting in "Zhang Huan: Blessings," a two-venue exhibit of, among other things, his ash paintings, *Giant No. 3* and works from the "Memory Door" series (2007), bas-reliefs carved into antique doors and overlaid with silkscreen prints. A couple of trips later and Glimcher had signed both artists to Pace.

For a gallery with such a long and storied history, it might seem odd that PaceWildenstein has taken so long to embrace Chinese artists. Yet the timing follows a proven modus operandi. In the United States, Pace doesn't represent young, up-and-coming artists. As Glimcher puts it, "A 20-year-old artist doesn't belong at Pace." Indeed, to receive the Pace imprimatur and be invited to join the gallery's existing heavyweights—Chuck Close, Alex Katz and Claes Oldenburg, for example—might be interpreted as a confirmation of a contemporary artist's arrival.

Glimcher's invitation to Zhang Xiaogang and Zhang Huan to join PaceWildenstein suggests that he feels they are world-class talents. "I was going to see the photographs," recalls Glimcher of his meeting with Zhang Huan. "I had no idea he was making the ash paintings and the memory doors. I was astonished. I was blown over by the energy, industry and ambition; and all of that with an extraordinary product. He's very much like Rauschenberg. He does everything: performance, sculpture, painting. But everything's inventive, there's nothing you've ever seen before."

But PaceWildenstein isn't limiting itself to representing these artists in the US. The team's trips to Beijing revealed a market ready for a world-class gallery. Pace responded with alacrity, propelled, says Peter Boris, by the additional lure of an irresistible location. Almost one year and many millions of dollars after they first saw it, PaceWildenstein is about to open what will be Beijing's premier gallery space. Located in the 798 Arts District, the 22,000-square-foot former munitions factory is undergoing an architectural makeover by New York-based Richard Gluckman. The intention is that it will open in time for the Olympics.

Glimcher says that Beijing's other galleries shouldn't be intimidated by this art-world powerhouse. "We're not going to go in like a bull into a china shop. Galleries should be encouraged by our entry into Beijing. The more important the galleries that go there, the better it is for everyone." Still, the infrastructure and support, including research and publishing, that PaceWildenstein brings to its artists—and its clients—may eventually prove irresistible to other major players in the field invited into its fold.

Naysayers, though, are likely to point out that Westerners are rarely immune to the vagaries of doing business in the Middle Kingdom. Glimcher may have reduced the downside by appointing Leng Lin, founder of the Beijing Commune, as president of PaceWildenstein Beijing. It was Leng who first introduced Glimcher to the Beijing art community, and the two, says Glimcher, have enjoyed a good relationship since first meeting in New York several years ago.

Also on Pace's side, tacitly or otherwise, are the authorities. That Glimcher secured such a prestigious space in Beijing speaks to the government's desire to build a world-class cultural front, and having PaceWildenstein in Beijing surely adds to that. Marc Glimcher, Arne's son and president of Pace, says his father's affinity for other cultures should also serve them well in their relationships with artists. "His bent for history and cultural traditions—so often lost on Americans—rang true with the Chinese. There was a real bridge between them."

PaceWildenstein's first show in Beijing will feature Zhang Huan and Zhang Xiaogang, as well as some artists from the gallery's American roster, possibly Katz and Close. After that, the gallery will revert to showing mainly Chinese art, although Arne Glimcher says he hopes to present work by Robert Mangold, Sol LeWitt and the minimalists. Whether Pace will be able to sway the Chinese taste for figurative art remains to be seen. Right now, though, there's an intimation of a larger mission beyond selling paintings. As Marc Glimcher puts it: "By opening in Beijing, we offer Chinese artists a place to come into our world. And our artists will have open connection to their world. Everything else will follow."



(Opposite) Zhang Huan installing *Canal Building* (2007-08) at Pace Wildenstein, New York. (Top) Production still of *Canal Building* (2007-08). (Bottom) Installation view of *Canal Building* (2007-08) at Pace Wildenstein, New York. All images: artwork by Zhang Huan; photos by Curtis Hamilton for ArtAsiaPacific.