

VANITY FAIR

On Art

Exclusive

KAWS (and yes, that's a *pietà*)

Photograph by
Christopher Sturman



Plus

Florence vs Flanders:
the Renaissance Debate
By Andrew Graham-Dixon
and Waldemar Januszczak

Lord Snowdon: 300
Years of Chippendale

Master Plan: One Picture
Creating Thousands of Jobs
By Cristina Ruiz

The Old Masters Issue

Maria Kreyen, Huma Bhabha, Liu Dan, Yoan Capote and Zhang Huan in their studios; why past art exerts a hold over living artists, contemporary fashion and interior design



Zhang Huan photographed on June 28, 2018, at his studio in Songjiang District, Shanghai, in front of *Know the Destiny*, created from cow skin, steel, wood and polystyrene foam

PORTRAIT

Zhang HUAN

Few artists wield their own bodies in the name of art as wilfully as Zhang Huan. FABIEN FRYNS celebrates the provocative work of the lauded Chinese artist

Photograph by PATRICK WACK

Zhang Huan has been a giant in the contemporary art world since his appearance in the mid-1990s. Few other contemporary Chinese artists are part of more prestigious museum collections. At the time of writing, his work is part of four institutional group shows worldwide.

Personally, my life has been marked significantly by Zhang and his work. It was through his iconic photo series *Family Tree* that my Chinese adventure, now 14 years in the making, started. I first saw this work while exhibiting at Arco in Madrid: it stopped me dead in my tracks, and I was lucky enough to be able to purchase the work on the spot. It was my first by a Chinese artist, and eventually led me to participate in the inaugural China International Gallery Exposition in Beijing in 2004. This in turn led to the opening of my gallery in Beijing in 2005, where the very first work I ever sold to a mainland Chinese collector was a smaller version of *Family Tree*. This megapolis has been my home ever since.

It is not possible to give Zhang his full due on this page, given the diversity of his practice: from performance to painting in oil, insects or ash and other media, and sculptures, often monumental, in bronze, bone, fibreglass, ash, cowhide and so on.

Hence, I would like to focus on his early performances documented in photography or video, shown last summer at the Guggenheim Bilbao's *Theater of the World* exhibition; the "uncensored" version of the controversial New York show. One of the most striking works in this show was *To Add One Metre to an Anonymous Mountain*, a filmed

performance conceived and executed by Zhang and nine other artists from the avant-garde Beijing East Village. It took place in the hills on the outskirts of Beijing in May 1995 and consisted of Zhang, Cang Xin, Ma Liuming et al stripping and lying down on top of one another to create a second, one-metre mini-peak. It was inspired by an old Chinese proverb suggesting beyond every metaphorical mountain peak is a higher one to climb.

Born in 1965 in rural Henan Province, Zhang studied at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts from 1991. There he quickly realized that he wanted to use his body, often in very extreme ways, to create art. "I bring my body to art because I realize that the body is the most direct way of interacting with society," he says. "My inspiration comes from the most common and trivial things in daily life, such as eating, sleeping, and going to the toilet. I try to discover and experience the essence of human nature from ordinary life."

Besides works from the early East Village period such as *12 Square Metres*, *65 Kilograms* and *To Raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond*, *Family Tree* remains the most powerful. This one-day performance is eternalized in nine photographs that record the gradual inking of Zhang's face with poems and texts, until it is completely black. It is a work inspired by determination. "People's fate cannot be understood. It is controlled by something mysterious. My appearance disappeared as well. Nobody knew the colour of my skin, and it was as if my identification no longer existed. I disappeared." □