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Art in Review



ZHANG HUAN, COURTESY OF PACEWILDENSTEIN

Zhang Huan's "Giant No. 3," at PaceWildenstein, is made of stapled-together cowhides (complete with hooves and tails).

Zhang Huan

Blessings

PaceWildenstein

534 West 25th Street, Chelsea

545 West 22nd Street, Chelsea

Through July 25

In these days of festivalist artworks, spectacle can be achieved in several ways. One involves selecting a familiar form or object and recreating it on a giant scale in an unexpected material with its own charged significance. In his fourth New York gallery show, the Chinese artist Zhang Huan, who once specialized in grueling, sensational works of performance art, follows this recipe closely, with predictably jaw-dropping results.

The centerpiece of his two-gallery exhibition is "Giant No. 3," a towering sculpture of a pregnant beggar slouched on the ground with a small child clinging to one shoulder, at PaceWildenstein's 25th Street space. She seems wrapped in rags but is really covered with whole, efficiently stapled cowhides, complete with dangling hooves and tails. They intimate maternity and luxury (and a lot of slaughtered animals), and also convert the well-known Surrealist precedent of the fur-lined teacup (here turned inside out) to an architectural scale. The big figure is an obvious idea; the hides are things in themselves and, in such quantity, would be almost as impressive just stacked on the floor.

Five examples from Mr. Huan's Memory Door series displayed next to the giant reflect a similar one-plus-one-equals-two-and-a-smidge approach. In these large wall pieces, antique Chinese doors have been covered with blown-up photographs of modern China. Highly skilled artisans have then carved parts of the image into exquisitely detailed reliefs in the wood. The abrupt shifts between two and three dimensions; hazy photograph and crisp carving; mechanical and handmade; Mao's China and older: all this is intellectually entertaining, vaguely exotic, but ultimately generic and mannered.

In PaceWildenstein's 22nd Street space, giantism, Photo Realism and unusual materials combine in "Canal Building." Here a Chinese photograph of scores of laborers digging a canal has been enlarged to a 19-foot-by-59-foot panorama rendered in incense ash sprinkled on a slab of solid blocks of the ash six feet thick. Seeing the image requires climbing a tall flight of stairs to a large viewing platform. Sometimes a woman perched in a small chair attached to a movable scaffold can also be seen, fine-tuning the work with sprinkles of ash.

Mr. Huan's role models would seem to be artist-impresarios like Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, except that his intellectual rationales — explained in detail in the exhibition catalog — are more complex than the works themselves. This reduces his efforts to grandiosely physical Conceptual Art, entertaining and accessible but devoid of new form. The main subject here is scale itself; height, volume and quantity as well as hours of human labor. It's the mantra of our age: I'm doing this because I can get someone else to do it. **ROBERTA SMITH**