

RISING DRAGON



Contemporary Chinese Photography

"Performance and Photography", Katonah Museum of Art, 2012

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001
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Plate 4
Zhang Huan
Family Tree, 2000



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PERFORMANCE AND PHOTOGRAPHY

One of the most pivotal creative figures represented in the exhibition is Zhang Huan, who produced his early performance art in Beijing's East Village. *Family Tree* (plate 4) is among his best known and most widely reproduced works, and also one of his few performance pieces that was not videotaped. The nine images are a photographic record of a one-day event that took place in Amherst, Massachusetts (Zhang moved to New York City in 1998, becoming one of the first Chinese expatriate artists). He asked three calligraphers to write texts with references to historic Chinese poems and proverbs on his face from dawn until dusk. As time passed, the writing entirely obscured his features. *Family Tree* expresses the artist's concerns about where westernization is leading contemporary Chinese society and how quickly it is obliterating the country's traditional culture. Zhang currently divides his time between New York and Shanghai, where he has established a large facility for the production of his sculptures and other projects.

Wang Jin's *To Marry a Mule*, a performance that took place shortly after he left Beijing's East Village, reflects his frustration with and defiance of Chinese government regulations. Wang's wife had immigrated to the United States, and his application to visit her was denied eight times (the couple eventually divorced). The image in the exhibition shows Wang, holding a bouquet of roses, next to his mule-bride, lavishly decked out in stockings, rouge, and a white hat with veils (plate 5). The photograph is a cynically disdainful, absurdist reflection of the artist's bureaucratic nightmare.

After Beijing's East Village was shut down by the authorities, Rong Rong turned from documentary photography to performance art. *Beijing #1* (plate 6) is part of a series of dreamlike works titled "Wedding Gown," which examine his relationship with inri, a Japanese photographer whom he met in 1999 and later married. In *Beijing #1*, the figures enact a narrative of death, cleansing, and potential rebirth. A haunting effect was created by applying dyes to the surface of the moderately low contrast prints. In 2007, Rong Rong and inri founded the Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, China's first public institution devoted to photographic education, located in Beijing's Caochangdi art district.⁵

The Western culture that began flowing into China in the early 1990s and the arrival of the Internet in 1997 have strongly influenced Cao Fei and her artwork. Her performances focus on the identity crisis experienced by her generation and the feelings of frustration and confusion that accompanied the whirlwind of changes sweeping through China. At the time, Cao and her peers were quickly becoming an isolated segment of Chinese society, while simultaneously assimilating global cultural influences. Her photograph *Dog Days* (plate 7), from her performance "Rabid Dogs," shows workers dressed in Burberry plaids, crawling around the office like dogs. The artist explains:

*We love whips, we need to worry, we don't dare to bark, and we work tamely, faithfully and patiently like dogs. We do everything our boss asked, understanding his point brightly in no time. We are surely poor dogs, willing to act as animals and being locked in the cage of modernization. When will we have the courage to bite our bosses ruthlessly, taking off our masks, peeling off our fur, and being a group of real rabid dogs?*⁶

Cao was one of the first artists in China to adopt and synthesize computer technology and computer-generated animation to create or enhance her work. She is also known as China Tracy, her *Second Life* name. (*Second Life* is a virtual 3-D world, where people interact with each other through anonymous digital representations of themselves called avatars.) Her performances, photographs, installations, and videos reflect her concern for the fate of the individual in a radically changing society.

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Chen Qiulin brandishes her concerns about China's frenetic urbanization like a patriotic Chinese worker in the 1950s waving a banner. The environmental devastation and the displacement of people who live along the Yangtze River, which resulted from the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, is the inspiration for much of her art. Her hometown of Wanxian in Hubei Province was in the direct path of the dam's construction. In "Ellipsis," a performance documented in film and photographs, she plays a beautiful bride applying make-up at a vanity mirror as she sits among the rubble of a former Chinese city. Just prior to the scene depicted in this photograph (plate 8), her fiancé appears among a crowd gathered in the background and begins to pelt her with pieces of a wedding cake, an act that symbolizes the damage and debris of urbanization.

Qiu Zhijie's print *Depth in the Reality Shadow* (plate 9), from his "Lightwriting" series, incorporates elements from his extensive earlier work with Chinese calligraphy. While the camera lens is open, Qiu moves in front of it using a flashlight to "write" Chinese characters, which are subsequently recorded on film or by digital means. In almost every print in the series, the words (most in Chinese, some in English) describe the artist's passion for the beauty and eloquence of Chinese calligraphy.

Creating a new conceptual hybrid, Huang Yan paints traditional Chinese landscapes and outdoor scenes, in an appropriately classic style, directly onto his skin. For over a thousand years, landscape painting represented the quintessence of Chinese art. Huang breaks with this heritage, at the same time giving it a new direction, by transposing it onto the human body. Although rarely used in ancient painting, the human body has played an important role in the development of contemporary art in China since the end of the 1970s. In *Spring* (plate 10), from the series "The Four Seasons," the painting is so elaborately detailed that viewers are given the impression that a mask has been placed over the artist's face.

Li Wei was initially inspired by the performances of Zhang Huan, which he saw during a visit to Beijing's East Village in 1993. Gravity, or the lack thereof, is his overarching theme, and he approaches his performances like a commercial filmmaker. Li is the main character, screenwriter, casting director, cinematographer, stunt and special effects coordinator, producer, and director. He hires a photographer to shoot the images, and together they carefully work out camera angles and calculate risk factors. Cranes, ropes, wires, and mirrors are used to set up the scenes; Li later removes these with Photoshop. His astounding gravity-defying results describe a precarious society in the midst of enormous change, where everything is unstable and dangerous but nothing is impossible (plates 1, 11).

Like Li Wei, Xu Zhen is a performance artist who likes to tease and provoke. He wants to challenge the viewer, who he believes is often too passive. His "My Club" series (plate 12) consists of elaborately staged, fictional confrontations between Xu's so-called "club" members and various personalities from the political and business worlds. When the photographs were first exhibited in Shanghai, the installation included a large bowl for donations to finance the club's future battles. "Generally speaking," he claims, "my works are not concerned with truth or reason, and perhaps there is something mischievous about them, they use art to bring you a piece of the world. That is to say, perhaps at the time I was realizing these works my state of mind was the same as a hooligan going out for a fight.... Hooliganism is a way of life, an attitude towards life."⁷

⁵ The Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, designed by the acclaimed artist and architect Ai Weiwei, opened in 2007. It is the most comprehensive organization in China that promotes photographic education through an extensive program of Chinese and international exhibitions, publications, classes, public lectures, and seminars. It also houses a library and permanent collection and maintains an artist-in-residence program.

⁶ <<http://www.caofei.com/works.aspx?id=31&wtid=3&year=2002>>.

⁷ Lu Leiping, "Xu Zhen: Provoked and Provoking Art," June 2009, <<http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/786>>.

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Plate 5
Wang Jin
To Marry a Mule, 1995



Plate 6
Rong Rong
Beijing #1, 2000



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