

ART REVIEW

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His performance art is bound to provoke

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | September 28, 2005

Zhang Huan is the type of artist whom many outside the rarefied world of performance art label a crackpot. He has covered his naked body in honey and fish oil and sat in a public toilet, attracting flies. For his piece "Zhang Huan: Seeds of Hamburg," documented in a series of photographs on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, he coated himself with honey and birdseed and closed himself in a cage with 28 doves. Under rainy skies Monday evening in "Zhang Huan: My Boston," a live performance, he had himself buried under a pile of books.

Zhang, 40, pioneered performance work in China in the 1990s. It got him thrown in jail. He moved to New York in 1998. His work fits neatly into a tradition that includes Joseph Beuys (who wrapped himself in felt and shut himself in a room with a coyote for five days in 1974) and Yoko Ono (who sat stock still while audience members took turns cutting her clothing off in 1964). In work like this, the artist's body becomes a metaphor for us all, as well as our existential agonies, which are sometimes no less absurd than being pecked at by pigeons.

Eloquent and haunting, "Seeds of Hamburg" depicts a 2002 performance in Germany. The 12 large-scale color photos distill it down to a series of poignant moments. Zhang, coated in dark seeds, looks more stone than flesh, a contemporary-art version of a comic-strip mutant. A slender man, here he appears to lumber into the giant cage.

He attracts the birds like the Pied Piper attracted rats. The interaction is strangely moving, a tender interspecies collaboration. In one photo, Zhang lies on his stomach as doves perch on his back and buttocks. In another, he rises to sit, setting the birds fluttering in front of his chest. At the end, he sits atop a throne of crates, Buddha-like. After a dove pulls a red ribbon from his mouth, Zhang cradles that dove in his hands and exits the cage.

Excerpting moments from a performance punches up their symbolic power, making a spare visual poetry. The MFA, which is not in the habit of hosting performance art, laudably brought Zhang to town for a Monday evening outdoor performance of "My Boston."

Zhang makes pieces that are relevant to their site and freighted with history. "My Boston" centers on a giant pyramid of books and the story of a Chinese emperor in 213 BC who ordered a massive burning of books. The theme spans centuries and cultures and is as relevant in a city where "banned in Boston" became a catch phrase as it is in China.

Over the years, the artist's pieces have become more complicated, although they remain ritualistic and centered on his body. In "My Boston," the added bells and whistles, including eight dogs and a fog machine, get in the way of the Zen-like clarity on view in "Seeds of Hamburg." The fog machine, meant to mimic smoke, didn't generate enough vapor amid the evening's light rain to suggest the funeral pyre the artist seemed to be aiming for.

The dogs barked, bickered, and strayed, making a solemn scene unintentionally comical. The artist has marveled at how in America, dogs seem to be treated as well as children, unlike in China, where they're treated like animals. That's why he incorporates dogs in some performances that straddle the two cultures. Here, they simply got in the way.

Zhang entered like a snake, slithering through the grass from beneath a bush, a dozen or more books tied in a stack to his ankles. As with "Hamburg," "My Boston" amounted to a series of moving, crystalline images: Zhang, nude and weighted by his literary shackles, shimmying up a flagpole; Zhang, prostrate along a pyramid shelf, buried under many volumes; Zhang, perched regally atop the pyramid with a giant volume around his neck.

Edited down to a few still photos, "My Boston" will make a more potent document than it did a performance.

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