
WANXIN ZHANG: INNOVATION IN CERAMIC SCULPTURE

INTRODUCTION

Today, artistic clay use in California is extensive. Its modern history begins with the 19th-century discovery of large clay deposits in California's Central Valley. This find coincided with the growth of cities like San Francisco and Oakland, creating an expanding market for clay sewer pipe and architectural building elements. Immigrants to California from the Pacific Rim, Mexico, and other areas of the United States brought culturally varied clay use into a region that was simultaneously developing its own, often nature-inspired, style. With the unleashing of artistic experimentation in the 1950s and 1960s, clay's possibilities seemed limitless. Since then, Northern California's artistic amalgam has been a point of departure for artists using ceramic as their medium—vessel-based, sculpture, installation, and conceptual. This broad scope makes clay one of the most versatile and expressive materials for three-dimensional art forms.

Wanxin Zhang entered this pluralistic environment when he arrived in San Francisco from China twenty years ago. As an aspiring sculptor with painterly skills in search of an artistic future, he maximized his opportunities by seeking out artists, studying museum exhibitions, and working endlessly in his San Francisco studio. His ten-year survey exhibition marks a decade of focused effort and resourcefulness during which Wanxin Zhang's local productivity led to Western and national recognition. His success in pursuing opportunities like the Virginia A. Groot Foundation sculptor's grant 1st place award in 2006 chart his rise as a skilled and prolific sculptor whose native culture melds with his identity as a American artist.

SEEDS of CHANGE

In 1992 Wanxin Zhang (b. 1961, China) emigrated to the United States as an established artist in pursuit of a more open artistic future. He came directly to San Francisco from China, leaving his wife, Diane Ding, and young daughter until their emigration could be assured six months and three years later, respectively. Acceptance into the San Francisco Academy of Art dictated his point of entry to a country he scarcely knew or understood. Wanxin Zhang began a course of study, development, and observation that has resulted



Head study, 2004

in the accomplished body of figurative and politically suggestive work featured in his ten-year survey. With this bold move, he unknowingly entered a world where clay, the most traditional of materials so prevalent in China, would capture his energy and redirect his focus.

Wanxin Zhang grew up during China's ten-year Cultural Revolution and endured the dictates of Chairman Mao Zedong (1893-1976). Soon after Mao's death Wanxin Zhang attended the Jilin Art School in ChangChun City. He then completed five years of study at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Art, which was still under the lingering influence of art trumpeted by the earlier regime. In 1983, the young artist visited the recently discovered and extensive burial site of the (once poly-chromed) 2,200-year-old terra-cotta warriors. It was there that Wanxin Zhang's artistic sensibilities began to shift.¹ As a sculpture instructor at the Jilin Art College, where he taught for seven years (1985-1992), he established himself as an artist, and his work was collected by the National Art Museum of Beijing.

This post-Mao era was marked by China's increasing openness toward the West, illustrated by a landmark exhibition in Beijing that shattered many artists' preconceptions of contemporary art. In 1985, the China Art

Gallery, now known as the National Art Museum of China, hosted the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange (ROCI), which welcomed over 300,000 visitors during its three-week run. The exhibition featured numerous paintings, sculptures, photographs, and graphic works by one of the United States' preeminent artists, Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008), who created the global travelling exhibition to promote cross-cultural understanding and world peace. For many who saw the exhibit, it was a watershed moment that radically changed their artistic views. Not only were new ideas and creative methods introduced, but China's artistic identity was challenged.



Burning Bridges, 2011

While Robert Rauschenberg's art and his exhibit laid the groundwork for Wanxin Zhang's evolving artistic inquiry, particularly his exploration into painting, the equine sculpture of American and University of California, Davis-trained artist Deborah Butterfield (b. 1949) focused his attention on the evocative capacity of sculpture. Having seen her work in books and other publications before he came to the United

States, he wrote to Butterfield expressing the hope of meeting her someday. She responded with a letter and a copy of her most recent catalogue of work.²

ABSORPTION of IDEAS

Wanxin Zhang came directly to California in 1992 to undertake his studies at the Academy of Art and equally to immerse himself in the regional art scene. He completed his master of fine arts degree in 1996 and took advantage of every opportunity to explore ideas and art practices of Northern California artists. Briefly working with another artist in the studio of Peter Voulkos (1924-2002) was just one of many moments that influenced Zhang's shift from metal to a preference for clay. The artist also recalls seeing two special exhibitions that were particularly influential: *The Art of Peter Voulkos* retrospective at the Oakland Museum in 1995, and *Robert Arneson: Self-Reflections* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) in 1997. Viola Frey's (1933-2004) looming figures with painterly surfaces were also notable.³ Such sculptural diversity using clay was a strong catalyst for him.

CALIFORNIA ARTIST, TOO

Some writers describe Wanxin Zhang's work as an intersection between the great second-century BCE terra-cotta Chinese warriors with the work of California Funk artists. Direct reference to some of the most notable



Detail of body, 2009

practitioners of this Bay Area movement does indeed exist. Robert Arneson (1930-1992), the acknowledged progenitor of California Funk, was an artist whose self-referential, humorous and often confrontational ceramic sculpture forged new artistic territory. Wanxin Zhang's *California Artist, Too*, 2006-07, pays direct homage to Arneson's original 1982 piece in the collection of SFMOMA. Arneson's humor and socio-political imagery resonated with Wanxin Zhang's tendency to portray everyman imagery in his work. Gestural expressiveness – both painterly and substantive – found on many of his sculptural surfaces echoes Peter Voulkos' approach to the medium. Interestingly, Wanxin Zhang's textured warriors are reminiscent of the surfaces of Voulkos's stacks, of which the young Zhang made molds for bronze foundry production. He also cites the profound figures of Stephen De Staebler (1933-2011)

as an empathic guidepost in his pursuit to develop *anima* in his work.

While appropriation is considered a part of a deeply ingrained Chinese artistic tradition, Wanxin Zhang reinterprets contemporary Western aesthetics through his internalization of Northern California ceramic practice with his inherent cultural references and expert building skill. Many figures in his ten-year survey exhibition are nearly life-sized. They are completely slab built without using armatures, then sectioned in three parts for firing. Frequently, three layers of glazing further address each piece, exposing the work to multiple times in the kiln. Alternately, some figures may be painted upon completion. What results is an installation of figures that chorus varied contemporary societal issues through fully realized and assured forms. Some of these ideas appear as meditations on 21st century fatherhood and poetic warriors. *Fatherhood*, 2005 for example, portrays a referential Chinese father snuggly holding his child who wears a mouse-like cap. This combination captures Wanxin Zhang's skill at artistically synthesizing two divergent cultures through the expressive use of clay. At the beginning of Wanxin Zhang's ten-year effort in 2002, Christopher Newhard aptly observed, "The artist sculpts people in transition, unwitting travelers of space and time that preserve their personalities. The result is an extraordinary physical synthesis in which the artistic product is greater than the sum of its parts . . ."⁴.



"Old Friends," 2008

Wanxin Zhang's works, though composed of recognized social, political, and artistic markers, are an original contribution to the Bay Area figurative tradition breaking fresh artistic ground in contemporary ceramic sculpture.

Wanxin Zhang's mostly male population often sport a traditional Chinese hair knot and are dressed in cloaks or costume while adorned with an object as signifier like necktie, young child, basketball, or even a skateboard. The frequent use of rounded eyeglasses implies a constant lens through which the world is viewed and is an important symbol for the artist, whose global perspective dramatically changed through his exposure to Western art. Each figure's shifting posture illustrates the artist's ability to integrate vitality into sculpted human form. As individual sculptures, each work can easily stand alone. Wanxin Zhang's figures however gain further importance through his preference for populated installation – a dynamic that acknowledges their lineage to the ancient Chinese warriors but also succeeds in the realm of contemporary ceramics where boundary-pushing is limitless. While

many of Wanxin Zhang's sculptures illustrate his adaptation of Chinese imagery, a more recent body of work focuses on American-inspired topics. These new pieces are a departure from the former warriors to a new world with broader connections to social and political issues. *God Bless You*, 2008, *Inauguration Day*, 2009

and *Impossible III*, 2009 depict profound experiences for the artist. Specifically, the idea for *God Bless You* developed many years ago when the artist saw homeless people in the streets of his adopted city. Their three-word comment to him was a glaring distinction from “Long live Chairman Mao,” that he heard in China. Wanxin’s second tribute piece in the show, *Inauguration Day*, depicts Barack Obama, the first African-American president whom the artist personally found inspirational. Wanxin Zhang’s horizontal and only non-figurative work in this show is titled *Impossible III*. Here he uses the structure of a building hybrid using the United States Capitol and Beijing’s Forbidden City to describe the current relationship between China and the United States⁵.

SUMMARY

Wanxin Zhang’s pursuit of artistic direction fortuitously brought him to Northern California where it collided with the pluralistic use of clay. His exposure to this versatile medium transformed his artistic direction, placing him in a context in which his creativity was fueled by the ceramic innovation of those around him. His status as an immigrant to California is consistent with the state’s artistic history. That he adapted to a new culture while using one of the region’s most noted artistic genres validates Wanxin Zhang as an original contributor to the Northern California ceramic canon, making him a California Artist, too.

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Davis, California
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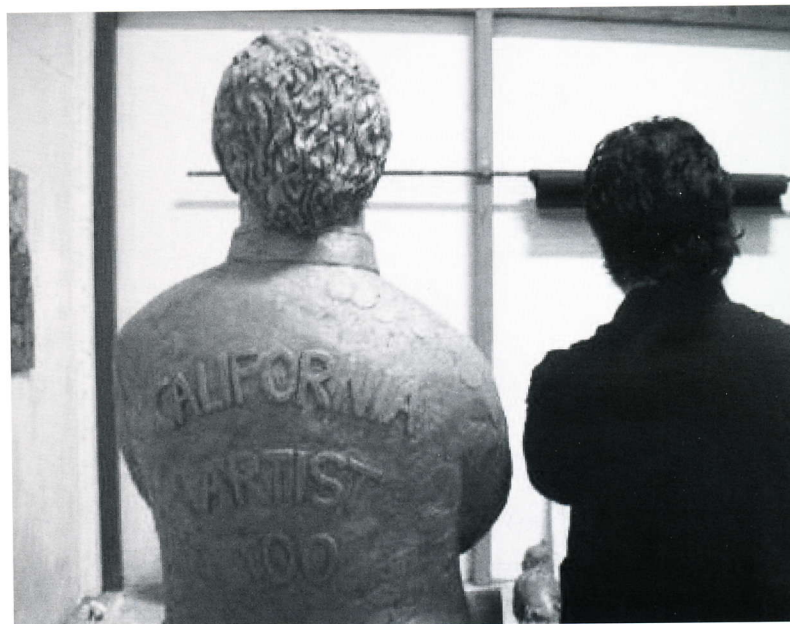
¹ The artist discusses how this impressive cache honoring China’s first emperor, Qin Shihuanghi, was uncomfortably similar to the revision and control of Chinese culture by Chairman Mao.

² Interview with the artist, February 29, 2012. San Francisco.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Newhard, Christopher. “The Sculpture of Wanxin Zhang: The Qin Warriors On His Mind,” Exhibition catalogue, *Wanxin Zhang Sculpture*. Triangle Gallery, San Francisco, 2002. pg. 39.

⁵ The artist explains that the center structure looks like the US Capitol building, but the side is clipped by the Forbidden City, China’s Imperial palace for over 500 years, representing the idea that despite the two countries having a lot in common, their different internal structures result in dialogue with negative impact. He further states that this piece is also inspired by many of Robert Arneson’s building works.



“California Artist, Too,” Work in progress. 2006-2007