

## Zhang Huan: Altered States

Vancouver Art Gallery, [www.vanartgallery.bc.ca](http://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca), June 7 to October 5, 2008

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ZHANG HUAN

# ALTERED STATES

By Melissa Lam



WHEN IS THE PINNACLE MOMENT IN AN ARTIST'S CAREER WHEN HE IS READY FOR A VAST MUSEUM RETROSPECTIVE OF HIS WORK? FOR FORTY-THREE YEAR OLD MAINLAND CHINESE ARTIST ZHANG HUAN, THE ANSWER IS QUITE EARLY. ZHANG'S FOURTEEN YEAR PRACTICE OF PERFORMANCE ART AND RECENT FORAY INTO SCULPTURE AND NEW MEDIA HAS BEEN GIVEN THE ATTENTION USUALLY ALLOTTED TO BLOCKBUSTER SHOWS, TRAVELING FROM THE ASIA SOCIETY NEW YORK, TO THE MOCA, SHANGHAI, AND CURRENTLY ON EXHIBITION AT THE VANCOUVER ART GALLERY IN CANADA.

*Skin*, 1997  
Black-and-white photographs  
Collection of Friedman Benda  
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

The first thing the viewer notices in Zhang's performance work is that the photographs appear more startling than the actual documented video work. The well known "12 Square Meters", one of Zhang's earliest executed works in which he slathers himself with honey and fish oil and sits on a Chinese toilet for 6 hours covered in house flies is more effective in photography and less so in actual film documentation. This is not surprising as much of Zhang's performance art ("Family Tree", "Skin") was created specifically for photographs rather than as a documentation of events. This gives the photographs a slick lush quality that is often lacking in candid snapshots of performance art. Traditionally, Performance Art video recordings are given the tough realism of documentary, expressed in the shaky unfolding of events through the ubiquitous hand-held camera. In contrast, Zhang's videos are complete with piped in music recording, voice-overs, close-ups, and are slick and professional in their execution. "My New York" shows Zhang walking through the streets of Manhattan dressed in a costume made entirely of beef steak and handing out white doves to New Yorkers for them to set the birds free. Close-ups and panoramic shots of Zhang gazing in the distance against a blue sky, cradling a white dove play to a theatrical German bombastic influence not common in Performance Art. Zhang often mixes his body art in relation to cultural and power politics stating in the exhibition catalogue "I wanted



to measure myself against insurmountable limits even though I didn't have the energy needed to do so. I wanted to raise a mountain or move a building." This statement is realized in his work, *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, in which he piles 10 naked bodies one on top of the other in order to add width to a mountain; and *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* in which he enlists a variety of different people including himself to stand in the pond in order to raise the water level with their body density.

The most startling and interesting aspect about Zhang Huan's retrospective is definitely the new sculpture and media he has been creating for the past 2 years. Works such as *Ash Army #1, #2, #3*, and *Buddha Finger #7 and #8*, are impressive works of gigantic proportions. The Ash Army series are beautifully sculpted heads works made of a combination of ashes (sourced from prayer temples) and steel, the massive heads a cross between Buddha's profile and the Artist's own likeness. The ash of burnt offerings used in the sculpture series are a loose texture of material, temporality, commenting on the fleeting nature of history and memory.

Zhang Huan's body of performance art may have been interesting but it is his new work in sculpture that will begin to mark him as a prolific artist to watch in the coming decade. □

*To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, 1995  
color photograph  
Collection of the Artist  
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

#### EXPOSITION

Vancouver Art Gallery  
750 Hornby Street  
Vancouver, British Columbia  
24-hour Info line: 604.662.4719  
[www.vanartgallery.bc.ca](http://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca)  
June 7 to October 5, 2008