

ASIAN ART NEWS

HK\$80/US\$10/
C\$14/ 7/UK£9

VOLUME 26 NUMBER 1 2016

QUARTERLY



P. GNANA



Wucius Wong * **Cai Dondong & Zhong Biao** * **Reagan Lee (Li Nanfeng)** *
Stephen King * **Roe Rosen** * **Reviews**



Cai Dongdong, *Off the Target*, 2015, silver gelatin print and arrow, 54 x 54 x 80 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artists and Klein Sun Gallery, New York.

Outsider And Insider

Cai Dongdong and Zhong Biao are artists of very different hues. Cai's works are 'eloquent and disturbing' while Zhong Biao's may give 'enlightenment to morbidity.' However one views these artists' works, there is always the challenge of interpretation.

By Robert C. Morgan

Cai Dongdong carries the title of “outsider artist,” which means that he is outside the mainstream of art education and production, having never attended an art school or academy. However, Cai did happen to have come upon photography at a relatively young age during his years with China’s People Liberation Army. Apparently, a commanding officer presented him with a camera and then asked him to photograph the soldiers around him. In effect, Cai suddenly became a military portrait photographer.

While this story is interesting, the work included in the current exhibition at Klein Sun Gallery in New York

is less about portraiture than a kind of Duchampian tribute whereby the majority of the photographs, used in his recent “photo sculptures,” are, in fact, “readymades,” in that they are photographs not taken by the artist himself. This repeats the American artist John Baldessari who, as early as the mid-1970s, began appropriating film stills from Grade B movies as his primary subject matter, only rarely employing his own photographs. Although these artists might have an affinity between their methods of using photographs more than actually photographing their subjects, the generational gap between them would suggest that this affinity is, for the most part, coinci-

dental or possibly unconscious from the perspective of Cai Dongdong (b.1978, Tianshu, Gansu).

Cai’s photo sculptures are eloquent and disturbing. For some they create a kind of “dissociative experience” in which the viewer feels strangely distant from the work being viewed. The collective title for this group of works is *Fountain* and is taken directly from the famous urinal displayed by Duchamp in 1917 at *The Independent Artists’ Exhibition* in New York. In these works, the black-and-white photographs are manipulated silver gelatin prints with protruding objects attached to them. The images are appropriated from either the

artist's assorted collection or are produced from hand-developed negatives, taken during the era of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), some of which he may have actually taken himself and later forgot about.

Two of my favorites in the current exhibition are *Off the Target* and *Practice Shooting* (both 2015). In the former, a group of soldiers is being instructed as to how to hit the bull's eye on the target, while, at the same time, a feathered error is affixed to the photograph between the somber heads of two of the men.

In *Practice Shooting*, a male and a female soldier sight their respective targets. Cai has placed a mirror, equal in size to the photograph of the couple, which reflects them in such a way as to suggest they are aiming directly at one another. The humor in these works is clearly based on the absurd idea that the neophyte soldiers are being taught to kill, yet, as conscripted citizens, they appear utterly removed from the experience of warfare.

Cai Dongdong elevates this concept metaphorically to the extent that one may be operating the latest technology without the slightest regard for the content of the information they are

manipulating, even if people's lives are at stake. Cai's exhibition was one of the more engaging exhibitions on West 22nd Street in West Chelsea, suggesting that humor is not always separated from the seriousness of what some art proposes itself to be.

My initial occasion to view the work of Zhong Biao (b.1968, Chongqing) was in Shanghai during the World Expo in 2010. At the time, Zhong was presenting a work that was heavily saturated with conflicting visual affects. I recall the interior of the museum space where his work was being shown as including figures, mainly of young Chinese people, who were in a state of obsessive liberation, mostly bourgeois in appearance, posed in a manner that suggested a kind of bizarre stridency, feigning euphoria, but never clear as to what was inciting this euphoria other than the artist's speculation on gleeful entrepreneurship.

It has been said that Zhong's point of view tends toward cynicism, a point of view that appears as an overriding theme in his recent work. This group of paintings, often employing digital printing, include renderings of chaos, hallucination, and seemingly mindless destruction, all

enticingly present along with symbols of purity that seem strangely distant from one another.

Zhong's exhibition of recent paintings entitled *The Other Shore* reveals divergent entities, presumably representing the destroyed remains of high culture in a state of empty desolation. The connections to place and geography are unclear as are the ideological referents that appear to exist without defined values, suspended in relation to one another. Nor is the reference to the important *Prajnaparamita Sutra* in Buddhism made clear, at least to this viewer. One may understand that terrorist attacks and "pure virtue" exist in opposition to one another, but it is difficult to get the sense of how virtue endures within the construct of Zhong's paintings.

Here, I refer to works such as *House of Cards* and *Chinese Dream* (both 2016), the former based on a popular TV series, starring Kevin Spacey, which deals with corruption and illicit romantic intrigue in the White House; and the latter, a doubling of Tiananmen Square in Beijing, suggesting a juxtaposition between the celestial Qing dynasty and the People's Republic of China. The sym-



Cai Dongdong, *Practice Shooting*, 2015, photographs, 53 x 53 x 53 cm.

bolic historical buildings portrayed in each of these paintings suggest a counterpoise between America and China, accompanied by heavy grayish brushwork, perhaps symbolic of the chaos and power of destruction that symbolically surround these edifices. In addition, these paintings appear strangely literal, even illustrational, avoiding the necessary ambiguity that the artist feels the need to express.

Journey to the West (2015), also in grayish brushwork in its pigmented tonality, features a rising three-armed woman, as if performing on stage in a nightclub, and a more serene, pensive, male figure below in a lesser scale. Whereas the Chinese woman appears overtly expressive in her gestural mode, the diminutive male implies a monk or a secular figure more bent on spiritual longings. Again the avid brush-



Zhong_Biao, **Take Off**, 2015, oil on canvas 150 x 120 cm.

work secretes throughout this dyadic ensemble, never quite settling on what the illustration means.

Zhong's more successful painting, but less explosively expressive, is called *Take Off* (2015) in which a young girl is reading a book with the imprint of a flying bird on the cover, with the same bird flying above her head. There is a kind of sweetness in this painting that virtually challenges the demonic hostility that abides throughout the show. As the author of the catalog, Paul Manfredi, has expressed: "His [Zhong's] goal is to use painting to challenge the limits of space and time, which frame our experience." In this case the "Buddhist purity" shown in *Take Off* would seem to quell everything else, indeed, finally giving enlightenment to morbidity. Δ

Robert C. Morgan is the New York editor of Asian Art News and World Sculpture News.



Zhong Biao, **Journey to the West**, 2015, oil on canvas, 280 x 200 cm.



Zhong Biao, **House of Cards**, 2016, acrylic and oil on canvas, 150 x 120 cm.