

Press Release

May 2017

Zhang Dali *Body and Soul*



museum Beelden aan Zee: 1 July 2017 – 8 October 2017

This summer, in the main hall of museum Beelden aan Zee a major retrospective will be exhibited of characteristic works of the Chinese performance artist, graffiti artist and sculptor Zhang Dali (Harbin, 1963). The group sculpture of 18 nude, everyday Chinese, which have been carved in the finest marble, will be seen for the first time in Europe. In the middle of the hall will stand a large, unique installation, created from scaffolding material. Zhang Dali is one of China's most renowned sculptors, and this occasion will be his first retrospective in Europe. Zhang Dali is an important figure in the Chinese art world. This well-known artist is also primarily a promoter of humanitarianism and compassion in the hard lives of millions of Chinese.

Zhang Dali's artistic activism is aimed at the emancipation of the underclass in Chinese society. In a country that is ruled by communism this accusation is painfully ironic; after all, ideology assumes the sovereignty of the worker. The local authorities were not happy about this and he was kept under close scrutiny, sometimes even being arrested and interrogated. Fortunately it never led to a major confrontation. In the ever-increasing constructional activities Zhang Dali saw a metaphor that he could use to great advantage in an artistic manner. In the Chinese metropolises old urban districts and historic housing blocks were demolished, making way for huge office blocks and modern highways. In some cases the residents had to leave their homes in great haste to escape the wrecking ball, whilst for the residents, expropriation procedures, any form of respect or even information was lacking.

Zhang Dali used spray paint to apply his own portrait contour on the buildings, also often with the lettering AK-47 (referring to a Russian assault rifle). This was a reflection of the brutal markings of the demolition contractors, who spray painted the character *chai* surrounded by a circle painted on the outer wall of the buildings. *Chai* means 'knock down'. Sometimes Zhang Dali's graffiti was the template for sawing out the contours of the circle, in order that he could take a photograph – always of a new office block – through the old wall that was destined for destruction. The old world was being demolished to make way for a new one. Is the past over and done with? Is the present better?

In the second half of the 1990s and in the run-up to the 2008 Summer Olympic Games, constructional activities in China were intensified. At their peak a group of 300 million so-called *urban peasants* were at work in the industry, sleeping in containers or sheds, with their only private space being a bunk bed. They travelled from city to city, from job to job. Zhang Dali wanted to give back to these modern, travelling serfs their identity, their face. He

began by making casts of their bodies and their heads, then creating installations of one hundred portraits exhibited in a row (*100 Chinese*), or in a sort of cloudlike shaped bodies suspended upside down (*Chinese Offspring*). The bodies were numbered, as a sign of the fact that they were treated not as human being but as numbers.

Note for the editorial staff (not for publication):

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