

“When I was young, the educational process in China was essentially a process of foot-binding, so that one’s natural feet became deformed. I felt that if one day I might be able to throw away the binding cloths and restore my natural feet, then it would be possible to recover my true self. For me, over the last twenty-five years in New York, to keep doing my art was a restoration of my natural feet and also a way to find my true self. New York’s cultural diversity not only gave me creative inspiration, it also let me enjoy the happiness of escape from artificial limitations, such as “Eastern art,” “Western art,” “Conceptual art,” and “formalist art.” Because of my life

ZHANG HONGTU *Artist’s Statement*

experiences and my multicultural background, I have always been interested in different cultures and the relationships between them. My recent “hybrid” works don’t give an answer to current issues such as “globalization,” “East and West,” “high and low,” “elite culture from the museum and mass culture from the society.” Rather, what I have been doing with my art is to question viewers’ conventional taste, to evoke viewers’ thinking on these issues from a different perspective.”

CULTURAL ICONOGRAPHY AS STYLE

MICHELLE LIM

An incongruous photo of a painting stands out among the already eclectic collection of images of Zhang Hongtu's works laid out before us. In it the artist is standing in front of his painting *Fish* (1985; fig. 1) with his face contorted, bulging eyes and gaping mouth in playful imitation of the painted fishes. The similarity between man and fish is unmistakable; as if Zhang's shock of spiky hair had been transposed onto the fishes' electrified white fins while they in turn stare back at the viewer through the sketchy yellow reeds, their faces radiating a Munchian kind of palpable anxiety.

Today, it would be only too easy to peg *Fish* as an "Expressionist" painting from the artist's extensive repertoire of styles. But put *Fish* and *Self-Portrait in the Style of the Old Masters* (2004; fig. 2; cat. 42) side by side, and Zhang Hongtu's own adventures in New York could not be more plainly told, with the contrast between his somewhat straitened circumstances when he first arrived in 1982 and his current status as a darling of the burgeoning Asian American art scene in New York set in sharp relief.

In his *Self-Portrait*, dating more than a decade later,¹ Zhang has costumed and posed himself as Mona Lisa in a framed caricature that pokes gentle humor in a self-critique of his own style. The satirical take on the famed painting by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) is unmistakable. The dark luminescence of the sixteenth-century *Mona Lisa*'s Italian landscape remains as a background for *Self-Portrait*, but the enigmatically smiling Florentine lady who has come to stand for the ideal of Renaissance portraiture has been replaced. Zhang's rather large painter's hands are demurely folded in the classic pose of European portraiture, and a half-smile plays about his lips. Zhang is costumed in his usual studio work clothes, a checkered workman's shirt buttoned over a vermilion sweater, the latter's meticulously detailed knit wool a party to the joke. In a nod to Picasso, Zhang has applied a Cubist eye patch to his painted doppelganger and "preframed" it in the heavy ornate gold so commonly seen in galleries of European master paintings. Last but not least, Zhang signs off with a Chinese colophon in vertical script and a couple of painted Chinese seals. The flamboyant



FIGURE 1
Photograph of *Fish*, with artist, 2006.

Primary interview date: 12 January 2007
1 The painting exhibited here was made in 2004 based on a digital version completed in 2001.



FIGURE 2
Zhang Hongtu (b. 1943), *Self-Portrait in the Style of the Old Masters*, 2004. Oil on wood, 97.0 × 74.0 cm. Collection of Leo Shih.

persona presented in this portrait matches what one might expect of the artist behind works that, when shown in a group exhibition, were described by the *New York Times* as a “peacock-like show of [the artist’s] considerable artistic talents, painting zany mixtures of traditional Chinese landscape painting and the work of European Impressionist and Post-Impressionist masters.”²

As Zhang’s own style continues to mature more than a quarter century after his arrival in America, the spectrum of his works has come to reveal a textured visual commentary on the cyclical nature of historical progression, through his mock/real staging of repetitions in art-historical action and event. Traversing a diverse palette of artists’ styles, trends, and cultures, Zhang has proven himself a master at identifying the iconography of a culture. He has incisively demonstrated through his works a “synthetic intuition” in summarizing the visual essence of an era.³ Over the last twenty years, Zhang has “repainted” Chinese ink paintings into Impressionist oil paintings, transfigured Quaker Oats boxes à la Warhol, and given Ping-Pong tables a Duchampian punch. Under his direction, Coca-Cola bottles have morphed into Ming blue-and-white porcelain, freshly baked from the famed Jingdezhen ovens (cat. 41), while Big Mac cartons segue back and forth in time as ancient Shang-dynasty bronzes (cat. 40). Little remains sacrosanct in Zhang’s borrowing of the visual altarpieces from Chinese and Western cultural temples.

But to see Zhang Hongtu’s style simply as a collage of other artistic styles would put one in the same camp with those who persist in viewing Picasso as nothing more than the great modern master of pastiche—in other words, a debate grounded on a refusal to accept or see how visual synthesis can evolve into a new stylistic language. In her widely read *Picasso Papers*, Rosalind Krauss muses on this anecdote: “Picasso had labored long and hard for the show he mounted in 1919 for his new dealer, Paul Rosenberg, the first one-man show he had had in thirteen years. But Roger Allard’s review dismissed it as nothing but historical pastiche: ‘Everything, including Leonardo, Dürer, Le Nain, Ingres, Van Gogh, Cézanne, yes, everything... except Picasso,’ he lamented.”⁴ Krauss arbitrates this half-century-long debate by putting its counter-argument on the table, asserting that Picasso is not in fact a pasticheur but an artist who follows the “inherent logic” of an artistic trend whose momentum through art history cannot be contained. According to Krauss, “Proponents of this interpretation call this not pastiche but rather the ‘access’ that Picasso had patiently and legitimately gained to *le musée imaginaire*.”⁵

² Benjamin Genocchio, “Through Ink and Brush, a Melding of Traditions,” *New York Times*, 4 May 2003.

³ The term is Panofsky’s. Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper and Row), 15.

⁴ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Picasso Papers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 95–96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 97. These views were reinforced again by Robert Delaunay in 1923 and Gerard Genette in 1982.

The same can be said of Zhang and his own imaginary museum—his works hint that we may finally have come to the point where we can move beyond the typical East-West artistic collage into the beginning of a truly global art history. Zhang is interested in creating spaces for others to rethink their own worldviews. As Zhang commented about his use of iconic styles and images, “Yes, everybody knows these are clichés, but I use them because they are something I have in common with people—they are public images, which I try to let people see from a new angle.... To me, it doesn’t matter, you can think this way or that way, I just give you a chance to think, feel a different way with this image.”⁶ In *Ping-Pong Mao* (1995; cat. 36), Zhang adds a humorous twist by cutting out the silhouette of Mao on each half of the table, leaving little table-room to play. One is first drawn in by the technical challenge of playing the game on such a table, but the physical exertion of negotiating these boundaries inevitably forces one to confront the psychological depths of those very same lines. Reminding us how Ping-Pong diplomacy helped with the warming of Sino-US relations in the early 1970s, Jerome Silbergeld critiques *Ping-Pong Mao* thus: “Placing oneself too far away from the Chairman and his ideology lands one in trouble, off of the table; but Mao is dangerous, too, and landing too close to him can be equally disastrous, as his closest associates repeatedly discovered. Negotiating boundaries, living along peripheries, requires great care.”⁷ It is a joke with a dark undertone, and as Zhang intended, an intellectually provocative game with “a humor that draws people in.”⁸

Audience games are another manifestation of Zhang’s sometimes sly humor. His colophon on *Zhao Mengfu–Monet, Noon* (1999) is a cheeky example of his jokes on unsuspecting viewers. It reads,

Thank you for coming so close in order to read this calligraphy. You must be able to understand Chinese, right? However, have you noticed something truly unfortunate has happened? When you come close enough to be able to read these words—which is to say, just this moment—you lose the possibility of enjoying the painting as a whole. So, please step back five or six steps (but be careful not to bump into anyone or anything behind you!) Find what you feel to be an appropriate distance and angle, and shift your attention from these words to the painting. Thank you for your attention.

This interactive aspect of Zhang’s work is very much a product of the post-modern condition, where boundaries between the audience and the artist, a performance and real life have been blurred into an omnicontext for the creation and reception of art.

The entry level to Zhang’s art merely tests our art-historical erudition: to identify the style employed. It is an amusing game played by many visitors



FIGURE 3
Édouard Manet (1832–1883), *Olympia*, 1863. Oil on canvas,
130.5 × 190.0 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

6 Jonathan Hay, “Zhang Hongtu/Hongtu Zhang,” in John Hay, ed., *Boundaries in China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 288–89.

7 Jerome Silbergeld, “Zhang Hongtu’s Alternative History of Painting,” *Zhang Hongtu: an on-going painting project* (New York: On-going Publications, 2000), 6.

8 Jennifer A. Weyburn, “Drawing on East and West,” *Yale-China Review* 2002, available on www.momao.com/yalechina.html (accessed 15 August 2007).

9 Simon Leung, “... and there I am: Andy Warhol and the Ethics of Identification,” *Art Journal*, Spring 2003, 4.

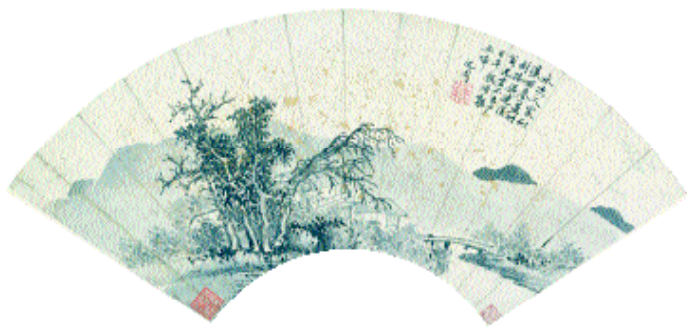


FIGURE 4

Shen Zhou (1427–1509), *Home by the Stream* (*Shui ci ren jia*), ca. 1490. Folding fan mounted as album; ink on gold flecked paper, 18.1 × 53.7 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gift of Mrs. Edward L. Elliott (y1984–51a).

to large brand-name museums like the Metropolitan Museum in New York or the Louvre in Paris. We are pleased, because this stage is passed without much difficulty. But if we stay enraptured by the elegantly designed forms of blue-and-white porcelain Coke bottles with delicately scalloped caps, we would have fallen by the wayside. If we are easily affronted by Zhang’s muddying of delicate Chinese ink lines and translucent washes with heavy oil brushes, we are lost. The *surface* of form is the playground for many contemporary artists, but few games are as sophisticated as Zhang’s. Like Andy Warhol, who claimed, “If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There’s nothing behind it,”⁹ the forms taken by works like Zhang’s *Quaker Oats Mao* (1987) or *Six-Pack of Kekou-Kele (Coca-Cola)* (2002) (cats. 35, 41) voice the obvious, the clichéd, or even the kitsch, but the artist’s original aesthetic sensibility is revealed as each layer of meaning is unpeeled to reveal a still more complicated iconological structure, not just a visual quip.

The uniqueness of Zhang’s style lies in his ability to say exactly what he wants, in an inimitably Zhang Hongtu style and with signature Zhang Hongtu humor, through languages that may have been preconstructed by others. There are many artists with talent and technique, but few have “a unique and exact way of looking at things, and finding the right context for expressing that way of looking”; in other words, that indefinable “IT” factor that makes a writer or artist’s work go beyond a good idea and the fundamental mastery of craft so as to “make the world over to his own specifications.”¹⁰ The eccentric Qing artist Shitao, someone much admired by Zhang, wryly quipped: “I am what I am and must always remain myself.... The beards and eyebrows of the ancients cannot grow on my face; the lungs and bowels of the ancients cannot be placed in my stomach.... How can I follow any ancient style without transforming it?”¹¹ It is in this vein of gentle mockery that Zhang’s colophon on his *Wang Hui–Monet #2* (2000) painting reads,

*Scholars consider Wang Hui’s lifework to have been based on the copying of ancient masters, in such a way that he learned to master the techniques of the many great artists since the Song and Yuan dynasties. Wang Hui himself said, “It would be a great accomplishment to have combined the lines of the Yuan, the composition of the Song and the magnificence of the Tang.” Is it not all the more marvelous to add to that the color of the French Impressionists?*¹²

While Zhang is a conceptual artist who paints with the iconography of assorted art traditions and popular cultural mythology, a consistent awareness of historical progression underlies his stylistic *mélange*. His

¹⁰ Raymond Carver, *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories, 1966–1982* (Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, 1983), 13.

¹¹ Wen Fong, *Images of the Mind: Selections from the Edward L. Elliott Family and the John B. Elliott Collections of Chi-*

nese Calligraphy and Painting at the Art Museum, Princeton University (Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1984), 205.

¹² Weyburn, “Drawing on East and West.”

seemingly decontextualized subversions reframe his own highly personal viewpoints and reactions to events of his time, in the appropriate visual idiom. It is a philosophical challenge to the boundaries of both cultural time and art-historical trends. Zhang does more than paint *in the manner* of others; his seemingly derivative work can be seen, instead, as a commentary on the placeholder status of the original work in art history. There are no better-known conceptual precedents for Zhang's mode of replacing motifs in a classic composition than what Édouard Manet (1832–1883) did in his *Olympia* (1863; fig. 3). And thus when Zhang turns to works by Impressionist master Claude Monet for inspiration, it is not any Monet that will do, but it had to be Monet's celebrated *Sunrise* (1872), which created such an uproar at the landmark Salon des Refusés in Paris, 1873. Zhang's composition of his own *Impression: Sunrise, 117 Years after Monet* (1989) painting is thus parallel to an art historian-critic's careful composition of the textual. Like the historian who chooses whatever art-historical or cultural examples best support her arguments, Zhang's visual cross-referencing cannot be misconstrued as the tree for the forest. The symbolic value of the icon is not limited to its popular iconographic attributes. Instead, the viewer needs to realize meanings that are "derived at a second remove, as the result of reflection upon the immediate impression left by the plastic values. They are not immediately or externally present in... painting, but must be projected *into it* by the spectator sensitive enough to react sufficiently to plastic qualities" (emphasis added).¹³ Zhang's *Impression: Sunrise* can be seen to contain semiotic cues from both Monet's *Sunrise* and the slogan popular in Communist China "Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts." That said, what we see or how we understand the painting is affected by our own personal context. Even though Zhang said that he would have preferred an art-historical reference, given his conscious attempts to avoid the political during his early years in America, he was aware that political meaning could not be avoided, given a personal history that inevitably colored the audience's reading of the work, albeit in different ways whether shown in America or in China.¹⁴

Zhang's repetition and cross-cultural referencing of Chinese and Western classical forms in the *Repaint Chinese Shan Shui Painting* series has provided serious fodder for critics and scholars, but it is the playfulness of his works that steal the show. Zhang's delight in drawing connections back to the origins of his iconological references is quite infectious. Interestingly, the titles of works in the *Repaint Chinese Shan Shui Painting* series always place the names of the Chinese artists before those of the European masters. This 'packaging' reflects Zhang's understanding of his American audience's



FIGURE 5
Zhang Hongtu (b. 1943), *Shitao-Van Gogh PUAM*, 2002–3. Oil on canvas, 238.8 × 96.5 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund (2003-144).

¹³ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in his, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 15.

¹⁴ Hay, "Zhang Hongtu," 291. See also Jerome Silbergeld's biographical essay, "Zhang Hongtu: An Outsider's Outsider Comes In," in this volume.

¹⁵ David Marcus, "Shuffling the Deck: Art Exhibition Offers New Perspectives

on Familiar Works," *Princeton Alumni Weekly* 3, no. 12 (March 26, 2003), www.princeton.edu/archive_new/PAW02-03/12-0326/features2.html (accessed 15 August 2007).

¹⁶ The other three artists were Sanford Biggers, Anne Chu, and Ellen Harvey.

¹⁷ Marcus, "Shuffling the Deck."



FIGURE 6

Shitao (1642–ca. 1707), *An Ancient House under Tall Pine Trees* (*Changsong laowu tu*) (with partial view of mounting), ca. 1700. Hanging scroll; ink on paper, 184.8 × 88.3 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gift of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (y1984-48).

position, most of whom can only look at Chinese art through lenses colored by Western art-historical education, while hinting at the artist's own loyalties. Meandering through the *Repaint Chinese Shan Shui* paintings gives one the feeling of being at a garden picnic with a motley crowd of artists, from Wang Xizhi (303–361), Dong Qichang (1555–1636), and Shitao (1642–ca. 1707) to Monet (1840–1926), Picasso (1881–1973), and van Gogh (1853–1890)—although what also comes to mind is a séance where Zhang as medium gets these past masters to speak about their views on topical issues, especially when he remarks, charmingly, about his process for the *Repaint Chinese Shan Shui* series: “I feel like I’m an actor. Today I’m van Gogh; tomorrow I’m Monet.”¹⁵

The naturalness by which Zhang chooses and welds together stylistic motifs underscores the deliberate planning that went into the composition of its synthesized appearance. In designing *Shen Zhou–Monet* (2002–3) for the Princeton University Art Museum’s *Shuffling the Deck: The Collection Reconsidered* exhibition in 2003, Zhang was given an interesting curatorial proposal, together with three other artists: to select and respond to works from the museum’s own permanent collection.¹⁶ Zhang had already decided that he was going to focus on Monet’s *Lilies and the Japanese Bridge* (1899), which tied in with his *Repaint Chinese Shan Shui Painting* series. After going through the museum’s collection of Chinese paintings, Zhang decided on a fan painting by the Ming artist Shen Zhou (1427–1509), *Home by the Stream* (ca. 1490; fig. 4), which has a simple bridge in the middle. As Zhang commented later, “If I want to combine Monet and a Chinese painting, I have to find something in common. The difference is already there.”¹⁷

In Zhang Hongtu’s *Shitao–van Gogh PUAM* (2002–3; fig. 5), also created for that exhibition and based compositionally on the early Qing artist Shitao’s *Ancient House under Tall Pine Trees* (ca. 1700; fig. 6), one is greeted by what appears to be van Gogh’s take on Chinese landscape painting, which might not seem entirely incongruous given the Dutch master’s penchant for Japonisme in the form of *ukiyo*e prints. But the viewer steeped in Western painting soon becomes conscious of the painting’s disorientingly vertical format, as opposed to the horizontal format conventionalized in the Western landscape genre. Those who have grown up on a staple of East Asian painting, conversely, may find themselves equally disconcerted by the thick, oil-loaded brushstrokes used by Zhang to retrace the traditional lines of Shitao’s painting. As one continues to gaze at the painting, these seeming stylistic similarities and apparent formal differences melt into each other. As in the *Shen Zhou–Monet* painting discussed, Zhang has synthesized common motifs from both van Gogh’s oeuvre and the Chinese artist’s work—in

this case Shitao's *Ancient House*—to provide a visual handrail. The Chinese hut on the mountain evokes images of van Gogh's cottages in the French countryside, just as the yellow-green strokes that constitute wind-bent pine branches would seem to recall van Gogh's haystacks. A closer examination of the work however, reveals stylistic differences in technique and colors. For van Gogh's thick, visceral paint globs and pure glowing pigments, Zhang has substituted tender artifice. Zhang's lines and colors are carefully applied and composed, as opposed to van Gogh's quick expressionistic movements, and his paints have been calibrated to subdued contrasts that comfortably play off each other to create the impression of the subtler tonality of Shitao's painting. The Impressionists appeared to paint from nature and Zhang, too, appears initially to have painted directly from model paintings, much like any young painter of Western or Eastern tradition. In fact, appearances are deceptive on both counts. The composition of *Shitao-van Gogh* was meticulously constructed on a computer before being projected and finished on canvas. Many Impressionist works were completed in the studio instead of in one sitting *en plein air*, as frequently romanticized. Zhang's visual process, albeit using far more modern methods than what the Impressionists had to work with, thus makes as much of a comment on the historical connection to these European masters as do the more obvious iconological readings derived from parallels in artistic style. Thus, coming full circle, Zhang has been more conceptually true to the spirit of the European masters than first imagined: *Shitao-van Gogh* is literally Zhang's Impressionistic take on Chinese painting.

Shitao-van Gogh is a work by an artist who considers himself first and foremost to be someone working with the legacy of centuries-old Chinese traditions. In Zhang's colophon on *Shitao-van Gogh* he addresses the Qing master directly: "Concealed within these colorful verses, one finds a mindscape of rain, wind, and brilliant clouds—thus did this work come to be painted. Shitao's forgiveness is sought. Hongtu." Indeed, the strength of this work lies in its translation—and subsequent subversion—of traditional Chinese painting into postmodern visual idioms of ambiguity and studied illusion. Chinese art historian Wen Fong's description of Shitao's having "rearranged the familiar motifs of mountains and trees in a new design, 'writing' strong and strange-looking rock and tree forms powerfully and expressively" seems just as applicable as commentary on Zhang's treatment of Shitao's *Ancient House*.¹⁸ However, while Fong has described Shitao as treating "painting as calligraphy" in *Ancient House*, Zhang does the opposite, by turning calligraphy into painting, sometimes literally where the identifying



18 Fong, *Images of the Mind*, 2007.

seals and calligraphic text are concerned. Instead of the traditional Chinese characters one expects in inscriptions, Zhang used post-1949 simplified Chinese characters, which have been described by some traditionalists as “barbaric,” seeing in them the abandonment of centuries of literati culture. The full title of the painting, *Shitao’s “Ancient House under the Tall Pine Trees” Painting*, has been directly painted on the top of the canvas, and this text runs horizontally, not vertically as would traditional Chinese calligraphy. Conversely, the text, through its inclusion within the actual physical boundaries of the canvas, is made to share the responsibility of communicating visual meaning through motifs like the classic recluse’s hut, the evergreen pines, and the enduring mountains of tradition. These classical Chinese visual motifs are less representational than symbolic, and Zhang uses them as visual shorthand to highlight conventions and models that have come to function as vehicles of cultural meaning, thus drawing upon an index of Chinese visual art canons in his paintings.

FIGURE 7

Zhang Hongtu, *Last Banquet*, 1989. Mixed media: laser prints, pages of the Little Red Book, acrylic on canvas, 152.4 × 426.7 cm. The Guy and Myriam Ullens Foundation Collection.



While Zhang does not undertake as formal an investigation into language as some of his fellow Chinese artists, such as Xu Bing and Gu Wenda, his counter-traditional probing of text and meaning nevertheless raises sophisticated questions about the role of text and language, particularly when transferred across cultural contexts or displayed on a cross-cultural platform.¹⁹ It is important to register Zhang’s fundamental commitment to visual expression and not overweigh the play of words with too much unintended meaning. Zhang’s verses are often witty and amusingly direct, yet the textual forms are usually camouflaged comfortably within the rest of the pictorial composition. Thus, unlike traditional Chinese paintings where the black ink of the calligraphy contrasts against the white space of sky, Zhang’s painted Chinese words blend into the background of the *Repaint Chinese Shan Shui* paintings, black into dark blues in the case of *Shitao-van Gogh*.

Zhang’s framing of *Shitao-van Gogh* is a sympathetic parody of traditional Chinese scroll painting. The mock Chinese border deftly captures the dichotomy between style and content. To borrow a phrase from media guru Marshall McLuhan, “the medium is the message” where this conceptual device is concerned.²⁰ The active landscape composition is demarcated by a flat gray painted “scroll” border on which the painting’s title has been painted. This neutralized gray zone symbolizes a silk background like that on which Chinese paintings are usually mounted. In the context of this Chinese-Western painting, this gray zone has been rendered with multiple meanings. Like a painted theater set, it is a prop for the artwork. It also simultaneously serves as an actor in the role of ambiguous divider between

¹⁹ See Chang Tsong-zung et al., *Power of the Word* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2000).

²⁰ “The medium is the message” is an expression coined by Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man* (1964), and he later published a book under the title *The Medium Is the Message* (1967).

the Chinese art and its Western audience, or between “art” as denoted by painted color surfaces and the featureless white walls of the museum or white cube gallery that the *Repaint Chinese Shan Shui* paintings are almost inevitably hung against. The ironic counter-play of text and image in the paintings is finally completed with Zhang’s painted “Hongtu zai zao” seals, with the last two Chinese words “zai zao” having their own play on meaning, from “reproduce” and “remake,” to “repaint.”

Zhang’s works belong in the context of today’s popular culture, where the myth of a sublime beauty in art has become irrevocably contaminated by kitschy glamour. Works like *The Last Supper* or the *Mona Lisa*, through ubiquitous reproductions, have come to embody the ultimate cliché of the art masterpiece, presenting irresistibly rich material for artists interested in the playful subversion of cultural iconology. When the art critic Clement Greenberg wrote dryly that if the Russian peasant had been given a choice, the Soviet Realist kitsch would have stood no chance next to “products of American capitalism,” he perhaps did not anticipate competition from the Chinese contemporary art movement’s propensity to copy, absorb, reinvent, and turn the symbols of Western capitalism on their own head, as Zhang did in his *Quaker Oats Mao* (cat. 35).²¹ These garish cardboard cereal boxes, where the iconic Quaker Oats man has been conveniently replaced by Chinese leader Mao Zedong, border on kitsch—and like Warhol’s Campbell soup cans, probably *would* slip into pure kitsch if taken out of the art world. Zhang has described how he looked around his kitchen one day and realized that Mao was looking out of the Quaker Oats box. He said, “I realized that even though I [had] left China more than five years before, psychologically I couldn’t eliminate Mao’s image from my mind.”²²

At the same time, the reverse effects of such selective cognition have played a major factor in the reception of works like his *Last Banquet* (1989; fig. 7), when an audience sees what it wants to see. Zhang’s transposition of *The Last Supper* into a pop culture idiom presents an ideal test laboratory for Panofsky’s theories on iconographic seeing. Zhang’s *Last Banquet*, itself a humorously ironic “Maoist” take on Leonardo’s *Last Supper*, made a real-life satire out of art when it was banned at the federally funded *Exhibition at the First Anniversary of the Tiananmen Event by the Congressional Human Rights Foundation* in Washington, DC, for fear of offending Christians in America.²³ (Ironically, the Tiananmen Incident in Beijing, 4 June 1989, had arisen from anger over the Chinese government’s curtailment of freedom of expression.) In *Last Banquet*, Zhang replaced everyone in Leonardo’s *Last Supper* tableau with images of Mao Zedong. Thus, in Zhang’s painting, Mao is Jesus Christ,

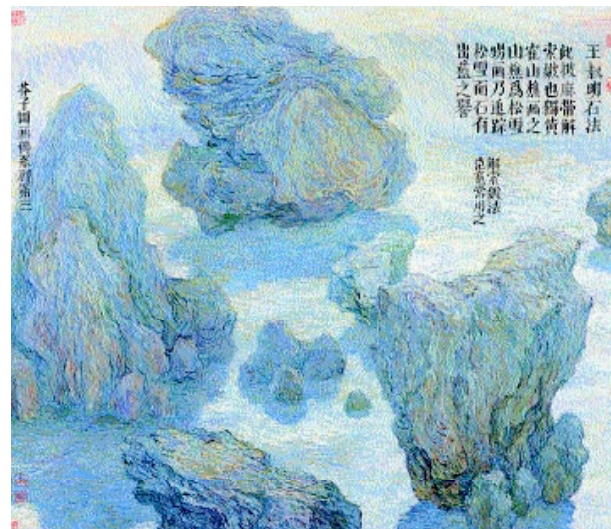


FIGURE 8
Zhang Hongtu, *Monet, Study of Pima Cun and Jiesuo Cun*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 146.0 × 167.6 cm. Private collection, Taipei, Taiwan.

21 Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 14.

22 Jonathan Goodman, “Zhang Hongtu at The Bronx Museum of the Arts,” in *Asia-Pacific Sculpture News* (Hong Kong) (Winter, 1996), 58. Also on www.momao.com/review_jg.html (accessed 15 August 2007).

23 Morgan Perkins, “The Supple

Vision of Zhang Hongtu,” in *Icons & Innovations: Zhang Hongtu* (New York: The Gibson Gallery, State University of New York at Potsdam, 2003), 4.

24 Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 15.

25 Hay, “Zhang Hongtu,” 287.

26 See also Zhang’s description of the process in Cui Fei, “An Interview with Zhang Hongtu,” *Chineseart.com* (2001),

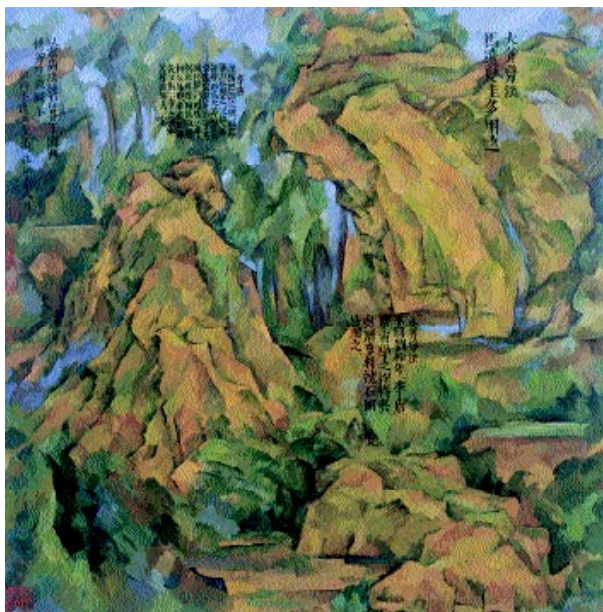


FIGURE 9

Zhang Hongtu, *Cézanne, Study of Axe-Cut Cui*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 142.3 × 142.3 cm. Private collection, Taipei, Taiwan.

Mao is Judas, Mao holds up the Little Red Book, Mao has a spittoon—all the disciples have been replaced by Mao, and thus Mao is redeeming Mao even as Mao is betraying Mao. To expand further on this iconological play, we might even consider how the master theorist on iconography, Panofsky himself, betrayed his own cultural suppositions about Australian bushmen and Western dinner parties when he wryly commented in his own canonical *Studies on Iconology*: “Our Australian bushman would be unable to recognize the subject of a Last Supper; to him it would only convey the idea of an excited dinner party. To understand the iconological meaning of the picture he would have to familiarize himself with the content of the Gospels. When it comes to representations of *themes* other than biblical stories or scenes from history and mythology which happen to be known to the average ‘educated person,’ all of us are Australian bushmen.”²⁴ Zhang Hongtu’s work thrives on such intellectual presumptions, creating forms whose surfaces hold up a mirror to our own cultural affinities and prejudices. In this case, the test of time and audiences of different cultural contexts have proven that Zhang’s perceptive reading of the original iconography in Leonardo’s painting remains true; more than anything else, the Last Supper is about human trust and betrayal in a society of men, whether Christian or Maoist, communist or democratic.

Not everyone has responded well to what they perceive as Zhang’s irreverence toward Chinese traditions or misunderstanding of European art canons. Zhang is aware that his own intention is sometimes misunderstood, but this does not bother him, as he believes that “when a new language is created, a new audience is created, so along with the creation of a new language the message of his work will be clarified.”²⁵ Despite Zhang’s strategy of co-opting the clichés of Western and Chinese painting so as to escape the stranglehold of art-historical traditions, his own art is neatly taking its place in the rapidly forming category of diasporic Chinese American art and contributing to the canons for future Chinese American artists.

Different cultures and historical periods, their boundaries intentionally blurred, are thrown into Zhang’s philosophical microwave, as in the case of *Bikers* (2001), which gives a somewhat comic expression to the dilemma of Chinese contemporary art today (cat. 39). A double-scroll digital print on canvas, *Bikers* can be produced in any size desired since its primary existence is in Zhang’s computer.²⁶ The works are montages of photographs and paintings, composed in the vertical format of Chinese hanging scrolls. One scroll presents a sea of Chinese cyclists riding furiously toward us. They are clearly from the present day, dressed in modern clothes, some

available at www.momao.com/cuifei.html (accessed 15 August 2007): “The diptych ‘Bikers’ also reflects my impression of my recent trips to China. The bicycle is still the primary form of transportation for most of people there. I felt that more people are eager for material life. Every image in these paintings is real. I took hundreds of

digital pictures in Beijing, which were then retouched and rearranged in Adobe Photoshop. The background of the first piece is a Chinese landscape painting, while that of the second one is simply an empty space. Here I used Chinese traditional collection seals and the scroll painting format to create an ancient atmosphere.”

with sunglasses and a few in polo shirts. Behind them, rising incongruously in the background is the crest of a painted mountain easily recognizable as from classical Chinese painting; it is Shen Zhou's *Lofty Mount Lu* (1467). Like the recluse coming down from the mountain, these modern Chinese cyclists seem determined to rejoin the real world, leaving tradition behind. But the other scroll undermines this easy conclusion. It depicts a sea of cyclists again, this time cycling just as frantically but away from the audience instead, toward an unknown horizon. Where are the cyclists going? No one knows, perhaps not even the artist himself. Is this the back view of the same sea of cyclists imaged in the first work? Which scroll comes first, which second? Again, these questions are unlikely to have any simple answers. The classic mountain occupying the upper third of the first scroll has been replaced in the second by a vast white misty expanse, covered by the calligraphy of Mao Zedong and the text of his famous poem, "Snow." *Bikers* reveals the Daoist ambiguity of an artist who has reframed the world from an ironic perspective that is tied to neither East nor West but anchored in the heart of a traveler through time and space. Yet, the issues framed by Zhang's works have a particular relevance and urgency to our contemporary society, grounded as they are in our current time.

Zhang's latest series of paintings, the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* series, takes his earlier *Repaint Chinese Shan Shui Painting* series as a point of departure. The styles are still inspired by Western masters but instead of working with the composition of a painting by a Chinese master, Zhang now focuses on one or two specific elements, such as rocks and trees, and creates entirely new compositions based on variations of those elements. These variations are all taken from Wang Gai's late-seventeenth-century *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, that would-be universal style-book for Chinese painting, on whose pages are prescriptive prints illustrating standardized brushwork ("texture strokes" like *da fupi cun*, "big axe cuts"), motifs, formulaic compositions, and remarks to the effect that "Ma Yuan and Xia Gui often painted in this style."²⁷ In the painting *Monet, Study of Pima Cun and Jiesuo Cun* ("study of unraveled hemp fiber strokes," 2007; fig. 8), Zhang has arranged these familiar Chinese rocks, of assorted styles and shapes from different time periods and by various masters, into an imaginary rock garden, whereas in *Cézanne, Study of Axe-Cut Cun* (2005; fig. 9) he depicts a hillside grove with a variety of vegetation and rocks. Through this recontextualization of these standardized rock and tree forms, he highlights how painting modes that were once the signature styles of individual artists have become routine and ubiquitous through rote copying



FIGURE 10
Zhang Hongtu, *Illustration: Portrait of Zhang Xiaoming*, 2006.
Oil on canvas, 61.0 × 50.8 cm. Collection of the artist.

²⁷ Wang Gai, trans. by Mai-mai Sze, *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956).

²⁸ Published in *Art + Auction*, December 2006, 112.

by later Chinese painters, and how painterly repetition throughout history culminates in the visual iconography of what we perceive to be “traditional Chinese painting” today. By recasting what was stereotypical into an original composite, Zhang thus updates the visual lexicon of the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual* for postmodern use and restores its relevance for a Chinese contemporary artist working today. Zhang’s *Mustard Seed Garden Manual* paintings depict mindscapes that are at once strange and familiar, seemingly surreal yet not fantastic—indeed, a description that might well be voiced by a modern viewer looking with fresh eyes at a traditional Chinese painting by Fan Kuan (d. after 1023) or Shitao.

Zhang’s own style has come to be recognized for its distinctive Zhang Hongtu qualities. The artist has embraced the movement of a cliché’s semiotic journey, where the iconographic power that propels a cliché can easily take on a life of its own, moving off in an unexpected new direction of its own to find its own original iconographic power when set down in new cultural territory. Following the runaway success of Sotheby’s first Chinese contemporary art auction in New York in March 2006, Zhang was persuaded to render Sotheby’s then Chinese contemporary art specialist Zhang Xiaoming for an illustration in *Art + Auction* magazine’s December 2006 issue, themed “Power 2006: Who Wields It Well” (fig. 10).²⁸ Zhang’s design of a glamorized Zhang Xiaoming in his own mock-masterpiece style for the auction news magazine is a toast to the spirit of Andy Warhol’s *Interview* magazine, where celebrities interview other celebrities. With this recent artistic foray, Zhang playfully messes up the already blurred boundaries between Chinese contemporary art and its market. With art imitating art imitating life in multiples, and at a time when Zhang the outsider is now in truth the insider (still in the guise of an outsider) in the art mecca that is New York, there is much irony and humor for Zhang himself to appreciate in this current state of the art.

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

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