

ZHAN WANG

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# THE MIRRORED FACADES OF UTOPIA

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*With a body of work that ranges from dirt-encrusted Mao suits to stainless-steel scholar's rocks to giant reflective pills, an artist recasts ancient myths to question present-day ideology in China.*

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*By Andrew Cohen*





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## ZHAN'S ART CONCEPTUALLY AND PHYSICALLY PRESERVES HISTORY FROM ITS INEVITABLE DISAPPEARANCE FROM MEMORY.

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The works of Zhan Wang harmonize with and confront a rapidly modernizing China. In prolific variations—from his early installations of tortured Mao suits and anti-demolition performances to his later works in steel, such as futuristic cities built of pots and pans, and his signature scholar's rocks—Zhan has minted a new visual language that mythologizes China's 21st-century metamorphosis into a modern, gleaming stainless-steel society while holding onto its traditions.

Educated in artistic canons both Eastern and Western, Zhan's work combines Taoist notions of illusion, reality and nature with an existentialist embrace of the absurd. His art reached a turning point in 1989. Employed as a teacher at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, he was on assignment outside the city when the June 4th incident occurred in Tiananmen Square. Upon his immediate return he learned that one of his students was missing, and he was dispatched to search the hospitals and look through photographs of victims. Tirelessly roaming the streets and alleys and witnessing the suffering in the massacre's aftermath had a profound impact on him. By his own assessment, his work from before then was more closed and inward-looking. In search of his original Chinese voice, his sculptural style had ranged from academic Soviet realism to Western modernism. After 1989, his art broke free from academic realism and turned outward, fueled by humanistic and societal concerns.

The most compelling of Zhan's work during the early 1990s was the site-specific installation "Temptation – Mao Suits" series (1993–94), which consisted of a garden, as the artist has described it, of "figures rotting in hell." Zhan took more than a dozen cloth suits of the kind that the chairman wore during his rule of China from 1949 until his death in 1976, and displayed them in contorted shapes, hardened with epoxy, at various sites around Beijing. Suspended on scaffolds in the CAFA Gallery, or, amid the ruins of the same site a year later (within a few months time the art academy had been taken over by the state,

sold to a Hong Kong developer and demolished to build the Wangfujing commercial district), the twisted, empty suits evoked the sulfurous suffering of souls in Dante's *Inferno*—eternally burning, crying out to be remembered on earth. Torture, both physical and psychological, resonated from the mud-encrusted surfaces of these hollow figures, clothed in the stained, decaying garb of ideology. The "temptation" in the title, sometimes translated as "seduction," refers to those lured into sacrificing their individuality for the collective good, as well as to those tricked by the tyranny of power to persecute the vulnerable. The Mao suits, worn by both the oppressed and the oppressors, suggest the interchangeability of the roles, as well as the artist's condemnation of this abusive relationship.

The Mao suits can be viewed as cocoons, Zhan explains, embodying a century of China's desire and struggle to transform and redefine itself. In this light, the Mao suit—which the chairman actually appropriated from his revolutionary forefather Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), who himself wanted a suit that was uniquely Chinese but with Western traits—can be viewed as the empty chrysalis that is shed during metamorphosis. China's struggle out of its turbulent and dark past paved the way for its future salvation, a form of rebirth that Zhan reflected in his later works.

Zhan's art conceptually and physically preserves history from its inevitable disappearance from memory. Having experienced demolition and forced relocation firsthand, the concept of "home" is an integral part of Zhan's work. The State has appropriated his grandfather's courtyard house, demolished his kindergarten, his high school, his art academy and his studios, all in the name of progress. In a bold reaction to this policy of forced relocation, at the Wangfujing demolition zone he staged the performance *Ruin Cleaning Project* (1994), in which he whitewashed a half-demolished small old house during the demolition crew's lunch break only to watch his work destroyed moments later. In another performance that year, *Real-Estate Development*, he molded bricks out of clay and lined them up next to the broken bricks heaped haphazardly inside his ruined classroom. Zhan reprised this idea years later in 2001, when he and a group of migrant workers carried out *The Inlaid Great Wall*. Using 250 sleek titanium-plated golden bricks, Zhan rebuilt decayed sections of the Wall's serrated ramparts, mimicking the efforts of the emperors. Zhan's *Great Wall* has a sort of golden smile—an apt metaphor for present-day China renovating and gentrifying its old neighborhoods.

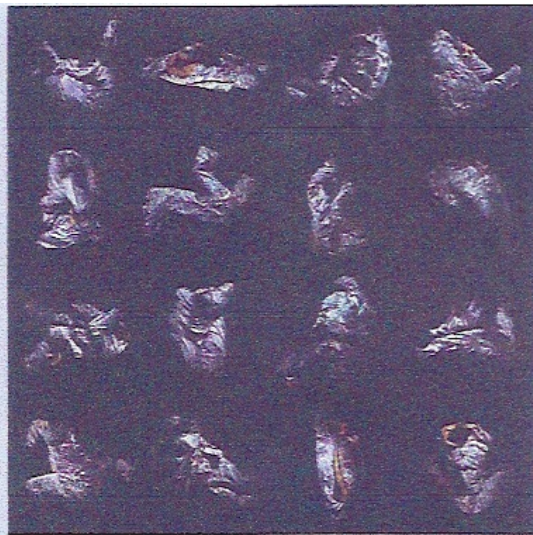
Zhan's career had been well established since the mid-1990s, when he became known for his stainless-steel scholar's rocks. Ironically, one of these monumental steel rocks now stands in front of a gleaming new high-rise in the Wangfujing shopping complex, next to where the Mao suits had been exhibited. The progression of one body of work to the next shows a conceptual and formal continuity: exchanging old suits of stained cloth for new suits of armor, the Mao suit is resurrected in the form of the hollow stainless-steel scholar's rock, reflecting the rise of skyscrapers on the demolished sites of old Beijing.

There is a mystical aura around these strangely shaped stones, which are associated with the highly disciplined, elite scholars from the Song dynasty (960–1279) onward. Painters and poets seeking intellectual and aesthetic inspiration used the rocks to evoke the grandeur of nature, and harness the power of faraway mountains from the comfort of their desks. Zhan grew up watching his grandfather sketch and paint traditional

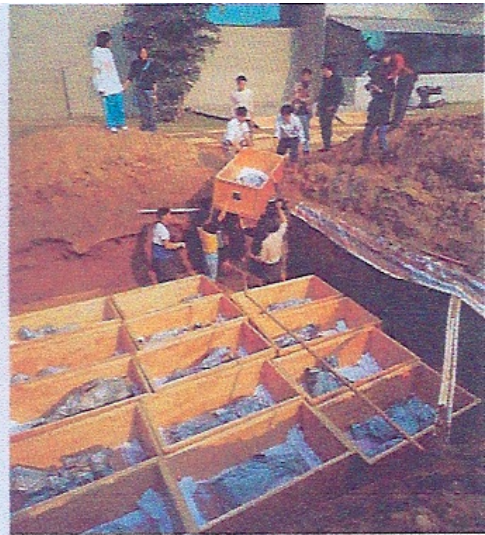




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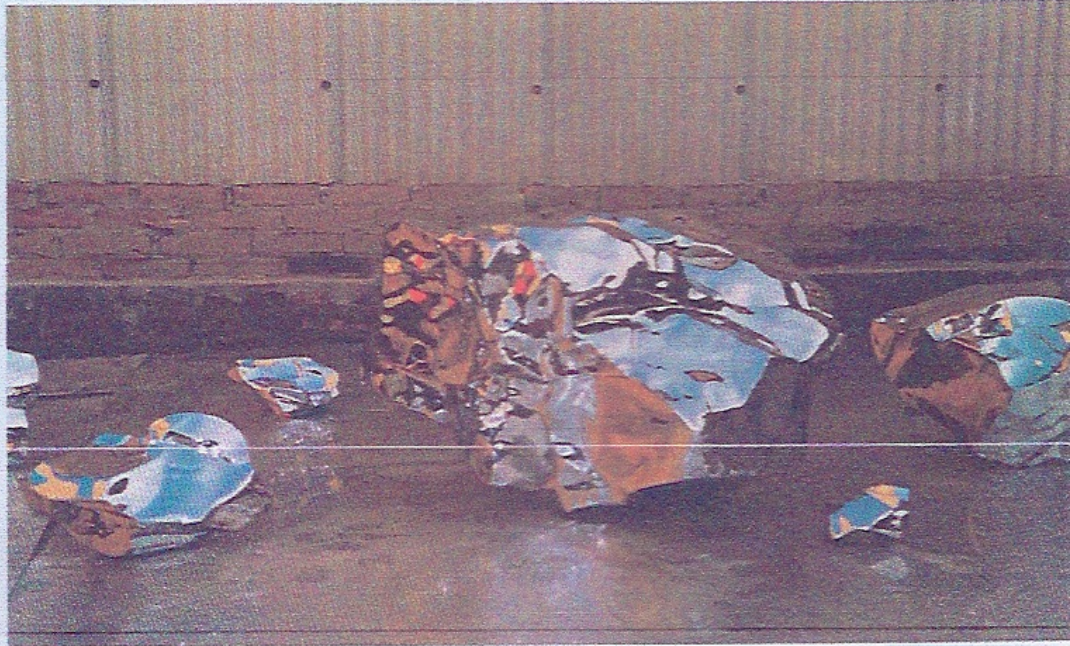
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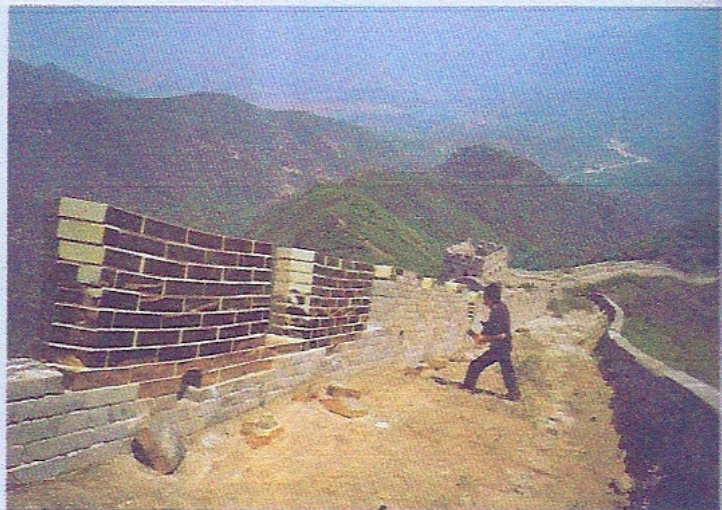
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1. RUIN CLEANING PROJECT, 1994, documentation of performance in which the artist cleaned and painted a near-destroyed traditional house in Beijing. 2. Zhan Wang excavating "scholar's rocks" in Shangdong Province, China, to use as molds for his sculptures. 3. TEMPTATION, 1993-94, a series of cloth suits of the kind worn by Mao Zedong, dimensions variable. 4. An installation of TEMPTATION, 1993-94, at the First Guangzhou Triennial. 2002. 5. REAL-ESTATE DEVELOPMENT, 1995, mixed-media installation at the sculpture studio in the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. 6. FIRST JIASHANSHI, 1995, stainless steel, 80 x 50 x 60 cm. 7. FIRST JIASHANSHI GROUP, 1995, a series of stainless steel sculptures, dimensions variable.

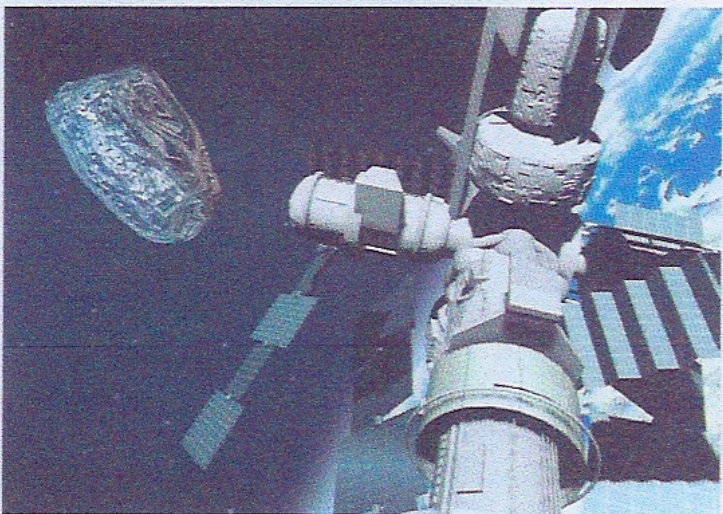




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8. BEYOND TWELVE NAUTICAL MILES - FLOATING ROCK DRIFTS ON THE OPEN SEA, 2000, stainless-steel rock in the sea near Shandong Province, China, 180 x 90 x 160 cm. 9. THE INLAID GREAT WALL 2001, 260 titanium-plated bricks on the Great Wall of China, site-specific installation. 10. NEW METEORITE SKY-PATCHING PROJECT, 2001, digital rendering of an unrealized idea. 11. MOUNT EVEREST PROJECT, 2004, stainless-steel rock being placed on Mount Everest, 35 x 25 x 13 cm. 12. FLOATING MOUNTAIN OF IMMORTALITY, 2005-06, stainless-steel mountain off the coast of Oostende, Belgium, 860 x 480 cm. 13. Documentation of BEYOND TWELVE NAUTICAL MILES - FLOATING ROCK DRIFTS ON THE OPEN SEA, 2000.



landscapes—ink, brushes and rock gardens were part of his daily life. “When I grew older,” he recalls, “I realized that the literati selected rocks as a substitute for sculpture. I felt that this was uniquely Chinese. I wanted to transform this ancient appreciation into contemporary art that is also wholly Chinese, and in turn bring the concept to the world and internationalize this unique culture of rock appreciation.”

Eager to share his knowledge, Zhan suggests a visit to some of the finest rocks in Beijing. With his wife Peipei and three-year-old daughter Rourou, he took *ArtAsiaPacific* on a tour through the imperial rock garden at the northern end of the Forbidden City. Having visited these grounds often as a child and as an art student, Zhan points out the rocks he grew up admiring. “Rocks belong in the garden,” he says, “they serve the same purpose as sculpture does in the West.” However, he explains that there are four criteria that connoisseurs use to evaluate these formations: *shou* (slender shape), *zhou* (wrinkles), *lou* (crevices), *tou* (holes). The rocks with more peculiar shapes are more prized. “The holes are not necessarily indicative of something negative or missing,” he says, running his hand over and around one, “but something that can add virtue and personality. Every person, every society has deficiencies. Holes and caves in the mountains are where the immortals dwelled.” When asked if he ever modified a rock to make it more interesting, he says no, that a large part of the concept is that they remain natural. Even in the ancient times, the rocks that were valued most, and traded at the highest prices, were those unadulterated by the human hand.

The process of creation, from discovery of the rocks to their meticulous replication, reflects ancient philosopher Laozi’s notion that man cannot transcend nature. Working within nature’s confines, Zhan says, is what distinguishes his works from those of Western sculptors, who seek to transform nature to express themselves in their art. Zhan travels far and wide throughout China’s Shandong and Anhui provinces, searching for rocks that appeal to his sensibility. He often has to commit to having them excavated after only seeing the tip protruding from the ground. The average mid-sized rocks he uses weigh from three to six tons; the largest measured 7.5 meters tall and weighed 20 tons.

The rocks are transported to his studio in Hegezhuang Village outside Beijing. Situated in the middle of farm country, where deer and peacocks roam fields strewn with natural scholar’s rocks and their metal replicas, this is Zhan’s fourth studio; the other three were reclaimed and demolished by the authorities for redevelopment purposes. The space resounds with the constant clanging of his assistants hammering steel plates around the stones. After heating and welding the metal to make it fit every nook and cranny, they cut the metal to remove it, then reweld it together and polish it. The finished product, which takes ten months to complete, is a shining, hollow replica of the original.

Much of Zhan’s work can only be seen in photographs or videos because part of his concept is that some of the sculptures be permanently exhibited in unreachable destinations. In *Beyond Twelve Nautical Miles – Floating Rock Drifts on the Open Sea* (2000), the origins of which stem from a Song-dynasty landscape painting entitled *Fish Play by the Floating Rock*, Zhan had a large steel rock dumped in international waters, where it will drift until it sinks, erodes or is salvaged. Hand-etched into its surface in Chinese, English, Japanese, Korean and Spanish, the rock bears the note: *This is a piece of art created specifically to be exhibited on the open sea. If by any chance you pick it up, please put it back into the sea. The artist thanks you from afar.* Lost in the oceans, the work effectively exists as an idea as it floats far from the trends of the art market and conventional viewing spaces of galleries, museums and fairs.

From the ever-shifting seas, Zhan turned his sights to space in *New Meteorite Sky-Patching Project* (2001). This installation is a stainless-steel replica of a meteor that fell on China during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and is now housed in the Beijing Ancient Observatory. Zhan’s replica floats in a field of magnetic force, hovering off the ground in a special display case, while five colored beams of light reflect off its surface, representing the five colored rocks that the goddess Nüwa used



13a.



13b.

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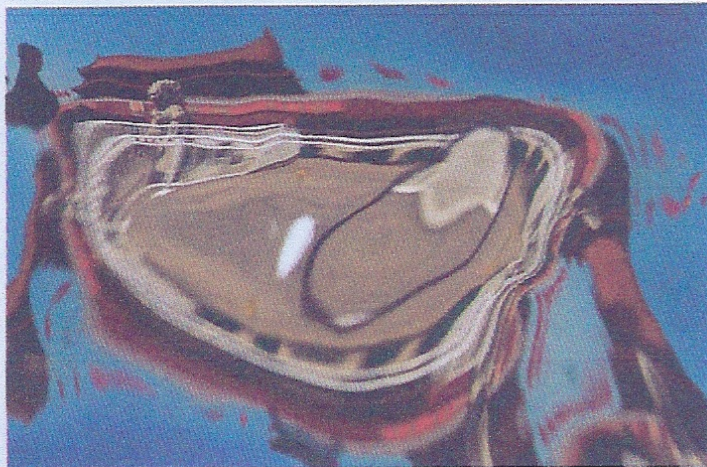
to mend the holes in the sky and ward off destruction on earth in ancient Chinese mythology. “In Chinese, there is a saying that there is no need to worry about the things that are far away from you,” Zhan says. “My contemporary take on the myth is that, yes, Nüwa patched up the sky, but the rocks keep falling. Nothing is ideal.” Zhan hopes to send this meteor up into space on a shuttle one day. As in his “Mao Suits” series, Zhan continues to explore the theme of being suspended between two worlds, whether between heaven and hell or earth and space.

In *Mount Everest Project* (2004), Zhan collaborated with a Chinese mountaineer, who, in a Sisyphean effort, climbed Everest carrying a small metal rock that Zhan made for the occasion. Upon reaching the summit the mountaineer held up the rock in triumph, and then left it there as a permanent exhibit. A year later, Zhan made the monumental nine-by-five-meter steel sculpture *Floating Mountain of Immortality* (2005–06) and set it adrift in the seas of northwestern Europe. In a variation of the Taoist myth of the Heavenly Mountain that floats beyond the reach of ordinary mortals, Zhan recreated this heaven out of artificial rock, and cast it out to sea so that it is dependent not on the whims of divine beings, but on the forces of nature. The work questions traditional notions of paradise as a fixed, controlled place; even the gods, created by man, cannot transcend nature. “Society floats, artists float,” Zhan says. “Existence is forever in a floating state.”





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IN HIS “GARDEN UTOPIA” EXHIBITION,  
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In the midst of creating these works that elude the typical viewer, Zhan also decided to create a permanent display for his Mao suits of the previous decade, organizing a funeral procession for the work during the Guangzhou Triennial in 2002. Zhan and his fellow artists, curators and students ceremoniously laid the original twisted figures to rest in nondescript wooden coffins and buried them in neat rows beneath the Guangdong Museum of Art. A single plaque commemorates the mass grave. By burying these disintegrating shells of ideology, letting them mix with the dirt and debris of razed buildings throughout China, a new ideological myth was born: forgetting the past forges the way to a gleaming bright future.

Zhan, however, does not buy into this myth of “Laughter and Forgetting,” to quote one of his favorite writers, Milan Kundera; rather he is inspired and influenced by the past, creating contemporary variations on old themes. Installed in “Garden Utopia,” a major exhibition curated by Fan Di’an and Huang Du, and held at the National Art Museum of China in May 2008, was Zhan’s mythic *Look – New Beijing* (“Urban Landscapes” series, 2008), a stainless-steel cityscape of thousands of stacked pots, pans, trays, knives, forks and spoons. The arrangement clearly shows the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square at the city center surrounded by tall office buildings and mountains made out of his signature rocks. “Children like to build and then take down what

they have constructed,” Zhan explains. “This is not dissimilar to what is happening to the neighborhoods around Beijing.” Zhan’s “Urban Landscapes” can be endlessly reiterated; he has used its building blocks to create Beijing, London and San Francisco. The mass-produced kitchen utensils are manufactured and used in both the East and the West, and by employing the same collection of materials to build different cities, Zhan further breaks down the boundaries that separate Eastern and Western thought, while ironically illustrating the homogenizing effects of globalization and consumerism.

In “Garden Utopia,” Zhan also addressed the question of where spirituality is left if urbanization is cutting man off from nature, with striking works that combine computers, drugs, spirituality and cash. In *ATM Deity Search Engine* (2008) one can find religion and meditation at any of his eight stainless-steel ATMs. The replication of these pill-shaped machines refers to the repetition involved in meditation, as well as to the mass production of drugs and computers. It is not cash that the ATMs dispense, but information on world religions, and the opportunity to create one’s own religion on a touchscreen. In *Buddhist Medicine Temple* (2006), one’s reflection grows larger or smaller as one moves back and forth before an austere and impenetrable “temple” built in the form of a giant, highly reflective stainless-steel pill. With these two conceptual sculptures, Zhan humorously comments on our feel-good society that eliminates depression with drugs. His ATM is a digital effort to put all gods in one temple. “In my temple,” he says, “all deities are together. There is equality between all religions. Why not coexist in peace?”

Zhan is not the first of his clan to achieve cultural renown. Tracing back 86 generations of Zhans over 2,000 years, one comes across two Zhan brothers deified in temples: the elder Zhan Qin, known as the great Saint Sage, was famous among Confucian scholars for his ideas on peace and harmony; the younger Zhan Zhi was the great Saint Thief, honored by pirates and bandits for promoting vengeance and justice. These two brothers, opposites who complemented each other like the black and white of the yin and yang, have been deified in clay figures over the centuries throughout Shandong province. As the political tides of dynastic rule ebbed and flowed, these two saints were revered by one generation, then knocked off their pedestals by the next, only to be resurrected generations later. “So, you see, this is an old style of politics for Chinese people,” Zhan explains. “It’s not newly invented.”

At the same time as his “Garden Utopia” exhibition, Zhan honored his forefathers’ legendary fate at the Long March Space in Beijing. There, he built 86 life-sized representations of the saints from clay, each weighing one ton, and then smashed 85 of them to pieces over 20 days, leaving one statue intact amid the rubble for future generations to destroy. With this project, entitled *86 Divinity Figures* (2008), Zhan used a personal example to illustrate the broader phenomenon of the old being destroyed to make way for the new. “There’s a Chinese expression that says if you can’t destroy, you can’t rebuild,” Zhan says. “Society wants to reinvent culture by destroying old culture, but they haven’t come up with anything new. They come up with the same thing over and over again.”

Zhan has refined this cyclical, regenerative theme in his new photo series, “Super Landscapes” (2009), but through the prism of Taoist ideas of illusion and reality. For this body of work, he chose as his subject five monumental and iconic buildings and spaces in Beijing: Rem Koolhaas’ CCTV headquarters, the National Aquatics Center, the National Center for Performing Arts, Herzog & de Meuron’s Beijing National Stadium and Tiananmen Square. “All the buildings have immense, imperial characteristics, representing the imaginations of the local people.” Depicted as reflections in the surfaces of Zhan’s stainless-steel rocks, these mighty architectures are given the air of literati landscape paintings—mirror images of the garden utopia. As the artist says: “The mirror image is not real, but it reflects the depth of our imagination. Through the reflection we have more clearly defined reality. Even the modern structures designed by foreigners undergo a transformation, making them seem very Chinese.”





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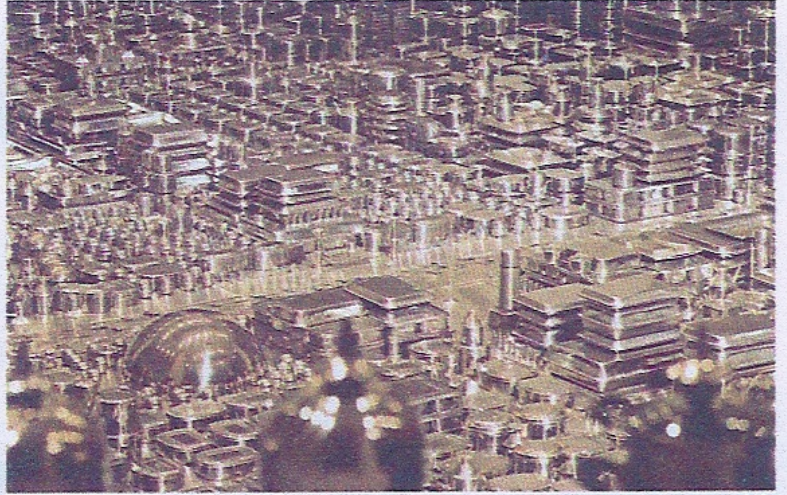
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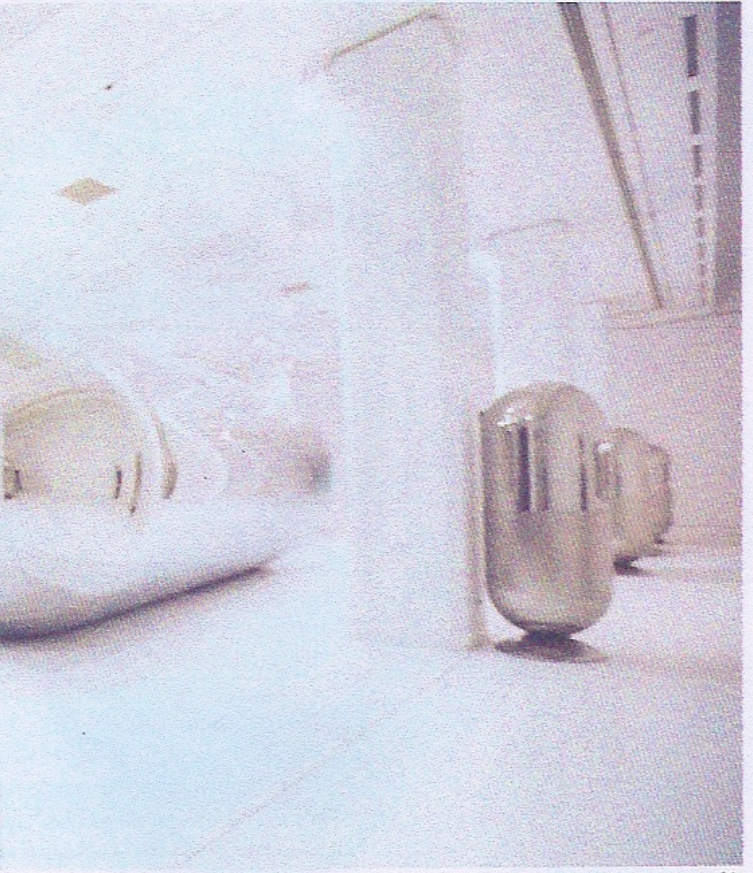
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14. Zhan Wang photographing SUPER LANDSCAPES, 2009, in Tiananmen Square, Beijing. 15. SUPER LANDSCAPES, 2009, from a series of photographs, 120 x 180 cm. 16. 86 DIVINITY FIGURES, 2008, one of 85 statues being destroyed for the performative installation. 17. TEMPLE OF WESTERN MEDICINE (detail), 2006, Buddha sculpture made from medicine pills. 18. THE BUDDHIST MEDICINE TEMPLE, 2006, traditional Chinese medicine, Western medicine, gold leaf, cast copper, 400 x 300 cm overall. 19. LOOK - NEW BEIJING, 2008, from the "Urban Landscape" series, views of the stainless-steel kitchenware installation, 75 x 70 x 2 m. 20. ATM DEITY SEARCH ENGINE, 2008, stainless steel, touch-screen panel, printer, intranet technology, 200 x 75 x 75 cm each.