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WHERE I WORK ZHANG XIAOGANG

[PROJECTS](#) BY ANDREW COHEN FROM MAR/APR 2010

CHINA



ZHANG XIAOGANG in his Beijing studio, a few days before the September opening of his solo show at Pace Beijing, 2009. Photo by Natalie Behring for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

Zhang Xiaogang's studio is located in a former motorcycle helmet factory in the village of Hegezhuang—one of the new "art areas" in northeast Beijing. The open interior is clean and bright, the walls freshly whitewashed. Sun pours in from high windows, light patches slanting on works in progress, as dozens of assistants, most of them art students, buzz about. "What a great opportunity they have," I say, "working with the master." Zhang chuckles. "Yeah, they should be paying me."

His 15-year-old daughter, the subject of so many of his works, sits at her own easel in a corner, studiously drafting a still life from a classical drawing, the old-fashioned way. Some assistants work on enormous canvases, up to two-by-three meters, the contemporary way: following the sketches of the artist and painting "in his style." Zhang always paints the details himself, especially the eyes. Other assistants unwrap five silk-screened sheets of highly polished steel that have arrived from the printing factory, laying them on easels for Zhang to inspect. He tilts his head, studying each work.

The scenes are of apartment interiors, empty except for isolated, outdated furniture, diaries and household appliances such as naked light bulbs, old television sets and portable heaters, reminiscent of the generation of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). He will turn these empty interiors into enigmatic dramas: some are shadowy and surreal, with disembodied heads dreaming or staring into space as an old TV show drones in the background. Others are melancholic and moody, painted with dripping images and existential diary passages.

In the middle of an adjacent room, workers clamber on a scaffold, throwing clay on a giant light bulb three-and-a-half meters tall, prepping it for a casting in fiberglass, while others make plaster molds of vintage household appliances Zhang found at flea markets. By the time of his upcoming show these articles will be mounted on cement squares, almost as if displayed in an open coffin, after which they will be lined up in rows, like tombstones of fallen soldiers in a national cemetery. With these ruins, reexamined out of their dated context and laid to rest, Zhang creates a memorial to life and destruction during the Cultural Revolution.

After inspecting two other large rooms, in which sculptures and prints are produced, we sit near Zhang's desk, with early works on the wall in front of us. These are from the late 1980s, a time of personal spiritual crisis, when he embraced Buddhism. When asked if the red and yellow colors used for different mystical figures in the paintings have political connotations, Zhang replies, "That is a common Western interpretation. These colors are cultural, not political. Red, for instance, is auspicious to the Chinese." I ask him about his use of red and yellow in his "Tiananmen" paintings from 1993. Zhang answers, "Again, this is a Western interpretation." For the artist, Tiananmen is merely a theme.

After the massacre, he concedes, his art did take a more political turn. For Chinese artists, 1989 was a wake-up call. Many, Zhang included, had previously been looking inward, producing

introspective works. The “Tiananmen” paintings are void of people, he explains, so that viewers can populate them and participate in the art as spectators would in the normally crowded square.

Zhang explores empty spaces again in his latest works. In place of the huge public square, he invites the viewer into a private living space. Yet there is no relief there; the paintings are palpably haunted by emptiness and shadows from the past. Zhang leaves the viewers to fill the void and read the diaries, with their stories of confession, reflection and humankind’s place in the world, as they inhabit a lonely apartment through their own reflection.

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GPO Box 10084

Hong Kong

info@aapmag.com