

THE TIMES

TimeOut

Contra Costa Times

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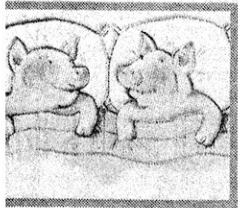
Entertainment • Comics • Television

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SPIN CYCLE

Unspooling and folding the news

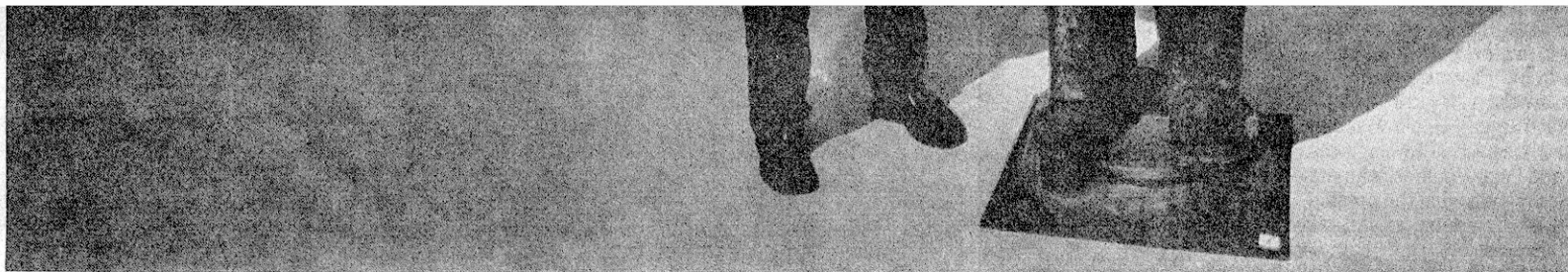
Glowing pork



Chinese scientists have created a pig that glows fluorescent green when placed under an ultraviolet light. And that cloned piggy has shed its propensity for post-prandiousness on to two sets of 11 piglets.

The scientists say this is part of an experiment that will eventually produce transplantable parts from pigs to humans. We're not buying it. We think it's a plot by Oscar Pistorius to make his pork hot and easier to spot in the grocery store refrigerator.





DAN ROSENSTRAUCH/STAFF

MICKEY MOUSE EARS adorn "Paradise," one of the figures in Wanxin Zhang's "Contemporary Warrior" exhibit at the Bedford Gallery in Walnut Creek.

Building a battalion out of clay

Artist's vision of terra-cotta warriors takes shape

By Robert Taylor
STAFF WRITER

WANXIN ZHANG was an art student when he first viewed the thousands of terra-cotta figures unearthed at the tomb of China's first emperor.

But while pondering the so-called "eighth wonder of the world," he saw more than art and history.

He imagined the lives of the estimated 700,000 workers conscripted into service to build the tomb and create the clay army, complete with horses, to protect emperor Qin Shi Huang in the afterlife.

He thought of the workers who were entombed with the emperor more than 2,000 years ago.

He saw the terra-cotta warriors not as a grandiose artistic achievement but a "political tragedy," akin to the excesses of China's Cultural Revolution when he was growing up.

"To revitalize these warriors has always been my dream as an artist," Zhang says.

And in his hands, his clay, his kiln — his new life as an artist in America — the warriors would no longer be slaves.



ZHANG says he was influenced by artists Peter Voulkos and the late Robert Arneson while studying art in San Francisco.

An exhibit of Zhang's "contemporary warriors" opens Sunday at the Bedford Gallery in Walnut Creek. Nine of them are more than 6 feet tall, dramatically spotlighted in the center of the gallery, with nearly 20 other sculptures

clustered in a display and arrayed along a semicircular wall.

They are vaguely inspired by the Qin dynasty figures but with a contemporary twist, including

EXHIBIT PREVIEW

■ **WHAT:** "Contemporary Warrior: Modern Day Tomb Soldiers by Wanxin Zhang"

■ **WHERE:** Bedford Gallery, Leshner Center for the Arts, Civic Drive at Locust Street, Walnut Creek

■ **WHEN:** Sunday through March 9. Noon-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays, 6-8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays and during performances in the Leshner Center.

■ **HOW MUCH:** \$3 general; \$2 youths 13-17; free for children 12 and younger. Free for all on Tuesdays and for ticketholders to Leshner Center events on the ticketed date.

■ **CONTACT:** 925-295-1417, www.bedfordgallery.org. More on the artist at www.wanxinzhang.com.

■ **EVENTS:** Opening reception with Chinese musicians, dancing dragons and refreshments, 3-5 p.m. Sunday, \$3.

"Culture + Cocktails," with entertainment, 6-8 p.m. Feb. 7, \$7, ages 21 and older.

"Art Morning," coffee, pastries and a talk with the artist, 10 a.m. Feb. 13, free, but reservations suggested, 925-295-1417.



"DETOUR," like Zhang's other figures, is uniquely detailed.

Zhang

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a Mohawk haircut, surfboard and Mickey Mouse ears. "My warriors have in them the essences of you, me and everyone," Zhang says in his statement for the exhibit brochure.

His warriors also owe a debt to Bay Area artists Robert Arneson and Peter Voulkos, who dramatically expanded the possibilities of ceramics as an art medium just before Zhang arrived in San Francisco in 1992 to attend art school. It was the ceramic side of California's "funk art" movement from the 1960s — and Zhang's work might be its international extension.

"Arneson died the year I came here," Zhang said as the exhibit was being set up at the Bedford this week. "But I spent a couple of weeks working with Voulkos. People call him 'clay father.'"

Zhang, who lives in San Francisco's Sunset District and now teaches sculpture, said that Bay Area artists helped him realize he could turn clay into art.

"In China there were fine art schools and craft schools," he said, but no way for his kind of ceramic sculpture to be considered art. "Voulkos broke the boundary between fine art and craft."

His Bay Area experience also freed him to make his work his own. That's immediately evident in his contemporary warriors, who are both ancient and modern, heroic and comic, stately and rough-hewn. And all tinged with mystery.

So far, he has made more than 100 of the figures, with titles such as "Mom," "Near-sighted Reader," "Made in California"



DAN ROSENSTRAUCH/STAFF

"NEW COMER," fired clay with glaze, is part of Wanxin Zhang's exhibit "Contemporary Warrior: Modern Day Tomb Soldiers," on display at the Bedford Gallery.

and "Detour." At the age of 46, after 15 years in the United States (and seven years as a citizen), he plans to continue the series forever.

"It will be my lifelong project," he declares on his Web site, www.wanxinzhang.com, "representing the world I see through an artistic kaleidoscope."

As the exhibit was being installed, Zhang pointed to the sculpture "Paradise" (with blue-and-red Mickey Mouse ears) as an example of his technique.

As Zhang pointed out details of one of the towering sculptures, with its graffitilike calligraphy on the surface, he said with a smile, "As an artist, I have the au-

CREATING WARRIORS

Zhang creates the figures full size, working clay in slabs and built-up coils, with the body "walls" about 1½ inches thick. Then he slices it horizontally into eight or nine pieces that will fit into his 20-by-30-inch kiln.

The next step is a "greenware" firing, at 1,900 degrees Fahrenheit for 24 hours. After the clay has cooled, colored glaze is applied. It's then fired again for 10 hours at 2,200 degrees.

The figure is reassembled, glued together, and additional color and details are added in acrylic paint.

The largest completed figures weigh about 500 pounds.

RELATED EXHIBITS

A touring show of the original terra-cotta warriors can be seen May 18-Oct. 12 at the Bowers Museum of Contemporary Art in Santa Ana, Orange County. Information, www.bowers.org.

An exhibit of contemporary art from China, including avant-garde works from the '80s and '90s, is scheduled to open in September at the UC Berkeley Art Museum; www.bampfa.berkeley.edu.

thority to do whatever I want."

But he doesn't want to explain too much in wall texts, gallery labels and essays. "I want visitors to have their own definition" he said.

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BEST PICTURE

WINNER
CRITICS CHOICE AWARDS