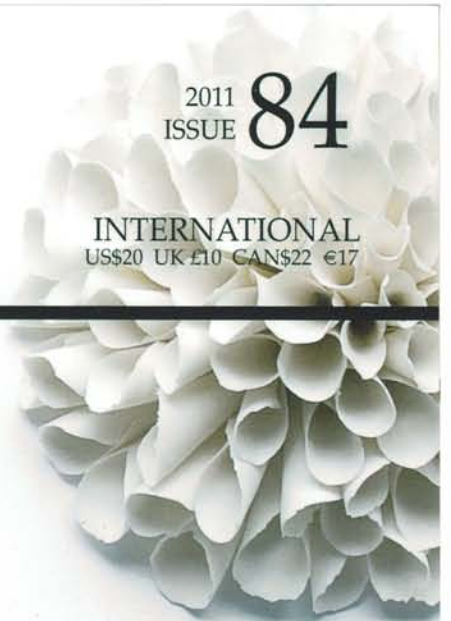
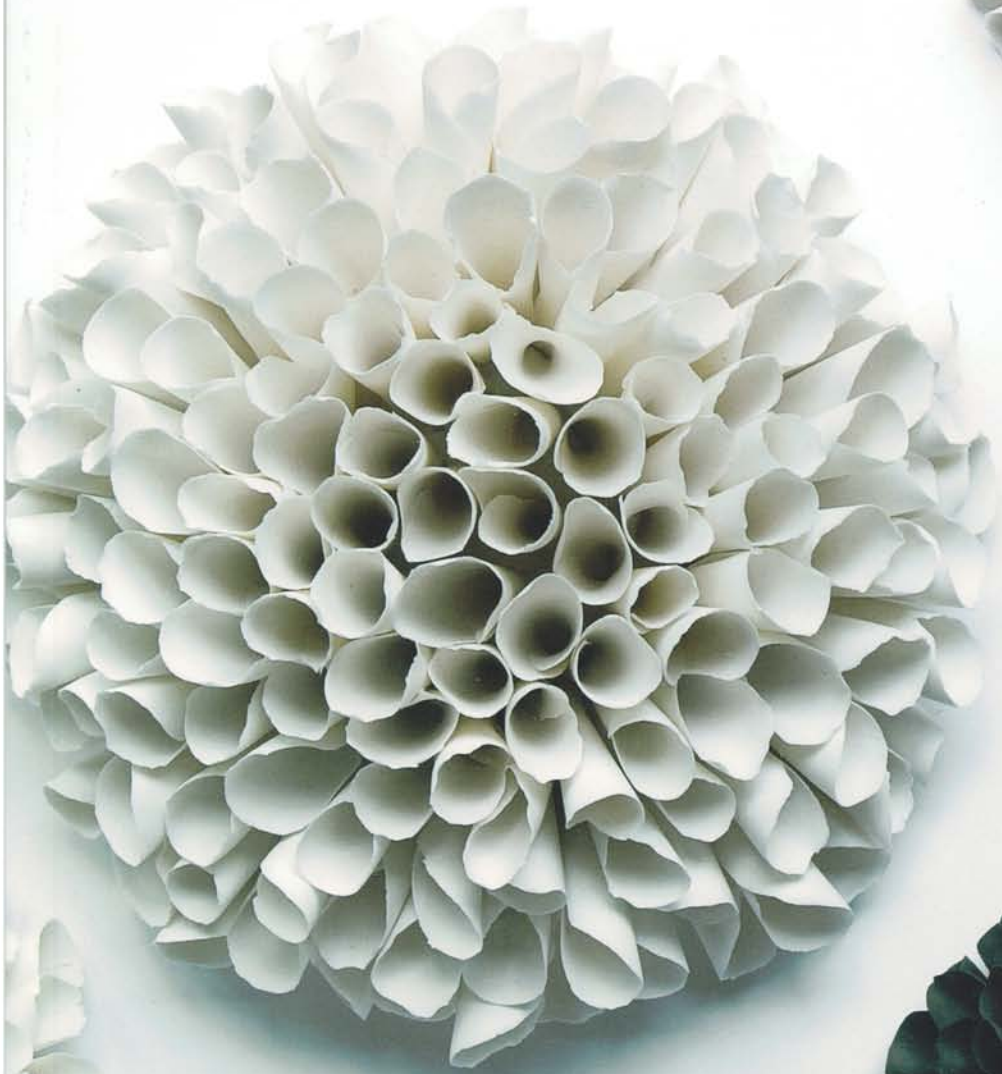


Ceramics

Art and Perception

2011
ISSUE 84

INTERNATIONAL
US\$20 UK £10 CAN\$22 €17



Wanxin Zhang



Father and Son.

A Ten-Year Survey at the Bellevue Arts Museum

A Review by Suzanne Beal

IMAGINE IF YOU WILL THE CONVERGENCE OF THE CULTURAL Revolution, the California Funk Art Movement and tomb figures from 210 BC and you will have some idea as to what to expect from San-Francisco-based artist Wanxin Zhang. Although Zhang's larger than life-sized handbuilt clay statues were inspired by powerful political leaders and those that follow them; his figures unapologetically celebrate individuality in all its many forms and commemorate characters who answer to no one.

Zhang was an already established sculptor when he left China for California in 1992. He had worked with a number of different media, including the fabrication of abstract metal works (one of which is

included in the National Gallery, Beijing) but clay was hardly a focus. Zhang's arrival in San Francisco to attend the Academy of Art University coincided with the death of Robert Arneson, a sculptor, a longtime ceramics professor in the Art Department at the University of California Davis (UCD) and the undisputed father of the Ceramic Funk Movement. Through Arneson and other key figures in the movement, such as Richard Shaw and William T Wiley, Zhang witnessed a rejection of traditional utilitarian wares for objects that instead incorporated aspects of the artist's personality and supported social responsibility.

Arneson's influence on Zhang is felt most acutely

California Artist Too.



Warhol Mao.



in *Artist Too*, a sculptural self-portrait of a jean-jacketed Zhang wearing sunglasses (created after an almost identical self-portrait of Arneson). But Zhang's works really shine brightest when we see the influences of a life lived on two continents and one spent grappling with the privileges of the powerful.

Raised in China during the Cultural Revolution, Zhang, like many others, revered revolutionary Chairman Mao, even while bearing witness to the violent class struggles that his dictatorship engendered: The employment of Red Guards, the disintegration of long-standing political institutions, and irreparable damage to historic sites. It was not until Zhang visited the excavated tomb of China's first Emperor Qin Shi Huang (246–210 BC) that he saw parallels between the actions of Qin and those of Mao (1893–1976). Both had ushered in political reforms and unified, then dominated China. And, writes Zhang, "[Qin] ordered the creation of thousands of terracotta warriors to protect him in his afterlife just as Mao ruled tens of thousands of Red Guards." Gazing at the vast excavated site, Zhang became suddenly aware of the enduring effect of political power.

In the spring of 1974 the discovery by local farmers of a collection of funerary statues in the Shanxi province of China had made headlines worldwide. And they resonated with the young artist Zhang too, who in 1997 began re-envisioning Qin's army using similar techniques of moulding and coil construction to create a vast series of individual human figures. Qin's tomb is a city-sized mausoleum and contains more than 8000 excavated statues, the majority depicting warriors, each created individually and none sharing identical traits. But if the differences from one soldier to the next are apparent, they nevertheless remain uniform in their loyalty to a leader. Not so the figures on view in this 10-year survey of Zhang's work. The articles of clothing, accessories, hairstyles and demeanour of these figures offer audiences a glimpse into states of extreme individuality, all while adhering to regularized modes of presentation. By using similarly upright stances, maintaining more or less standard dimensions and employing neutral facial expressions, Zhang subtly subverts social statuses, implying that the 'nobody' of *God Bless You*, a panhandler with a cardboard sign, is on a par with the powerful 'somebody' in the work titled *Warhol Mao*.

Panda Warrior.



God Bless You.





Above: *Winter Green*.

Below: *Too Late Too Win*.

Right: *Mulan*. 2002. Fired clay and pigment. 20 x 12 x 58 in.



As if reversing the status quo were not enough, Zhang incorporates a combination of antiquated and modern apparel, allowing his warriors to pass fluidly between the past and the present: The figure titled *Who is Calling* sports a traditional topknot while glancing at the face of his cell phone. In *Fatherhood*, a traditionally bedecked male wearing opaque glasses holds a Mickey-Mouse capped son. Multiple figures hold binoculars and many, such as *Traveler*, wear glasses, suggesting the act of viewing itself, perhaps a play on the terms 'near-sighted' and 'far-sighted', or even (given Zhang's adopted homeland) 'near-sited' and 'far-sited'.

Whereas Qin's army found strength in numbers, those created by Zhang find power in individuality. The term 'every man for himself' has long had negative connotations – selfishness, a lack of regard for others' wellbeing. But in Wanxin Zhang's army of individuals, this idiomatic expression takes on new meaning. His figures are not united by a common call to arms but by an over-arching humanity.

Suzanne Beal is a critic, arts writer and curator in Seattle. Her writings on theatre, dance and visual art have appeared in *Art in America*, *Art on Paper*, *Art Ltd*, *Seattle Weekly*, *City Arts*, *Sculpture*, *Fiberarts* and *American Craft*, among others. In addition, she is the author of numerous gallery monographs on selected Northwest artists.

