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(Detail) "Tibetan Women Collecting Milk" • oil on canvas 1998
33" x 57"

The World According To Zhang HongNian

by Tresca Weinstein

When Zhang HongNian was 15 years old, he heard Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 for the first time. The next day, in art class, he painted a picture of the music - a dark figure reaching toward a stormy sky. His teacher and his classmates were not pleased with the painting.

"You have captured Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 perfectly," his teacher told him. "Then what is wrong?" Zhang asked. "You are a Socialist young man. Beethoven is a capitalist composer," his teacher replied. "How can you have the same feelings?"

More than three decades later, in his Woodstock studio beside a goldfish pond, Zhang tells this story with a gentle smile. There is no bitterness in his voice as he speaks of that day, nor of the four years he

spent in hard labor during China's Cultural Revolution, or his years as a painter in the government's employ, when making his art was like "dancing in chains."

For much of his life as an artist, Zhang has been fettered by time, place, circumstances, and dogma. What is remarkable about his art is the depth

of feeling and independence of spirit that has not only survived but flourished despite the limitations within which the artist has worked. Zhang defied the conventions of propagandist art to launch the Scar movement in China, which portrayed the suffering of the Cultural Revolution.

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ZHANG HONGNIAN

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tion with clarity and honesty, and he pioneered the so-called flashback technique, in which he sought to reconcile loss and sorrow through memories and reflection.

But it is only in the last decade or so, since coming to the United States in 1985, that Zhang has been free to paint whatever inspires him, to put brush to canvas and allow his art to take shape without thought for requirements or reactions. Perhaps he has also left some of his own demons behind. His work has acquired a luminosity, a subtle nostalgia; his brush lingers over the line of a cheekbone, the folds of a robe blowing in the breeze, the shape made by a woman's arms as she adjusts her headscarf.

More than two dozen of Zhang's new paintings and prints, as well as a major piece done more than 30 years ago and recently recovered from Beijing, are on view at the Fletcher Gallery, 40 Mill Hill Road, in Woodstock, NY through October 11.

Gallery owner Tom Fletcher, who had been acting as an agent for Zhang, suggested a major show a year ago. "HongNian is considered to be one of the greatest realist painters in the world, although his work is not strictly realism," Fletcher says. "He has his own way of infusing a sense of abstraction in his work, through the use of color or perspective. It's realism with his own flavor."

"In China, I had a long training in European classical tradition, and here in America, I had a training in the abstract," Zhang says. "Now I combine them." Turning to a new work, "Magnolias," a painting of a Chinese girl in traditional Miao dress standing among flowering branches, Zhang traces a shape with his finger. He began the painting with an abstract line of composition, he explains, in this case a line suggesting the form of a dragon, which now lies hidden within the figure and the flowers. The artist speaks also of light and color — "a silver feeling," and of movement within the painting. So much of what he does is instinctual, yet it is also based on long and rigorous study.

Born in Nanjing, China, in 1947, Zhang had a happy, uneventful childhood, and his talent and love for art developed early and naturally. "Rich dirt grows art," he says. "You need a quiet life, time to think. I had a very simple, peaceful, quiet life."

He recalls drawing on the

"... So we sneak out, make a little sketchbook, put some pens in our pocket. It is like going out to have a secret date with someone you love. You see the sky, it looks different. You see the grass, it looks different. It's such a joy."

sides of open drawers when he was too small to reach the tabletop. "Nobody remembers their first drawing, but I remember my first drawing," he says. "I went like this, and like this, and it looked like a hammer. I saw it was a hammer, so I repeat, repeat, repeat." In that universal moment, when a child realizes he can recreate the world with his own hands, Zhang was exhilarated by the power and potential that lay open to him.

He began professional training in art at age nine, and, at 14, became the top student in the Central Art Academy Affiliated High School in Beijing. In 1949, when Mao Tse-tung came to power, Zhang's father, a banker who had been educated in the US during the 1920's, arranged for the family to emigrate to America. But they were not able to make the journey, and when the Cultural Revolution closed China's schools in the late 1960's, Zhang and the other students in his art class were sent to the country to perform hard labor. Zhang's father was sentenced to a year in jail.

At the labor camp, Zhang worked in the fields for 16 hours each day. When he went to bed at night, the hands that had so delicately manipulated pens and brushes were clenched and palsied from grasping shovels and sticks. In the morning, when his hands had relaxed and straightened again, Zhang was grateful and hopeful.

"Hard labor makes you a strong person," he says. "But it can kill you, it can make you despondent. We were not allowed to do art. Stalin said, 'The artist is the engineer of the people's assault.' So we sneak out, make a little sketchbook, put some pens in our pocket. It is like going out to have a secret date with someone you love. You see the sky, it looks different. You see the grass, it looks different. It's such a joy."

Zhang and his classmates found other ways to keep despair at bay. Every day at the same time, sparrows would come to rest in the trees by the camp, and Zhang recalls setting up nets, then waiting till just the right moment to pull them shut, catching dozens of sparrows inside. They covered the birds with mud and baked them, and the camp ate well

that night.

In 1973, Zhang returned to Beijing, where he became the youngest artist employed by the official Beijing Art Academy. In 1976, he painted a semi-work, "Before the Great March," a depiction of the young Mao and his generals preparing to set out against the invading Japanese in 1934. In the painting, Mao appears noble and confident, yet also gentle; his arm is around a young boy who leans trustfully against him.

"I tried to feel something human for those revolutionary leaders," Zhang says. "Mao is very complicated. He's not a simple figure like Hitler." "Before the Great March" was shown in China's National Museum of Art in 1977, in a show commemorating the one-year anniversary of Mao's death. On a trip to China last year, Zhang unearthed the painting in the basement of the museum and brought it back to the States, rolled up in his suitcase. After being restretched and restored, the 70" by 84" work is one of the centerpieces of the Woodstock show.

Zhang's work broke with both propaganda and idealization in 1980, with "When We Were Young," painted after Zhang returned to the site of the labor camp where he had served his sentence.

"When I go back, I see nothing," he recalled. "Everything is covered by grass—the room where we lived, the field where we planted. I never cried the whole time—that day, I wanted to cry for all the four years. All our souls were still buried there. I needed to record that something happened."

"When We Were Young" portrays a group of young men gathered in semi-darkness, in their faces the suppressed grief and confusion felt by all of China. The painting tapped into the nation's psyche at a time when the events and emotions of the Cultural Revolution and its wake were at last being looked at openly. The work launched the Scar movement, which Fletcher compares to the American Ashcan School in that both styles rejected idealism and elitist subjects in favor of depicting the everyday lives of real people.

"Before that, the art in China was really propaganda, it never really touched real life," Zhang says. "But the Cultural Revolution touched everybody. People wanted to talk about that, to think about that."

Another historical event of that period inspired Zhang's first painting in what came to be called the "flashback" style. The painting was made in memory of a woman executed for speaking out against the Cultural Revolution; when she refused to give up her opinions, her throat was cut.

Zhang at first had no idea how to approach the subject. "Suddenly, all her life came to me," he recalls. "She was a mother, a loyal Communist, a musician, and she died on the ground. Then everything came together, not in the same time or space but combining all dif-

(Detail) "Before the Long March" • oil on canvas, 1976, 70" x 84"



ferent moments." For Zhang, the painting was an attempt to make sense of a senseless event.

Zhang used the flashback style to tell a multi-layered story within the frame of a single canvas; his contemporary, Chen Yifei, developed a distinctively different flashback style around the same time. Zhang's best-known flashback paintings include "Deep Feeling for the Land" (1979), which integrates a central image of a new dam and the rich harvest it produces with an image of the dam's surveyors and of villagers dying of drought before the dam was built. The autobiographical "Thinking of the Source" (1981) weaves together scenes of the artist as a baby with his mother, walking with his family, and sitting with his future wife.

AMERICA... AMERICA

In 1984, Zhang was one of five students chosen for the master's degree program at the China Central Art Academy. A year later, he came to the US to continue his education at the City College of New York. In 1989, he moved north to the arts community of Woodstock, NY in Ulster County.

Woodstock made musical and social history in 1969, but the region has been a mecca for visual artists for nearly a century. Ralph Whitehead founded Byrdcliffe, the country's oldest continuous arts colony, in 1902, and artists flocked to the area to seek inspiration in nature and kindred spirits.

There was even a painting style called the Woodstock School, which emphasized earthy color and local landforms. Elements of Impressionism, Abstract Expressionism, and modernism found their way to this upstate enclave and were absorbed into the emerging traditions of American art.

Gallery owner Tom Fletcher says he's fascinated by the way in which "the development of 20th century American art can be followed in Woodstock." In his gallery, he focuses on artists who have done substantial work in the region.

Originally from the Boston area and now a Byrdcliffe resi-

dent, Fletcher has had numerous career incarnations. He ran a drilling company in West Africa and an export company in Europe, earned a degree in theology from the University of San Francisco, and worked in book publishing and then in sales before opening his gallery six years ago. His goal is to show art that has impact and meaning, and he saw Zhang's work as particularly appropriate in the current political atmosphere.

"With the whole geopolitical change taking place over the past 10 years, America is becoming the sole superpower, and China is emerging as our new co-superpower, with its great population, tremendous history, and tremendous potential," he said. "We're all feeling the effects of an emerging industrial China."

Zhang HongNian, for his part, says he feels as if he is half Chinese and half American. Working long serene days in his studio, surrounded by trees, tall grasses, and mostly silence, he says he is "living the Chinese intellectual dream in America." He still paints primarily scenes of China and Tibet, but American subjects have captivated him as well; after a visit to Plymouth Plantation in Massachusetts, he painted a series of works inspired by the Pilgrims' experiences in the New World. The paintings were shown at the Plantation in 1992.

"I felt a similarity between me and the early American pilgrims—not giving up, beginning a new life," he says. On the left side of the beautifully composed "The Sound of the Ocean," a young Pilgrim girl is glimpsed through a doorway; on the right, we see a small, alluring slice of blue sea. "You're in the new land but the ocean is calling you from your motherland," is how Zhang explains the essence of the piece.

The artist felt a similar pull of fellowship on the first of his five visits to Tibet, made soon after he achieved notoriety in China for the painting "When We Were Young." "I felt it was

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"Bathing By the River" • oil on canvas, 1998, 25" x 28"

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not enough," he says of the popularity he attained in his homeland. "I wanted something from my deep soul, I wanted to find something pure."

He felt at home in Tibet's open spaces, and he recorded not the political climate but rather the simple, daily life of the Tibetan people. He has shown his Tibetan paintings in two solo exhibitions, "The Year of Tibet" at the China House of Art in New York City, and "New Views of Tibet," in a Birmingham, Alabama gallery. For the Fletcher Gallery show, Zhang has translated his experiences of Tibet into a series of lithographs, "Dreams of Tibet."

"HongNian wanted a medium that would allow the average person to own his work," Fletcher says. The 10 lithographs in the series, each printed in a limited edition of 60, are priced between \$300 and \$500. "It was amazing to see," Fletcher continues. "Zhang had never done a lithograph before, and his first one was like a masterpiece."

"It was very, very natural for me," Zhang concurs. "In art school, we did hours and hours of drawing, so that is like my first language." "Dreams of Tibet" was done with traditional lithographic materials -- grease pencils on limestone -- and printed on cotton paper by Kate McGloughlin at the Woodstock School of Art, where Zhang teaches oil painting. Zhang and Fletcher plan to produce three more sets of lithographs.

Another technique which Zhang uses extensively is glazing, the process of applying thinned, transparent layers of oil over more opaque layers of color. Zhang uses glazing to add warmth and glow to his paintings and to control the relative lightness and darkness of colors.

In the studio on a warm August afternoon just days before his show opens, Zhang is working on several projects -- glazing a small-scale nude, signing his name to the just-completed "Magnolias," and setting out other new works to be taken to the gallery. The pieces ranged around the stu-



"Portrait of a Tibetan Woman" • oil on canvas, 1998, 24" x 18"

dio illustrate Zhang's devotion to painting the people of his country, which includes some 50 minority groups. "Southern Chinese Girls" casts soft light on the shy and shining faces of two Miao girls on their way to market. A Han woman sits pensively in a garden in "Gentle Breeze." In "The Green Scarf," a woman in typical Tibetan dress faces away from the viewer, off toward the cool green mountains. In "The Paper Cutter," a child watches a master craftsman create the traditional cut-paper ornaments which are hung in windows to make patterns of light.

A series of larger paintings, still in progress, represent a commission from *National Geographic* to recreate scenes of ancient China's 13th century Shang Dynasty, to be published in an upcoming issue. To make the work as historically accu-

rate as possible, Zhang visited the ancient sites of long-gone wooden palaces to study the remaining stone foundations, worked with a team of archeologists, and met with a Harvard professor who specializes in the Shang Dynasty.

The lush paintings include scenes of battle, revelry, and invasion. Zhang's intricate detailing and rich hues give the work a texture and majesty, but he has also inserted subtle messages in the pieces. In the background of the festival scene, men are being taken away to be put to death by order of the corrupt emperor. In the battle scene, the sky above is a deep tranquil blue, lined with fluffy white clouds, in direct contrast to the brutality occurring below.

Zhang says the project has allowed him to fulfill what he feels as a responsibility to teach people about ancient Chinese history. "People know [about ancient] Greek, Rome, Egypt, there's so much art showing that," he says. "But they don't know [ancient] China."

Free from Communist control and from the lure of money and fame, Zhang paints the images that come to him unbidden. They often have personal meaning for him, like his painting of an angel. "After my wife [Li Xin] died, I was a single parent to my daughter," he says. "I could feel some angel around me, come to protect me, to help me, so I painted it."

In Woodstock, Zhang has found friends, a companion (also a painter), and a community which welcomes and celebrates him. Zhang's mother spent a year in America, then returned to China to live near his sister and other relatives. His daughter left this month to attend Brown University. In a way, Zhang is able now to return to the unalloyed pleasure in making pictures that he experienced as a child.

"My life is very simple," he says. Each morning after breakfast, he goes to the studio, where he often spends 10 hours each day. "I'm very happy to feel myself as not limited," he says. "I open my heart and hear

the calls and respond to them."

Something in Zhang's nature has allowed him to transmute the suffering in his life into compassion and gentleness rather than rage and spite. While some say art is born of anguish, Zhang disagrees. "Art is a joy," he says. "I don't believe when people are angry they want to do art."

"It's good to be an artist because you have the time to

Pioneer of "Flashback" painting style and leader of Chinese "Scar" movement (1976-1981) which broke with official Communist propaganda art.

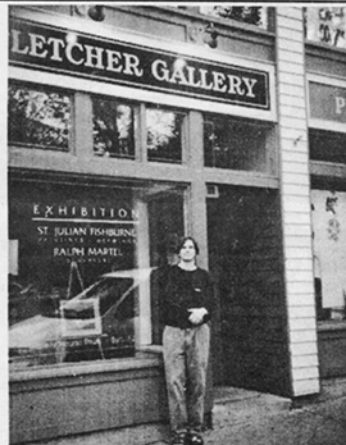
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Gallery Hours:
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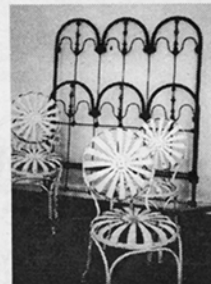
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<http://www.fletchergallery.com>



enjoy what you see and to help others see what you see," he continues. "Before, I wanted to change the world. But I am a painter. I can make people feel peace and beauty, and the rest they choose themselves."

The Fletcher Gallery is open Thursday through Monday from Noon to 5 p.m. For more information, call (914) 679-4411.

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