

Arts • Crafts • Galleries

The way of Zhang

It's a simple still-life arrangement—bowl of fruit, vase of flowers, a background of two wrinkled, draped curtains. Of course, there's a pear out of the bowl which extends the bowl's curve to the lower right, and the red of the artificial flowers sweeps up into the upper left, creating an echoing, symmetrical curve, and the contrasting colors of the curtains create further visual harmonies, and the shadows on the bowl and the apples whisper dark mysteries ... but then, you don't realize all that until Zhang Hong Nian starts teaching.

On a recent afternoon, 10 students with notebooks and easels gather close around Zhang (this is his last name, and sounds something like "John" pronounced with a French accent) at his Woodstock School of Art painting and composition class. As he paints—first a strongly stroked square within the rectangle of the canvas—he describes what he's doing. He's creating partly from a written plan inscribed in half-English, half-Chinese, and he encourages students to combine preconception with heartfelt spontaneity. This mixture of strong contrasts is the foundation of his method.

"You must always have something linked and something contrasted," he's saying as he blocks in form. "These," he adds, indicating the red of the flowers and the backdrop, "are very—how do you say—"

"Similar," a student supplies.

"You see," he says to a visitor, "This is my class—the students help me."

But as he touches paint to canvas his fluid moves speak more eloquently than spoken words. He finds a point of demarcation from where all action seems to jump off. The addition of each new color and form is like a new twist in plot, a visual story which increases in depth and meaning as it's told.

As Zhang conveys all this breathtaking, nearly metaphysical stuff, he's interweaving practical advice about softening a too-bright red, using light to make another portion recede to create shadows, borrowing color from his apples which are dark as stones and touching an orange with just the barest intimation, barely a breath of color.

"The most important thing now is to cover the canvas," he says. "When you have the



Zhang Hong Nian, Milking oil on canvas.

idea in your mind, don't do it too slow. All the canvas will be colored by this paint, and all the paint colored by the idea."

Zhang often conveys the sense of transition, as in his depiction of elder Tibetans turning to a young boy in preparation for a ceremonial procession. The temporary, fragile state of a Tibetan campsite, with thin tents billowing like snowy mountains and restless yaks breathing, is balanced by the rootedness of a baby nursing at its mother's lush breasts. Again a boy turns to look at us, his gaze the focal point, his eyes like the two dots on a yin-yang symbol, anchoring the ever-revolving elements in the present.

After a life of Maoist indoctrination, Zhang still has doubts about the existence of a traditional God, but he definitely believes in a higher power, something "bigger than Mao." One of his more spiritual paintings depicts in crystalline, early-morning-light colors a lone poetic figure, who seems to come out of the cool, dreamy, filtered light of the Tibetan landscape.

As a national artist Zhang was given materials, a studio and a regular salary. "It sounds good," he says, "but you paid the price." His works were displayed annually and had to pass the censors. Even when painting nearly pure propaganda he sneaked in bits of avant-garde imagery and subtly individualistic interpretations of his subject. When the revolution came, his father was doubly cursed by being a banker and

having been educated in America; he was investigated for years and finally jailed. Zhang's mother was a continuing source of strength. "She was peaceful, smiling, very strong inside and very soft outside," he says. "She had a very big heart, too. She said maybe the revolution wasn't good for us but it helped a lot of other people. She really gave me this training—don't always live just for yourself."

As he grew older Zhang was under scrutiny by the regime because of his father's work. During the years of re-education, when he turned 21, Zhang was sent to live with peasants, ordered not to create art and sentenced to four years of hard labor. He lived with 10 people in a shack big enough for a few goats and was forced to break ice with his bare feet to plant rice, the reasoning that pain would make him receptive to the doctrine. He carried baskets so heavy he thought he couldn't take one step and went to sleep each night with his hands clenched in spasm. "Right now," he says, "I think my hands are so valuable because I am an artist, but then I couldn't open them until the morning."

As he makes the fruit bowl emerge—almost like form out of clay, not by directly painting it, but by painting strokes in the void around it—he says, "When you do detail, never forget to use the language. Sometimes when you do detail like this," he says, bending close, miming someone getting lost in the painstaking work, "little by little, little by little, you lose the language."

Just seven years ago, Zhang had that nightmare sense of literally losing his language.

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He had come from China to America and had just \$30 and some paintings. He remembers sweating in the administrative offices of City College, not understanding a word being said, getting lost in the subways, not knowing north from south and walking all the way down from Columbia University to Chinatown to save 80 cents in bus fare. Even though he was a well-known artist in China with many of his pieces in the National Museum, he was unfamiliar and unconnected to the Western market.

His work was picked up by the Grand Central Art Gallery in Manhattan, and the gallery owner subsequently brought Zhang's work to his Woodstock venue, the James Cox Gallery. Some of Zhang's pieces are in the Cox's permanent collection and two are on view in the current *Woodstock—Then and Now* show, on view through April 4.

Zhang's figurative oils—whether of nomadic Tibetan families, the Pilgrims (he identifies with these first American immigrants) or ballet dancers—draw you immediately into scenes so real you become engaged by the action.

He's travelled to Tibet three times and compares the simple, harsh Tibetan life to that of American cowboys. Life revolves around the yak and people move on when the grasses are gone, carrying minimal belongings and tents. Reflecting this, his Tibetan work is full of movement, of figures and objects peripatetically interconnected. Sometimes there is a place where the energy seems to originate, but more often Zhang captures an eternal chain, as in his painting of a



Zhang Hong Nian, *Morning Milking*, oil on canvas.



Zhang Hong Nian, *Before The Procession*, oil on canvas.

woman curved into a yak as she milks it, as her child curves into her and as a baby yak curves into its mother.

His work shows fascination with community and traditions, but nearly always contains some allusion to the individual among the masses. Sometimes one face, usually a young male, turns to confront the viewer dead on, while the rest are concerned with the endless busyness of their lives and repetitious ceremonies.

After he became an artist he went back to the countryside, seeking the place where he had toiled. The houses were gone and the land was filled in and all he found was a patch of yellow earth he remembered from before. There was nothing to indicate that any of the pain and suffering had taken place. Alone in the countryside he wept. And later, many stood before his painting of that time—a montage of nearly unendurable deprivation—and wept as well. He received many letters from people who found the painting so strongly evocative of their own experience of re-education they were certain he had lived in the same rooms with them. But even in this painting there is one person who

looks up and out. His eyes are hollow with pain, but his face is a focal point, lit by an outer source, promising hope and light. "That's me," Zhang says, pointing to the boy.

Another painting pays homage to a woman who was shot because she wouldn't adhere to the regime. Before she was killed her throat was cut so she couldn't cry out words against Mao. Zhang is still haunted by this ultimate act of censorship. In 1972 he was nearly shot when a friend betrayed him and his anti-party thinking to the regime. He was threatened and questioned and saved by a sudden attack of a mysterious illness. He was dragged 20 miles in a handcart to a hospital. He had an appendectomy but believes he was actually sick from apprehension.

When he finally departed from China his wife and small daughter had to wait for clearance to leave. Before his wife could get her green card she died of cancer.

Although his heart will always mourn his wife, and for all its pain, his homeland, Zhang has found peace and happiness in Woodstock, teaching and raising his daughter, who's now 12. He's just finished writing a screenplay about China which awaits translation.

He says in China all the intellectuals

had this Lao-tze-like dream of finding a special spot, like the classic brush-painted image of a mountain, trees and bridge, a spot to work and think. He never imagined he'd find that spot in Woodstock. "All my life I dreamed of this—there's a spiritual landscape all around me. I'm living in the woods, I'm free. Everything is fine, I do what I like, I do what I dream. But first you must know what you dream."

Zhang Hong Nian teaches painting and composition at the Woodstock School of Art, Route 212, on Wednesdays and Fridays from 1 to 4 p.m. He'll also be leading a workshop from May 12 through 14. To register, or for more information, call the WSA at 679-2388. ++

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