

BOB CRIMI

# TIMES TWO

ARTS

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PERFORMANCE

## *A painter's long march*

**Show recapitulates Zhang Hongnian's odyssey from Beijing to Bearsville**

BEN ARMENTO



*Zhang Hongnian, Before the Long March, oil*

by Renee Samuels

It's not clear to me why Zhang Hongnian's current exhibition at Fletcher Gallery is called *New Chinese Paintings and Prints*. Is it because the artist is Chinese? Probably not. Is it because a lot of the work depicts Tibetans? I don't know. It doesn't really matter what it's called, I suppose, although it's easy to get hung up on titles for some of us more literal types. The show is actually broader than the title implies. The work is not all new, and it's not all about China. It is all masterful.

Some people call Zhang an illustrator. That's like saying Ingres was an illustrator, or Sargent. These artists are painting representational subject matter,

but let's not lose sight of the fact that Zhang is, as Sargent was, an abstract painter. Take away the faces, or hands, or details of dress, and what you have are shapes and colors. Those aren't real people on canvas; they are not three-dimensional.

In a painting like "Childhood Friends" (1997), where two Tibetans huddle together in conversation, the only real detail is a hand. Without that hand, there would be little to identify the subject matter. At any rate, one must rely on imagination to fill in the details.

In "Thinking Of The Source" (1981), the abstract nature of Zhang's composition is far more apparent. Figures appear up close and at a distance, some in light, some in shadow, in at least two different

landscape settings. This painting is an example of the "Flashback" painting style: in it are depictions of a mother holding a baby, the child walking with his parents and siblings by a river, the young man sitting with the woman who will be his wife. It seems to be a self-portrait over the years.

Born in Nanjing in 1947, Zhang Hongnian started his professional artistic training at age 9. By the time he was 14, he was top student at the Central Art Academy Affiliated High School in Beijing. He spent four years at forced labor during the Cultural Revolution, and in 1973, returned to Beijing and was employed in the official Beijing Art Academy, where he was artist in residence from 1974 until he left

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## A painter's long march (cont.)

the country 11 years later. In 1979, he became the youngest artist in the All China Artist Association, and in 1984 he was one of five students in China chosen by the Central Art Academy for its master degree program. He pioneered the "Flashback" style, and was leader of the "Scar" movement, breaking with traditional propaganda art. Three of his paintings are in the National Art Museum in Beijing.

In 1985, he came to the United States, and became involved with Grand Central Art Gallery; it was through James Cox, the gallery's director, that Zhang first came to Woodstock. The artist participated in the successful 1986 show at Grand Central, *Realism From China*, reviewed by *Art News* and CBS, among others; his work has been noted in *The New York Times*, *Boston Globe* and *The Wall Street Journal*, as well. Since 1993, he's been a full-time painting instructor at Woodstock School of Art; in the last two years, he's also been a workshop instructor there. In 1996, *Artist Magazine* did a cover story on his painting technique. He's currently working on a series of paintings depicting scenes from Chinese history for *National Geographic Magazine*.

The featured painting in this show is "Before The Long March" (1977), brought to the U.S. in a suitcase by Zhang and restored to magnificence by St. Julian Fishburne. Even though the artist's family—bankers—lost everything in the revolution, according to Tom Fletcher, Zhang remembers his mother saying, "We lost our place but this has been good for China." So despite Mao's deficits as a person and leader, Zhang still maintains a respect for him as the central unifying force in 20th-century China, and this comes through in the glowing portrait of the young Mao and his countrymen.

Zhang's exhibition includes, along with painted portraits, still-lives and landscapes, a lithograph series, *Dreams Of Tibet*. After the colorful front

SUSAN ZINK



Zhang Hongnian in front of his 1998 oil, *Magnolias*.

room, these black-and-white images are direct and provocative. And they're so beautifully drawn—you can feel the line, the electric connection, from hand to crayon to stone. My favorite was a small one, "Pulling The Yak," in which tension and tenderness are palpable. By leaving detail to the imagination, the sensuousness of the soft, dark yak and it's struggle not to be mastered beams.

Zhang told me he remembers his first drawing. He couldn't have been very tall, because he drew it at eye level, and it was on the inside of a

desk drawer. He drew a hammer. He felt very good about that, so he drew another, and another and another. From the start, a sense of accomplishment at his labor infused him with a strong spirit.

As far as one can surmise from the amount of work completed in the last year alone, Zhang doesn't have any kind of psychological blocks to keep him from creating. It's not that it's superhuman to make this much art, it's just that artists can't always be in the place in themselves from which



Zhang Hongnian, *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, lithograph.

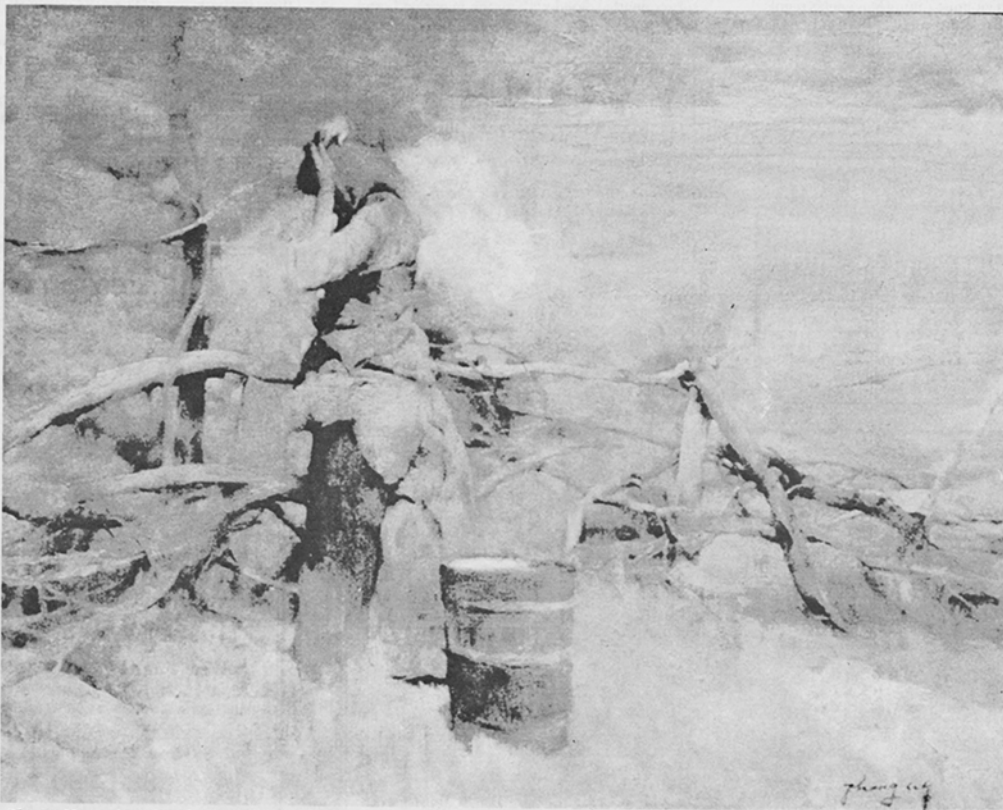


the art comes, it's an accumulation of something inside that prompts the output. Zhang is in that happy state where he is so completely a master of his medium—he can say what he wants to with his materials—that he just does the work. He doesn't have to be in the mood.

Zhang Hongnian's exhibition will continue through October 11 at Fletcher Gallery, 40 Mill Hill Road, Woodstock, with hours Thursday to Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. For information, call 679-4411. ++



**Zhang Hongnian, Portrait of a Tibetan Woman, oil**



**Zhang Hongnian, On the Road, oil**