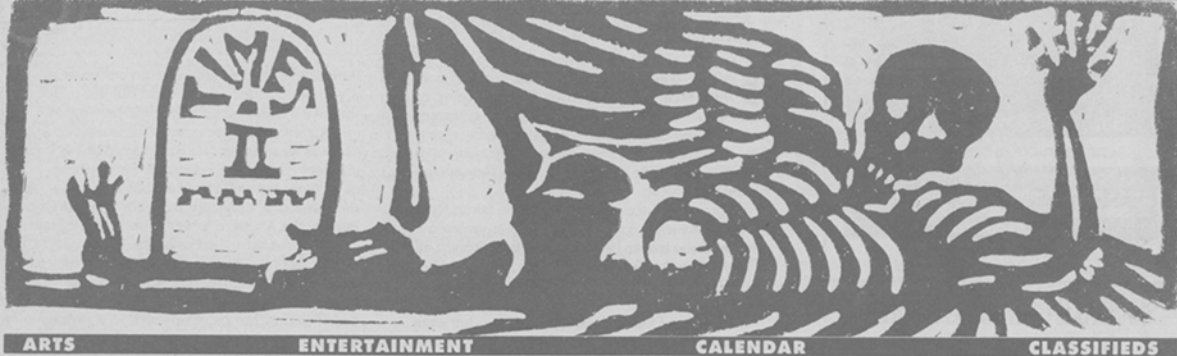


ILLUSTRATION BY CAROL ZALOOM



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## Dances with canvas

Zhang Hong Nian shows extraordinary paintings of ordinary events at Cox Gallery



Zhang Hong Nian, Halloween Eve, Woodstock, oil on canvas.

by Carol Zaloom

A trick of light, a treat for the heart awaits in James Cox Gallery this month. Zhang Hong Nian, extraordinary painter of ordinary events, both past and present, has a show of paintings in the downstairs gallery. Dominating one wall is a series of works featuring Woodstock's own All Hallow's Eve. These are a joyous tribute to the best of Woodstock's playfulness.

Our lives are glazed with history as surely as these oils are glazed with varnish. Layers of light simmer under a mist of color and movement. A contemporary Halloween has become as mystical as a visionary's dream. Here, all our lives are

staged and Zhang is director, costumer, lighting and set designer. The pageant goes on.

In "Halloween Eve—Woodstock" a "ghost" woman with all the elegance, mystery and soft beauty of a John Singer Sargent figure draws your eye to the center. Her perfect hand lifts a veil from her shadowed eyes, as a crowded street teems about her in frozen silence. Warm light gleams from windows and doorways while the chill night claims the far corner, a dark forest sliced by a distant silvered road.

"Starlight" contains so much heat and energy it's as though the paint itself is phosphorescent. The girl's face is warmed by the fire of her magic wand and her glowing pumpkin contains as many spells and prom-

ises as Cinderella's.

Another of the Halloween series, "Masquers," seems almost an arrested scene from a marvelous play. Dazzling light streams down and bathes a horned figure in a god-like aura, its face alight with laughter.

The exhibition's title, *The Universal Pageant*, reflects the varied humanity and cultures contained here. In addition to our own familiar time-frame and faces, the show also includes many of Zhang's Tibetan nomadic scenes. In "Encampment," lush with detail and distance, our eyes scan the darkening sky and seek a fire on the far plain. Nearby, warmed by furs and heavy fabrics, a mother sits nursing her baby as a single lantern burns. Her bare breast and the

baby's nude legs are almost shockingly smooth in the cool night air.

In "Milking," a small child reaches out and touches his mother with such a strong connection that it becomes the focus of the painting. It is a small gesture, a small hand, but it is felt deeply.

A particular favorite of mine is "White Yarn." Zhang's deft handling of paint is evident here. Achieving an almost sculptural quality with the loose strokes that swirl and streak the canvas with sublime softness, he puts the touch of cloth and wool at your fingertips. A woman sits, yarn in her hands and lost in the folds of her skirt, head down, hair hiding her face. There is so little detail the scene approaches

abstraction.

Zhang's ballet pieces are classic, evoking Degas. His dancers are presented to us resting, sitting, waiting. Their energy is contained or already expended. Again, his free handling of the oils is impressive. "In Morning Class" depicts a dancer lifting her foot into a toe shoe, which is a bright tangle of white brushstrokes.

The portrait "Elizabeth" is a striking contrast to the candid glimpses of nomadic life. This is a very formal painting, very restrained, very still. Dressed all in white Edwardian clothing in a dark Victorian room, the subject strongly reminds one of Whistler's portraits. There is a tension here in the very stillness

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Detail from Halloween Eve, Woodstock, Zhang Hong Nian

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### Dances with canvas (cont.)

of the model; only her eyes seem capable of movement. Like Zhang's still-lives, "Elizabeth" is a study in color of light and dark, the movement of shapes in space, the dance of paint on canvas.

In a revealing display, the gallery has placed on view some preliminary reference works of Zhang's, a few photographs and tiny oils in black, white and grey. The latter are light-and-shadow studies he uses to plan the shapes to come—blocking out areas of the canvas to be given to the light, and mapping where the dark should fall. I wish more exhibitions would include this sort of thing. The process by which the artist comes to the finished painting is a mysterious one; a display like this does not strip away the mystery, but sheds light on some of the painter's methods. One's pleasure can only be increased by understanding.

Zhang Hong Nian's story was told in a previous article in this newspaper (April 1, 1993). It is a life full of family love, political terror, harsh punishment and great personal loss. He has traveled far, not just in

Zhang Hong Nian,  
Yesteryear—Beijing,  
oil on canvas.



miles, to be here with us. He is a man of great heart.

Zhang was in the gallery last Sunday morning when I stopped by. He said he'd like the viewer to be able to *read* the work, not just look *at* it. Using Chinese calligraphy as an example he pointed out the shapes made by the values of light and dark, and how the eye travels the paths created. "When the painting works it will bring a feeling, an emotion," he said.

Smiling, his voice dropped to a whisper. "Last night I had a wonderful dream! I was painting and the paint was just flowing. It was an abstract and it was so right and I was so filled with joy it was as if I was *dancing* with the canvas." When he found himself awake he tried to return to sleep, to the dream, to recapture this feeling.

Standing, he opened his arms wide to all that was hanging around us, his eyes distant. "When you feel joy everything works. What is important, what matters, is the joy. Only the joy."



Zhang Hong Nian, Home Before Dark, oil on canvas.

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