

Time Out

Hong Kong

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- Artist interviews
- Pull-out guide
- Satellite events



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SHAPE OF ART
to come

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All cut up
Fragments; a piece of brass
Zhao Zhao cut into pieces to
resemble a gunshot



A false sense of SECURITY

One of China's most provocative modern artists, **Zhao Zhao** has emerged from the shadow of his mentor, Ai Weiwei, and is making waves in his own right. Hannah Hodson talks to him ahead of his exhibition *Lighter, Fragments, Untitled and Safe* at Tang Contemporary Art

Born to a family exiled to Xinjiang, the remote Uighur province of northwest China, controversial artist Zhao Zhao has always lived on the fringes of society. Since his first arrest in 1999, for a performance art piece, he has been watched by the Chinese government and seen a

string of further convictions added to his record. His latest exhibition touches on the subject of security, a privilege many in China are denied and a right many Hongkongers are fighting to keep. We chat to the multi talented artist about his upcoming show and the role of art in politics...

Security is a central theme in this exhibition, can you tell readers how you reflect this theme in the artwork?
When there is a lack of security, it implies there is an impending threat of a crisis. For example, lighters are connected to security. They are flammable and explosive, but they

are also very inexpensive, everyday products. I made one with white jade, turning it into a useless object. The safe [in the exhibition] is very straightforward—it is a tool of prevention and a cover for security, but I used marble to make a safe that can't be opened. This is a type of threat.

How have you developed this theme from past works?
Many of my works have an element of event to them. I have always been attracted to sudden events. Events contain the potential for danger, which fits with my current theme of security.

You work in a number of different mediums, from film to paint, what inspires you to move from one to another?
Art is not limited to a particular form, and I have an aversion to convention and set styles. Different mediums are not an impediment for me; I can use them all. I am more interested in the development of the artwork itself.

How long did it take to create these pieces and did you have to work with any challenging new materials?
I spent a year creating the works I have brought to Hong Kong. There wasn't really any challenge in the production. I think the only challenge in the material is figuring out how to transform a real material into something that is at once part of reality and detached from reality.

Your family was exiled to Shihezi, Xinjiang, do you think this inspired you in some way to create anti-conformist art?
I have never thought about whether art should be against something, and have never seen myself as anti-conformist. I don't think people in our country are anti-conformist. Our society is not built on rules and order as in the West. There is no order to the various things, big and small, that happen to us every day. Many people break the rules. Since the rules that have been set for our society were not made with people in mind, they aren't really suited to people's lives. Perhaps they are suited to the benefits of a particular group. Having always lived in this kind of social structure, people pick up a mentality of admiration for hooligans, for the breaking of rules. They think that whoever can break the rules to get things done is fucking awesome.

Hong Kong is facing political problem of its own, do you think that this work will resonate even more with Hong Kong audiences, given the current political climate?
I think my white jade lighter will resonate with Hong Kong

audiences, because the relationship between Hong Kong and the mainland just can't seem to spark a flame.

Prior to working with Ai Wei Wei, was your art political, or did he inspire you to create anti-authoritarian art?
In 1999, right as I was about to enter college, a performance artwork I was doing was stopped by the State Security Bureau. I was taken away for investigation, and placed under surveillance for a year. I didn't officially enter college until 2000. I began working with Ai Weiwei after I graduated in 2004. In our ten years together, we did a lot of things and encountered many incidents together. These experiences helped me to clearly see my own direction.

What role does art have in politics?
The role of art is perhaps to present a more precise 'extraction'. It extracts from reality, but what you see is still reality.

You relay emotions and events in China which are often not reported by the state, what has the reaction to your work been like abroad?
The West is certainly on the path to democracy and freedom, and many

of my works are about freedom of expression, so in the West, they are paying attention to what it is like in China.

“I've never thought about whether art should be against something, and have never seen myself as anti-conformist”

You've been arrested several times, what was this for? And how were you treated?
Beyond mere amusement, if you touch on anything solid, you come under threat... Their means of dealing with dissenters is to demonize them.

Has this ever made you want to stop making political art, or has it made you even more determined?
I may have become a bit more flexible, avoiding unnecessary trouble so that I can continue doing what I want to do. I certainly won't stop, but I can't say that I am more resolute than before. My artworks

embody things and issues I have personally encountered, and I can't ignore or give up on them.

A few years ago it was near impossible for you to exhibit your work, do you think that the state has relaxed its laws at all? Or is your art becoming less obviously provocative?
I don't think that my practice has changed direction. I don't think China is governed by the rule of law; it is governed by a particular group. Even when there are laws, they are just pretenses. The operations of society are run on 'agreed conventions'. I do not hold out much hope for 'relying on the law' or 'receiving its protection'.

How do you see the future of art in China?
At high speed, swaying.

A number of pieces of your art have been confiscated by the government, they stated that it's not art, what do you believe the real reason for this to be?
The real reason is that they actually believe they can determine what is and isn't art... Oh my god!

Lighter, Fragments, Untitled and Safe Tang Contemporary Art, Mar 21-Apr 24; tangcontemporary.com.



Back to safety
Zhao Zhao in an
exhibition space