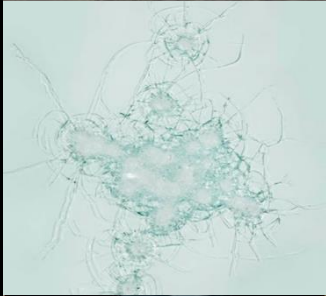


*“I try to resist being  
tamed as an artist.”*

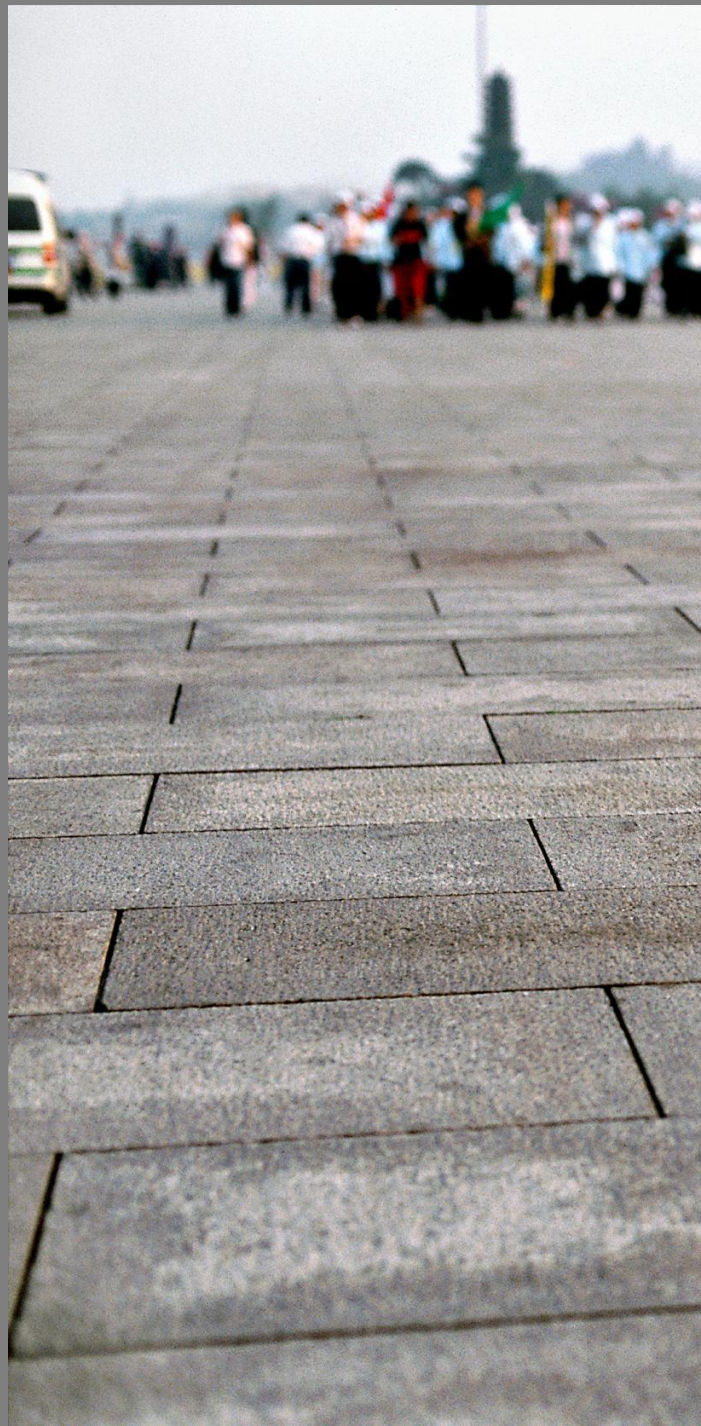
*– Zhao Zhao*





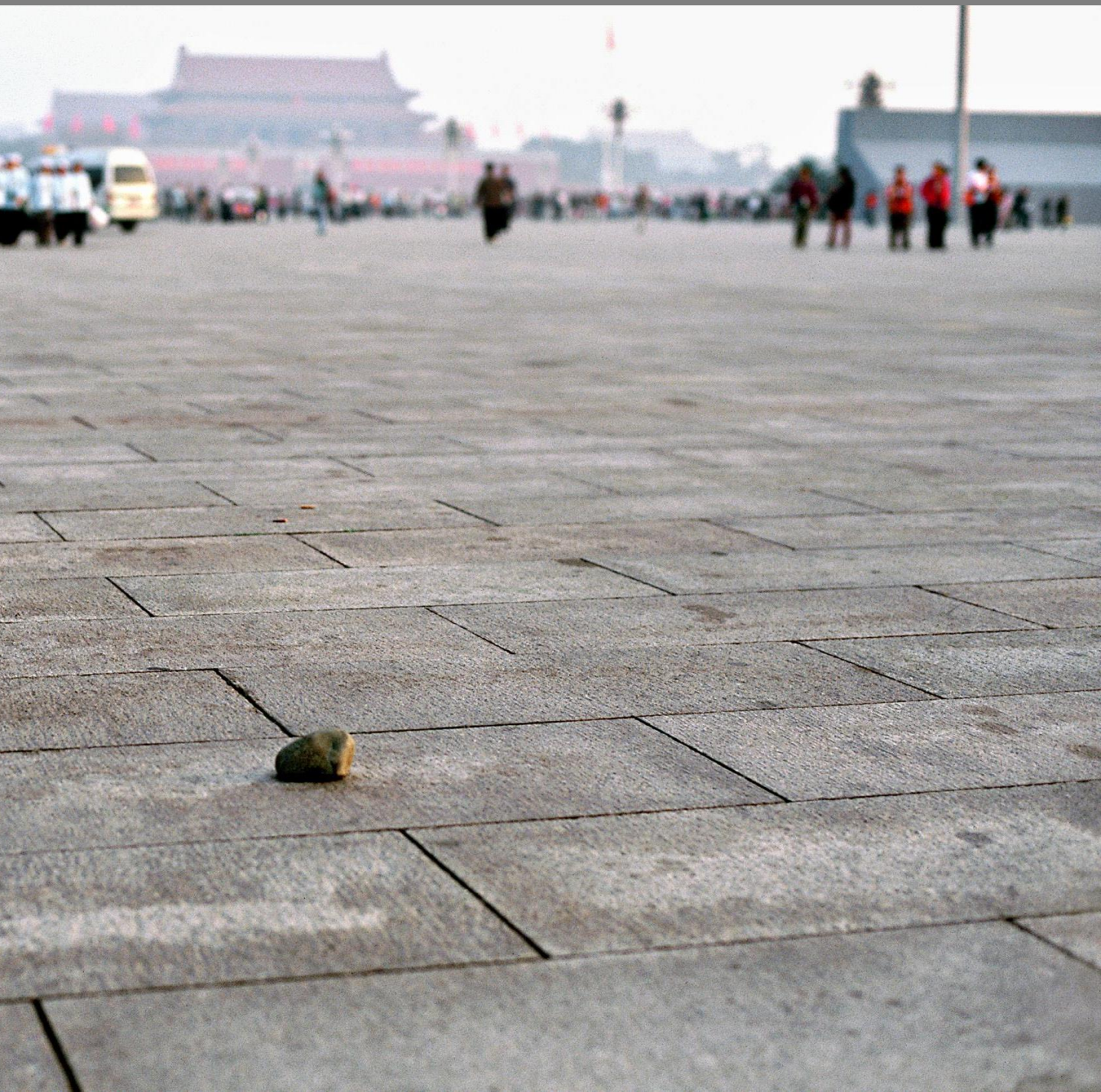


*F*or every generation of artists, one often stands out as the *enfant terrible* – a virtuoso who is unorthodox, innovative and excels at the unexpected. In Western art, there was Caravaggio, Picasso, and Warhol, to name a few. For today's generation of Chinese artists, few would fit the profile as well as Zhao Zhao. This is hardly surprising when his mentor of 7 years was none other than Ai Weiwei, the *enfant terrible* of the previous generation of Chinese artists.





*Cobblestone*, 2007, C-print, 40 x 60 cm, edition of 6





**B**orn in Xinjiang in 1982, Zhao had shown his rebellious streak as a student at the Xinjiang Institute of Arts. Originally trained as a painter, he soon discovered performance as a more suitable means of expression. His first-ever performance piece was based on the concept of running naked along Erdaoqiao Street, an area populated by conservative Muslims and the Uighur ethnic group. The project never came to fruition because the young art student was arrested before it could happen.

After graduating in 2004, Zhao moved to Beijing where he immediately started working in Ai Weiwei's studio. Although of different generations, both artists had grown up in Shihezi, a sub-prefectural city in the Gobi Desert, which was dominated by the bingtuan, a paramilitary farming and development organization. Zhao and his family had been sent to the small town for re-education during the Cultural Revolution.

Zhao's first assignment as Ai's assistant was *Beijing Chang'an Boulevard* (2004), a conceptual video work filmed over the course of one month, featuring Zhao walking the entire length of a 38-kilometre Beijing thoroughfare that runs past the symbolic Tiananmen Square. Zhao would stop to film his surroundings after every 50 metres, a task which was at once demanding and monotonous. When the piece was completed, Zhao was rewarded with the filming of two more videos – *Beijing: The Second Ring Road* (2005) and *Beijing: The Third Ring Road* (2005). Zhao remembers this period with great fondness.

*“Back then, Ai had nothing to do, not like now. I'd leave in the morning to film and when I came back at night, he'd review the footage. If there was still time in the evening, we'd watch a movie together, maybe one of Hou Hsiaohsien's, or a documentary.”*





Zhao went on to film many of Ai's most politically sensitive documentary works during the period and accompanied the older artist on numerous exhibition tours around the world. At the same time, the young artist was already building a significant body of his own artistic projects. Following Ai's advice, Zhao started creating object-based art, incorporating materials that he'd gathered around him, including *Cobblestone* (2007), a site-specific performance piece in which he glued a rock onto some of China's most sacred sites, including Tiananmen Square, and captured the moments when passersby stumbled over the rock. Zhao went one step further with *Toothpick* (2007), where he took a piece of Qing Dynasty wood from Ai's installation work *Fragments* (2005) and ground the now twice-salvaged wood into 32 toothpicks.



*Toothpick*, 2007, C-print, 100 x 150 cm

Naturally inclined to rebel against authority and conventional norms, Zhao's years as Ai's protégé also instilled in him a strong fascination with iconoclasm. *Necklace* (2007) was created using a piece of stone broken off from Joseph Beuys' *700 Oaks* project in Kassel, Germany.

*Necklace*, 2007, C-print





*“If you are really hungry and you see freshly baked bread in a shop window,*



*you break into the shop to eat.”*



The following year, Zhao created a set of eight “Euro coins” from the lead sheath that he had secretly removed from Anselm Kiefer’s monumental work, *Volkzahlung* (1991) at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum in Berlin. When questioned about his apparent disrespect for the integrity of other artists’ works, Zhao’s justification was characteristically philosophical – his admiration for Beuys and Kieffer are so intense that he simply could not resist keeping a piece of their work for himself.





*B*y 2008, Zhao had created enough artworks for his first solo exhibition at the China Art Archives and Warehouse in Beijing. The show was completely sold out and by 2010, the artist had participated in over 30 group exhibitions in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Hong Kong and even Belgium.

Zhao's first solo exhibition in Berlin took place in 2011 at Alexander Ochs Galleries. Entitled *Walking Naked*, in part a nostalgic reference to the first performance piece Zhao had conceptualized and aborted, the show featured such a diverse range of incongruent oil paintings that it could easily have been mistaken as a group show of various artists. Such pluralism and disparity underline the essence of Zhao's artistic approach – it is almost impossible to identify Zhao's oeuvre simply through aesthetics or medium.



*Portrait*, 2010, oil on canvas  
180 x 150 cm  
Courtesy of Alexander Ochs Galleries

On display are large pictures of sweet little kittens painted in soft pastel tones, reminiscent of 1950's postcards; what sets them apart are the small Chinese characters on the right of the canvas – “Restaurant for Young Fat Cat Meat”.

*Restaurant for Young Fat Cat Meat (detail), 2010, oil on canvas, 140 x 200 cm*





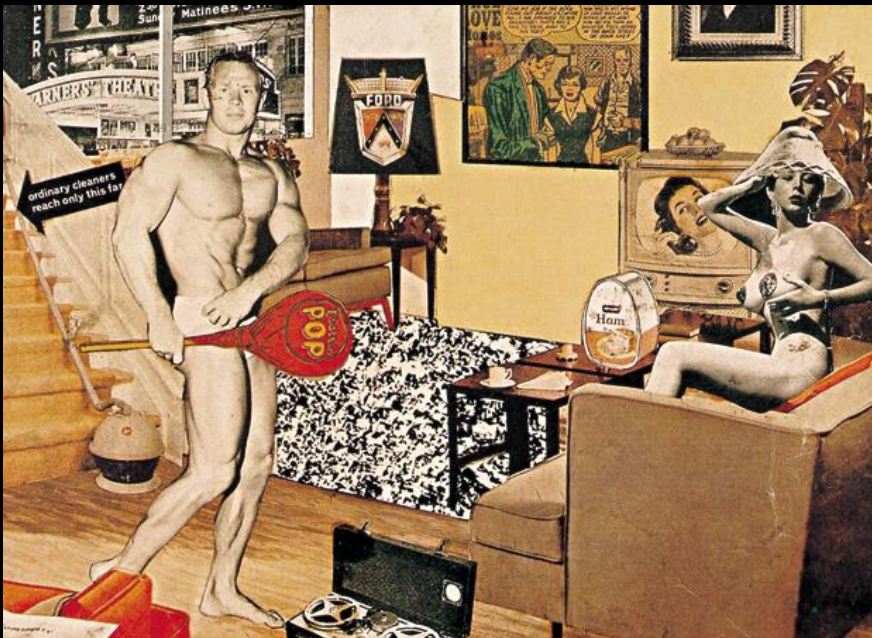
*Thank you Brother-in-law, 2010*  
Oil on canvas, 300 x 250 cm  
Courtesy of Alexander Ochs Galleries



姐夫我谢谢你!



As a sharp contrast to these seemingly innocuous paintings are two monumental works of dark-skinned bodybuilding ladies, which clearly recall Richard Hamilton's iconic Pop Art collage, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956). Featuring female bodies scantily clad in bikinis, Zhao has written "Thank you brother-in-law" in red Chinese characters at the bottom of the canvas. The viewer is once again left to wonder about the real meaning behind the inscription.



For Zhao, the manic content of the 2011 Berlin show was a mirror of the frenzied atmosphere in Zhao's hometown of Beijing, a city that was rapidly adapting to its post-Olympic success; his constantly changing aesthetic styles and discarding of themes reflected the spirit of the times.

Above: *Thank you brother-in-law (1)*, 2010, oil on canvas, 150 x 130 cm

Below: Richard Hamilton, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*, 1956, collage, 26 x 25 cm







*Milk 1-3*, 2008  
C-print (3 parts), 40 x 60 cm each  
Courtesy of Alexander Ochs Galleries

*“Every day, everything changes all around us. It’s too fake to keep painting in one style for the sake of perfecting technique.*

*Once one thing is done, I have no interest in painting it again.”*

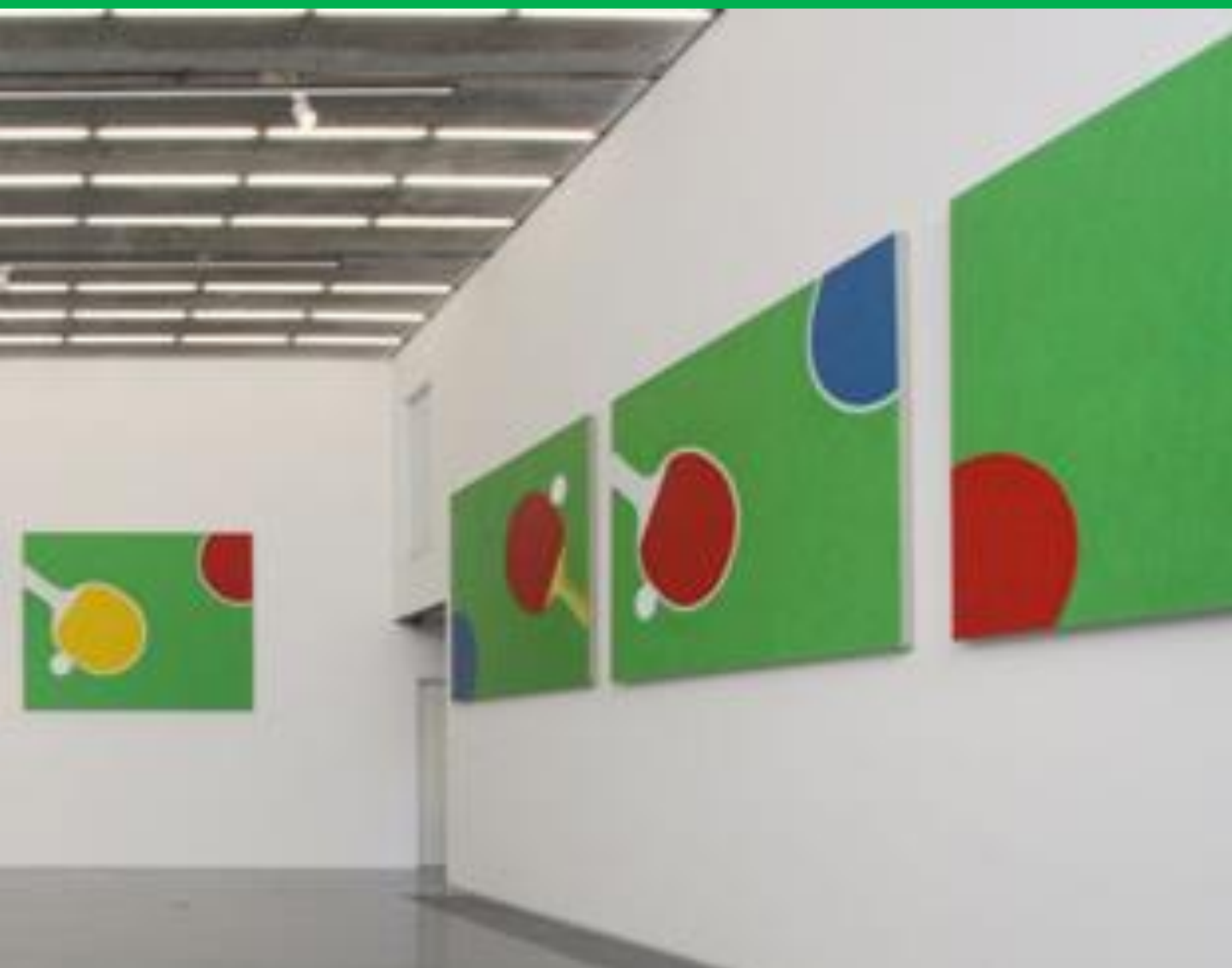


After several years of object-based art and provocative performances, Zhao has recently returned to painting in his *Ping Pong* series (2011), as a commentary on the issue of authority. The works themselves are large and emblematic – in direct contrast to the dynamic excitement of the game itself, the canvases are reduced to the three primary colours of red, yellow and blue, with paddles and ball carefully placed against a bright, unmodulated green background.



Here Zhao Zhao, the artist, has created his own set of rules – the formulaic format and execution of the paintings coincides with what Zhao has identified as the key characteristic of China’s national game – an unwavering willingness of all players to follow international rules.

*Ping Pong No. 1, 2, 2011*  
Oil on canvas (set of 2), 200 x 260 cm  
Chambers Fine Art, dslcollection





Juxtaposed against the simplistic, Pop-like, *Ping Pong* series is the monumental *Officer* installation (2011). For this project, Zhao invited a traditionally-trained sculptor to make a life-sized sculpture of himself in clay, which was then cast in fiberglass and further recast in plaster. The plaster cast was then broken into random pieces. Using a ten by twenty meter piece of limestone found in the mountains, Zhao made enlarged replicas of the broken plaster pieces; the finished installation measured 8.6 meters in height and over 40 tons in weight.





*Officer*, 2011, installation, limestone sculpture, 180 x 49 x 46 cm  
Chambers Fine Art, dslcollection

*“It is not merely a three-dimensional sculpture. It is not just about time either because it involves both time and an event.”*





*It is not a sculpture in the traditional sense but a complete conceptual work.”*  
*- Ai Weiwei on Officer (2011).*



In contrast to the deliberate arrangement and artifice of the *Ping Pong* paintings, this sculptural installation is defined purely by chance – the plaster cast was simply overturned to reveal the randomly broken pieces. Yet, there is little doubt to the viewer that the broken pieces could be easily reassembled to form the figure of the officer...one with Zhao Zhao's own face.

What is the artist's motivation and message? Zhao Zhao's history with the police is well-documented so perhaps this is a commentary on the Chinese authority? Or perhaps there is a broader message? One that questions the role of public sculpture in the 21st century? What is particularly meaningful about the installation is that it encapsulates an entire sequence of events.

Where the scattered fragments of *Officer* only gives the suggestion of violence, it is ironically the essential ingredient in the simple cubic form of *Again* (2012).

Here the artist refers to his country's consistent tendency towards political and religious intolerance that have led to the destruction of countless Buddhist statuary, the most destructive of which took place during the Cultural Revolution. He was particularly disturbed by the large number of stone

Buddhist sculptures (eg. heads of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, torsos of arhats and broken limbs of other deities) that are readily available in the art market.

Inspired by the cultural significance of these Buddhist fragments, the artist decided to "return" them to their original state of existence – cubes extracted from quarries. The cubic form itself also resonates with the Buddhist philosophy that all beings can aspire to Enlightenment.





*Bodhi is fundamentally without any tree;  
The bright mirror is also not a stand.  
Fundamentally there is not a single thing –  
Where could any dust be attracted?”*

*- Hui Neng (638-713), The Sutra of Hui Neng*



*Again*, 2012, white marble, limestone and other, 150 x 150 x 150 cm  
Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art









*The Happening*, 2012, oil on canvas (set of 3), 150 x 200 cm each  
dslcollection





*Constellations No. 3*, 2013, oil on canvas, 140 x 200 cm  
Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art





The image features a light green, almost white, background with several circular, spiky organisms. These organisms have a central, slightly darker green core and are surrounded by numerous thin, radiating lines that resemble spines or tentacles. They are scattered across the frame, with some appearing more prominent than others. A large, solid black rectangular area is positioned in the lower half of the image, containing white text.

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*presents*



Seven years after he created the first *Fragments* (2007), Zhao Zhao returned to this theme in his latest series of monumental sculpture installations. Vaguely reminiscent of a spider web, the inspiration actually came from a serious accident in which the artist's head was smashed against the car's windshield. The pattern of cracks from the impact was reproduced to form this stainless steel sculpture.



Right: *Fragments*, 2007, gold, 26 x 27.5 x 2 cm  
Courtesy of Platform China

Below: *Fragments*, 2014, steel, 200 x 300 x 5 cm  
Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art





In contrast to the strict cubic form of *Again* (2012), Zhao Zhao has deliberately left these Buddhist stone stupas in their original, unmodified form, only adding external support to keep the stones together. For the artist, these highly symbolic

stupas, now crudely bound together with ropes and appearing rather desolate, mirror contemporary Chinese society in which uncertainty has replaced the religious conviction and philosophical beliefs that used to prevail.

*Stupa 1-7*, 2014, stone, steel, cable, various dimensions  
Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art





Juxtaposed against the *Stupas* is a new series of intimate oil paintings based on the theme of duck eggs – a traditional Chinese dish that dates back to the Han dynasty (206BC-220AD). With echoes of his 2011 Berlin solo show, Zhao Zhao has once again created an exhibition that defies categorisation as the viewer moves between the forest of stupas and a gallery of duck eggs.



Top to bottom:  
*Spoiled Bird Egg*, 2013, oil on canvas, 27 x 35 cm  
*Preserved Duck Eggs 2*, 2014, oil on canvas, 27 x 35 cm  
*Spoiled Preserved Duck Eggs I*, 2012, oil on canvas, 60 x 70 cm  
Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art

Over the past 10 years, Zhao Zhao has gained a certain notoriety and critical attention in the art world, through his association with Ai Weiwei and the provocative nature of his *oeuvre*.

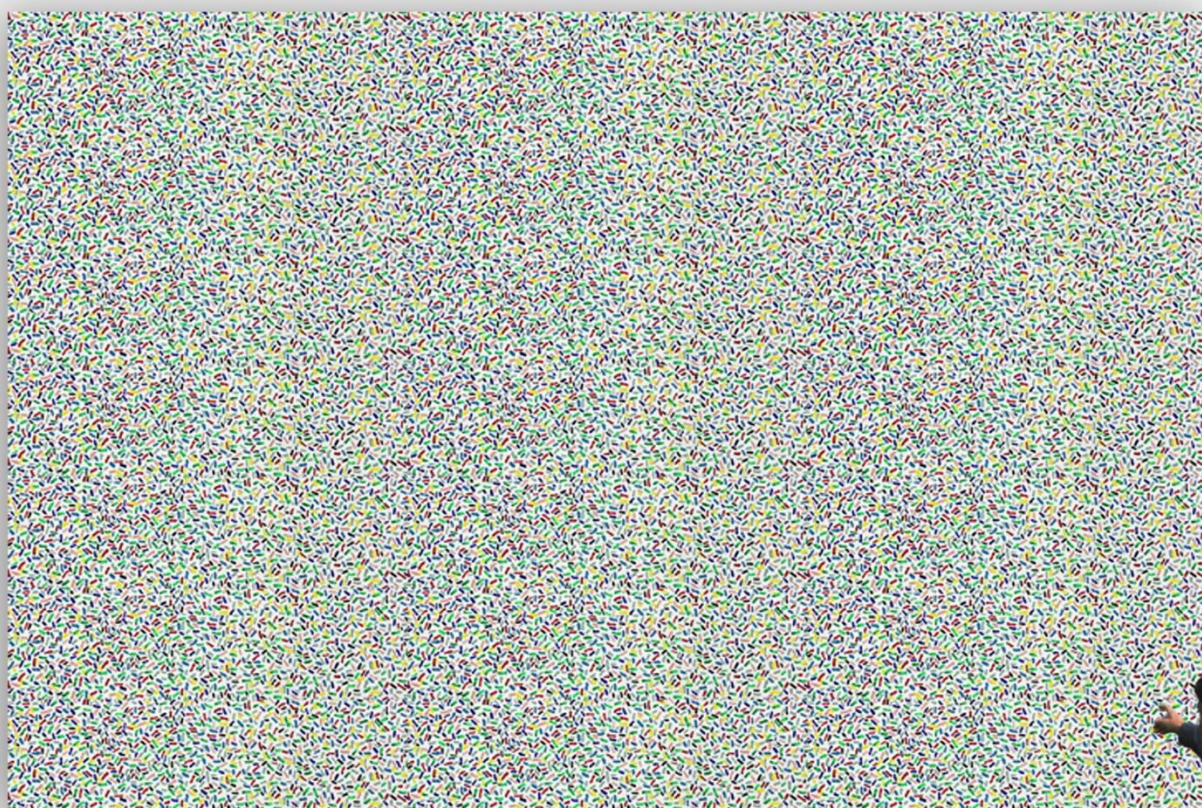
Using a wide range of media and ignoring prevalent art concepts and market pressure, he has presented the younger generation's thoughts on the reality of contemporary China, through the lens of his personal experiences. Despite the artist's stance of never repeating himself, his diverse artistic output is nonetheless united by an attitude that is at once cynical and deferential to the past.

It is this individual spirit that makes Zhao Zhao one of China's most important artists of his generation.





*Mouse droppings no. 14*, 2009, oil on canvas (set of 3), 396 x 200 cm each  
Chambers Fine Art, dslcollection





*On September 29th, 2013 I travelled for about 400 km from Beijing to Jincheng in Shanxi province, where I came across a Sakyamuni Buddha dating back to some 200 years ago, covered with the patina of time. Sitting on a Lotus flower, the Buddha was bowing his head a little, looking down. Holding his right hand next to his body, while putting his left hand on his left knee. The Buddha was about 2m15 tall and 1m81 wide: a set of numbers of destiny.*

*On November 1st, 2013 the Buddha was transported back to Beijing. With the help of seven woodworkers, we used method like sawing, planning and polishing to cut up the Buddha into geometric shapes, similar to LEGO. Then we hired another five workers to reproduce the ancient handicraft method of making gold leaf. We first cut the gold ingot into thin pieces and then place them inside special leaves beating paper. Hence, we hammered the sheets on a bluestone for about thirty*

*thousand times and finally obtained gold leaf. The thickness of the gold leaf is about 0.0003 mm the size of each is 9.3x9.3cm for a total of 45sqm of gold leaf which we used to cover the 'LEGO' pieces. It took another 99 days to finish.*

*All things are born from God. They come in different shapes, some live and some die, only saints can understand.*

*On April 20th, 2014 the all process was completed. The above-mentioned are just a few of the tasks involved in the production of the work, the others are not worth mentioning.*

*- Zhao Zhao, Beijing 2014*





All images courtesy of Platform China and the artist









*How*, 2014, wood and gold leaf, variable dimensions  
Courtesy of Platform China and the artist







*Sky no. 21*, 2013, oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm  
Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art

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*We would also like to credit Dr John Tancock for his essay  
“According to Zhao Zhao: New Works” .*