

REVIEWS

Memorials to Desolation: Zhao Gang at Long March Space, Beijing

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by Jacob Dreyer

In 2020, a year that has sent many of us “back to basics,” Zhao Gang and his artist friend Zhang Hui decided to visit the industrial northeast of their country, stopping by the towns strung along the China Eastern Railway, a 1930s infrastructural ancestor of the high-speed trains that crisscross China today. For Chinese people, the northeast can feel like either an abandoned backyard or a heartland; it is among the regions that have changed the least since 1979—which may explain its allure for Zhao.

The result of this journey, titled *Chinese Eastern Railway*, was presented in Beijing's Long March Space, where Zhao showed dozens of sketches and paintings he made en plein air in the small town of Hengdaohezi. The works belie a desire for authenticity on the part of an artist in the middle of a decades-long career.

Zhao made his debut back in 1979, at age eighteen, in the Stars group exhibition at Beijing's National Art Museum. He was then one of a tight-knit group of artists who found themselves in the capital during the first years of China's reform and opening. The Stars were young artists who, alongside China's Democracy Wall movement, made the first independent exhibition of paintings in China, marking a decisive break from decades of Socialist Realist art confined to government institutions.

In the course of a life as a wanderer, Zhao has been an artist, financier, and free spirit. He left China early in search of the wider world: in 1983 he moved to the West, and didn't come back until 2007. Since his return, he has been building a distinctive hybrid practice of painterly meditation on the Chinese past. It's been an exhausting forty years since the Stars exhibition; the China that came into being back in 1979 has never been more powerful, rich, or tired than it is today. Searching for the structure of everyday life in a small Chinese town by painting it, Zhao sought with *Chinese Eastern Railway* to travel to the origin of modern China—or, put another way, to the origin of his own path.

Cultures in flux tend to nostalgia. Chinese writers in the 1980s described themselves as 寻根, "root-seeking," as they sought to recuperate their heritage after the Cultural Revolution. Sometimes the craving for something real can be desperate. In a society of people and cities that have gotten rich very quickly, many romanticize their working-class origins and the associated lifestyle characterized by simplicity and teamwork. There is a certain movement among art world people who are looking for answers in the countryside. Painter Liu Xiaodong's oil portraits of his hometown, Jincheng, shown in 2010 in *Hometown Boy* at Ullens Center of Contemporary Art, Beijing, depict the same northeastern heartland that Zhao visited. In towns such as Hengdaohezi or Heilongjiang, a nearly abandoned railway junction in Manchuria, a hotel room costs 15 euros a night, the waitress is friendly, and you can spend days exploring with a curiosity that has been absent for decades, painting everything you see.

Manchuria's blankness—it is frozen and covered in snow for months of the year—encourages outside seekers who wish to project their own desires onto it. Back in the colonial 1920s, the Kyoto School of Nishida Kitaro suggested that it was the "pure land" of Zen Buddhism, and Natsume Sōseki rode the China Eastern Railway that Zhao followed, writing a novel about the silent workers he saw.¹ This region, originally colonized by Japanese and Russians, doesn't feel culturally Chinese—perhaps reflecting its status as a former colonial frontier for the Japanese and Russian empires, with architecture and lifestyle habits inherited from that time.

In a video accompanying the Long March Space show, Zhao explains that that's what attracted him; in these Soviet-Mitteleuropean landscapes populated by Chinese faces, he sees his life as a Chinese artist for whom Europe has become also familiar. The first city to be liberated by the People's Liberation Army in 1949 was Harbin, an hour's drive from Hengdaohezi; the local flavor there is decidedly postrevolutionary and popular. Zhao's paintings, and the digital account of his trip the gallery has shared on WeChat, seek to capture the social fabric of post-socialism with the self-consciousness of an outsider.

A bunch of warehouses and a parked motorbike on a dirty road take shape in the painting *Life Painting at Hengdaohezi-4* (2020). While Zhao expresses his wish to reconnect with the hybrid landscapes of northern China, his references seem closer to European modernist painting than to the propaganda posters and films that locals grew up with. In his sincere paintings, a longing that many of us have been feeling—to abandon the cities, even if they're what made us, to search for some simpler way of life, and of making art, enthusiastically, painting for weeks on end all by ourselves—becomes graspable.

[1] Natsume Sōseki, "Travels in Manchuria and Korea," in *Rediscovering Natsume Sōseki*, ed. Inger Sigrun Brodey and Sammy I. Tsunematsu (Folkestone, UK: Global Books, 2000).

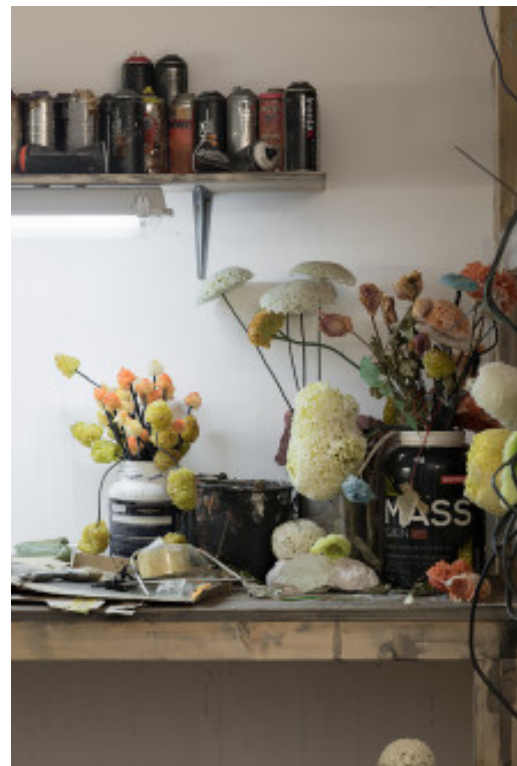
Zhao Gang (b. 1961, Beijing) lives and works in New York and Beijing. He made his artistic debut in 1979 as a member of the Stars, one of the first avant-garde artist groups to inaugurate the era of contemporary art in China. Shortly thereafter he pursued formal art education in Europe and then New York. Since returning to Beijing in 2006, he has turned his ever-expanding focus toward the entanglement of his personal past with Chinese history. Selected solo exhibitions include *21st: Supports / ColorLumps as Anthropography of History*, Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei (2020); *History Painting*, Pérez Art Museum, Miami (2019); *Acquiring Identity*, Long March Space, Beijing (2018); *The Road to Serfdom II*, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Santiago, Spain (2016); *Paramour's Garden*, Suzhou Museum, China (2015); *The Road to Serfdom*, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2015); and *Sick Man*, Today Art Museum, Beijing (2011).

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