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Double Estrangement: Zhao Gang's Memories of China

A mix of unashamed nudes and demure portraits, Zhao Gang's paintings take in 21st-century China with feigned crudeness and humour

BY MATTHEW SHEN GOODMAN

Visiting last year's 'Art and China After 1989', the Guggenheim Museum's attempt to take in three decades of China's recent past, it was easy to feel overwhelmed. (In spite of the twin absences of Huang Yong Ping's emptied *Theater of the World* (1993) and Sun Yuan & Peng Yu's *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* (2003), frozen on its title frame, both works having met with protest from animal rights activists in their original forms.) Viewers understood that they were observing documents of artistic ferment unique to the post-Tiananmen transformation from socialism with Chinese characteristics to whatever mongrel politico-economic

model holds forth today. Because of that monumental historical scope, however, a more comprehensive understanding of what we were looking at could feel out of reach.



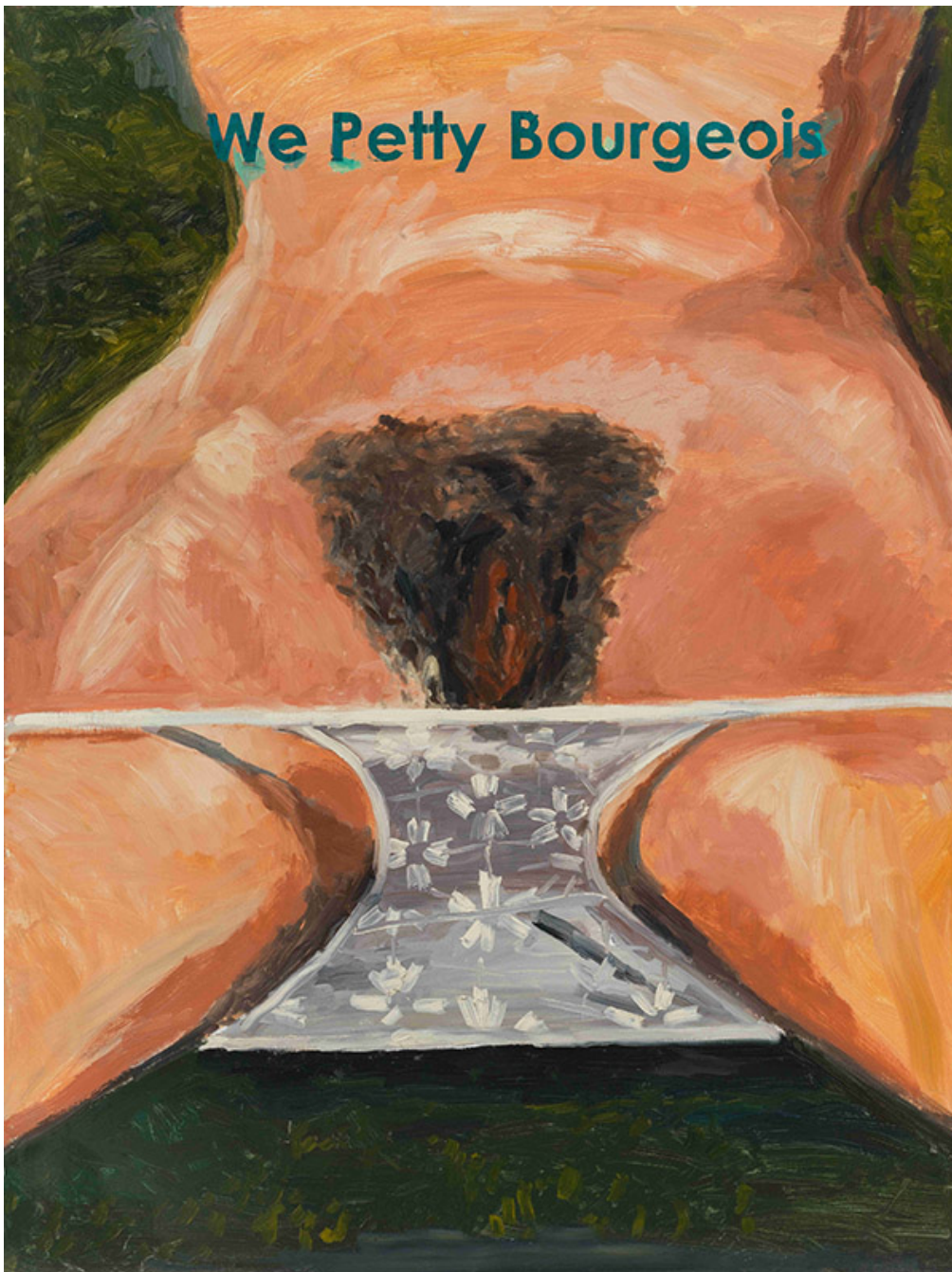
Zhao Gang, *The Central Academy of Fine Arts Model*, 2014–17, oil on board, 1.5 x 1.3 m. Courtesy: the artist and Long March Space, Beijing

To confess a New Yorker's provincialism: there was a certain solace in seeing artist Zhao Gang's video *Harlem Socialism – Real Talk* (2002). Zhao's contribution from afar to curator Liu Jie's Long March project – which staged various exhibitions and performances along the route of Red Army's military retreat in 2002 – the video shows two dinner-meetings of the 'Harlem School of Social Realism', a sort of cross-cultural consciousness-raising circle grouping together a number of art-world figures – including the black painters Deborah Grant and Jeff Sonhouse, curators Franklin Sirmans and Lilly Wei, and Gang himself. Sitting around Gang's Harlem kitchen, they discuss theories of pigmentocracy, the Chinese Revolution as inspiration for the Black Panthers and professional trajectories post-MFA. Zhao mentions Theodor Adorno and is waved away by a graffiti artist preferring to talk Mao Zedong. With the work of artists like BUFU and against flashpoints like the trial of former NYPD officer Peter Liang, and Asian American, who, in 2014, killed the 28-year-old black man Akai Gurley, there seems to be current moment of reckoning with the possibilities of Afro-Asian political solidarity. *Harlem Socialism* provides an endlessly fascinating reminder of previous attempts, their strengths and shortcomings. (The video ends with someone reading a passage from Robin D.G. Kelley's 2002 essay "'Roaring From The East": Third World Dreaming', detailing the opportunistic and intermittent support China provided African freedom struggles.)



Zhao Gang, *Cocksucker Blues*, 2014–15, oil on canvas, 4 x 6 m. Courtesy: the artist and Long March Space, Beijing

With its focus on black discourse (and black faces), *Harlem Socialism* already felt like a strange, if welcome, outlier to the show, which made me wonder whether Zhao would have been included at all if not for the Long March project. He could have been on the basis of a sort of premature historical pertinence. Primarily a painter, with a new exhibition opening this month at Long March's current commercial apotheosis as Beijing gallery, Zhao was a teenage member of the famed avant-garde Stars group. Their 1979 group exhibition, and the protests that followed, are often cast as contemporary Chinese art's radical break with state-sanctioned ideological and aesthetic strictures by Western commentators hungering for any signs of Democracy™ and particularly enamored with group member Ai Wei Wei. Gang, however, quickly left Beijing's avant-garde scene in 1983, just before the onset of that year's Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, which sought to quell any possible outgrowths of Western liberalism. He went abroad to attend art school in Maastricht and from there to New York, where he became an undergraduate at Vassar. His work progressed from his teenage modernist cityscapes, inspired by Qingdao's German colonial architecture, to full-blown abstractions ranging from canvas deconstructions – a void here, a frame revealed there – to hazinesses approaching something like a landscape. Leaving Vassar and bouncing around Europe, with a brief and depressing return to Beijing in 1988, Zhao found himself to be a 'just good commercial painter' (as quoted in the catalogue to his 2015 retrospective at Beijing's UCCA). He left the art world to be a banker – a move he's since recast, somewhat snarkily, as a work of performance art. Following his seven-year stint on Wall Street, Zhao used a most American of means to rejoin the art world: completing an MFA in 1999 at Bard College in New York state, where he began to paint his memories, increasingly distant, of his home country. In one series, Song dynasty houses float unmoored on the canvas, half-detailed as if barely recalled.



Zhao Gang, *We Petty Bourgeois*, 2011, oil on canvas, 120 x 90 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and Long March Space, Beijing

Zhao returned to Beijing in 2003, following the end of a relationship that made New York untenable. Both native and newcomer, his painting took on a feigned crudeness whose humour belied a critical eye taking in 21st-century China. A series of large-scale nudes (2010–ongoing), for example, features Northern Chinese women, their bodies swollen from debilitating working conditions; shroud-like paintings of modern-day descendants of the Khitan people, an ethnic group that both aggressively invaded China’s central plains and were eventually integrated into the nation-state, bring to mind today’s drive towards Hanification pursued by China in its outer regions (*‘The Khitans,’* 2012). At times, it seems Zhao is warning himself, especially in his series of portraits of Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth movement (*‘Intellectuals,’* 2014–15). Having returned home with patriotic intent after studying abroad, only to face the vicissitudes of the Cultural Revolution, the various men crowd their faces towards the viewer in a mess of reddish clay tones, their bodies sometimes left blank, a brown blur underneath an optimistically blue sky.



Zhao Gang, *Map of China*, 2015, oil on canvas, 1.2 x 1.5 m. Courtesy: the artist and Long March Space, Beijing

Ahead of the Long March show, entitled 'Acquiring Identity', I met with Gang in his Taipei apartment, which has recently served as his studio and an idyll away from Beijing. He seemed, in the third space of Taiwan, to have made peace with his being doubly estranged. As he chain-smoked Cubans and made pasta, he amusedly recounted the interminable process of trying to preempt the Chinese government censor's ban while finalizing the checklist. ('They're smart now,' he said. 'You went to Yale? They did too.') 'Acquiring Identity' features twinned spatial interventions evoking his dual homes: paintings are hung in both Timezone8 – an expat bookstore and cafe haunted by Zhao as a means of recouping some sense of New York – and an apartment-installation in the gallery itself, which recalls the Beijing practice of showing art in public residential complex apartments that sustained the city's experimental scene in the 1980s and '90s.



Zhao Gang, *Apple of Minnan*, 2017–18, oil on canvas, 1.2 x 1.5 m. Courtesy: the artist and Long March Space

The paintings themselves are an odd mix: a woman sitting demurely in a qipao, her face covered by a burst of white flowers; a few nudes barred from a Chinese art fair (not for nudity, but for ugliness, according to Zhao); an ennobled bust of Stalin, marred by a streak of black and surrounded by rough-hewn figures. Zhao seems to be taking a perverse pleasure in throwing around the label Minnan, referring to the southern Chinese region where many pre-Kuomintang-rule Taiwanese Chinese can trace their origins. Two rhinos copulate under the celestial bodies in *The Starry Night in Minnan* (2018); *Smooth Criminal*-era Michael Jackson is *Singer Star of Minnan* (2018). Hiroshima's Fat Man bomb sits on a scaffold: a *Minnan Lemon* (2018). Minnan becoming more placeholder than place, Zhao's evacuating the region's name of any cohesive meaning reflects perhaps his own capitulation to the overwhelming scope of the histories he's both lived in the West and tried to make sense of after the fact in China. To again confess a New Yorker's provincialism: Zhao's lightly cursed cosmopolitanism (how bad can you feel for a successful banker with a painting career, or its inverse?) reminded me of the aggravated rootlessness common to most who have spent prolonged time in that city. We share Zhao's doubled estrangement, both unable to live there and angry at living anywhere else, simultaneously indulgent and disdainful of nostalgia and its objects.

Main image: Zhao Gang, *The Women in the Bamboo Forest*, 2012, oil on canvas, 1 x 1 m. Courtesy: the artist Long March Space, Beijing