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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.



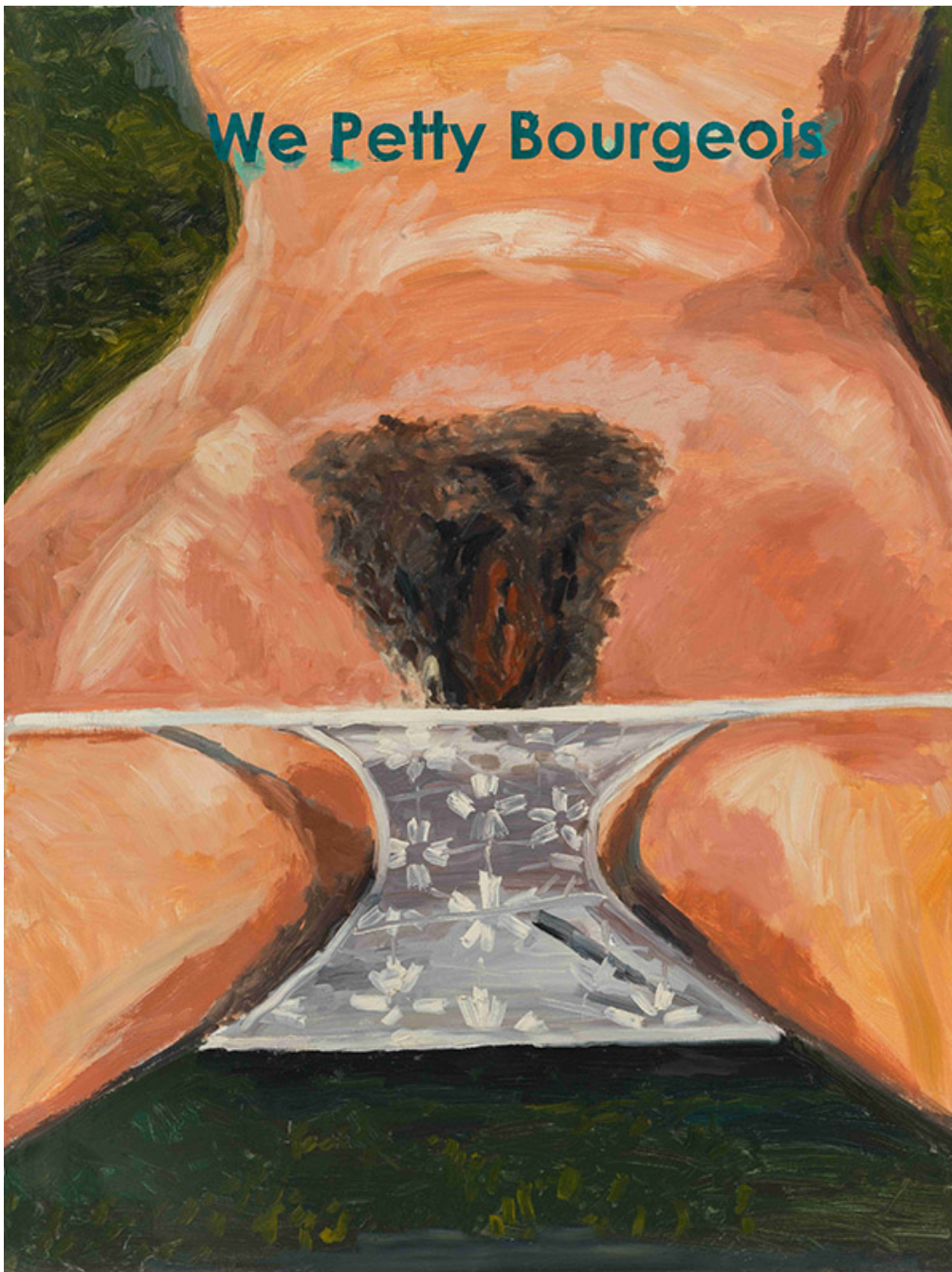
Zhao Gang, *The Central Academy of Fine Arts Model*, 2014-17, oil on board, 1.5 x 1.3 m. Courtesy: the artist and Long March Space, Beijing

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.)



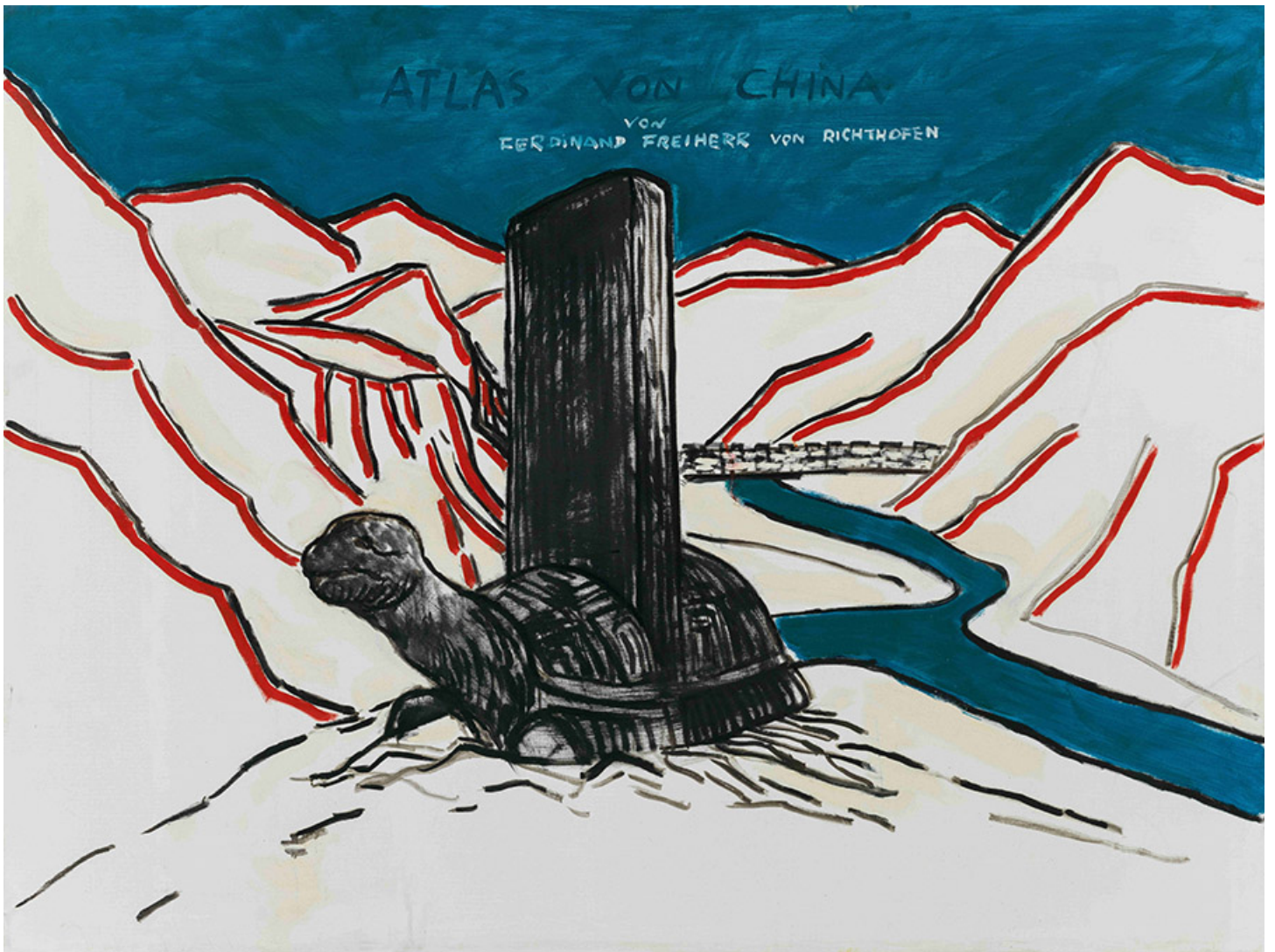
Zhao Gang, *Cocksucker Blues*, 2014–15, oil on canvas, 4 x 6 m. Courtesy: the artist and Long March Space, Beijing

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

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雙重隔閡：趙剛的中國記憶

結合了奔放裸體與保守人像，趙剛以偽粗獷與幽默的回應 21 世紀的中國。

文 / Matthew Shen Goodman, Frieze.com

參觀去年古根漢美術館試圖詮釋中國近 30 年來近況的展覽「Art and China After 1989」時，很容易令人感到壓迫（儘管黃永砅的 *Theater of the World*（1993）、孫原和彭禹的 *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other*（2003）皆因動物權利的抗爭而雙雙缺席）。觀眾能理解到他們正在觀看一場後天安門轉型的藝術紀錄：從具中國特色的社會主義到一個混雜政治經濟體。但也由於這段歷史的涵括層面巨大，即使人們可以看到的內容越多，卻也更難全面理解。

當承認紐約人的地方主義時，藝術家趙剛的錄像作品 *Harlem Socialism—Real Talk*（2002）或許能給予些許的安慰。2002 年，趙剛在策展人盧杰的長征計畫—沿紅軍撤退路線所舉辦的一系列展覽與表演—中做出了貢獻。其中，趙剛的錄像展示了兩次由多元文化意識覺醒之藝術人士所組成的「Harlem School of Social Realism」晚宴，包含了非裔藝術家 Deborah Grant 與 Jeff Sonhouse、策展人 Franklin Sirmans 與 Lilly Wei 及趙剛本人。圍繞在趙剛位於哈林區的廚房，這個聚會討論著膚色政治理論、受中國革命影響的黑豹黨與藝術創作碩士畢業後的職涯發展。當趙剛提到了 Theodor Adorno 時，一位好談毛澤東的塗鴉藝術家向他揮了揮手。隨著提及 BUFU 等藝術家，以及因 2014 年，前紐約市警察局的亞裔美籍警官 Peter Liang 槍殺 28 歲非裔美國人 Akai Gurley 所引起的導火線時，非裔與亞裔似乎在某一個時刻在政治上團結。錄像 *Harlem Socialism* 對於過往嘗試及他們的優、劣勢提供了一種無盡又迷人的提醒（錄像結束於某人朗讀 Robin D.G. Kelley 於 2002 年所著的文章「《Roaring From The East》：Third World Dreaming」，其中詳細描述了中國對於非洲自由鬥爭投機又間斷的支持）。

由於專注於黑人議題（與黑人的臉孔），錄像 *Harlem Socialism* 在展覽中更像是一個陌生詭異的局外人。這不禁讓我懷疑，若不是這次的長征計畫，趙剛是否會被包括在內，他可能是以一種過早的歷史關聯為基礎。作為一位本月在可謂商業典範的長征北京藝廊舉辦新展的畫家，趙剛曾是前衛明星團體中的一位年輕成員。他們於 1979 年的聯展與隨後的抗爭活動，經常被追尋民主標誌的西方評論家視為中國當代藝術與國家意識形態及美學限制的激烈抗爭。他們尤其偏愛同為成員之一的艾未未。不過，就在意圖平息西方自由主義的「清除精神污染」運動開始之前，趙剛於 1983 年離開了北京的前衛藝術圈。他先是到了馬斯垂克就讀藝術學校，再到紐約的瓦薩學院就讀大學部。這時，他的作品始於少年時期的現代城市景觀，且受到青島的德國殖民建築啟發。他利用爆炸性的抽象與畫布的解構暴露框架與虛無，並呈現出了類似風景的朦朧。在離開瓦薩並流連歐洲期間，他於 1988 年短暫且沮喪地回到了北京。趙剛發現他被定位成了「只是一個不錯的商業畫家」（節錄自北京尤倫斯當代藝術中心於 2015 年為他所舉辦的回顧展畫冊）。他離開了藝術界並成為了一名銀行家，並諷刺地將此重塑之舉視為一種藝術行為。在華爾街工作了 7 年之後，趙剛透過一種最美國的方法重返藝術界：於 1999 年取得紐約州巴德學院的藝術創作碩士學位。在那裡，他開始畫出他對於家鄉的遙遠記憶。在其中的一個系列中，宋代的房屋在畫布上載浮載沉，細節似有似無，如同回憶無法重現。

趙剛於 2003 年回到了北京，與紐約的關係也不再穩固。既是本地人又是新來者，他的繪畫呈現出了虛偽的粗糙，而其幽默被視為一種對於 21 世紀中國的批判眼光。一系列的大型裸體畫（2010 至今），例如因惡劣工作環境而導致身體腫脹的中國北方女性、看似耶穌裹屍布影像的現代契丹人後代畫像——一個曾積極侵略中土卻最終融入中國的民族，讓人聯想起中國現在邊疆地區所推廣的漢化政策（「契丹人」，

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2012)。有時，趙剛似乎是在警告著自己，尤其是他所繪的五四運動知識份子肖像（「知識份子」，2014—15）。這些人在外留學之後抱持著愛國心回國，卻只能面對文化大革命的滄桑。這些男人們的臉呈現給觀眾的是一團雜亂的紅土色，而身體有時留白，在樂觀的藍空下模糊的棕色調。

在長征空間的展覽「購買的身份」之前，我與趙剛在台北見了面。他那遠離北京的台北公寓最近剛成為了工作室。在台灣這樣的第三地，他似乎已經與雙重隔閡和談。抽著雪茄，做著義大利麵，他打趣地敘述了那完成作品清單時，試圖阻止中國政府審查禁令的無盡過程（「他們現在很聰明，」他說。「你畢業於耶魯對吧？他們也是。」）。「購買的身份」呈現了對於孿生空間的干預，並喚起他的雙重家園：畫作被掛置於 Timezone8——一家被趙剛佔據並試圖拾回紐約感的外籍書店兼咖啡店——與在畫廊本身空間公寓裝置，重現了北京 80 與 90 年代在公共複合住宅中實驗性展示藝術品的面貌。

這些畫作本身就是怪奇的混合體：穿著旗袍、被白花遮住臉的雅靜女人；一些被中國藝術博覽會禁展的裸體畫作（非關裸體，而是因為醜陋）；崇高的史達林被一道黑條紋破壞，並被一群粗糙人們包圍。影射前國民黨統治下的台灣中國人追溯其中國南方的起源地時，趙剛似乎在試圖甩開閩南標籤的過程中得到了一種不正當樂趣。在閩南星夜（2018）中，兩隻犀牛在星空下交配；歌曲罪犯高手時期的麥可傑克森成為了閩南歌星（2018）。投放到廣島，代號「胖子」的原子彈在閩南檸檬（2018）中成為了支架上的一顆檸檬。比起為一個地名，閩南更成為了佔位符。趙剛將地名的凝聚力含義撇離的這個動作，或許反映出了他對於西方生活與認清中國現實後的壓倒性投降。再一次地承認紐約人的地方主義：趙剛輕率地咒罵世界主義（對於一個有著畫家生涯的成功的銀行家，你會覺得有多糟呢？或是相反？）讓我想起了在那座城市中生活甚久，卻也相同更加無根的人們。無法生活在這裡，也只能氣憤地生活在其他任何地方，我們分享趙剛的雙重隔閡，也同時以放縱且鄙視的態度來看待鄉思事物。