

Art and Iconography 7th Street 6-01-19 Oak Street 5-25-19 Hartford 6-15-19

Last year in Boise, I encountered a Buddha as a monk with gas mask in a bar. In medieval times, western saints were pictured being martyred or in devotional trances. In addition to scenes of devotion and transcendence monks and martyrs are shown as tortured, starved or attacked by others,. In our times, we have the spectacle of attacking ourselves through ecological debasement, and defending ourselves with guns and gas masks. Hi tech and primitive: all of it doomed.

Art can show us what words cannot. Music can bring us to places that no serman can touch. Creation can stop the world: whether it is the maker or the receiver. A vision can inspire long after we have left the building or lost the person.

Leonardo da Vinci developed his craft in religious art production studios. The reason his name is known today, out of many thousands who struggled there, was his intense devotion to discover and record the realities all around him. His tireless investigation of the details of bird flight, light, anatomy, color, perspective and posture allowed him to render the most astonishing personalities and perspectives in all of western art. His ability to embody and enliven his subjects with emotion and vitality through the minutiae of physical tension, gesture, attention, and subtle aspects of vision: to reveal states of mind and emotion are almost without equal. Only Rembrandt comes to mind as someone who approaches that level of mastery: to create and illuminate nuances of emotion and character through draftsmanship and acute perceptive ability: to see and appreciate the true conditions of his subjects, including himself.

There is a [series of self portraits which reveals Rembrandt](#) as a youth, and as he gathered and extended himself as an artist and developed resounding social success in a world overgrown with artistic energy, attention and development. What is noteworthy to me is the progression shown as he advances in capacity and also experiences the demands and the insults of age in a number of his late self portraits. These works do not reveal a man who is growing in wisdom and acceptance. His suffering and the uncertainty of age are very well developed and in full view in his latter work.

I recently encountered a Chinese artist: **Wanxin Zhang**, who has developed a wide & respected body of work in the US. He survived the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution when he was young, growing up in China.

Starting out in an era when the artistic energy of the country was exclusively devoted to exalting the revolution: with endless renditions of Mao and the idealization of a beneficent state. He witnessed the widespread destruction of China's cultural and religious treasures. Monasteries, shrines, museums and educational institutions were under attack and much was lost or destroyed. Millions died of displacement or starvation.

After more than 30 years in the US, his work includes references to many of China's historic and cultural treasures: Buddhist Iconography and most dramatically: the **Terracotta Warriors**. History notes that over 700,000 artisans were buried alive, along with their creation, to keep the location secret, over 2200

years ago. The Emperor Qin committed mass murder to glorify himself, much as had Mao had done in his own time.

Three years after the Tiananmen Square protests were violently suppressed, Zhang flew to California in 1991. He enrolled at the SF Art Institute, the first American institution that offered him an opening.

Zhang worked with various clay masters both in school and in private studios, influenced by Robert Arneson and Peter Voulkos. In 1998, 15 years after visiting the original site, Zhang began the creation of his own warriors. Although the original work had variations according to rank, costume and facial differences, he wanted his soldiers to have individual personalities and features: hence the creation of identities such as poet, drillmaster, philosopher and skateboarder, and rooster warrior. His figures include traditional topknots and the stoic battle stance of the originals, some with spectacles and skateboards: expressing new ways to see the world more clearly and individually.

Sunglasses convey discernment, as well as the modern era. These frames reflect our ability to see past the passions and dogmatics of the present, as well as keep up with high fashion. For Buddhism, it means insight, which we understand as cultivated through sitting practice.

In Buddhism, we come to appreciate that it is impossible to understand someone without developing empathy and compassion for them. Without sympathy, we are seeing only the reflection of our own projections. **The key to noticing projections and stereotypes is to notice their repetitive nature.** When we keep repeating the same story about a person or worse yet, a group, we are being driven by our greed, hate and delusion. Sitting helps to reveal these obsessions, and allow us to note their cost, as well as give hints on how we might have the courage and ability to move past and through them.

Zhang's figures include many references to traditional religious iconography. Seated monks, many-armed bodhisattvas, sages in bondage, all expressing the timeless challenges of the human condition, resonant with the tensions between East and West. Themes of diversity, liberty and the challenges of environmental destruction, as well as cultural change and loss through ideological perversion, economic revolutions and the winds and floods of market forces. In China we see the destruction of ancient neighborhoods and the creation of modern cities. Cultural loss or dissolution through poverty, the market or mass migration. Environmental destruction and human and non human exploitation. This mirrors our situation in much of the US: wealth and poverty, grandeur & grief.

Zhang is intuiting, remembering and embodying what he is immersed in and has experienced by bridging East/West, as well as multiple eras in his own lifetime. He starts in the time of the great leap forward, with its destructive policies, mass suffering and dislocation. He is now, and for the past 30 years, a member of the world art community and a resident of San Francisco. His work includes traditional forms and incorporates modern gestures and themes. A terracotta warrior on a skateboard, a man in traditional costume and his daughter, with her Mickey Mouse hat, looking out from a snuggly,. A Pieta in rough clay with a smooth porcelain glaze in white and China blue shadows and accents.

Bricks referencing the Great Wall are individual, with decals, graffiti and engrossing articulating detail. Now as American, deference is paid to American issues of race, discrimination and betrayal.

There is a very interesting and lengthy interview with **Gerhard Richter**, a first order German painter whose works, starting out as photographer in East Germany, are some of the most intriguing investigations of how we come to recognize our own complete selves: how we reconcile our humanity and our in-humanity. His relationship with his work sounds like a relentless investigation and Buddhist practice of **what is this?**

I will quote some of his responses or statements from an extended interview.

After the war, the atmosphere was of collective shame and the compulsion & desire to repress or forget. By picturing WWII aircraft, including German fighters, Richter was making a very unusual (for that time) statement. The work was photographic and seemed to be neutral... When the work was taken as a joke, he was relieved. It would have been embarrassing if it was too serious.

This work was not an accusation: *I never wanted to accuse anyone: except life and how shitty it was.* After all, they were right: Everything was fine (laughs). The common response was “not to take anything too seriously” That was important for survival. Asked about painting warplanes, he said: *I never knew what I was doing. I did not want to be part of the faction that accuses. Nor do I belong with those who present themselves as anti fascist.*

I depend on the photo and mindlessly copy what I see. I am not a virtuoso; but I do have the ability to judge whether something is good or bad. I am *disinclined to be conscious of too many things.* I just wanted to let myself go. It’s still the same today. *At the time I do something, I really don’t know what I am doing. Later on I understand.*

Nothing is unpaintable. But what is unpaintable for me is something which I know would go wrong. I don’t know how I choose what to focus on. People have said that Richter is all about light. I never knew what they were talking about. I was never interested in light.

You have said that you have many tools at your disposal, but elimination is perhaps the most important. I believe that the task of the artist is to concentrate on what is essential.

Warhol legitimized the mechanical.

I often have the feeling that what I have done is destructive--borne out of the need and inability to construct. I feel very close to the idea of seeing pain and loss in the work.

I never wanted to capture and hold reality in a painting. That was never my intention. But I wanted to paint the appearance of reality. **Talking about painting from photos: It was my wish to be neutral. I saw it as an opportunity: the opposite of ideology. The notion of neutrality or objectivity is an illusion, of course.. My work is not about purity, but rather the greatest possible purity.**

The classical is what holds me together. It is the order I do not have to attack.

John Cage is a really classical artist, so scrupulous in the way he holds things together.

He does so little, and makes it beautiful. **Cage once said: I have nothing to say, and I am saying it.**

The equivalent of: I know that I don’t know anything.

Richter: I do not have a theme or a framework. I work more by intuition: from accident to accident.

People are always upset when confronted with something traditional and conservative: saying it's over or reactionary. The absence of the father. It references a loss. It takes account of the fact that we have lost something. It asks the question of whether we need to do something or not. It is not about the establishment of something.

Bruce Nauman made a neon sign: *The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths:* and put it into his studio window like a beer sign.

My struggles were considerable in the 60s. Later on I realized that these crises were not something to get so agitated about, but rather were the normal way of working.

In abstract work, **you try to "avoid" something that resembles a table or other things.** If it does, then **all you can see is the object.** We cannot actually look at painting any other way. We only find paintings interesting because **we always search for something that looks familiar to us.**

We are always looking for familiar patterns, but **whether the artist encourages or discourages this tendency is a huge issue for abstract painting. A painting can help us to think about something which goes beyond this senseless existence.** The 1960s were nothing real, only dreams, strawberry fields.

It is impossible to exist without idealism. I imagined I was one of the few who could live without it, only to discover that I was full of illusions, even when I was against it: I believed in my opposition.

My opposition was primarily to the terrorists, but also by the art world that was possessed by big beliefs: I could never participate in that.

Government was the lesser evil because they were merely gangsters: who are always around in any period. But those who are full of beliefs, they were dangerous.

I would like to be understood as a guardian or keeper of tradition, rather than any other misunderstanding.

An aesthetic tradition, philosophic or moral tradition?

WHATEVER I CAN GET...laughter....