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Xu Zhen's Brand of Armory Show

by Richard Vine



Installation view, "Xu Zhen: A MadeIn Company Production,"
Ullens Center for Contemporary Art,
Beijing.



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Xu Zhen, the wily Shanghai-based artist commissioned to spearhead this year's China Focus at the Armory Show in New York (Mar. 6-9) and to design the graphic identity for the fair, seems at first blush like a highly unlikely choice. After graduating in 1996 from the Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts (a technical school, not a fine art academy), Xu Zhen began his career with acts of artistic provocation verging on outrage and has since largely dedicated himself to satirizing all things commercial and corporate.

This is the second year in a row that the Armory Show has, in effect, sponsored its own critique. In 2013, performance artist Liz Magic Laser was tapped to produce invitations, VIP cards, signage, tote bags and T-shirts for the event. She responded, tongue in cheek, by setting up a series of six art-world focus groups that resulted in such items as T-shirts bearing age and income demographics on fair attendees. One can only wonder what surprises await the global gathering of dealers, collectors and other art cognoscenti this year.

Among Xu Zhen's early works are the videos *I'm Not Asking for Anything* (1998), a record of the artist thrashing a room with a dead cat; *Shouting* (1998), which captures the reaction of urban crowds when Xu Zhen suddenly screams from behind the camera; *Inside the Body* (1999), showing two young people obsessively sniffing each other's bodies; and *We Are Right Back* (2000), a neck-down study of a couple digging random items—cigarettes, cosmetics, a lighter—out of the crotches of their partner's pants.

At the 2004 Shanghai Biennale, Xu Zhen sped up the timepiece on the Shanghai Art Museum's famous clock tower to suggest the breakneck pace of change in contemporary China. Rumors that he also planned to drop a cat from the top of the spire to see if the creature really would land on its feet (another metaphor for Chinese culture under duress) went unconfirmed. But in 2008 he did not hesitate to replicate photojournalist Kevin Carter's notorious image of a starving African child watched over by a vulture. Xu Zhen's live installation at Beijing's Long March Space, featuring a real African toddler and a mechanical buzzard, was compulsively photographed by visitors.

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More recent works include a black-and-white swastika carpet, electronic devices that operate exercise machines without any sweaty effort, and paintings reproducing the glare of tourist camera flashes on European masterpieces. Xu Zhen's latest major installation comprises copies of standing Buddhist figures and Hellenistic statues joined vertically (and headlessly) neck-to-neck—his comment on today's ubiquitous and, it seems, too often mindless melding of Eastern and Western traditions.

But the most distinctive aspect of Xu Zhen's oeuvre is his long-running parody of corporate identity and the business ethos. In 1998, he cofounded BizArt, a "bizarre" Shanghai nonprofit that sold work in order to support nonmarketable art projects. It immediately became a center for alternative exhibitions and events, while maintaining, in its press materials and daily operations, a wry commercial gloss. Xu Zhen's contribution to the 2007 Art Basel Miami Beach fair, presented under the auspices of ShanghART Gallery, was a fully stocked and operating convenience store—one in which the artworks, consisting of authentic but empty bottles and packages, could be purchased for the price of the missing product.

This subtle mockery of Western consumerism and the global art market grew more complex in 2009, when Xu Zhen launched the art-creation enterprise MadeIn Company. With Xu Zhen as CEO, a half-dozen lesser-known artists as a salaried creative team and an elastic workforce of assistants on hourly wages, the firm is clearly a double jibe. The approach pokes fun not only at the worldwide commodification of contemporary art but also at the specifically Chinese tendency to, in effect, industrialize art-making.

From the start of China's great Opening Up in the 1980s, the emerging avant-garde displayed a deeply ambivalent attitude toward Western consumerism—embracing it for its material abundance and freedom of choice, while resenting it for its obliteration of traditional Chinese life. This did not, however, keep many Chinese artists from taking a cue from the art-factory methods of Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. Before long, artists like Zhang Xiaogang, Wang Guangyi, Yue Minjun, Sui Jianguo, Qi Zhilong, Feng Zhengjie, Zhang Huan and Ai Weiwei were outstripping the Renaissance workshop model (as well as that of the old imperial Chinese artisanal corps) to produce endless

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variations on a single motif or a dazzling variety—and stupendous quantity—of work that was, in some instances, executed by large teams of unnamed assistants.

The idea of the modified copy (think of a musical theme-and-variations produced by one artist and by generations of emulators) is deeply engrained in Chinese culture, based on a distinctly non-Western view of originality—one that treats it as a secondary artistic virtue, well below spiritual cultivation, technical knowledge and manual finesse. Melded to this, under the economically reformist Deng Xiaoping, was China's newfound sense of urgency—a drive to catch up and even to triumph, both at home and abroad. (The Four Modernizations were to take place in agriculture, industry, defense and technology; avant-garde artists took it upon themselves to add culture to the mix.) After all, it was, as British journalist Martin Jacques has persuasively argued in his book *When China Rules the World* (2012), China's failure to industrialize aggressively in the 19th century that left it impoverished and vulnerable to foreign incursions, precipitating the Century of Humiliations.

In time, though, growing appreciation for the law of supply and demand, along with the lure of brand-name control and aspirational marketing, prompted some of China's top artists—many of whom had long eschewed formal gallery representation—to begin limiting their output and strategizing their placement of works as exactly as veteran dealers would (and, in such venues as Pace Beijing, adamantly do) insist. Hence, Xu Zhen's new tactic: the Xu Zhen brand, launched amid China's boundless mania for prestige logos and luxury goods.

"Xu Zhen: A MadeIn Company Production," on view at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, through Apr. 20, is the artist's savvy repackaging of himself via a midcareer retrospective that encompasses more than 100 installations, paintings, collages, photographs, videos and performances. The early works (though often made collaboratively) are attributed to Xu Zhen alone, those made between 2009 and 2013 to the corporate entity MadeIn and the most recent to the firm's new "Xu Zhen" product line.

Does this self-reflexive ploy mean that MadeIn Company will now generate less controversial work than, for example, "Seeing One's Own Eyes" (2009)? In that group

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show of fictive Middle Eastern artists, the MadeIn crew protested the West's stereotyping of Chinese culture by themselves presenting stereotypes of Arab culture—burqas, cutout camels, potted date palms and paintings of bombs. Will the new "Xu Zhen" offerings turn out to be gentlemanly and high-end market friendly? Only time and perhaps Xu Zhen's designs (in both senses of the word) for the impending Armory Show will truly tell.

A hint is to be found at the Ullens Center, though, in the form of what a studio representative described to *A.i.A.* as an Armory preview piece, *Action of Consciousness* (2011), consisting of a room-size box, 11 feet square and nearly 8 feet high, with an open top. From time to time, energetically heaved items—a fake Classical pillar, stuffed toys, a sailing ship model—pop out of the container and fall back in. The surprises, meant to be hard to identify, recall both the jack-in-the-box spontaneity of artistic creation and the art market's insatiable craving for novelty.

But *Action of Consciousness* also brings to mind the arrangement of Plato's cave, where people bearing various objects on their heads passed along a wall, mesmerizing the chained cave-dwellers with huge, distorted shadows of their freight. Only an escapee, fleeing outside into the sunlight of pure reason, could truly perceive the physical objects and their illusions, and thus know the world for what it really is. Will Xu Zhen play that heroic role on the Armory piers, or will he simply—with perverse delight—cast a few more shadows on the global art market's cavernous walls?