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Where Minimalist Meets Showy
Zhang Huan and Virginia Overton Contrast at Storm King
By Ken Johnson
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Zhang Huan's "Three Legged Buddha," part of his exhibition "Evoking Tradition" at Storm King Art Center in New Windsor, N.Y. Credit Damon Winter/The New York Times

MOUNTAINVILLE, N.Y. — Sculptures by the two artists featured here in temporary [presentations at Storm King Art Center](#) this year couldn't be less alike. A single Minimalist piece by the New York sculptor Virginia Overton is gracefully fitted to the landscape of gently rolling hills. Six monumental, figurative sculptures by Zhang Huan of Shanghai are ponderously theatrical.

Ms. Overton's [untitled piece](#) is a straight, nearly 500-foot length of brass tubing about four inches in diameter elevated four feet above the ground by thin rods. From a valley between low hills, it follows an upward slope to its peak and then disappears over the other side. The brass has darkened to brown, but it still has a shiny surface, which, when seen from a certain angle, makes a bright reflective line above the grassy field. In a happy accident, birds like to perch on the tube. Walking along beside it, you see that it's rhythmically striped on both sides by the gray-and-white streaks of avian droppings, creating a kind of natural Abstract Expressionist drip painting.



Anna Gorovoy, visiting from Brooklyn, puts her ear to the opening of an untitled piece in “Outlooks” by Virginia Overton. The sculpture allows for conversation through nearly 500 feet in brass tubing. Credit Damon Winter/The New York Times

Another surprising dimension — this one intended by Ms. Overton — is aural. If you and a partner station yourselves at either end of the tube and speak into it, you can clearly hear each other.

In some ways, Ms. Overton’s sculpture is a throwback to the early 1970s, when avant-gardists like [Robert Smithson](#), [Nancy Holt](#) and [Walter De Maria](#) created large-scale works embedded in remote, undeveloped locales. They produced a kind of pragmatic transcendentalism as their creations involved visitors in heightened experiences of nature and perceptual consciousness. Born in Tennessee in 1971, Ms. Overton is of a later generation, and her work could be construed as a hyper-sophisticated instance of postmodern academicism. But here at Storm King, it

appears as gracefully continuous with the past as it is with the landscape.

Mr. Zhang also harks back to the past: to the traditional Buddhist art and culture of his native China. [His works](#) resemble ancient Buddhist sculptures but with a contemporary, surrealistic spin. They are like elements of a kitschy, operatic stage set. In the exhibition's earliest work, "Peace No. 2" (2001), a gold-leafed bronze cast of the artist's nude body hangs below the mouth of a monumental bell that's suspended from a steel post and lintel structure. The most recent, "Milly's Temple" (2013), is a salvaged and reconstructed antique wooden doorway with an aluminum representation of a beehive added under the eaves of its roof.

Other works include a hammered-copper head of a Buddha almost six feet high that appears to be sinking into the ground. Two pieces are based on found fragments of Buddha sculptures: an arm and hand over 20 feet long; and a nearly 19-foot-long leg and foot with a little lumpy head emerging from a hole in the foot's heel. "Small Three Heads Six Arms" (2011) is a reduced version of a much larger sculpture of a multi-headed and -armed Buddha.

"Three Legged Buddha," the largest piece at 12 tons and over 28 feet tall, represents in hammered copper the lower half of a huge figure with three squat, muscular legs and fat bare feet. Two of its feet are raised about six feet off the ground on posts; the third rests on the upper half of a human giant's bald head, a self-portrait of the artist. It's an intriguing image, but at this scale, it is grotesquely overbearing. (Mr. Zhang and Pace Gallery, his New York dealer, donated this piece to Storm King in 2010.)

Mr. Zhang, who was born in 1965 in Henan Province, participated in Beijing's underground avant-garde scene as a performance artist in the 1990s. He moved to New York City in 1998 and

continued to work in performance for eight years, attracting enough attention to warrant his first museum retrospective: [“Altered States” at Asia Society in 2007 and ’08](#). By then, he had moved back to China — in 2005 to Shanghai — where he began to create sculptural works based on antique Buddhist traditions to great success. He now employs about 100 assistants to produce sculptures and paintings for his international, blue-chip clientele.

In an exhibition catalog interview with Melissa Chiu, director of Asia Society Museum and [soon to be director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden](#), Mr. Zhang talks about the impact of Buddhism on his art and life. It has been, he says, “a long process of gradually shrinking my ego and overcoming my narcissism.” He adds: “Since I am somewhat egotistical even now, I still have a long way to go. Buddhism aims to transform one’s self-construct from a big-ego self to a small-ego self and eventually to an egoless self, the highest achievable state in Buddhism.”

This sheds pertinent interpretive light on “Three Legged Buddha”: The Buddha’s foot is resisting the artist’s effort to express his own big ego. But however sincerely Mr. Zhang may be about his Buddhist path, it hasn’t seemed to reduce the showy grandiosity of his art.

In a gallery inside the center’s main building, Mr. Zhang is exhibiting a series of generalized portrait busts made of incense ashes that his assistants collect by the barrelful from Buddhist temples. These have a certain melancholy poetry; their material symbolizes the fate to which all living things are destined. But there’s an off-putting cleverness about the concept. Paradoxically, there’s more Buddhist-type humility in Ms. Overton’s long, simple tube than there is in any of Mr. Zhang’s calculated spectacles.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

“Zhang Huan: Evoking Tradition,” runs through Nov. 9 and
“Outlooks: Virginia Overton” through Nov. 30 at Storm King Art
Center, Old Pleasant Hill Road, Mountainville, N.Y.; 845-534-
3115, stormking.org.

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