To make *Family Tree*, a set of nine self-portrait photographs, the Chinese-born, now international artist Zhang Huan invited three traditional calligraphers to spend a day painting kanji characters on his face. Asked to maintain a solemn attitude and to keep working even after their words had become a black mask, the calligraphers gradually obscured his features with ink. The writing included proverbial stories such as “How Yukong Moved the Mountain,” a traditional tale that was a favorite of Mao Tse-Tung, and instructions for divining a person’s fate from his or her facial features.1

Made two years after he immigrated to America, this work reflects the artist’s ongoing quest to symbolize—often using his body as a primary material—his own struggles as well as the challenges others have faced in a rapidly changing China.

Born in Henan province and reared in a rural village, Zhang Huan grew up in poverty, and he saw members of his family suffer and die. Although he was a poor student, Zhang Huan could draw. He won a place in an art program that trained him in Soviet and European painting styles. Transferring to the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1991, he began discovering his distinctive style. One day, he tried using the bottom half of a broken plastic mannequin to walk with three legs. This bizarre experiment led him to a key understanding:

I have always had troubles in my life. And these troubles often ended up in physical conflicts… All of these troubles happened to my body. This frequent body contact made me realize the very fact that the body is the only direct way through which I come to know society and society comes to know me.2

Zhang Huan abandoned easel painting and began creating performance-based works, a number of which symbolically addressed social conditions in China. For example, *12 Square Meters* (1994), in which the honey- and fish oil-covered artist sat for an hour in a fly-infested public latrine, and photographs such as *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995), depicting naked bodies piled on a hilltop, symbolized the subordination of the individual to the collective. Other works derived from his experiences as a foreigner. For the hourlong *Pilgrimage – Wind and Water in New York* (1997), he lay naked and face down on a block of ice in the courtyard of a Long Island City museum, surrounded by dogs; he explained that the piece stemmed from his difficulties adjusting to America, where pets are often received more warmly than new immigrants.

*Family Tree* dramatizes how Zhang Huan’s interior life has been stamped by the stories passed on to him by his family, peers, and homeland. His accomplishment has been to recognize this second skin of conditioning and to slip in and out of it to make art that is both personal and universal.

Toby Kamps

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About the Contributors

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Living to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vicky Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwarm, won the Henrickson Book Award and Prize.


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