

Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

NEW YORK

Zhang Xiaogan at Max Protetch

Zhang Xiaogang's first solo show in the U.S. featured new works from the "Bloodlines: The Big Family" series he has been developing since 1993. These are large paintings (in this case, oil on linen) in which subjects, posed against a neutral, mottled background, face the viewer, stiff and expressionless, as if captured in, say, a passport photo. On top of a carefully executed finish, small abstract elements are imposed. For example, one painting in this show, *2000-2*, depicts a young couple next to a baby. (The three-member family is a recurring motif in Zhang's work, a statement about China's "one-child" policy). From the baby, a fine red line can be seen to issue toward the parents. A similar connecting vein courses through a large untitled 2000 triptych, which seems to depict a male in different life phases: first, as a red-tinged baby standing upright; then, in a slightly taller canvas, as a schoolboy; and in a still lengthier canvas, as a youth standing stiffly in a soldier's black uniform.

The artist has said these red traceries indicate bloodlines linking all Chinese to one family, and may also refer to a shared history under Communist rule. Zhang is one of a generation deeply affected by incidents at Tiananmen Square—painters who pictorially critique Chinese life. However, unlike the openly satiric, quasi-Pop paintings he and others made in the 1980s, which included comic portrayals of Mao, commentary now is more veiled. In these works, there is a Photo-Realist exactitude: Zhang draws from the outmoded conventions of 1920s family photographic portraiture, a commercial form suppressed under

the Communist regime. But he alters aspects of his images. He may tint one figure a certain hue, or diagonally tilt a subject's position on the canvas (as was the case with *2000-2*, the three-member family). He often swaps gender characteristics to make men and women seem almost neutered; he has described this maneuver as indicating, among other things, an oppressive degree of uniformity imposed by current Chinese society.

The show also included large portrait heads of small children. In these, the eyes are mildly exaggerated, with a glassy, android quality, and the painting's surface is often faintly tinted, so that the image appears as if seen through a fog. A small, translucent colored patch appears over every delicately

rendered face, like a random pool of light. This form has been interpreted in a variety of ways: as a kind of DNA marker, showing each person's hidden individuality, or as some kind of personal memory.

Zhang, who lives in Sichuan Province, makes frequent appearances on the international festival circuit. But the concerns he addresses—grappling with his country's weighty history, Communist and otherwise—are specific to his locality and expressed in ciphers incomprehensible without translation. Nonetheless, the works have a compelling idiosyncrasy and a haunting sense of isolation that transcend language barriers: they are universally expressive images.

--Carey Love/ace

Zhang Xiaogang: *2000-4*, oil on linen, 59 by 75 inches; at Max Protetch.

