

ARTIFICIAL ROCK # 143

By Zhan Wang (Beijing, China)

WHO MADE THIS SCULPTURE? This stainless steel sculpture was made by Zhan Wang, a Beijing-based artist who was born in 1962. He made this stainless steel sculpture for the Vancouver Biennale. Making drawings since he was a young boy, Zhan Wang studied traditional Chinese culture and history during his early school years. Later he spent several years studying sculpture at the Beijing Industrial Arts College, where he was mostly instructed in the Soviet socialist realism form of sculpture. He described this early experience: “The Soviet School, namely the traditional school of sculpture was what I studied most at that time. I didn’t get in touch with modern master sculptors like August Rodin and Henry Moore until after graduation.”

Although the college he attended specialized in industrial art, he also took classes at the Fine Arts College and even spent time practicing his drawing skills by copying Buddha figures in Buddhist temples. Zhan also worked as a jade carver in a factory for two years. He is currently a professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, China. Zhan Wang is one of the leading contemporary artists emerging from the post-revolutionary avant-garde movement in China.



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HOW WAS THIS SCULPTURE MADE? Wang finds and collects actual rocks from around China, and then blankets or wraps them with thin sheets of stainless steel, which he then hammer onto the rocks until the stainless steel is pushed into the exact form of the rock, in both form, texture and details. These are his models. At times due to size the rock requires a number of sheets. After forming the stainless steel skin on top of the rock, the skin is taken off the rock form in sections, and any seams in the stainless steel are welded together to make a complete hollow form “replica” of the stone model. The surface of the stainless steel is then polished to a high sheen, giving it a mirror finish. Wang has applied this technique to meteorites, as well as rocks from various places outside of China. One of his projects is called “New Meteorite Sky-Patching Project” a plan where Zhan Wang intends to send stainless-steel copies of meteors back to outer space, thus restoring order to the universe. For an exhibition in California in 2008 titled “On Gold Mountain” Zhan Wang used rocks selected from the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, chosen to bring



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attention to the history of the Chinese migrants who came to the California gold fields in the nineteenth century during the gold rush period. In 2004, Zhan scaled Mount Everest and placed one of his own artificial rocks at the summit.

ARTIFICIAL ROCK #143 WEIGHS 300 KG (660 LB.) AND ITS DIMENSION IS 260 CM (8.5 FT.) X 120 CM (3.9 FT) X 210 CM (6.9 FT).

WHAT IS THE TRADITIONAL MEANING OF “ARTIFICIAL” ROCKS? Sometimes called “pretend mountains” *jia shan shi*, in Chinese or “fake mountain rocks” or “scholar stones” in English these are important traditional forms in Chinese culture. Traditionally, Chinese artists have situated rockeries, and gnarled stones in front of important buildings and in gardens for decoration and meditation. Zhan Wang’s stainless steel sculptures imitate and comment on this traditional form from a perspective of the new urban environment in Chinese cities like Beijing and Shanghai.. They symbolically represent mountain landscapes and contain the power to connect man with nature. When one imagines crossing these “mountains” they promote a spiritual experience and a direct connection with nature. The practice of placing these stones dates back to the Han Dynasty over 2000 years ago.

The “pretend mountains” or actual natural forms are traditionally placed in urban gardens and courtyards so people living away from nature can contemplate and meditate on the beauty of nature within the city. Often these natural rock forms are placed near ponds or in gardens. The traditional purpose of the rocks was spiritual, placed in the city to promote a calming and meditative space. The shiny, polished, stainless steel rocks - which are modeled on Chinese garden rocks are sometimes called *Taihu* - The name of a lake renowned for its unique limestone formations. These “Scholar Rocks” are highly prized for their use in traditional Chinese gardens.



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WHAT IDEAS ARE BEING EXPLORED IN THIS ARTIST'S

WORK? This artist is exploring ideas about authenticity. Which rock is the original? Which is the copy? According to the artist within China even the natural rockeries, those made of real stones, have truly become “fakes” when used to decorate a contemporary environment.

But his stainless-steel rocks, made as art are “genuine” works of art. Since Zhan Wang uses the actual rock as his form and hammers the stainless steel sheet over the actual rock, he captures all of the fine detail of the surface of the stone. He can do this multiple times, making endless “rocks” from the one natural rock. You could see his piece as a replica or a copy – but the aesthetics, the material and how it looks are completely different. “I use steel to replicate the stone and create a fake “artificial mountain rock”--a really fake stone. Negating a negation equals an affirmation; it becomes something real.” Zhan Wang

His work also comments on the changing traditions and landscape of China, where the new is rapidly replacing the old. Zhan Wang believes that tradition need not disappear to become modern. His stainless steel recre-

WHY DID THE ARTIST MAKE THEM SO SHINY AND REFLECTIVE? Zhan Wang began making these shiny artificial jiashanshi stones in 1995 during the building boom in Beijing, when numerous glass and steel skyscrapers appeared on the cityscape dwarfing the older traditional dwellings that began to disappear. The artist intends them to be a “reflection” a mirror held up to see the new modernized China, fast paced, modern, industrial and technological, rapidly changing – but also losing and reshaping past traditions.

“The glittering surface of the rock reflects ever-changing images and further distorts them. Like a magic mirror, it does not confirm what is already there, but has the power of generating new illusions. In this way the rock acquires materiality and subjectivity. Zhan Wang can thus conceive his stainless-steel rock as a postmodern “monument” whose surface accounts for everything.”

Wu Hong



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ate a traditional form in a modern material. For many centuries Chinese culture has placed a high value on strangely and beautifully shaped rocks. Rocks in a Chinese garden symbolize mountains. In tandem with water, they form a microcosmic or miniature representation of the grand scale of nature.

Placed in a traditional courtyard, rockery satisfied people's desire to return to Nature by offering them stone fragments from nature. But huge changes in the world have made this traditional ideal increasingly out of date. I have thus used stainless steel to duplicate and transform natural rockery into manufactured forms. The material's glittering surface, ostentatious glamour and illusory appearance make it an ideal medium to convey new dreams.

Zhan Wang

Zhan Wang also created a topographic cityscape of San Francisco using all steel items, such as his mirrored stainless steel rocks. The entire model of the city was constructed out of silverware, and stainless steel pots and pans.



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TO LEARN MORE:

About Zhan Wang, visit

www.artzinechina.com/display.php?a=200

www.asianart.org/zhanwang.htm

About the Chinese and the Gold Rush go to:

www.sfmuseum.net/hist6/chinhate.html

GLOSSARY

AUGUST RODIN—French sculptor generally considered the father of modern sculpture (1840-1917).

BIENNALE—The name for any biennial art exhibition such as the Biennale international art exhibition held every two years in Venice, Italy.

CITY-SCAPE—noun—A view of a city, or a view that captures the essence of a city such as the New York skyline.

HENRY MOORE—English sculptor (1898–1986)

MEDITATIVE—continued or extended thought; reflection; contemplation, usually done in silence or in a calm environment.

METEORITE—meteorite – noun – a mass of stone or metal that has reached the earth from outer space.

PUBLIC ART—Public art is any work of art in any media that is created by an artist with the specific intention of being placed in a public accessible space.

SOCIALIST REALISM—a style of realistic art used to further the goals, and values of socialism and communism. Joseph Stalin decreed it state policy in 1932 and it was enforced on all types of art. This was the officially approved style of art in the Soviet Union for nearly sixty years.

STAINLESS STEEL—noun—an alloy of steel which is resistant to rust and other chemicals due to it contains 12% or more of chromium.

TOPOGRAPHIC—noun—mapping the relief features or surface of an area

WHO PUT THIS SCULPTURE ON DISPLAY IN VANCOUVER? This sculpture is part of Vancouver Biennale 2009-2011 Exhibition. The Vancouver Biennale is a non-profit charitable organization that celebrates art in public space. Each exhibition transforms the urban landscape into an Open Air Museum, creating globally inspired cultural experiences where people live, work, play and transit. The Biennale features internationally renowned and emerging Contemporary artists that represent a diversity of cultural perspectives and artistic disciplines including sculpture, new media, performance works and film. The objective is to use great art as a catalyst to transformative learning and social action.

The Vancouver Biennale also creates supporting public programs, events and publications including the award-winning BIG IDEAS Education program, the International Artist Residency Program inspired by Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream", the CineFest LIVE documentary film festival and the Tour de Biennale and BIKennale arts & culture cycling events.

TO LEARN MORE you can search the terms **BIENNALE**, **PUBLIC ART** or **OUTDOOR SCULPTURE PARKS** on-line. Also Visit the Vancouver Biennale website at www.vancouverbiennale.com

IMAGE CREDITS:

- 1 *Artificial Rock #143*; Dan Fairchild
- 2 Artist
- 3 *Floating Island of Inmortals Maquette*; artnet.com
- 4 *Rock Number 59, British Museum*; Reguileee
- 5 *Rock Number 59, British Museum*; danielweir.esq
- 6 *Classical Chinese Garden Art Rock*; US National Aboretum
- 7 *Gold Mountain, 2008 at Haines Gallery*; Haines Gallery
- 8 San Francisco Cityscape, 2008 at Asian Art Museum; Asian Art Museum

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