

Zhang Huan: Ash Paintings and Performances

March 6 – April 4, 2026
395 Broadway
New York



Zhang Huan, *My New York*, 2002 © Zhang Huan, courtesy Pace Gallery.

New York – 125 Newbury is pleased to present *Zhang Huan: Ash Paintings and Performances*, the first solo exhibition of the artist's work in New York City in over a decade. On view from March 6 through April 4, the exhibition comprises never-before-seen filmic documentation of Zhang's iconic performances of the 1990s and 2000s, which are presented in dialogue with his renowned works in photography, painting, and sculpture. Curated by Arne Glimcher and marking the twentieth anniversary of Glimcher's first visit to the artist's Beijing studio, the exhibition explores themes of impermanence, memory, and history.

In May of 2007, Glimcher once again visited Zhang Huan, writing of the experience:

Getting off the plane in Shanghai, I'm excited to see what this magician has been up to since my last visit. At the height of his powers, Zhang is the conductor of a hundred-person orchestra of assistants, who sift and catalogue various colors of ash. He tells me it's from incense that he's been collecting from nearby Buddhist temples.

We walk through Zhang's massive studio, stopping at an assistant's workspace. Zhang picks up a pencil and makes changes to the image already sketched on the canvas. The assistant will roughly fill in the outlines with the ash before Zhang returns to finish the painting himself. It's like a Renaissance master's studio. "It's perfectly normal for us, growing up in a communal society, to work together on projects," he explains. "My art is a communal activity."

Zhang tells me he has made me the gift of a new ash painting. I'm a little embarrassed, but very excited to see it. He shows me a block of compressed ash sitting on the floor, approximately one meter square wide and elevated about eight inches off the ground. An ash painting of flowers, lilies, and grasses rests atop the block. It is breathtakingly beautiful and delicate. I thank him profusely and we continue our tour of the studio. All the time, however, I am wondering: How will I move this painting? How do I take it home? There is no support. It's just a pile of ash on the floor.

Before we sit down to a lunch of Dim Sum served in tin canteens, I ask Zhang if we can take another look at the painting he has made for me. I finally build up the courage to ask him, “How do I take this with me?” In response, Zhang smiles. He bends down on his knees and inhales deeply. With one great exhalation, he blows the painting away. “That’s how,” he says.

I realize this laboriously created painting existed only for me in that one ephemeral moment. I am touched to tears. I understand now more than ever how impermanence is the thread that weaves together all of Zhang Huan’s art.

It was in performance that Zhang first developed his practice, emerging in the mid-1990s as a central figure in the legendary Beijing East Village, a group of avant-garde artists redefining contemporary practice in China during that decade. Zhang’s provocative early work probed the limits of the body and its relationship to the environment. In *12 Square Meters* (1994), he famously sat naked for hours in a public latrine, his skin covered in honey, allowing flies to cover his body. In *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995), he and a group of friends lay naked in a pile atop the summit of a mountain on the outskirts of the city, temporarily “raising the height” of its peak. In *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997), Zhang recruited a group of rural laborers to follow him into a pond in a poetic effort to collectively raise its water level by one meter.

After moving to New York City in 1998, Zhang’s performances began to address cultural adjustment and the immigrant identity. At MoMA PS1, he presented *Pilgrimage—Wind and Water in New York* (1998), a durational action in which he lay naked, face down in the museum’s courtyard, elevated on a traditional Chinese bed covered in blocks of ice and surrounded by tethered dogs. In *My America (Hard to Acclimatize)* (1999), dozens of participants threw stale bread at the artist from atop scaffolding, laying bare themes of assimilation and cultural disjuncture. For the 2002 Whitney Biennial, Zhang staged *My New York*, a performance in which he donned a suit made of raw meat and walked barefoot through the city handing out white doves. These works established Zhang as a crucial figure in the history of performance art and one of the most important Chinese contemporary artists of his time.

In 2006, Zhang relocated back to China, embraced Buddhism, and began working in sculpture and painting. To create his new works, he began collecting massive quantities of ash from Buddhist temples near his Shanghai studio—residues from incense burnt in prayer. Separating the ash by color and texture, Zhang developed a method for using the material as pigment, creating grisaille compositions that depict historical scenes from China’s past. The exhibition at 125 Newbury features a group of ash paintings presented together with works from the artist’s Memory Door series—low-relief carvings that combine sculptural and drawing elements. Both series were begun concurrently, and both deal with the transience of history and the role of memory in preserving and fixing the past.

Widely regarded as one of the most important living Chinese contemporary artists, Zhang’s work is held in numerous public collections internationally, including The Museum of Modern Art and Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris, and the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, among many others. *Zhang Huan: Ash Paintings and Performances* follows *Ordinary Life*, a 2025 exhibition of the artist’s ash paintings at the University of Kentucky Art Museum in Lexington.

Zhang Huan (b. 1965, Anyang, China) emerged in the 1990s as a leading figure of Beijing’s Conceptual art movement. His internationally acclaimed practice engages with themes of spirituality and memory. While the artist gained early critical praise for his performance-based work—conceived as existential explorations and social commentaries—his interdisciplinary practice encompasses photography, sculpture, painting, and installation. In the early 2000s, Zhang began incorporating incense ash into his work, developing his celebrated series of ash paintings and sculptures, which marked a departure from performance and a return to his formal artistic training.

Zhang attended Henan University in Kaifeng, China, from 1984 to 1988 and received an MA from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1993. He gained international recognition for performances including *12 Square Meters* (1994) and *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995). In 1998, he was included in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, organized



by the Asia Society, New York, and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York. The exhibition traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1999); Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, Mexico (1999); Tacoma Art Museum and Henry Art Gallery, The University of Washington, Seattle (1999–2000); and National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (2000). During this period, Zhang relocated to New York City, where over the following eight years he created thirteen performances, presented five solo exhibitions, and was included in more than sixty group exhibitions across the United States. He returned to China in 2006 and established Zhang Huan Studio in Shanghai.

Notable solo exhibitions and installations include *Altered States*, Asia Society, New York (2007–08), which traveled to Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia, Canada (2008); *Three-Legged Buddha*, Royal Academy of Arts, London (2007–08); *Evoking Tradition*, Storm King Art Center, New Windsor, New York (2014); *In the Ashes of History*, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia (2020); and *Zhang Huan: Ordinary Life*, University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington (2025), among others.

His work has appeared in important group exhibitions, including La Biennale di Venezia (1999, 2011, 2013, 2015); Biennale de Lyon, France (2000); Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2002); *Between Past and Future*, International Center of Photography, New York (2004), which traveled to The Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago (2004–05), Seattle Art Museum, Washington (2005), and Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2005–06); *Contemplating the Void*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2010); *Human Nature*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2011); *Ink Art*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2013–14); *The Allure of Matter*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2019–20), which traveled to The Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago (2020), Seattle Art Museum, Washington (2020), and Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts (2020–21); and *A Window Suddenly Opens*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (2022), among others.

Zhang’s work is held in major public collections worldwide, including Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Storm King Art Center, New Windsor, New York; and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, among others.

125 Newbury is a project space in New York City founded in 2022 and helmed by Arne Glimcher, Founder and Chairman of Pace Gallery. Named for the gallery’s original location, which Glimcher opened at 125 Newbury Street in Boston in 1960, the venture is located at 395 Broadway in Manhattan’s Tribeca neighborhood, at the corner of Walker Street. Occupying a 3,900-square-foot ground-floor space in a landmark building with 17-foot ceilings, the interior of 125 Newbury has been fully renovated by Enrico Bonetti and Dominic Kozerski of Bonetti/Kozerski Architecture.

Guided by Glimcher’s six decades of pioneering exhibition-making and steadfast commitment to close collaboration with artists, 125 Newbury presents up to five exhibitions per year. Directing and shaping 125 Newbury’s program, Glimcher organizes exhibitions of work by artists—both within and beyond Pace’s roster—who inspire him, often highlighting a specific aspect or focused period of their practice.



For immediate release

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