

**JIN SHAN** 靳山

**My dad is Li Gang!** 我爸是李刚!



MY DAD IS LI GANG! 我爸是李刚! 2012

Mixed media, dimensions variable

Photograph by Shane Photography

**IN THE NORTH OF SHANGHAI**, an old industrial complex is shifting with the currents of contemporary China. An ink pen company that long ago supported the establishment of the Communist Party is suffering decreasing demand for handwriting instruments, likely due to the growth of digital media and the internet in Chinese society. Now the company is sustained by direct funding from the government, preserving it almost as a return-favor and an anachronistic national monument. As production has slowed, its buildings have opened to new uses by a young generation of Chinese creators. This is the location of Jin Shan's studio. For an artist concerned with power dynamics, politics, and social change, the setting is apt.

Jin Shan situates his art on the increasingly contentious fault lines of contemporary Chinese society. "So many absurd, terrible, and amazing stories emerge everyday, and these stories become the inspiration for my work," he says. A jester, a sensationalist and an *agent provocateur*, Jin Shan and his art might be compared to the early careers of Maurizio Cattelan, David Černý, and, at times, Banksy. He uses wit, humor, and play as his modes of critiquing the socio-cultural and political situations of his contemporary China.

Jin Shan first received critical note for his 2004 series *I am 27 Years Old*. The series established Jin Shan alongside the growing number of contemporary Chinese artists confronting the Cultural Revolution (e.g. Ai Weiwei and Cai Guo-Qiang), who open new dialogue with the past and imbue their works with the cultural and political histories of China. Jin Shan, however,

distinguished himself through what has become his characteristic wit and humor. Based on found historical photographs from the Cheng Huang temple book market in Shanghai, *I am 27 Years Old* invokes a childhood scrapbook, featuring one historic image from every year of Jin Shan's 27 years of life. Onto each black and white image, Jin Shan superimposed a color cutout of himself, adopting a humorous or playful pose. With the dissonance of the superimposition, the compositions establish the distance necessary to comment upon the iconic and troubling moments of Chinese history through the veil of his personal history. In *I'm a good man, don't arrest me* (2004), Jin Shan placed himself in a scene depicting



**I'M A GOOD MAN, DON'T ARREST ME** 2004  
C-print, 27½ x 23½"

the longstanding tradition of public executions. With an annotation that "In 1984, our country was waging 'Severe Punishment,' across the field of the entire state" and the image of the artist holding a gun to his head, the work

When the direction of the wind changes, some build walls, others build windmills. CHINESE PROVERB

(as does the entire series) highlights the impact of collective histories on the individual and perhaps suggests the dangers of historical amnesia.

Jin Shan often draws from his personal life as the mechanism for playful commentary on the state of affairs in China. In *Shoot* (2007), he constructed a replica of a traffic police booth that was ubiquitous across Shanghai in his youth. Assailing the booth in the installation are an unceasing barrage of yellow ping pong balls propelled by a specially designed system that recycles the balls through subterranean tunnels and back into the air again. The balls, for Jin Shan, represent his unfulfilled childhood desire to enter into the traffic booth. As a restricted space of authority, the booth becomes a metaphor for the power of the state, and the balls playfully become the artist's little "yellow" dreams doomed to continual and inevitable failure.

Beyond his personal history, Jin Shan also uses his body in his sculptural and installation works. At the 52nd Venice Biennale, he installed a life-size silicone replica of himself at Campo San Polo. The installation *Desperate Pee* (2007) featured the figure of Jin Shan with his trousers lowered, urinating into the Venetian canals by use of a pump mechanism built into the sculpture. An ambitious development of his street interventionist art works, *Desperate Pee* was in effect a temporary public fountain, creating a playfully rude response to more familiar sculptural forms of cherub statues urinating into fountains. For Jin Shan, it raised the question of why it might be acceptable for a statue based on a baby to be depicted urinating but

unseemly for a statue of an adult to be depicted similarly. Inserting himself as the hyper-real, racial other, Jin Shan exploited the alarm or disgust of visitors to highlight social prejudices and racial stigmatization within public sculptural form.

*Desperate Pee* and *Shoot* represent a significant turning point in Jin Shan's career towards technically sophisticated installation works. Utilizing complex mechanical systems and methods of replicating and producing cast copies of objects and people, his recent works are hyper-real replications and animations of people and structures wrapped in playful, critical wit. *Retired Pillar* (2010) is an elegant piece delivering a simple distillation of complex symbolic relationships between the legacy of colonial Shanghai and the visual expression of contemporary Chinese social status. The work



**DESPERATE PEE** 2007  
Mixed media, 65 x 13¾ x 19¾"

features a Corinthian column replicated in latex and connected to a blast blower and timer. The gusts of air from the blower are timed perfectly to simulate a labored and exhausted breathing in the column. The column refers, on the one hand, to the passing away of the French colonial influence in Shanghai, visible in decaying, Neoclassical architecture throughout

**RETIRED PILLAR** 2010  
Latex, synthetic glass, blast blower, timer  
119¼ x 45¼ x 11¾"



much of the old city. On the other hand, it refers to the increasing adoption of replicated western sculptural forms in the decorative embellishment of personal homes as an expression of wealth and status by the *nouveauriche* in China. Animating the symbolic column with labored breathing is amusing, but it also critiques the human desires for wealth, prestige, and power indexed by such a symbol — a symbol that, through its excessive replication, has become exhausted.

Replication for Jin Shan is a practical strategy. It allows him to manipulate and subvert a realistic copy of a person or structure for the purposes of his critiques. It is also a mode of reflexive critique, making playful use of the stereotype of flagrant Chinese copying of western cultural objects and exploring the plasticity of social, cultural, and political relations. His work *Sweep* (2010) for the Van Abbe Museum, utilized both a replica of John Körmeling's *Parking Carpet* (1991) — a work in the museum's collection — and silicone copies of human arms holding a replicated traditional reed broom used by street cleaners throughout China. The work shifts Körmeling's perhaps altruistic attempt to address urban traffic congestion into a statement of the interminable absurdity and futility of Chinese manual labor. A mechanical "sweeping machine," moves back and forth along the carpet, attempting to clean the carpet. However, the reed broom does not remove the dirt. It collects and redistributes it along the carpet, at times embedding it deeper, making the carpet dirtier rather than cleaner.

The theme of the futility of labor in *Sweep* when considered with his subsequent installation *It came from the*



**SWEEP** 2011  
Mixed media, 192 x 96 x 70¾"

So many absurd, terrible, and amazing stories emerge everyday, and these stories become the inspiration for my work. JIN SHAN

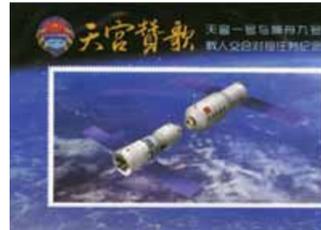
*sky* (2011) represents a bold turn in Jin Shan's installation work. Together they mark a return to some of the sensibilities of his 2004 series *I am 27 Years Old*. Rather than address-

ing only historical issues, these recent works form a body of direct commentaries about contemporary power dynamics within Chinese society. Created for the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, *It came from the sky* is a whimsical exploration of authority

conceived through a response to the Christian art collections of the Spencer Museum. A life-size silicone replica of a policeman is used as a symbol of secular authority grafted onto sacred symbolic forms. The policeman hangs near the ceiling, in a relaxed cruciform pose. He is enveloped in a projected image of "the cosmos." In his mouth is a planet, which he may be devouring or creating for the surrounding cosmos. The cosmic image also evokes the Chinese concept of *tian* (天) — sky or heaven — believed to have authority over the balance of the world and the mandate to validate just rulers and condemn the corrupt. Considering the policeman as the symbol of secular authority imbued with a "Mandate of Heaven (天命)," the installation becomes a metaphor for the increasingly supreme authority of the Chinese police state. But suddenly and without warning, the policeman drops to the floor. A violent messianic fulfillment perhaps or an expulsion from

the garden of creation, the event is certainly anticipation for a withdrawal of the "Mandate of Heaven" from the current power regime in China.

Jin Shan's current installation for the David Winton Bell Gallery *My dad is Li Gang! 我爸是李刚!* (2012) sustains and perhaps fulfills this anticipation. The title of the installation is coopted from a recent Chinese social meme that calls for urgent social critique of the corrupt financial and political elite of China, who believe they can pursue their desires and act with impunity, avoiding any responsibility for harm they have inflicted on others.\* Almost directly referencing *It came from the sky*, Jin Shan has placed at the center of the gallery a reduced-scale, abstracted replica of a space station connected to a glue-made replica of a three-wheeled cycle. Both



Souvenir postage stamp commemorating the docking of the Shenzhou 9 manned spacecraft with the Tiangong 1 orbital laboratory

have fallen from the sky. The glue of the cycle has melted during "atmospheric re-entry," and the space station has lodged itself into a pile of melted glue on the gallery's floor.

The work references the *Tiangong 1* orbital laboratory. Launched in September 2011, it completed China's first successful docking of a manned spacecraft (Shenzhou 9) with

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**A graduate of East China Normal University, Jin Shan was born in Jiangsu and lives and works in Shanghai, China. He is represented by Pekin Fine Arts, Beijing, Aike Dell'Arco, Shanghai, and Masters & Pelavin, New York.**

\* "My dad is Li Gang!" (我爸是李刚!) is a Chinese social meme that developed in late 2010 after a hit-and-run incident involving the son of a local police official in Baoding, Hebei province, China. The driver Li Qiming, who hit two students, killing one, fled the scene saying "Go ahead, sue me if you dare. My dad is Li Gang!" Social outrage erupted, provoking a social media phenomenon in Chinese internet culture known as the "human flesh search engine"—a massive, socially dispersed research phenomenon using blogs and forums to collaboratively identify and expose individuals to public humiliation. Shortly after the incident, the human flesh search engine revealed that Li Qiming's father was the deputy director of the local police security bureau. The Communist Party responded with attempts to suppress and assuage the issue, releasing weeping apologies by Li Gang and then his son Li Qiming. Prominent newspapers responded with calls for authorities to investigate the issue until the Central Propaganda Department issued a directive for the news media to recall all reporters from Baoding. The legal representation of the victims' families subsequently withdrew from the case, and internet discussion of the case ceased abruptly. Local students and activists continued to speak out, but it was not until January 2011 that Li Qiming was arrested, sentenced, and ordered to pay damages to the families of the victims.

For an excellent discussion of the history and development of Chinese internet social activism see: Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*, Columbia University Press, 2009.

an orbital laboratory in June 2012. The Tiangong 1 represents a major achievement for China in its ambitions to rival the United States and Russia in space exploration and is a source of tremendous national pride. Rather than replicate it realistically, Jin Shan has chosen to abstract the space station's form. He has covered the surface of the cylinder with hundreds of small square mirrors transforming the station into an inverted kaleidoscope that fractures and distorts all that surrounds it. Rotating slowly, the space station appears to be powered by the energy of the three-wheeled cycle that is attached to its axis. The cycle is a cast replica of cycles used by millions of migrant laborers across China. By connecting the cycle and the space station, Jin Shan creates a materialization of the power-dynamics in China, stating overtly that while the Chinese space program may be a fulfillment of the desire of the government and the Communist Party, it is powered by the exploitation of manual labor.

Around the central installation are four false walls with visible construction supports. The surfaces of the walls are covered entirely with plaster that has been beaten and marked by hundreds of hands. The visible construction of the walls and the labored texture of the plaster evoke images of building and development, referencing an everyday scene throughout China of demolition and building-in-progress that has been symptomatic of China's economic ambitions of the last decade. The texture of the plaster on the walls was made using silicone replicas of the hands of three-wheeled cycle workers known

by Jin Shan in Shanghai, many who have been displaced by development and construction over the last decade. Sustaining the critique of power, desire, and ambition, the false walls allow the visitor to "see behind the scene," revealing the power dynamics proposed by Jin Shan's installation to be temporary and vulnerable. They are



A three-wheeled cycle worker on Hua Shan Lu, Shanghai (May 2012)

a construction, not an absolute, and are subject to criticism.

The texture of physical pressure from the hands of the workers on the walls creates a backdrop of angst and resistance for the playing out of a final dance between the space station and the three-wheeled cycle. The whole scene is lit in a soft yellow light, the space station's mirrors casting hundreds of small reflections around the room. The scene could be called a big "yellow" political disco party, but as the disco-ball has crashed to the ground, Jin Shan may be declaring that, for him, the party is over.

**Ian Aiden Russell**, Curator