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Super studios

China's art super-stars have large-scale ambitions. And ateliers to match. Wallpaper* sent photographer Gautier Deblonde, acclaimed for his portraits of artists studios in Europe and the US, to Beijing and art's new powerhouses

WRITER: ARIC CHEN



State of the art

Not so long ago, China's contemporary artists barely registered on the international radar — a band of scrappy outsiders toiling in near-total obscurity. Of course nowadays, that cliché has led to yet another: that of the artist superstar. One survey, released in 2008, found that out of the top ten-selling artists from the previous year a whopping five were Chinese — this in addition to the sprawling artist enclaves, hundreds of galleries, and reported 1,600 auction houses that have sprung up in China in recent years. Wallpaper* has been granted unprecedented access to the studios of 13 of the country's top artists, most in the undisputed art capital of Beijing. And we've found that they're still toiling — not in obscurity, but in surroundings spanning ironic suburban subdivisions and grungy factories to more traditional lofts. Bubble or not, Chinese contemporary art is here to stay.

01. Zhang Huan

In Zhang Huan's studio, the numbers speak for themselves: it consists of about 20 buildings spread over eight acres in Shanghai's Songjiang Industrial Park. That leaves just enough space for his offices, his ash and oil painting studio, his sculpture, welding, block printing, photography and carpentry workshops, and his mysterious 'comprehensive experimentations'. Zhang moved into the then-decrepit 1970s former factory in January and immediately set to work. In the main building, you might now find a reconstructed 450-year-old temple which is being used for an opera he's directing in Brussels this autumn. About 80 staff members live and work here, and Zhang is planting trees and building everything from a reading room, tennis court and fitness centre to a coffee shop and bar. 'This is like my home,' he says, 'and every member of the studio is part of my family.' www.zhanghuan.com

02. Yue Minjun

'First and foremost, it needed to look simple,' says painter and sculptor Yue Minjun of his studio in the Songzhuang artists village outside Beijing. Indeed, there is something almost monastic about the walled red brick compound where Yue and his staff grow fruits and vegetables and raise hens among the three small ponds of a willow, elm and pagoda tree-filled garden. Yue, whose reserved, somewhat impenetrable demeanour contrasts sharply with the comically over-smiling portraits for which he is best known, finished construction on the property in 2000. The space is exponentially bigger than the studio the artist previously worked from, and Yue says the upgrade has had an influence on his work. 'A smaller space makes you more introverted, while a bigger one tends to give you this need to control the space,' he says, 'and you need that tension for painting.' www.yueminjun.com



▲ 05. ZHANG DALI



03. Ai Weiwei

Enter the compound Ai Weiwei designed for himself in Beijing's outlying Caochangdi village, and you will be greeted by the F-word in big neon letters and, resting nonchalantly on the floor, a photo of Ai giving the White House the finger. Upon his arrival in 1999, the patriarch of China's contemporary art world transformed Caochangdi into Beijing's pre-eminent artist community – 'I'd been living with my mother and she kicked me out,' he smirks. He's since designed dozens of grey brick buildings on the site, starting with the compound he still shares with his wife, a dozen cats and half as many dogs, and which includes staff housing as well as his art and architecture studios. Still, most of the heavy lifting is done in a nearby cathedral-like tractor factory (pictured above) that stretches over a gargantuan 40,000 sq ft. And that ain't no eff-ing around. www.aiweiwei.com

04. Lin Tianmiao & Wang Gongxin

Time it right, and you might catch a half dozen or so craftswomen filing into the studio Lin Tianmiao currently shares with her husband, the video artist Wang Gongxin, in Songzhuang art village. The women are there to work the textiles and hair-like strands of silk that Lin often employs in her delicate, stunningly elaborate installations. Lin is perhaps China's best-known female artist, and her and Wang's success is demonstrated by the scale of the new studio they're planning to move to this summer. It's in the basement – if you can call an 1,800-square-metre space with six-metre high ceilings a basement – of a spectacular new house nearby that they've designed themselves. 'I don't want to separate home and work,' Lin says. Given that her home will be a modernist stack with a pool, pond and sunken courtyard, you can't blame her. www.lintianmiao.com

05. Zhang Dali

Chased ever outward by Beijing's breakneck urban development and rising rents, Zhang Dali has moved six times in the past ten years. But Zhang, who's best-known for his life-size, cast-resin sculptures of migrant workers, is taking things in his stride with a new studio in the Black Bridge art zone in the city's northeast outskirts. A 4,000-square-foot rice warehouse (above) now houses his photography darkroom and a surreal menagerie that includes stuffed horses, wax figures, bronze sculptures and large portraits rendered in the words 'AK-47.' Zhang's tag from his graffiti days. A short walk away, Zhang has an even newer compound, occupying most of two long sheds, containing 12,000 sq ft of immaculately finished office, gallery and storage spaces. Still, 'I can't promise how long I'll be able to stay here,' he says, nodding to the construction noise outside.



06. Liu Xiaodong & Yu Hong

Facing an onslaught of galleries, shops and tourists, most artists long ago decamped from Beijing's 798 art district. But Liu Xiaodong, one of China's top painters, and his artist wife, Yu Hong, have managed to hang on. Squierred away in an isolated corner of the sprawling former factory complex, the couple's studio is located in a one-time loudspeaker workshop that seems 'as quiet as 798 once was,' Yu says. Yu set up shop in the 3,500-square-foot building in 2003; Liu moved in a few years later. New skylights transformed the once-dark space, which is now filled with flea market finds and family pieces, such as a drafting desk from the university (where Yu's father taught) and a pair of ingenious convertible armchairs he made. Nonetheless, Yu claims the studio is not very big. But with Liu often away on location to paint landscapes, 'I use it more often anyway,' she adds. www.xiaodongstudio.com

07. Wang Guangyi

Wang Guangyi's Beijing studio is in an American-style suburban subdivision that might just as well be outside Kansas City. And the irony is not lost on him that, strewn out front, where the lawn gnomes and plastic flamingoes should be, are 14 of his massive, cast-iron socialist-realist-style sculptures. Wang is best-known for his 'political pop' paintings, which juxtapose Communist propaganda and capitalist motifs. The studio itself offers a similarly jarring contrast. Four years ago, Wang, who smokes Cohiba cigars and wears a moustache and goatee, bought and combined the two semi-detached houses it occupies. On the inside, it's hushed minimalism with white walls, concrete floors and a mezzanine level ringing a double-height workspace. 'I need absolute quiet to work,' says Wang, who drives a black Jaguar from his real home in the city each day. 'And I also need the distance,' he adds.

08. Rong Rong & Inri

As China's most famous photographer duo, Rong Rong and his Japanese wife Inri act as one: 'Before we met, we were two individuals,' says Rong Rong, whose long hair, like Inri's, falls well below his waist. 'But together, it's three lives' — the third life being the merging of the two. Located in Caochangdi, their Three Shadows photography art centre and nearby home have both been designed by Ai Weiwei. Inside, stacks of rolled photographs and the couple's moody self-portraits help fill a vast double-height studio presided over by an industrial-scale vintage photo enlarger and a Guanyin Buddha statue. There is also a tea room and, in the upstairs master bedroom, an extra-large bed where the couple sleeps with their three sons, aged 10 months to four years. 'It can get messy,' Inri jokes. But in the end, she adds, 'this house brings work, life and rest together.' www.rongin.com



09. Wang Qingsong

Set in Beijing's Caochangdi artists enclave, Wang Qingsong's studio is part home, part film set. At the moment it is dominated by a huge garage door plastered with scraped and peeling stickers. Celebrated for his elaborately staged, cheeky photographic tableaux, Wang moved into the loft with his wife several years ago; their bedroom is in the mezzanine, an assistant sometimes stays downstairs, while five turtles live in the garden. Throughout are the artifacts of Wang's social critique, such as a mini-fridge shaped like a Coca-Cola can or a wall etched with a large grid of prohibitory traffic signs, some real, some farcically made-up. Nearby, a remote-controlled car for his two young sons reveals a lighter side. Still, Wang is a fastidious type and everything is just-so – even the plaster scrapings at the foot of the etched wall get regularly swept back into place. www.wangqingsong.com

10. Zhan Wang

Working in the far eastern fringes of Beijing, Zhan is renowned for making huge scholars' rocks – those craggy, weathered boulders pondered by Chinese intellectuals since time immemorial – out of pristine mirror-finished, stainless steel. Which is why his studio hums with workers painstakingly cutting, pounding, welding and polishing sheets of metal into shape. 'Rocks are the basic element of the universe,' Zhan explains philosophically, 'they are the most natural thing we can try to replicate.' Scholar's rocks are everywhere in his rambling compound which includes a gallery, workshops, storage sheds and airy studio spaces. Not to mention a peacock aviary, two spotted deer, an indoor pond and an office with an alcove window faceted like a rock. And that's just the tip of the iceberg: Zhan is hoping to build three new workshops shaped like giant stones. www.zhanwangart.com

11. Chen Ke

Painter Chen Ke first moved into her studio in Beijing's Jiuchang art district four years ago. 'It was shared by me and my husband (painter Cao Jingping),' she says, 'but neither of us can work with someone else around – so he moved out.' Chen may have gotten the better end of the deal: her studio comes with high ceilings, a loft area and an intimate courtyard where Chen takes tea breaks among potted plants, bamboo and goldfish swimming in an antique stone trough. 'It's a small world for myself,' she says. In fact, Chen's paintings are like small fairy-tale worlds themselves, filled with children and starry skies. 'Painting is a way of recollecting and expressing your feelings, and childhood is the period of pure, beautiful things,' she says. Which helps explain the dolls scattered around her studio, and the large suitcase filled with objects sent from her childhood home in Sichuan province.