

Zhang Peng is a Chinese artist based in The Netherlands. His work brings the viewer into the rural village Shijian Cun where Zhang spent his childhood. His memories are his treasures that offer opportunities to reconnect to the past that cannot be experienced anymore, but that can be recalled via Zhang's artworks.

Since September 2021 Zhang Peng has joined the Rijksacademy Residency programme. In 2018 he obtained a Master in Fine Arts from AKV/St-Joost Art Academy in 's-Hertogenbosch. Before coming to the Netherlands, he was trained as a painter at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. Zhang Peng uses the fields, or an allotment, as his artist studio, working with natural low-tech materials and the garden space to reveal his memories. Zhang calls himself a farmer artist – to him the land is just another kind of canvas. Working materials or pigments originate from nature and his inspiration is grounded in rural life, which reflects the simplicity and earthiness of his artworks. Zhang's most recent works relate to land art and earthworks.

Re-growing the memory

Zhang Peng travels back to his home village a few times a year and spends time walking through the countryside and talking to the local farmers. He invites the farming community to participate in the process of creation. This offer of co-creation and collaborative intentions are not always met with understanding, because farming has been the way of sustaining resources for one's family. It was never related to collaborative work with a stranger. None of the local farmers in Zhang's village ever perceived their work as an art-related activity nor as a work of art in itself. Yet, at the same time, the local villagers slowly change the way they build their homes, grow their crops or socialize with their neighbours. The younger generation is moving to the city; their way of living becoming urbanized and economically developed as an inevitable process of modernization. Zhang, therefore, imparts farming practices and lifestyle into his artworks and site-specific interventions.

Zhang Peng does not judge whether life in a Chinese farming village is good or bad but points out that the disappearance of traditions, craft techniques, and skills leaves a gap in Shijian Cun village. Via a collection of his childhood memories, Zhang digs in the soil and regrows what is becoming forgotten.

Reactionary vs progressive

While back in Zhang Peng's village his recreation of rural life might be considered reactionary, the situation in the Netherlands is different. Urbanization has gone through different stages and city dwellers long for reconnection with nature, which might seem to have a rather romantic perception of working with the land. Most Dutch farmers belong to the new upper class of land and animal owners and city gardening is seen in the light of those who seek a relaxing hobby.

Going towards the future, we are deciding what is seen as progressive and what is seen as reactionary. In the talk [Why Gaia is not the Globe](#) (2016), philosopher Bruno Latour explains how humanity stands between the two vectors: local vs global or archaic vs future oriented. Depending on how far we position ourselves towards one of those poles, we might perceive our actions (or the actions of others) as being progressive, or on contrary, reactionary. That is where Zhang Peng's work finds its challenges across the culture and society in which it is

presented. In these uncertain times when we already know that economic development has its limitations, we might want to reconsider what it means to go forward. Bruno Latour thus suggests paying attention to the third vector which he calls Earth or Gaia according to Gaia theory as formulated by James Lovelock. While we try to figure out which direction to go, we are reminded to learn how to belong to the soil and eventually how to land. The work of Zhang Peng has the potential to do so. It has the attitude to reflect upon the past and search for the essence of what the rustic used to be and what it can offer now or in the future. With the hands dirty from the soil and with the simplicity and slowness in the soul we might find out how to experience and deserve the present (as of a present time and of a memory/nature which is gifted).

Belonging to the Soil

Zhang Peng does not consider himself an environmental artist, although we might find similar aesthetics in the works of those who place great importance on Ecology. For example, in the work of Herman de Vries, we have learned how to closely observe nature and understand its interrelation to the human world, but to find out how we became estranged from it. The complex dialogue between culture and nature is reflected in the gratitude for simple meanings like a presentation of the rubbings of soil samples or documentation of 27 years of his walks in nature – ‘ambulo ergo sum’ – ‘I walk therefore I am’. Although farming, which is at the forefront of Zhang Peng’s interest, can be considered the beginning of nature’s colonization, the work of Zhang Peng is grounded with similar intentions to remind us what is becoming forgotten about our relations and connections to the land. His process comes from thinking through doing. Via his projects *Shapes of Rural Life*, *Villagers in Memory* or *Weaving Memories* (2019), Zhang Peng presents the mementos of times when our activities were dictated by the rhythm of nature; when we relied on our abilities and the strength of community and shared the knowledge from generation to generation.