



"Texas Holdem," oil, 32" x 40"

DASH AND DARING

Xiang Zhang's bravura brushwork and scintillating colors delight the senses.

BY SUSAN HALLSTEN MCGARRY

Action fills the moment in Xiang Zhang's western paintings. For his fifth one-man show at McLarry Fine Art, Zhang presents a moving and memorable collection of 30 canvases documenting the teamwork and rugged glory of cowhands engaged in the all-American job of riding and roping, herding and branding.

Dust, sweat, sun, and shadow permeate Zhang's oil paintings. He finds his subjects on ranches throughout central and west Texas, from the Rio Grande to the Hill

country and Panhandle. And when he needs a model closer to home, he just steps outside his studio on a 35-acre ranchette near Sherman, Texas, and whistles for his neighbor's horses, who are happy to accommodate since they graze along the edge of his property.

As his name suggests, Zhang came to his western American subjects by a circuitous route. Born in China during the Year of the Horse, as a youngster he had a penchant for drawing and a passion for brush-and-ink

calligraphy, especially copying the horse paintings of renowned Chinese painter Xu Beihong (1895-1953).

During his teenage years in the Cultural Revolution, Zhang studied oil painting by assisting an artist/friend in creating mural-sized portraits of Chairman Mao in the Social Realist style. By the time he was ready for college, Zhang's mastery of both traditions earned him acceptance at two universities.

"I selected the Central Academy of



"First Light," oil, 30" × 48"



"You're Always in My Way," oil, 26" × 45"



"Claire," oil, 32" x 25"

Drama because it is in Beijing, which is the Paris of China," Zhang relates. "It also has a broader curriculum, combining four hours a day of painting in the nineteenth-century Russian tradition of masters such as Ilya Repin, with afternoons dedicated to re-creating life on stage using architecture, design, lighting, direction, costuming, and music."

As with his endless pursuit of horses, once he graduated in 1982, Zhang needed space to roam. He set his sights on moving to the United States and earned a full scholarship to Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, where he received his MFA in 1989.

"I believe my work is different from other western painters because of my training in theater," he observes. "When I paint a scene, I stage it as if it were real life, using dramatic compositions, exaggerated lighting, and people who appear to breathe. I don't freeze a moment on canvas; rather I want to convey the feeling of openness and air and of people and animals on the move."

Zhang is partial to early morning and late afternoon light, as seen in the blazing sunset in "Planning for Tomorrow." The warm yellows reflecting off the figures and horses almost glow and are a colorful contrast to the cooler blues and reds in the sky. Even

the ground is a dazzling mix of warm and cool strokes in the light and shadow areas.

A master of both animal and human anatomy, Zhang also has a knack for storytelling. You can almost "hear" the cowboys talking through his adept suggestion of gestures and body language, which he attributes to decades of making quick sketches of people and animals using minimal line and value. "I also use photographs as resources for certain details," he adds. "In each painting I experiment with all the formal elements, representational and abstract, that will bring the painting to life."

Critical to Zhang's "enlivening" process are his brushwork and use of a palette knife to apply paint. "For the western paintings, I use strong, masculine brushstrokes, leaving textures on the canvas that follow and enhance the action," he explains. "Conversely, for portraits such as "Claire," I use softer, more precise strokes and delicate tones. I capture the likeness of the person with detail in the face and hands, contrasted by expressionistic strokes in the background and clothing."

Typically, Zhang focuses on western subjects caught in their daily activities, but occasionally the cowboys pose for him, as was the case in "Texas Hold 'em." "I felt like a movie director!" he enthuses. "The cowboys adopted various poses as I positioned them in a circle. In the painting, I added the large shadow and the dog on the left to lead the viewer into the composition and to suggest that something was happening outside of the scene. Of course, I changed all the clothing colors, ground cover, etc. to create more surface excitement and flattened the perspective to give the scene more immediacy."

A versatile artist whose work is in great demand, Xiang Zhang enjoys working large. "I've got ideas for an 82-inch stretcher bar in my studio," he comments. "I'm just waiting to find the time to do it." When he does, one can rest assured Zhang will fill the canvas with rich, luminous color, energetic movement, powerful brushwork, and a breath of air that brings his cowboys and horses to life.

Xiang Zhang is represented by McLarry Fine Art, 225 Canyon Road. Hours: 9:00-6:00 Monday-Saturday and 10:00-5:00 Sunday. (505) 988-1161 or 1-877-983-2123. www.mclarryfineart.com. His paintings are the subject of "Home on the Range," a one-man show September 24-November 1, 2004, opening with a reception from 5:00 to 7:00 pm on Friday, September 24.



"Planning for Tomorrow," oil, 42" × 60"



"A Hard Day's Reward," oil, 25" × 32"