



ZHANG HUAN (b. 1965)

Earth Life No. 19

(small)

Signed verso, "(unreadable) 2006, No. 19."

oil on linen

39 1/4 x 59 in.

99.7 x 149.86 cm

2006

4872

PROVENANCE:

Private Collection, United Kingdom

Contemporary Chinese artist Zhang Huan is best known for his provocative and challenging performance art. The detailed insects in this painting recall the artist's striking performance piece, *12 Square Meters* (1994), in which he sat covered in honey and fish oil in an unkept public toilet, attracting flies and other insects. Here, canvas replaces flesh, allowing bugs to explore this human terrain. *Earth Life No. 19* (2007) is meant to be a meditation on the ability of mind and spirit to overcome physical discomfort.

Zhang Huan was born in 1965, in Anyang, Henan Province, and studied at the Art Academy of Henan before graduating in 1991 from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. He currently divides his time between New York, Shanghai and Berlin. He came to the attention of the art world in 1993 when Ai Wei Wei wrote three books *The White Book*, *The Gray Book* and *The Black Book*, each immortalizing a different performance artist, one of whom was Zhang Huan. Two of his most famous early performances were *The Anonymous Mountain Raised by a Meter*, in 1995, where nine or ten naked bodies were stacked on top of one another on a hill and *To Raise the Water Level in a Pond* (1997). In this performance, a group of men stand up to their chests in water, looking into the camera. With this poetically absurd performance, Zhang Huan shows that collective action can actually have an effect.

In other works, Zhang Huan has subjected himself to extreme physical and mental ordeals. In *64 Kilograms* (1994), he had himself suspended horizontally by chains, naked, face down, with a small opening in a vein. His blood dripped onto a hotplate of a stove, where it evaporated. Or he crouched for hours on a public toilet – naked, motionless, his body smeared with honey and fish oil – until he was covered in flies. This performance, *12 Square Meters* (1994), could be interpreted as a condemnation of the deplorable cramped living conditions in the overpopulated cities.

In this particular series, *Foam*, Zhang lathers himself with soap and water, letting the foam act as a cleansing and purifying agent. He then ate pictures of his family members and ancestors in a symbolic act by which he incorporated the past into his present. While his art seeks to reconcile China's brutal past with the present, his process takes place on a very personal level. Like his series *Family Tree*, in

which he wrote the names of his ancestors all over his face, the Foam series also conveys this idea that the past is always with us and that we must actively come to terms with it.

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2006. NO. 19.

