

ARTFORUM

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REVIEWS

LAKEWOOD, CO

Fang Lijun

THE LABORATORY OF ART AND IDEAS AT BELMAR

Born in 1963, Chinese artist Fang Lijun was still a student when his work was included in 1989's milestone exhibition "No U-Turn," at the China Art Gallery in Beijing. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, Fang emerged as a pioneer of "cynical realism," a style that writer Ben Davidson has characterized as a "mix of ennui and rogue humor." And while he is still best known for his figurative paintings and wood-block prints—in particular those featuring his trademark bald Everyman—the artist has focused increasingly on sculpture in recent years.

Fang's first solo museum exhibition in the US, staged recently in a thirty-five-hundred-square-foot space at the Laboratory of Art and Ideas at Belmar (a new venue near Denver), was dominated by bronze casts covered in gold leaf, its arresting centerpiece an untitled field of fifteen thousand tiny heads dated 2003–2006. Some of Fang's diminutive busts are unique, while others exist in multiples of up to fifty; the whole display filled most of one gallery's floor and made for a breathtaking sight.

Each head was mounted on its own six to fourteen-inch metal pole, and although the poles' square bases were contiguous, the slight variations in height and the different directions in which the models leaned gave the installation as a whole a pleasing irregularity. If the array inevitably conjured the feeling of gazing across a soybean field, it seems more likely that Fang's intended allusion was to vast gatherings of people, perhaps evoking Tiananmen (he has depicted similar subjects in paintings). The emphasis on massed ranks of anonymous figures is unsurprising from a citizen of a country of more than 1.3 billion people that is currently undergoing a radical and rapid economic transformation.

Other works on display included a set of six larger heads on poles, from 2004, each standing five to six feet tall overall, and another floor installation featuring a line of several dozen heads, made in 2005, that snaked around the corner of one gallery (these have a kind of squeezed look, suggesting a literal and figurative compression). While traces of the cynical-realist approach are evident in these untitled works, Fang has expanded his scope. His use of gold leaf, for example, suggests a move toward a more celebratory aesthetic—he elevates the nameless



Fang Lijun, *Untitled* (detail), 2003–2006, bronze, steel, gold leaf, dimensions variable.

people he represents by covering them in a rich, seductive patina. In an interview with the show's curator, Tom Whitten, the artist acknowledges the continuing power of gold's conventional associations with beauty and value, admitting that its seductive gleam was what primarily attracted him to it as a sculptural material.

Separating himself still further from much of his earlier output, Fang also showed "Life-Size" (2006), a group of thirty-two casts of heads of prominent figures in China's cultural scene, such as filmmaker Zhang Yuan and artist Lu Hao. This exhibition marked the first time that the entire sequence was shown together. Also on view here was a related set of thirty-six monochromatic portrait paintings, "Portrait Series" (2000–), of subjects well known and otherwise. Already a major figure in China and internationally, Fang continues, with such projects, to push his art in exciting new directions, paralleling the lately accelerated pace of change in his home country.

—*Kyle MacMillan*