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[Zhang Dali, Suffocation](#)

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[Eli Klein Gallery](#)

398 West Street

New York, NY 10014

## Zhang Dali, Suffocation @Eli Klein

By Loring Knoblauch / In Galleries / June 20, 2023

**JTF (just the facts):** A total of 13 large scale color cyanotypes, hung unframed in the main gallery space. All of the works are cyanotypes on cotton (in blue, yellow, and red colors), made between 2020 and 2023. Physical sizes range from roughly 53x48 to 63x91 inches (or the reverse) and all of the works are unique. (Installation shots below.)



**Comments/Context:** In the past few years, more and more artistic responses to the global pandemic have reached broader audiences, as gallery shows and photobooks of works made during the lockdowns and quarantines have finally come together. The personal traumas, tragedies, and adaptations of that period have taken many photographic forms – we’ve seen claustrophobic family scenes, inventive solo interior and studio play, images of empty streets and storefronts around the world, and pictures that sensitively document different kinds of visual loneliness, separation, and isolation. And while protests against vaccines, mask wearing, school closures, and other government imposed Covid regulations and restrictions sprung up in various countries, the artistic response to the Covid years hasn’t been consistently political, at least until Zhang Dali’s work surfaced from China.

China’s response to Covid was particularly unforgiving and strict, with severe lockdowns, work stoppages, and travel bans to prevent the spread of the virus, and its tolerance for any kind of public dissent against these policies has been effectively nil, even in the months after many of the most confining rules were loosened or terminated. Zhang’s new works take life under these extreme conditions as their subject, and given their implied criticism of China’s Covid response (which itself is overtly forbidden), many have been unable to be shown in the artist’s home country.

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Zhang first appeared on the artistic scene in the late 1990s and early 2000s with his spray painted interventions at sites marked for demolition, where his profiled figures and cutouts in walls drew attention to the rapid transformations taking place in China's urban areas. His work was included in MoMA's *New Photography* show in 2011, where he presented censored and altered images of Chairman Mao, and in the decade or so since, he has continued to experiment with the intersection of photography (particularly the cyanotype) and sculpture, often with a decidedly political edge. Zhang's Covid-era cyanotypes, gathered here under the provocative title "Suffocation", take aim at China's oppressive restrictions, gasping for air via a range of different motifs and themes.

Over the years, Zhang has refined his cyanotype process, adapting it to larger swaths of cotton as a substrate (instead of light sensitive paper) and developing other color options beyond the traditional blue. His works here explore blue tonalities with white, green with yellow, and near black with light red, and he has gone on to apply these color schemes to different subject matter, matching and amplifying the resulting moods.

Pigeons and doves have been a recurring subject in Zhang's work over the past decade, as both sculptural forms and silhouettes, and they reappear here in a handful of new works. Two large works use the doves as an all-over pattern, their flapping wings twisting, turning, and overlapping as though in a dense cloud of ghostly birds; in blue, the doves feel almost peaceful and free in the open sky, but in red, the same subject turns much more chokingly sinister. Three other works introduce figures with their hands up amid the swarming birds, and these compositions have a deeper mood of frustration, annoyance, and menace. Arms flail around, seemingly trying to fend off the birds (like in Alfred Hitchcock's horror film *The Birds*), their suffocating presence closing in with each breath. These images seem to be silent cries for help, the figures desperately trying to get our attention from inside the smothered cacophony of the flapping wings.

Another group of works turns back toward the naturalist traditions of the cyanotype, making trees and grasses their ostensible subject. But within the political context of the Chinese Covid lockdowns, where citizens were kept in their apartments for months on end, such images of nature take on a more wistful tone of absence and longing. Zhang's images of crabapple and pagoda trees are densely overlapped and elegantly layered, the individual leaves and branches seeming to rustle in the invisible wind, almost to the point of overwhelming us with their energy. Zhang's grasses feel similarly full, composed to reach over our heads and pull us down into their undergrowth, and once again, the red versions feel the most urgent and perilous, the individual plants reaching up like licking flames.

The last few works in the show become even more overtly political, adding in additional symbols and slogans. A swarm of grasshoppers (like Biblical locusts) replaces the flapping doves in one work, with the arms-raised figure now wearing a Covid face mask; executed in vibrant saturated red, it feels grimly apocalyptic, with hands seemingly pressed against invisible glass as though trapped. In another red image, the figure is now surrounded by a fence of barbed wire, his fingers pushing on the barrier with more obvious (and desperate) force, trying in vain to get out. And a third work in searing red repurposes George Floyd's "I can't breathe" words, adding them as a banner to a black sun and ominous clouds, and connecting the suffocating feeling of the Chinese lockdowns to broader examples of institutional inhumanity and oppression.

Seen as a group, Zhang's recent cyanotypes simmer with uneasiness. Even his most graceful natural forms feel strangely out of reach, and when his anonymous figures are included, they seem to be quickly overwhelmed by swarms of birds and bugs. As visual metaphors for the experience of living within the severe Chinese Covid lockdowns, they are incisively biting, the quiet distress and misery of the situation building into a mood of poignantly stifled outrage.

**Collector's POV:** The works in this show range in price from \$21300 to \$36000, based on size. Zhang's work has been infrequently available in the secondary markets for photography in the past decade, so gallery retail likely remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.



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