

art-st-urban

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Art and Sculpture at St. Urban

### Chinese Artists In St. Urban – A Passage To The Alps Dignity and the Power of Touch

By Michael Flückiger, Zofinger Tagblatt

St. Urban Zeng Chenggang's touching sculptures on the monastery grounds offer an artistic experience that stirs the senses as much as the spirit. Bronze figures are enthroned on a red oxidised pedestal in the courtyard of the monastery of St. Urban. Their powerful, patina-covered bronze bodies are united into a singular sculpture of spiritual and symbolic power. The gazes of the six prophets, Socrates, Confucius, Lao-Tse, Sakyamuni Buddha, Jesus Christ and Karl Marx, are fixed in the distance. They sit and stand in attitudes of devotion. A seventh figure is provided them in the form of the Philosopher's Stone. Embedded in the block of stone to the left of the Buddha is the footprint of humanity. Figures of thought are here united with traces of the human in a highly abstracted way.

Figures of thought with aura

For anyone standing before this colossal sculpture, Walter Benjamin's seemingly cryptic dictum from *The Arcades Project* may arise with a new concrete clarity: *"Trace and aura. The trace is the appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is the appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us."*

It seems as if, in *"The Prophets"* (2012), attitudes of thought and traces of the human have run together and fused into a monument. Michael Suh, co-curator of the "art-st-urban"-conceived exhibition "Chinese Artists in St. Urban, A Passage to the Alps," explains the intention of the Chinese sculptor Zeng Chenggang: *"The Prophets* stands for an all-embracing tolerance and is an expression of hope for a world in harmony." He helped organise the transport of the extremely heavy prophets to Switzerland. Thus 26 sculptures arrived in St. Urban. In total, under the title *"The Spiritual Passages"* the sculptures, *"The Prophets"*, *"The Lotus Flower"* (2010) and *"The Animal Series"* (2012) together weigh over 120 tonnes. The large-scaled works have been in St. Urban since late May. Anyone who wishes to see them has to be ready to hike it, as they populate a vast area of 120,000 sqm.

Three different kinds of permeability

Michael Suh insistently points out that this large-scale outdoor exposition with Chenggang's works revolves around the concept of "Passage" in three different ways. "For one, it's about breaking through space and time. For another, the exhibition alludes to the cultural and geographical passage between China and Switzerland. And finally, with these works, Chenggang creates permeability (i.e. "passage") in a third sense of the term: He addresses contemporary issues, whereby he combines traditional figurative sculpture with modern forms of expression."

The prophets group gives viewers access into an artistic experience that is quite unusual in Western culture. Despite the dignity that these figures radiate (and reverence they evoke), each and every

visitor feels invited to touch them. The surfaces are not smooth and repellent as with a Jeff Koons sculpture. They are furthermore relieved of the "keep your distance" aura of classical sculpture.

Unique in all of Switzerland

This aspect is one of many that thrill Gertrud Aeschlimann, co-curator of the exhibition, about the Zeng Chenggang's works. Her favourite figure is that of the lotus, which is reached after a short walk. "I enjoy the sight of this flower and I also like to touch it," she says, who, along with her husband, the entrepreneur and sculptor Heinz Aeschlimann, is responsible for ensuring that these sculptures are seen in Switzerland. "An exhibition of a contemporary Chinese sculptor of this scale and quality is a first for this country and absolutely unrivalled," she says with pride.

Unlike the prophets and the animal sculptures arranged throughout the entire grounds of the former psychiatric hospital, *The Lotus Blossom* is made of stainless steel. In Eastern culture, the lotus enjoys a key role as a symbol of purity, says Suh. All the more so since it grows in a swampy, brackish environment - one that is anything but clinically clean. In Zeng Chenggang's realisation, the flower is at least as much a mirror of its environment and its audience as it is an expression of a serene, inherently plant-like beauty. Tricky: Which is the reflection and which the reflector? The plant in the eye of the viewer or the viewer in its pollen capsules?

Returned respect

Zeng Chenggang's sculptures are immanences of dual principles. This is also reflected in his expressive animal sculptures. "With superelevated figuring, Chenggang returns to them the respect that they deserve," says Gertrud Aeschlimann. The musculature of the animals is taut, like a spring about to be sprung. The bird digs its talons into the pedestal, as if he were about to carry it off into the air. The cat seems to be on alert and on the verge of hissing. A stag thrusts his head with flaring nostrils into the hide of his chest and readies himself to dash forward, antlers first. The thin-boned horse is like an arrow, set to gallop off leaving great distances behind it. The pride of the cock is boundless; his neck is outstretched, commanding respect. The turtle rests powerfully in its breadth. It is a calming influence in this bewitching fauna. If you look closely, you will see little turtles walking along its back like a string of pearls.

*The park is open daily and open to the public free of charge. For more information: [www.art-st-urban.ch](http://www.art-st-urban.ch)*