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Zhang Xinjun at Telescope

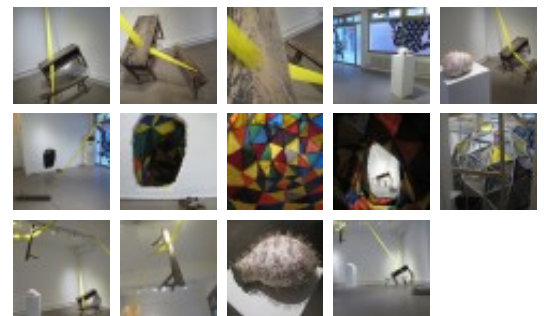
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Zhang Xinjun: solo exhibition

Telescope (10 Caochangdi, Beijing, China) Jan 11–Apr 6, 2014

Most of the large windows that separate Telescope from the street are obscured by a translucent film printed with a mosaic pattern, and a clear glass door gives away very little more. The majority of the space—a massage parlor at one time, although a minimal renovation has all but effaced this presumably lurid history without quite lending it the generic white cube effect—is divided up and defined by dense clusters of thin yellow rope pulled taut to stretch between and, in several cases, directly through old wooden benches fastened, as if impeccably balanced, to the ceiling, walls, and floor. Taken as a totality, the effect is compelling: one cluster of thread seems to shoot up from the leg of a bench lying on its side on the tile floor, bounce off of the ceiling, fan out and penetrate the body of a second bench dangling from the ceiling, and then collect itself again back into a neat cluster before disappearing into a corner adjacent to a spotlight. Another, thicker group of filament emerges from a corner of the ceiling, immediately spreads and bores its way through the top of a desk leaning against a wall, and then ricochets through another bench balanced on three legs on the floor. The most thrilling individual moments, however, occur not in this game of space and installation but rather in the sculptural details: in the tiny holes in wooden boards through which individual threads run, and in the neat pilings around which broad handfuls of the same material are collected.

A second project is intimated in small objects that intervene in the space otherwise segmented by this first work: on a white plinth, numbered triangular sheets of paper are pinned with toothpicks into an irregular globe of grey clay; hung together on one wall, two marker sketches depict a similar spherical object, its panels replaced with red, yellow, green, and blue triangles. Before one has the chance to absorb these preparatory drawings, however, one is likely to be distracted by two entrances to—or, more properly, windows into—a second exhibition space. One entrance, facing towards the geometric space of wooden furniture and yellow line, takes the form of a rough-hewn hole through the lower portion of a brick wall. A pair of sneakers sits to one side, suggesting that someone might be inside until, bending over or crouching down, one discovers that the recess is occupied only by an uninhabited nest akin to a parachute in the process of collapse. Yellow, green, blue, and orange triangles form a tight space, big enough, one might guess, for two. The second entrance, a more standard doorway in the wall perpendicular to this one, allows a view onto the exterior of the fabric structure, which reveals itself to be supported by a skeleton of PVC piping tied with white rope to a wooden frame.



[See all photos \(15\)](#)



Zhang Xinjun, "Primary school tables and chairs—telescope No.1 (details)", material: tables and chairs, thread, dimensions variable, 2014

张新军, 《小学课桌椅 – 望远镜 NO.1 (细节) 》, 材料:课桌椅、线, 尺寸可变, 2014



Zhang Xinjun, "A hole, a space, an organ", material: clay, paper, toothpicks, 30×30×20 cm, 2014

张新军, 《洞、空间、器官》, 材料: 油泥、纸、牙签, 30×30×20 厘米, 2014

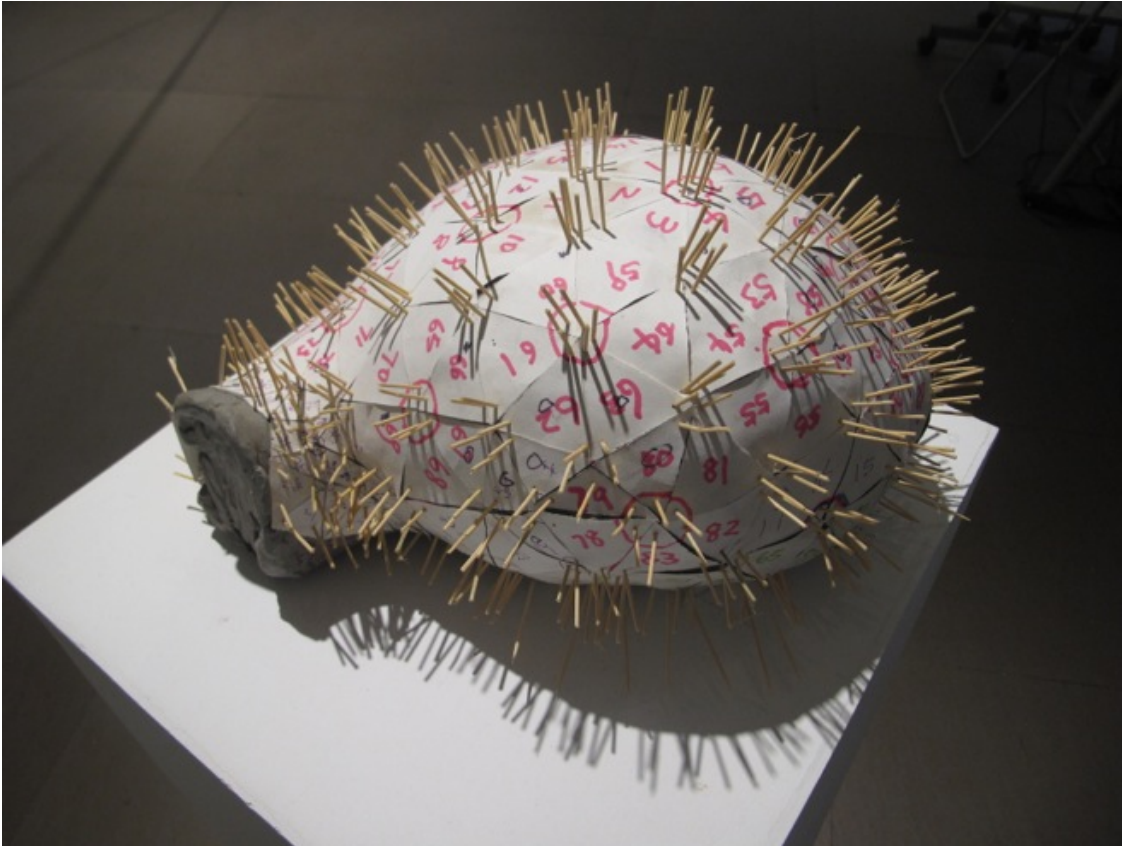
This is the work of Zhang Xinjun, an artist living in Beijing with a scant exhibition record but an enviable reputation among a certain set of artists working in a cool, conceptual mode that embraces interplay amongst genres—painting, sculpture, photography—that are often, in the capital, considered staid and old-fashioned. Though he has produced relatively little work over the course of his career, Zhang has allowed an impressive depth of thinking to seep its way, over time, into the few projects he does allow to see the light of day. He is reserved and soft-spoken about his practice, but allows a few straightforward facts to stand in the place of

didactic explanations of the environment produced by these two works: first, the wooden furniture was acquired, by way of trade for newer replacements, from the rural primary school where he was educated; second, his childhood garments were made by hand by his mother; third, that the fabric of the geodesic tent was gathered from sleeping bags. With knowledge of this personal background, certain readings of the exhibition are unavoidable, if instantly recognizable as facile foils for a more complex intellectual system—that the clay model of the nest resembles a womb, a heart, or some other organ, for instance, or that there are certain psychoanalytic qualities to the expansion of a sleeping bag for one into a tent for two. Other interpretations might be derived from the context of the space: toothpicks in a clay organ, in the context of a massage parlor, suddenly become instruments for acupuncture, and the geodesic structure of the nest suggests a reference to the utopian architecture of mid-century America, alternately punctured and illuminated by rays of light embedded in the bright yellow lines running from ceiling to floor.

Confronted with these possibilities, however, Zhang Xinjun insists that his focus is not on affect or, much less, art historical reference. Instead, he positions himself with a strong interest in material; it just so happens that the sculptural matter that he chooses to work with, be it fabric or cloth, is pervaded with a corporeal sense of attachment and entanglement. His earnest and measured approach to these specific materials precludes the sentimental sigh that one might expect to accompany his work as described rather than witnessed, and he manages to disperse any lingering sense of the diaristic by placing these highly personal things within an installation that speaks of generic experience. It is a triumph of collective memory and suggestibility over personal identity. Zhang's dedication to materiality pulls him in occasionally unexpected directions, as with the nest project in this exhibition. Two sketches and a model, all appearing as preparatory sketches for a single final experiential installation, are not included here for the sake of legibility. Instead, he considers the project a conceptual whole, unwilling to discard these material traces of his logic. This additive tension between thing and idea offers the possibility of the network as a central if barely visible component of the artist's practice, present in the structure of his nest and the links between pieces of furniture as much as in the relationships, personal and historical, that span time and space to bring these works into being.

It seems likely that a project of this complexity, rigor, and feeling could only occur in a space like Telescope. With the creative landscape of Beijing increasingly fragmented by allegiances and enmities defined by a few core commercial galleries and an even smaller number of oppositional figures whose rejection of the market is patterned on the same binary logic of those who embrace it, this interstitial studio for artist projects—one would hesitate to call it an institution—is a reminder that, even in China, the art world is something larger and greater than it sometimes appears. Founded and operated by the American curator James Elaine, its program is marked by an extraordinary generosity of curatorial expertise and a willingness to embrace the process of the artist as a mode of operation. Although Zhang and Elaine have been in touch for years, this exhibition could only happen on its own timeline, a luxury apart from the demands not of the gallery system per se but rather of the pressures of performing as a young artist in a competitive and critical milieu, and the resulting installation is a proud project of this collaborative and empathetic way of working. Situated quite literally on a village side street (its address, circulated via text message, is best described as “next to the two-yuan hotpot bar”) between the minimalist brick courtyards that represent the Caochangdi art scene, Telescope is nonetheless not defined by the spectacle of its alternative nature—it is not a themed site for the examination of relations between villagers and art, but rather a space for art.

Zhang Xinjun, exemplar of an artist who has chosen an introspective practice over the visibility offered by the vocal staking out of a position, thrives in this environment. Foregoing a typical exhibition poster, he chose instead to work with Fang Jianping, whose design work acts as the public face of Telescope, to produce the simple black and white tessellation that further obscures the already enigmatic windows of the space. One can only imagine how Beijing could further benefit from matches like this one.



Zhang Xinjun, "A hole, a space, an organ", material: clay, paper, toothpicks, 30×30×20 cm, 2014
张新军, 《洞、空间、器官》, 材料: 油泥、纸、牙签, 30×30×20 厘米, 2014



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张新军, 《洞、空间、器官》, 材料: 油泥、纸、牙签, 30×30×20 厘米, 2014



Zhang Xinjun, "Primary school tables and chairs—telescope No. 2", material: tables and chairs, thread, dimensions variable, 2014

张新军, 《小学课桌椅 – 望远镜 NO.2》, 材料:课桌椅、线, 尺寸可变, 2014

Keywords: [Caochangdi art district](#), [Randian review](#), [Robin Peckham](#), [Telescope art space Beijing](#), [Zhang Xinjun](#), [张新军](#), [望远镜{艺术工作室}](#), [燃点展评](#), [草场地](#),

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