

# Zhao Bandi

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## 阻击非典 保卫家园



*BLOCK SARS, DEFEND THE HOMELAND*

*Fight SARS, Photo, 2003, 116x80 cm*

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Chinese Story, Photo, 1998  
126x72 cm

Zhao Bandi has made his reputation with idiosyncratic staged situations where he and his toy-panda play out everyday situations. Sometimes these consist of scenes from the life of a single father, and sometimes the panda becomes partner and lover. The panda is treated and acts as a 'real' character with a voice of its own manifested as speech bubbles in the photos. Zhao Bandi is brilliant at both playing with and being played by the culture of media. The work feels humorously subversive and self-promoting, critical and seductive. Addressing the idea of media and mass reproduction, Zhao Bandi suggests that the boundary between image and reality has broken down. He emphasizes the images' potential for transformation, but also the power of the manipulating gesture: It takes so little to change the value and significance of an image.

Zhao Bandi's enchantment with the banality of modern life could seem condescending if he himself did not seem extraordinarily sincere about the whole theatrical set-up concerning his panda. Lately, the artist has paid special attention to state-run campaigns with determined instructions to be followed. These are often characterized by humorless didactic telling the people how to act in relation to anything from personal hygiene to SARS decease. Zhao appropriates them, reverse them, and refuses against being told what to do by authority. His striking images, which are presented on the pages of calendars and subway posters, or as technically sophisticated light-boxes, at other public places in Shanghai, mix communist propaganda with the forms of glossy advertisements that are spreading so rapidly in China. Interacting with Zhao's pieces makes one susceptible to this special pathos, and to the pleasure of the meaninglessness of it all.

Although Zhao Bandi's work frequently moves across the fine line between reality and fiction, there are times when the two of them coincide: His video, *A Tale of Love Gone Wrong for Pandaman*, is more than just a parody of reality. In 2003 Zhao sued two media businesses for publishing his poster *Block SARS, Defend the Homeland* without acknowledging his copyright. During the hearing Zhao sits lost and abandoned with his Panda, and finally he reads as evidence a letter from his ex-lover, where she tells him why she is leaving him. She describes Zhao's relationship to the toy-panda as being sick, and denies that the SARS poster could have anything to do with his personality. Because of the letter (or despite of it) Zhao wins the case. It's a reality producing fiction that produces a reality. Zhao Bandi was born in 1966 in Beijing, where he still lives and works. He graduated from the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1988. Since 1993 his works have been shown at international exhibitions, including the Sydney Biennale (1998), the 48th Venice Biennale (1999), and the first Guangzhou Triennale (2002). His project *Zhao Bandi & Panda* has been on public display in Shanghai, Milan, London, and elsewhere.



Zhao Bandi & Panda (*love each other*), Photo, 2001, 126x126 cm