



# Contemplating America from the Road

An artist of international stature who is best known for her work in photography and mixed media, Chinese-born O Zhang (b. 1976) has created a phenomenal new sitespecific installation for the Vilcek Foundation Gallery, I Am Your *Mirror*, that utilizes the entire gallery space—walls and floors included to explore the expressive potential of the abandoned billboard in the American landscape. In working with her over the course of the past three years, we have had the privilege of watching her artistic vision evolve. In its final form, the installation includes not only the color photography for which she is best known, but also painting and collage, some of it utilizing commercial and industrial building materials.

When we first became involved with O Zhang's project, she had already completed the first of what would ultimately be four extended trips through the U.S.A. Over the course of the next two years she took thousands of photographs and traveled nearly ten thousand miles. In doing so, she became deeply caught up in America as seen from the road, something she has described as the "beautiful and quintessential American landscape."

In I Am Your Mirror, O Zhang presents us with a new vision of the American landscape an installation that has been partly shaped by her early years in China; partly by her explorations of America with her husband, the artist Peter Garfield; and partly by her multicultural art-historical awareness, for O Zhang studied art and photography extensively in Europe and the United States as well as in China, and she is well versed in various forms of modernist abstraction and high-modernist design. Her sensitivity to the unique qualities of roadside America is therefore informed by her own broad multinational awareness of art, even as she admits to a particular fondness for those quintessential American artists, Edward Hopper and Ed Ruscha.

O Zhang was born in a country where billboard-size imagery had long been utilized for visionary political messages, and more recently has been used to create an extraordinary visual cacophony of capitalist-inspired commercial messages. In her recollection, she never once saw a blank billboard in China, for "any advertising surface not used for a commercial purpose would be filled by the Communist Party with some form of political propaganda." As a result, in her recollection, the "commercial ads and billboards [in China] reach almost an insane degree."

In her travels through the United States,
O Zhang encountered many billboards that
were blank, neglected, or abandoned. While
in some regard these billboards seemed to her
to reflect economic distress, their emptiness
had an evocative and meditative aspect as
well, and in many instances their dilapidation
seemed formally rich and expressive.

O Zhang's vision of the American landscape may reflect upon the changing nature of the American economy, but it does so without condescension or scorn. Rather, the artist encourages viewers to consider the unexpected beauty and emotional resonance of these blank everyday structures and by extension to consider them as cultural artifacts; mirrors. as it were, that reflect contemporary American society. In chronicling her experience of the American billboard during the course of her travels, O Zhang has created a vision of the American road and American culture that is both texturally rich and thematically evocative, as rooted in cultural history and the history of twentieth-century visual art as it is in the everyday visual experience of the American road.

By challenging preconceived notions, by questioning meanings and understandings, and by seeing the American landscape in a refreshingly new way, O Zhang seems to me to be an ideal artist for the Vilcek Foundation, which was specifically created to foster the vision of immigrant artists and to promote their inclusion in the American cultural mainstream. She has discovered through her American travels a new way of understanding and appreciating the beauty of our country, and in doing so has also made a valuable contribution to the dialogue of contemporary American art.

The great strength of America is its openness and cultural diversity. In our efforts to foster and promote new ways of thinking and seeing, we are very proud to present O Zhang's *I Am Your Mirror*, a Chinese-born artist's resonant evocation of the ever-evolving landscape of the United States.

## Rick Kinsel

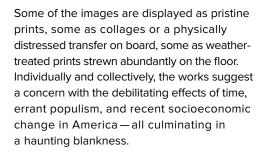
Executive Director



# AMERICAN MIRROR

Again and again in her new photo installation, *I Am Your Mirror*, the Chinese-born artist O Zhang presents images of empty billboards from various U.S. locales, both urban and rural. Shot during numerous car trips over the last two years, the pictures represent, in effect, a single journey of discovery: one in which regional elements — landscape, people, buildings, livestock, weather — matter surprisingly little. Pushed to the margins of the visual field, these particulars simply lend compositional support and a hint of local context to the true subject of Zhang's anti-travelogue — the towering voids offered by these commercial message boards.







If that emptiness is somewhat disconcerting for U.S. viewers, it is doubly so for a Chinese artist of Zhang's generation. Born in 1976, Zhang was raised in southern China in the years just after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a tumultuous decade during which billboards and walls were obsessively used for the display of propaganda: Big Character posters bearing strident messages from the Party; depictions of workers, peasants, and soldiers striving happily toward a socialist utopia; heroic images of Mao. This legacy was, in Zhang's early youth, not abandoned but converted. With the great Opening Up of the 1980s, public surfaces in the People's Republic began to receive today's ceaseless barrage of advertising, often overwhelming in size and density. Even now, any suitable space not used for commercial purposes is likely to carry government messages.



Zhang's professional training was likewise culturally mixed. As an undergraduate, she studied Western oil painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where she experimented privately with photography (a discipline not taught at CAFA at the time). Then, fulfilling a dream widely shared in China, she traveled abroad, attaining master's degrees from St. Martin's School of Art and the Royal College of Art, both in London. She moved to New York in 2004.



Like many of her compatriots, Zhang long imagined the United States as broadly and quintessentially prosperous—the Beautiful Country, as it is called in Mandarin, an expression connoting economic as well as geographic grandeur. Thus the sight of unused billboards here, growing in number following the financial meltdown of 2008, shocked her, psychologically and aesthetically. What could this strange disuse mean, and how could one react to it artistically?

Zhang's response must be understood in both Western and Eastern contexts, for the import of blankness differs greatly between the two cultures. Her journey carries us, sadly, from a bold and hopeful ideal to a more world-weary and poignant view of this country's fate.



Taking to the highway, Zhang and her American artist husband, Peter Garfield, covered some ten thousand miles in their intermittent odyssey — an action that has a rich historic resonance in the United States. Christopher Columbus, searching for a shorter route to the cultivated richness of the East, discovered instead a raw land rife with incalculable potential wealth. Later, British colonists brought with them the notion of a tabula rasa, seeing this fresh continent, like the human mind at birth, as a clean slate upon which new social conditions could be inscribed — an idea that soon prompted a revolutionary break from Britain itself and, later, with the myriad Old World countries, crippled by hereditary class strictures, from which new Americans emigrated.



The "wide open spaces" explored by Lewis and Clark at the behest of President Thomas Jefferson (whose vast Louisiana Purchase was initially a pig in a poke), the boundless "territory" to which misfit souls like Mark Twain's Huck Finn could always "light out," were central to the conflicted frontier myth of absolute freedom and progressive settlement. These lands embodied a paradox: a conceptual blank, they in fact teemed with natural resources — water, game, timber, minerals, and arable land — soon under the dominance of corporations determined to exploit them.

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And how could it be otherwise? The thirteen original colonies, the birthplace of America's self-image, may have touted themselves as havens of religious freedom and staging areas for exploration, but they also served, first and foremost, as commercial enterprises expected to turn a profit. This is the contradiction at the heart of perhaps the greatest of all American tales. In Moby-Dick, Herman Melville's Ishmael sets out on a watery highway, where he eventually encounters the white whale or, as a chapter title has it, "The Whiteness of the Whale" — a multifarious, inexhaustible mystery that seems to be at once everything and Nothing. Yet all along in this spiritual quest, at every step, we are shown — in maddeningly intricate detail — the workings of a rigorously hierarchical seaborne industry based on slaughter. In the end. Ishmael alone — a timeless voice, an eternal witness — is spared being swept down in the vortex with Captain Ahab.



At both the mundane and the symbolic levels, a universe sprung from the void returns to the void.

In I Am Your Mirror, Zhang shows us our own modern-day white whales, the billboard Moby-Dicks of every American region and neighborhood. For in the U.S. today, a sign without a message is like something from a Freudian dream — a page from which the past is erased, looming high and blank as a drive-in movie screen, fraught with erotic memories of what was once seen there and done secretly in its glow. These huge placards, so long the locus of vagabond promise (saying, in effect, "Attractions Ahead") or consumerist enticement ("Buy This, Live Better"), now bespeak — in their blankness a sense of failure and ending: an arc traced in art as well as history.



The Hudson River School painters portrayed a transcendent Nature bathed in ethereal light; Albert Bierstadt, a wilderness still open and inviting. But in the work of Frederic Remington, we see a Wild West that is already vanishing a transition caught more solemnly in the photographs of Carleton Watkins and Edward S. Curtis. Zhang's experience is closer to that of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and other Farm Security Administration photographers of the Depression era, or of the foreign-born Robert Frank, recording his deeply skeptical take on Americans in the 1950s.



What happened to the country that once prided itself as the Land of Opportunity? When Hank Williams sang of being a "Ramblin' Man." when Jack Kerouac spewed forth his novel On the Road, the America they discovered "out there" was growing in wealth and power but not yet entirely free of the poverty that had provoked John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath and James Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Only for a few post-World War II decades did the country seem fiscally stable and increasingly generous to its citizens — long enough to produce the love/ hate relationship with consumer culture that was captured by pop artists such as James Rosenquist, a former billboard painter. More clinical, and closer perhaps to the lightly disguised formalism Zhang has adopted, were such deadpan projects as Ed Ruscha's photo books Twentysix Gasoline Stations and Every Building on the Sunset Strip.



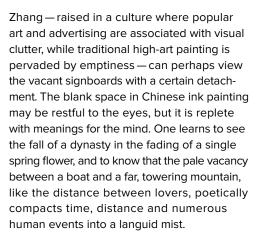
From a purely technological standpoint, one could argue that the abandoning of billboards is but one more entirely natural consequence of the overall cultural shift from print to electronic media: the inert message wall, bearing paintings or posters, will soon be replaced by streaming digital text and HD video screens, dazzling viewers with movement and saturated color as they do in major East Asian cities. But that view ignores a morally crucial factor: the devastating greed that has corrupted American ideals from their inception. In the past, slavery was its ugliest aspect; today, the squeezing of farmers and workers for the gross enrichment of bankers and financiers remains its most common, most recurrent, manifestation.



How far we have come from F. Scott Fitzgerald's ecstatic vision of primordial America at the end of The Great Gatsby (another story of transcendent desire tainted by commercial villainy):

for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.







Such an aesthetic, and the unimaginably long history from which it derives, might provide at least the comfort of a venerable perspective, the wisdom of acceptance. But that is not what shots like Zhang's picture of three bill-boards standing together in the low-high-low configuration of the three crosses on Calvary seem to imply. The surfaces are not entirely blank: "We hang to live" is the printed message left from an old neon-sign company ad. "Bless yourself" reads a scrawl on the derelict billboard in another picture, as though at least one anonymous graffiti writer has found where salvation must originate.



Since the millennium, U.S. businesses have closed and billboards have gone empty largely due to the ploys of a financial elite that cares more for excessive personal gain than for civic decency. One message to be read in Zhang's blank billboards, one reflection that comes back to us from her haunting *Mirror*, is the judgment tersely delivered near the end of the 1969 road-film classic *Easy Rider*. "We blew it," says the flag-wearing motorcyclist Wyatt (a.k.a. Captain America) to his sidekick, the buckskin-clad Billy: "We blew it, man."



Yet there is in Zhang's imagery another, more hopeful paradox — the fact that, in their very starkness, the blank billboards are formally beautiful. Flat or angled together in a wedge, whole or reduced to the grid of a previously supporting framework, they hold their own against the landscape — "destroyed," as Ernest Hemingway wrote of his old fisherman, "but not defeated."



For a series titled Horizon (2004), Zhang once photographed impoverished young girls as they crouched against the sky in the remote Chinese countryside. Seemingly sad and bewildered, the children — shot close from a low, heroizing angle — become surprisingly strong visual presences, not unlike those of Zhang's later American road signs. Neither the poor girls nor the blank billboards are entirely without promise. The golden light that emblazons an empty sign Zhang found standing among West Coast palm trees is not completely ironic. Sunset or sunrise? No matter; each comes repeatedly in succession. America has renewed itself a hundred times. and will probably do so once more. The old billboards may come back strong and colorful again, or they may vanish forever, replaced by some as yet unknown medium. Either way, it is up to us to write the new message.



# PLATES

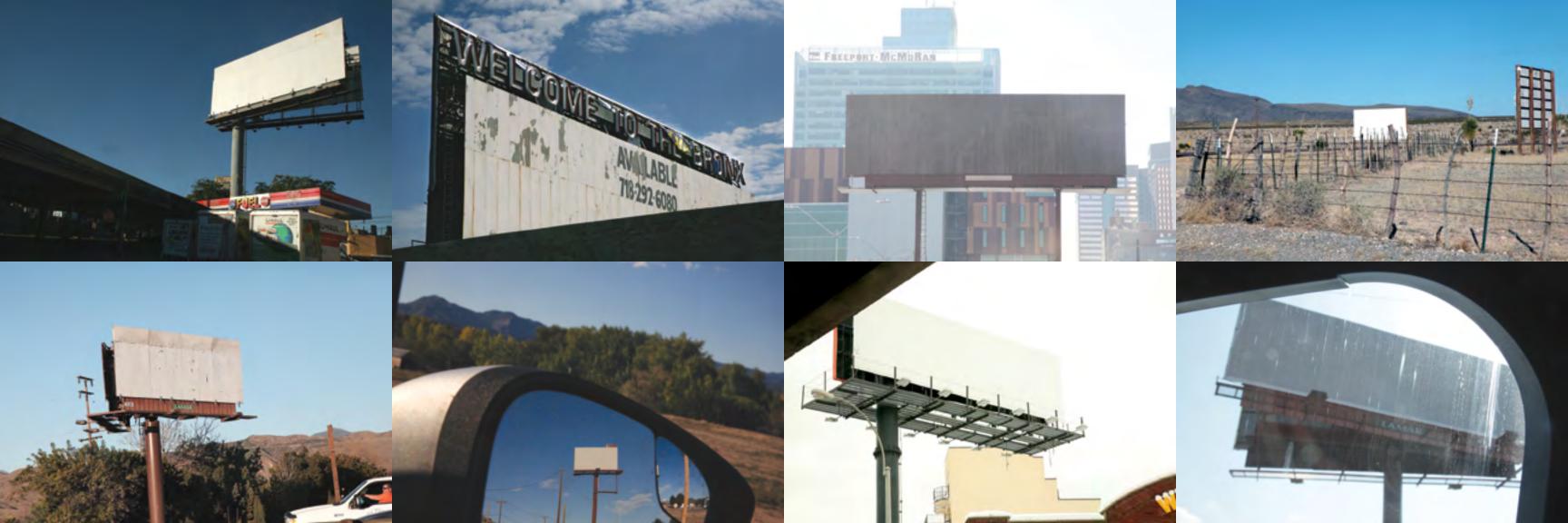












INSTALLATION AT THE VILCEK FOUNDATION



# Artist Statement

O Zhang

Driving some ten thousand miles in the United States in the last two years, I have been struck by the proliferation of empty billboards. They are blank and mute, but not silent.

Many of these neglected or graffiti-strewn advertising surfaces reminded me of the large-format paintings popular during the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s — abstract expressionist, minimalist, and early pop paintings whose expansive visions coincided with the rise of consumer and automobile culture in post-World War II America. During that period of optimism and upward mobility, roadside billboard advertising suggested a future of unlimited material prosperity and idealism.

Today's empty billboards tell a different story. Their blank surfaces promise nothing. Some possess a meditative calmness; others embody melancholy; still others seem merely remnants of times gone by. In *I Am Your Mirror*, each blank billboard seems to me a reflection of contemporary America. Collectively, they describe both fading dreams and new beginnings.



# A Brief Curatorial Note on the Evolution of O Zhang's I Am Your Mirror

Working with O Zhang during the past three years, I've had the pleasure of watching her artistic vision develop into a full-fledged work of installation art. I'd like to briefly describe that process and to offer a special thanks, as well, to her husband, the artist Peter Garfield, who worked closely with O over the course of this project.



Returning from her four extensive trips around the United States, O Zhang came back to New York changed by what she had encountered and recorded on the road. In her discussions with us at the Vilcek Foundation, she told us she wanted to create a rough-edged, multilayered installation, one that would reflect the look and feel of all she had witnessed in her travels across America. Overflowing with ideas, she set to work.

Not content simply to mount an exhibition of photographs, O envisioned the work as one which would include expansive collages, a distressed wood-panel gel transfer, a number of framed photographic prints, and, as the installation's centerpiece, an immense freestanding billboard. The different styles and media would overlay and complement one another. Over the course of several months, these various individual works came together to form a single cohesive record of her transformational journey.



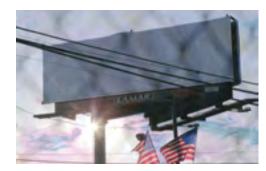
### **Anne Schruth**



O's husband, Peter, whose thoughts and ideas were invaluable to her throughout this long, ever-evolving project, accompanied her on each of her four endeavors across the country. Apart from serving as driver, navigator and travel companion to O during the course of her travels, Peter also dedicated a great deal of his time, energy and technical skill to helping O shape and refine her vision during the months following her return.

Peter's own work tends toward the uncanny and whimsical; he frequently manipulates scale and perspective in his projects. Like O, he works in a combination of media: photography, sculpture, conceptual installation and video. Peter has exhibited his work at the Brooklyn Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion (Stamford, Connecticut), and the Freight + Volume Gallery on West 24th Street in Chelsea. His work has also been collected by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among others.

Peter's vital contributions to this project, in lending both his time and artistic support, enabled O to bring her vision fully to life and to carefully construct a unique world of her own creation here within the walls of the Vilcek Foundation Gallery. It has been the greatest of pleasures watching O Zhang's vision take shape with the help of Peter Garfield here at the Vilcek Foundation, and I'm extremely pleased to have been a part of that process.









### Photography:

Front Cover: I Am Your Mirror, 2 (Buena Vista, Colorado). 2011. C-type Print.

Page 6 (Right): I Am Your Mirror, 8 (Alpine, Texas). 2012. C-type Print.

Page 8 (Center): I Am Your Mirror, 5 (Colton, California). 2012. C-type Print.

Page 11 (Left): I Am Your Mirror, 9 (Tucson, Arizona). 2012. C-type Print.

Page 11 (Right): I Am Your Mirror, 3 (Palm Desert, California). 2012. C-type Print.

Page 12: I Am Your Mirror, 6 (Cherokee, North Carolina). 2012. C-type Print.

Page 15: I Am Your Mirror, 4 (Deming, New Mexico). 2012. C-type Print.

Page 17: I Am Your Mirror, 1 (Brooklyn, New York). 2010.

Archival ink, presentation paper, wood and aluminum.

Page 18 (Bottom, right): I Am Your Mirror, 7 (Cañon City, Colorado). 2011. C-type Print.

Pages 24 & 27: Weather-treated prints.

All billboard images taken by O Zhang between October 8th, 2010 and April 8th, 2012.

Installation Concept / Design: O Zhang

Artistic Consultant: Peter Garfield

Graphic Design: Ahoy Studios

Artwork Installation: Erik Babcock

Copyeditor: Janice Borzendowski / Jennifer Milne

Billboard Design Consultant / Construction: **Khouri Guzman Bunce Limited**Photography: Page 23: **Peter Hurley Photography**, Pages 21, 24 – 28: **O Zhang** 

Project Coordinator: **Anne Schruth** 

Essayist: Richard Vine

### VILCEK FOUNDATION

EXHIBITIONS

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