

# santa fean

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# Xiang Zhang

the painter's new show at McLarry Fine Art celebrates the year of the horse and the storied history of the American West

by Gussie Fauntleroy

AFTER CHINESE-BORN XIANG ZHANG earned his first major oil painting award in 1995 while living in Dallas, a cable television reporter asked him if he had ever considered painting cowboys. "A big, wonderful idea!" Zhang says with characteristic enthusiasm while sitting in the studio at his home in McKinney, Texas. "It reminded me [I was] in a cowboy state!"

Zhang (whose full name is pronounced Shang Zang) was born in 1954—which, like 2014, is the year of the horse, according to the Chinese zodiac. As a boy in Sichuan, Zhang would pass plodding horses pulling farm carts during his daily walk to school, so horses were the first subjects of his frequent childhood sketches. They were his entry into a lifelong love of drawing and painting, and they remain a central feature in his widely collected art.

As a young man, Zhang studied set design at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, where coursework included four hours of oil painting instruction every morning. His painting professors were influenced by the Russian masters, and Zhang was also greatly impressed by works in traveling European and American museum shows. He earned a full scholarship to Tulane University in New Orleans, graduating with an MFA at the top of his class. During his time in the Big Easy, he spent hours painting jazz musicians in the French Quarter and worked as a set designer for New Orleans's op-

era house and, later, as a float designer for the Mardi Gras Parade.

While Zhang continues to paint dancers, portraits, and the like for his figurative work, he discovered his true artistic calling while sitting on fence railings and photographing (and later painting) Texas ranch hands at work. For years he's depicted the drama and dusty action of roundups, roping, branding, and cattle drives, portraying contemporary cowboys while excluding references to modern paraphernalia like pickup trucks.

Recently the artist began reaching more deeply into the history of the American West. His upcoming show at McLarry Fine Art, *Year of the Horse*, features large-scale imagined narratives from the past like longhorns being driven down a street in late-1800s Austin, Texas, as a vegetable seller wrangles prices with the cattle boss and a cook. Another image, inspired by Zhang's ongoing research into New Mexico history, depicts a turn-of-the-20th-century wedding party with musicians and onlookers on a Santa Fe street.

Fascinated by all genres of art and continually exploring new directions and nuances in his work, the painter muses good-naturedly about what might come next. "Maybe Western cowboy surrealism? You never know!" **SI**

*Xiang Zhang, Year of the Horse, October 24–November 7, reception October 24, 5–7 PM, McLarry Fine Art, 225 Canyon, mclarryfineart.com*



*Morning Drive in Palo Duro, oil on canvas, 48 x 80"*