

## Stars in the East

Wujcik and Giroux: Passing the torch at Nova 535.

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**MEAT THE MICHELIN MAN:** Wujcik gives the superhero treatment to Chinese performance artist Zhang Yuan.

### INFO

**Jay Giroux & Theo Wujcik: New Paintings and Installations**

Runs through May 31. **NOVA 535**, 535 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. St. N., St. Petersburg, 727-821-6682, [nova535.com](http://nova535.com).

Theo Wujcik knew something was up when the ads in

*Artforum* started to change. The monthly magazine -- phonebook-thick with glossy proclamations of exhibits in New York City and across the globe -- functions as a barometer for the Ybor City artist, a means of gauging trends in the art world from a distance. When the names of Chinese artists began to intermingle with the reigning American and European stars, Wujcik sensed a sea change.

"The Asian invasion," he calls it, with the bemused curiosity of someone who has witnessed such a power shift before.

"You used to have to go to Paris if you wanted to be considered serious as an artist," Wujcik explains. Then, in the 1950s -- the decade he began his education as an artist -- the Abstract Expressionists stole the limelight from Paris and brought it to New York. "Now I'm thinking ... are you going to have to go to Shanghai to become a serious artist? Will China 'steal' this from the U.S.?"

The thought seems to tickle Wujcik. It's an idea he finds intriguing enough that his latest series of large-scale paintings are devoted to the concept, paying homage to one of China's most important -- and most famous -- contemporary artists, Zhang Huan. The paintings are part of an exhibit at **NOVA 535**, a luxury event venue in downtown St. Petersburg with ambitions to function as an art gallery on the side. When Nova opened in February, owner **Michael S. Novilla** took some flack from me, and others, about the caliber of artwork on the walls. With the Wujcik show -- which also features work by Jay Giroux -- Novilla has proven his desire to improve in that department, finally offering a visual art component on par with the sophistication of his exquisitely renovated historic building.

This isn't the first time Wujcik's work has made a statement about other artists. In 2004, he completed a series of 28 drawings called "Breaking with the Past." Inspired by a chance encounter

with a photograph of an ancient Roman bust bearing an uncanny resemblance to Op Art proponent Richard Anuszkiewicz, Wujcik began to draw portraits of the post-Abstract Expressionist artists who ruled the 1960s, '70s and '80s as Roman statues -- simultaneously paying homage to the artists and pointing out that their avant-garde aesthetics had entered the canon. Besides Anuszkiewicz, he rendered Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Larry Bell and others as antique marble heads.

And those who follow Wujcik's work will recall that a series of silverpoint portraits of artists including Ed Ruscha, Johns, Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein launched his career as a fine artist in the 1970s. After he received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to complete the project, the drawings entered important collections, including the Museum of Modern Art. (Last week, following news of Rauschenberg's death, Wujcik says he phoned fellow artist James Rosenquist for a Jack Daniels toast to the deceased art titan, who favored whiskey.)

Wujcik gives Zhang, a Chinese artist best known for his unusual performances, the comic-book superhero treatment. In the painting, Zhang enacts his 2002 performance *My New York*, during which he walked the streets of Manhattan in a Michelin Man suit of raw meat and released a flock of white doves. In the second painting of the still-in-progress series, Wujcik depicts an older figure, interrupted in his contemplation of Zhang's ash Buddha sculpture, turning to look over his shoulder directly at the viewer.

With his Pop Art, comic-book-inspired style, Wujcik simultaneously affirms his identity as a slightly younger contemporary of now-canonical first-generation American Pop artists and suggests the inevitable passing of the torch -- in this case to Shanghai-based Zhang. Wujcik says his next painting in the series will focus on Japanese art superstar Takashi Murakami, whose anime-influenced prints and sculptures are more akin to his own aesthetic.

Besides a smattering of other paintings by Wujcik, the exhibit offers two major new works and some smaller prints by Giroux, a Tampa artist who looks to Wujcik as a mentor and friend. In a trio of paintings that function as a triptych and a larger piece that bridges installation and painting, Giroux collages found imagery (sometimes redrawn and pulled through the sieve of memory rather than replicated) that suggests a mix of comics, vintage advertisements and signs, and animal illustrations punctuated by the occasional graphic swirl à la Ryan McGinness. Though impressive in their execution, Giroux's contributions left me with a less-than-satisfying sense of the artist in a state of exploration and self-discovery rather than confidently asserting himself in visual or experiential terms.

Giroux heads to Houston in July for graduate school in art, so Tampa residents may find themselves bereft of an opportunity to see what he accomplishes next. If his ambition takes him as far as it should, the works in this exhibit might one day serve as a preview of where he's headed as an artist -- or a stark contrast with where he'll end up.

Who knows? Maybe it'll be Shanghai.