On a drive through the Pennsylvania hinterlands, Chinese installation artist Xu Bing is videotaping the verdant hills and valleys, muttering "beautiful" when a particularly lush landscape comes into view. Dense evergreen give way to leafy oaks, hawks circle and occasionally swoop down and disappear into swaying rows of corn, streams trickle over polished stones and Xu Bing swivels the camera around to capture it all.

Despite the woody scenery, this venture into farm country isn't just a pleasure trip. Xu Bing's exhibition Cultural Animal, featuring the world premiere of the work Pandas Zoo, opens this Friday at the Wood Street Galleries, downtown.

The foundation of the work has already been laid, but one of the chief elements is still missing. Gallery curator Murray Horne and artist Xu Bing are trekking to Ray Machulsky's hog farm in Apollo to find the final element of the installation.

A hog farm may seem a strange place to collect the components of an art exhibition. But if the piece requires live pigs, where else would you go?

Pandas Zoo resembles a zoo display of the great herbivorous creatures—except the pen doesn't hold pandas, but pigs in panda masks. The concept may sound funny, but it's actually a probing exploration of cultural perceptions. Westerners generally think pandas are smart animals, but the Chinese think pigs have superior intellect. This is not Xu Bing's first foray into works including live animals. For Cares, Study of Transience, a male and a female pig were decorated with English and Chinese characters and placed together in a pen, in their littered with books. Steam have shown up in exhibitions as well.

"The pig is an ancient animal," he says. "It was important to me to use them in his work, they'll spur contemplation on evolution, Darwin, relationships between the species and relationships between the races in his audience. Also, he adds, "the pig is really cute."

The pig of the moment is the Hampshire (or "hamp" to insiders)—mostly black with a white band encircling its forelegs and shoulders. When Xu Bing first saw them, he thought of pandas. Murray Horne asked him to create a new work for his show in Pittsburgh. He wanted to make a statement on cultural perceptions, and the Hampshires served as inspiration.

Horne contacted a few different farms in search of the Hampshires and was referred to Ray Machulsky. He and his wife Donna raise Hampshires on his family farm, and when Horne explained what he was looking for and why, Machulsky was game.

On the farm, which boasts a few hundred younger pigs, several dogs barking happily as the car approaches and several breeding pigs. Xu Bing makes his selection. The breeding sows and boars are bypassed. First, they're all the more standard pink model. Also, they can reach 600 pounds—a bit too large to take residence in a downtown gallery for more than a month. They're also a bit intimidating to approach with a handcrafted panda mask.

Xu Bing walks into the wooden structure where the 14- to 15-week-old pigs are housed, plastic grocery bags tied to his shoes to protect them from the mud. Several ramps stand out in a squealing.
squeezing sex of pig. He plates no one, and Machado holds it out of the main for further inspection. It wiggles as he holds it upside down by a leg, and Xu Bing pats at it gently.

It doesn't make the cut. A few other pigs are inspected. Then the judging moves along to some smaller ones, around 10 months old. He's searching for the pigs with darker black and the brighter white underside. Piling in their pens, they all look pretty dirty, but they'll be spiffed up for the exhibition. Machado admits they use baby powder and shoe polish on the pigs, which is what he does for his teddy bears.

Xu Bing eventually chooses one younger and two older pigs. He'd like to have several more, but in the small gallery space a half-dozen pigs would be ideal. The selected swines were chosen for personality as well as appearance, and he believes pigs are generally well-suited to this line of work. "They really enjoy themselves," he says.

Machado's wife, Donna, says the pigs in general are very intelligent. "They're always looking for something to play with, something to do. They get bored really fast. And they're actually very clean animals, and will only play with a ball or other toys until they get dirty. Then they want to eat."

"They'll be delivered to the gallery later. And when they're here, the customers will be cared for by volunteer security guards (who will doubtless have something new to add to their repertoire).

When the show closes, the pigs will return to the farm to be sold—lose their status as performance pixels doing nothing to earn them from thelaughterhouse. Though for several weeks, the 15 minutes of fame usually extended only to human beings will be granted also to pigs.

**SCRAPPLE**

The collection of Xu Bing Cultural Animal also includes the exhibition *Square Word: A New English Calligraphy*. For the piece, Xu Bing has created a written language interlacing letters into readable words that mirror Chinese characters, and square words encourage viewers to learn the principles of Chinese calligraphy. Also, in conjunction with Cultural Animal is an exhibition on Chinese artists, Artists in Zhou, and a film series at the same theater that includes *The Red Lantern* and *Sewn My Country*.

Xu Bing: Cultural Animal opens at the Road Street Gallery on Friday and runs through Oct. 3. For information call 475-6655.

Contributing editor Louis Bremer reviews the weekly "White on China" columns.