

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Zeng Fanzhi takes off his famous mask

Zeng Fanzhi, whose Hong Kong exhibition includes his paintings of other famous artists, explains why he's always in danger of losing himself in his works

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Zeng Fanzhi is known primarily for his *Mask* series of paintings. One of these, *Mask Series 1996 No6*, sold for HK\$75.4 million at a Christie's auction in May 2008 - a record for a Chinese contemporary artist at the time. It features eight Young Pioneers, the youth movement of the Communist Party, with red scarves and white masks. If you have not seen it, you've almost certainly seen something similar, genuine or copied, because many people now associate Zeng with perpetually grinning, white-masked faces.

Yet he hasn't done a *Mask* painting since 2004. Although you can glimpse the beginnings and the end of that theme in the arc of his solo exhibition at Gagosian on Pedder Street - the gallery's first with a Chinese artist - there's just one officially labelled example, *Mask Series No13*, from 1994.

Instead, there are 17 portraits plus a little oil on canvas from 2009 entitled *Boots*. It's wittily hung at right angles to a 2009 self-portrait in which Zeng is barefoot. Gagosian is showing us a bigger picture through this mini retrospective.

The earliest work on display, *Haircut* (1989), is clearly influenced by the German Expressionists: its sea-green introversion is the antithesis of the red-flag-waving-and-cheerleading school of Chinese art. There's a 1991 triptych from his *Hospital* series on the gallery's back wall; there are a couple of his *Meat* paintings; there are portraits of other artists (including two fine ones of British figurative painter Francis Bacon and a marvellous rendition of Lucian Freud); and right at the entrance, there's another self-portrait, completed this year. Its clear-eyed placement seems to be a physical statement: I have arrived.

That portrait features what has been a Zeng motif from the start - huge, articulated hands. So the first thing one needs to check, with apologies to Freud's grandfather, is size. The artist willingly holds his own out, palm up.

They're not noticeably large; along his right thumb, there's a jagged scar where he caught it in a door in 2004. He had to go to a Beijing hospital and have six stitches and the injury rendered him unable to paint for two months. When he restarted, he began to use his left hand. Now he uses both. The impressionist imperfections of the left create less controlled work than the right.

Zeng describes this, through an interpreter, amid the pungent fumes of the Red Chamber Cigar Divan in Pedder Building where he has come to escape the frenetic atmosphere of his press opening. During the interview, his left hand occasionally covers the lower half of his face as he's listening; his right hand holds a reeking Trinidad Reyes. He's wearing a military-style jacket; it's white and by Hermes.

There are two sides to any mega-successful artist in 21st-century China. Zeng is 47, with a wife, a nine-year-old daughter, a large studio on the outskirts of Beijing and international collectors, such as the

luxury-goods emperor, Francois Pinault (who owns a controlling percentage of Christie's), knocking at his door. The trick, now, is not to get his hand caught in that door. How can he retain the vision of that young man in Wuhan he once was, who lived adjacent to a hospital and - his family not having one - used its lavatory every day and painted the collective anguish that he saw?

"When you look at me, you may think I look very logical," he says. "But inside, I'm as emotional as 20 years ago. Once I pick up the brush or the pen, I enter a world of my own. Yes, there may be external distractions, not just specific to fame, but I keep the passion inside to create what I want."

One of the ways he taps into such emotion is by listening to Western classical music (Tchaikovsky is a favourite, particularly *Swan Lake* and the *1812 Overture*) or by singing along to Peking opera. Does the art become more Western or more Chinese depending on the music? Zeng, who can look faintly anxious when his work is being discussed (he shies away from any political analysis, the weight of interpretation falling on the viewer, not the artist), relaxes. For the portraits, he says, he listens to what he thinks the individual on his canvas would like to hear.

In the case of Freud, it was the soundtrack of *Schindler's List*. The Freud portrait - like the one of Bacon with a (punning) haunch of meat - is based on a famous photograph in which the British artist is cuddling a fox. It exactly captures the feral quality of both: seeing it in the late-afternoon silence of the gallery, you're inclined to take a step back, then a step forward to see how it's done. Zeng says that after he completed it this year, before Freud died in July, so much of himself went into this one work that he wondered if he'd ever be able to surpass what he'd created.

Is every portrait, then, a self-portrait? "Yes, yes, yes! A picture within the picture."

And yet, since he chooses such famously difficult, tormented, Western artists (Pablo Picasso being another in the show), what does that say about him? That, Zeng says after a pause, is the real conflict within himself - balancing the "egocentric" Western style with the Chinese tradition in which the artist is all but invisible. There's a self-portrait in which he poses in the Chinese manner, holding what looks like a smoking paint-brush (in his left hand) within a desolate landscape. You'll have to see it for yourself to decide whether he's wearing a mask.

None of his serious landscapes nor his sculptures are featured at Gagosian. Most of the works aren't even for sale: they're in museums or in private collections, such as those of the Swiss former ambassador to China, Uli Sigg, whose small portrait hangs in a corner.

These are dizzying years for the student from the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts who used to paint men sleeping on refrigerated carcasses to cool themselves in summer and who arrived in Beijing in 1993, without documents, and discovered what it was to be an outsider.

Now Zeng is having to hang on to that essential isolation, with two giant hands.

Tue-Sat, 11am-7pm, Gagosian, 7/F Pedder Bldg, 12 Pedder St, Central. Inquiries: 21510555. Ends Nov 5