

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



# Zeng Fanzhi

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With his psychologically complex portraits, Zeng Fanzhi has established himself as one of the greatest painters of his generation. **Edmund Lee** talks to the Chinese artist during his Hong Kong visit.

When people think about Zeng Fanzhi, they often recall his painting subjects' white masks, their outsized hands and the astonishingly high prices that these hands have been fetching in auctions. In person, the Beijing-based 47-year-old artist whose impressionistic portraits of seemingly suppressed emotions is himself rather serene. Zeng only sporadically breaks into very subdued chuckles when our conversation drifts on to his slightly awkward status as one of the world's top-selling artists, which, at a 2008 auction, saw his oil-on-canvas diptych *Mask Series 1996 No.6* sold for US\$9.7 million, a record for Asian contemporary art. Drawn from the inner struggles stemming from the self-confessed introvert's city living experiences, Zeng's *Mask Series* – which he started in 1994 and officially concluded in 2004, and is

generally considered his most important series to date – also delves into the artist's childhood memories amid the socialist influences that he grew up with in the 1970s. We meet up with the artist at his Hong Kong exhibition, which provides a fascinating survey of a career that's equally characterised for its many stages of reinvention.

**I can imagine that you must be a very busy man. So how much time in a day do you normally devote to painting?**

I usually spend about 80 to 90 percent of my time creating. It's not just the painting process, but a larger part of this time is spent on the thinking process. I spend several hours, every day, meditating by myself in a [quiet] environment. My work requires me to find the [right] feelings in a very quiet state. So I often spend my mornings meeting guests, taking interviews and managing my work duties. All these tasks must be finished before lunch. In the afternoon, I try to keep any interaction with the outside world to a minimum.

**It seems to me that much of your work is oozing a kind of dark and disquieting ambience. Can you describe your state of mind when you paint?**

I like to... how should I put it? The facial expressions of my characters are sometimes very solemn – just like me. From the outside, I look very sensible and serious and not very sociable; but in reality, I'm quite an emotional person. While my work may be perceived as cold and melancholy, it is very vivid and temperamental at heart. But I do like to create a powerful aura of tragedy on the surface [of my work]. I don't like images that are overwhelmingly beautiful.

**It's interesting you mention the tragic quality of your work. I've been wondering if the occasional smiling faces are indeed ironic in their conception.**

There are some [characters] who are smiling, but most of them are not. They're looking very sombre. Actually, I wouldn't say [the smiles] are ironic, because they are still symbolic of our living experiences in the past. Most of my work is based on my past memories and childhood experiences, which are now expressed in this particular manner. It's not an irony; [but] there's a little bit of social critique in there. We care about our living environment, and I'm expressing that through an artistic mode, to offer food for thought for the public.

**Indeed, your work has touched on many of the social changes in modern China from the Cultural Revolution onwards. How political do you consider your own work?**

Actually, it's impossible for our generation to get out of this way of thinking. I was born in the 1960s, and my teenage years – up to the 80s – were spent in a society in the shadow of the Cultural Revolution. So in a way, we would inevitably feel deeply about the drastic changes since then. I'm in my 40s, and every decade [in my life] has been very different. I think we are a very complicated generation, living against a very complicated social backdrop. The impact of the Cultural Revolution has been huge for us – it has contributed to the complicated milieu that our generation grew up in. As artists, we have too many experiences to serve as our creative inspirations. Apart from dealing with humanity and the society, however, my work is also looking towards the future. Whereas my early work focused on my life and my past, my later work connects with the world, functioning as a dialogue between Eastern and Western cultures.

**You've said quite a few times in the past that your work isn't meant to be political. But at the same time, it's hard to deny that the popularity of it is also partly indebted to its perceived political ingredient. What do you think about this paradox?**

We're all part of this society. On the one hand, my work reflects my life and my views on the society; on the other hand, art also has its aesthetic functions. Aside from our social concern and critique, the aesthetics are very important too. I think the two sides have to be connected.

### **How would you describe your style?**

My style is varied. My form and language are varied and vivid. It can be accepted by everyone and easily comprehended by anyone. I don't want my art to require too much explanation from me. Art is something to be seen. Each viewer has his own judgement after seeing a work, and it is very important for my [visual] language to be accepted. If your work is comprehensible only to 10 percent [of the viewers], with the remaining 90 percent requiring your linguistic explanation, the visual language is [effectively] absent. I feel that much of the comprehension should be through the viewers' eyes. [Painting] is a visual medium, and shouldn't require me to explain myself too much. That's why I find it necessary to [adopt] a generally comprehensible mode of expression.

### **In your work, how many of your characters are based on you?**

When I was working on the *Mask Series*, I was quite often expressing my inner feelings. I'm not saying that it's me in every painting, but every one of them tells a story from my past. I might find a person to play [a role] in my story, my dream or my imagination. My thoughts are encapsulated in there.

### **Do you remember what your earliest paintings were like?**

I can't recall too clearly, because I started painting when I was very young. I just picked up a pen and began drawing.

### **What kind of drawing?**

When I was little, I drew *lianhuanhua* [a form of sequential drawings that is the precursor of Chinese comics]. I modelled after the characters in *lianhuanhua*, so my interest in drawing people has been there right from the start. I was drawing whatever I felt like. My daughter is like that too: I never tell her what to draw, and – as in my own childhood – I just give her a pen and let her draw whatever she wants. Through this arbitrary process, your brain is in fact developing and creating and exercising its imagination. This is of utmost importance, because the technical issues can be solved when you're 15 or 16, but creativity and imagination must be [developed] before 10. It can't be taught.

### **What does your daughter think about your work?**

She normally has no comment [about my work]. She thinks dad is best. She always says dad's [work] is great.

### **So how did you decide to become an artist at first?**

I think [I decided] in a daze, between the ages of 16 and 18. I wasn't exactly thinking about becoming an artist. I only knew that I like art and thought it's a pleasure to express, to create, and to feel life through art. It's a job that I'm especially willing to do.

### **When did you first realise you've become well-known?**

I think in the early 1990s. At that time, it's mostly about being recognised by the professionals, by your peers in the industry. It wasn't about the public back then, because they weren't as interested in art as they are today. It was through exhibitions that we got to know other artists.

### **And then, in 2008, your *Mask Series 1996 No.6* was sold for US\$9.7 million, setting a record for Asian contemporary art along the way. What do you make of that now?**

This was definitely out of my imagination. I wouldn't have thought that... that there'd be such a price. For an artist... it was a complete surprise to me back then. But now that I've thought about it, [the price] was only logical, because China's economy has been rapidly developing. People are all very confident about the prosperity of the art market – and the future of China. As such, the new generation of Chinese artists are increasingly valued by the market. [Nonetheless] the 2008 [sale] was a shock. I thought it was an extremely high price.

**Along with the likes of Zhang Xiaogang and Yue Minjun, you belong to the first generation of Chinese artists who are internationally recognised and collected. What do you think are the factors that have really set you apart from the past generations?**

I think this has to do with the social changes in China. This is the era in which China rapidly develops in front of the eyes of the entire world. [We] are in the right place at the right time. It so happens that we've received a very good education and it so happens that we're very young. Unlike our predecessors, who enjoyed very limited artistic freedom and must work to others' ideas, we can work to our own life experiences and fully express our messages. It's a very liberated state of being. Of course, we've also caught up with the best period of economic growth in our society. The whole world is looking at China now – and if you start out at this very moment, it's easy to get noticed.

**On a relatively trivial note, I see that on top of your Chinese signature, you've also included the *pinyin* 'Zeng Fanzhi' on your paintings in recent years. Is this meant to offer easier access to a wider audience?**

Right. This is a habit: at first it's only the Chinese name and, later on, I'm also including my *pinyin*. I haven't thought too much about this... it's to let more people recognise your work.

**In terms of your artistic directions, are you experimenting with any new ideas at the moment?**

I have a few ideas. I've created some new works that I haven't shown to the public yet. I've been exploring... I started out by studying Western art; I'm seeking the dialogue between Eastern and Western cultures. I've been exploring many of the important concepts in traditional Chinese art. Perhaps I'll absorb some of these nutrients and turn them into my new work.

**Zeng Fanzhi's** Hong Kong exhibition is at Gagosian Gallery until **Nov 5**.