

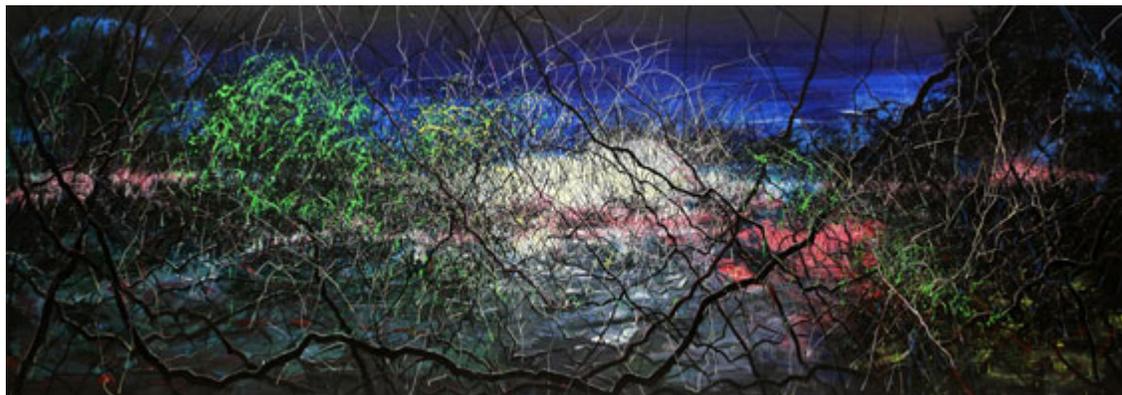
GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Balancing act

An exhibition by a Chinese artist at the Gagosian gallery in London goes beyond national and regional themes

By Jackie Wullschlager



'Pure Land' (2012)
Courtesy Zeng Fanzhi Studio

It has finally happened – a solo exhibition of a Chinese artist whose power and interest does not depend on Chinese themes or subject matter. Since the 1990s, China has been the promised land of the global arts scene, but not one of the numerous group shows staged in the past decade – at Tate Liverpool, the Saatchi Gallery, the Hayward – has been able to make a case that artists from the region are of more than local concern. Nor, apart from Ai Weiwei – and that for political reasons – have even the most successful, millionaire-career Chinese artists become names known individually outside Asia.

That is likely to change soon. Gagosian Gallery is a shaper as well as a barometer of taste, and its exhibition of new works by Zeng Fanzhi is currently the most exciting painting show in London.

At its heart hangs “Hare”: a four-by-four metre canvas in which an absurdly enlarged version in voluptuous oil of Dürer’s famous brush drawing of the animal is set in a luminous yet acrid-hued imaginary landscape, criss-crossed with a chaotic tangle of coal-black lines, edged in titanium white. This monster hare, as timid and fearfully alert, and more trapped, than in Dürer’s depiction, is a creature of ridicule, pathos, and depictive uncertainty. As you draw near, it disappears in a broad mass of abstract marks, merging with the background – the opposite effect

of the Renaissance master's breathtaking realism, where every strand of fur is intensely delineated and you feel that you are meeting the animal's watchful eye.

The eyes of Zeng's hare are deadened, yet the composition surges with energy and emotional tension. It seems to me to be about painting, about the challenge of representation in an age of sensory visual overload where every image is mediated, when differences between real and virtual are collapsed. Zeng is an immensely assured painter, and plays deftly on art history – while his dense oily gestures transform the figure of the hare, he reprises Dürer's delicate strokes of watercolour and ink in the calligraphic skein of lines that zigzag over and obscure our reading of it.



'Hare' (2012)
Courtesy of the Gagosian Gallery

Something similar happens in the painterly manner of two accompanying works, each starting with iconic Dürer drawings and reworked at the same scale. In “Old Man”, the focal point of Dürer's depiction, the beard, evoked in swirling lines created with subtle changes of brush pressure, is delineated by Zeng's long, creamy passages of thick oil paint, overlaid with thinner black and white strokes and streaks of red. Like the hare's fur, the beard fuses with the enveloping landscape; the old man's eyes are closed; he is lost in his own world of thought, the only reality of the painting.

If both these works turn on freedom and entrapment – physical or of the mind – the third in the trio, “Praying Hands”, must be about belief. Zeng has painted enormously enlarged hands before, in the celebrated 1990s “Mask” series, depicting young people wearing Communist guard red scarfs, their white-masked faces concealing identities and emotions – one of these fetched \$9.6m in 2008, then a record for a contemporary Asian work.

Here the larger-than-life bulging veins, gnarled joints, misshapen fingers folded in prayer, are an almost grotesque presence. To Dürer's original composition – based on the praying hands of his brother, who worked instead of pursuing his own artistic career in order to support Dürer's training, then found his hands too coarsened for art and prayed that his talent should be absorbed by Dürer – Zeng has added three glowing candles, alluding to a series by another German painter, Gerhard Richter.

It is hard to read the tone of these works. Realism is so monumental that it becomes fantastical; postmodern appropriation that suggests irony is laced with sentiment; heroism goes alongside mockery. There is the same ambivalence in the eerie twilit landscapes, heavily textured but refined and nuanced across vast surfaces.

Other works are more aggressive, and suggest environmental catastrophe. In the 10-metre “Pure Land”, pools of white shine out from deep blue and grey horizontal planes that imply sky, clouds, mist, rushing rivers, and are streaked, like the Dürer works, with knots of black/white lines here suggesting branches, vines or nature out of control. Patches of green hint at the optimism of growth but the mood is the tragic sublime of German romanticism, its tightrope between visible phenomena and mental imagery.

“These are not real landscapes. They are rather about an experience of *miao wu* [marvellous revelation]. *Miao wu* constitutes a restless journey of discovery,” Zeng says. Born in 1964 in Wuhan, an industrial city on the Yangtze River known as the “Chicago of China”, he has had a career noted for a quixotic changing of genre, though the restless, expressive vigour of his handling of paint is constant. He admired German expressionism from the start; the “Mask” figures and two earlier 1990s series, one depicting hospital workers and the other, “Meat”, barely distinguishing between animal carcasses and the human figures who pack and sell them, are all indebted to Max Beckmann.



'Praying Hands' (2012)
Courtesy of the Gagosian Gallery

No German painter, probably, would dare take on Dürer, but otherwise it would not be a surprise to be told that the densely worked, huge, abstracting canvases here were the work of a newly discovered German artist. Anselm Kiefer, for the emotional extravagance, and Gerhard Richter, for the virtuoso plurality of expression, repeatedly come to mind.

Like Richter, Zeng grew up in a repressive regime, came of age at a time when his country was making a decisive break with its past, launched his career with figurative works that were both painterly and overtly political, then suddenly but not exclusively embraced abstraction. The mesh of lines overwhelming his canvases like an abstract maze began in 2004, when he used them to deface portraits of Mao, Lenin and Marx in his “Great Men” series. These are the bridge between the cover-ups of the “Mask” paintings and the works at Gagosian.

If the “Masks” evoke a period of restrictive control in China, the free-flowing explosion of lines in these new paintings reflects the current political and social climate – an anything-goes economic policy, a nation increasingly connected to the world by a web of complex links, but one more open only to a degree.

Zeng does not directly depict the complicated reality of living in China at a time of transition, but it is in his paintings, as the Zeitgeist infuses the work of any serious artist. His unruly intersecting lines define social landscapes as well as imaginary ones – the global network of cyberspace, the power of social media to create a virtual world that overpowers both interior and exterior realities.

When I met Zeng earlier this year, he told me that he admired artists such as Bacon, Freud, Morandi, who “are completely disconnected from the real world ... think their own world and are truthful to it. I had a very pure life as a student, no market, no gallery ... a wonderful state. Young artists now face different challenges, too much information, confusion, temptations. If you can’t find yourself, you’re finished.”

Zeng’s paintings mirror the confusing, complicated layers through which we all now perceive the world, in a painterly language demonstrating the survival nonetheless of the life of the imagination: a terrific balancing act.