

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Zeng Fanzhi, China's richest artist

How did a high-school dropout from gritty Wuhan become one of Asia's most expensive living artists?

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Zeng Fanzhi in his Beijing studio, July 2013 ©Ben McMillan

It was 1998 and Zeng Fanzhi was struggling to find somewhere to display his paintings. The market for modern Chinese art barely existed. Thanks to help from a fledgling local dealership, Zeng was able to hang a piece in the lobby of the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Shanghai and was extremely pleased when the painting – “Mask Series No 6” (1996) – was sold to a visiting American tourist for \$16,000.

Just 10 years later, the same piece was bought for more than \$9.7m at a Christie's auction in Hong Kong, making Zeng the most expensive living Asian artist – and the American tourist who sold it a very happy man.

Today, Zeng is an icon in the art world and his career provides an analogy for the development of modern Chinese art – perhaps even Chinese society – from the utilitarian social realism of his childhood during the cultural revolution to the giddy heights of global art fairs and seven-figure price tags.

I arrive for our interview at his studio in a famous artists' district on the outskirts of Beijing to find a serene oasis away from the frenetic pollution and noise of the Chinese capital. An inner courtyard of rock fountains and tall trees leads into an entrance hall dominated by an exquisite wooden Buddha that pre-dates the founding of the Tang dynasty in AD618.

The hall opens to the left into Zeng's high-ceilinged, sunny studio, lined with enormous finished and half-finished canvases, casually strewn with millions of dollars worth of his creations. Puffing on a fine Cuban cigar, Zeng is busy poring over a small-scale model of his latest exhibition with a visitor – a retrospective of 40 of his paintings and sculptures from 1990 to 2012 that will open at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris in October.

An assistant makes me a delicious espresso in an adjoining kitchen area and after a few minutes Zeng appears, apologising profusely for making me wait and for the lack of air conditioning in the studio, which he explains is necessary so his paint can dry slowly.



A new painting, 'Inner Peace' ©Ben McMillan

He is studiously polite and almost shy in his quiet, unassuming manner but his eyes look like they are made from granite and, as we sit down in the courtyard garden with a pot of expensive Chinese tea, I have the feeling he is used to people flattering him. “We are now in a period of great artistic flourishing in China,” he says. “In the 1990s there was almost nothing but there are countless artists now. Whether they are all good is not for me to say, only people in the future will be able to tell.”

This is a typically oblique and diplomatic comment from Zeng on the millions of counterfeiters, copycats and opportunists drawn into the Chinese art boom by the promise of great riches. Rather than waste time thinking about the state of the art world or even the state of the wider world, Zeng says he focuses almost entirely on his painting. He insists that every brushstroke must be made by him so he ignores weekends, spending 330 full days a year in his studio, with just one month's break during the oppressive Beijing summer for travel with his family.

This dedication to art has been the defining feature of Zeng's life since he was born to workers from a printing factory in 1964 in the gritty central Chinese city of Wuhan. "I was always a bad student; I refused to let people force me to study things I wasn't interested in and I was only really interested in drawing and painting," he says.

Wuhan was one of the epicentres of the cultural revolution, which began in 1966 and involved the persecution or death of millions of intellectuals, professionals and officials. Because his parents were designated as working class, Zeng's family was relatively safe but they were not left unscathed by the convulsions ripping through society.

"At the time everyone wore the same clothes but my mother liked beautiful things and she sometimes wore a bit of colour – some pink flowers on her clothes," he says. "For that she was persecuted for her 'petit bourgeois sentimentalism' – that experience affected my whole family deeply."

Although Zeng's mother was not subjected to the violent "struggle sessions" that others endured, the family was publicly humiliated by groups of militant Red Guards who pasted denunciations outside their house and at his mother's factory in the form of "big character posters" – large handwritten banners of Chinese calligraphy that have been used since imperial times to protest or spread popular messages.

Not long after this, the young boy began to draw for pleasure and for a break from the monotony of formal Mao-era schooling. When he says he was a bad student, Zeng is not exaggerating or dabbling in false modesty. He did not finish high school, dropping out at 16 to work in a printing factory like his parents and taking formal painting lessons in his spare time.

When he discovered there was such a thing as art school he decided to apply but, because of his deficiency in subjects like maths and science, he failed the university entrance exams five years in a row before he was finally admitted to the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts in 1987 at the age of 23. "I was lucky that my parents did not pressure me or discourage me; they were very supportive and each year my exam marks got a little better until finally I got in," he says.

Although all he wanted to do was stay home and paint, Zeng was assigned by the government to work at a fledgling advertising agency when he graduated in 1991. It would turn out to be the dawn of the advertising industry in post-revolution China. "When I started there the only advertising that could be displayed was political slogans but that soon changed," Zeng says. "I managed to get a big ad contract for the agency and so then I didn't have to go to the office for a year. I did some of my best work in that period."

Much of his formal schooling was meant to produce social-realist works in the traditional Soviet style but he also developed an appreciation for German expressionists and, in his brief foray into advertising, he even read books by ad guru David Ogilvy on how to sell beer and shirts. He produced his first major works, including the haunting and grotesque "meat" and "hospital" series, in which his subjects already sported the oversized hands that would become a signature feature of his work.

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Zeng was able to quit his job altogether and move to culturally rich Beijing at the start of 1993, after selling his first paintings to Johnson Chang, the renowned Hong Kong collector. Partly on the advice of the influential art critic Li Xianting, Chang paid \$2,000 each for four large canvases, an enormous sum of money at that time in China.

Zeng says Chang still has the four pieces, which must be worth multiple millions of dollars today. “At that time those two [Chang and Li] were the most important people in the Chinese art world and they really gave me my start,” says Zeng. “It wasn’t just money, they also gave me confidence.”

In Beijing he found a community he says he could “eat with and play with” and that would later comprise some of the most famous artists in China. He also embarked on a relentless process of renewal and reinvention, adopting and then rejecting new styles at a furious pace. “We consider Fanzhi to be the greatest living artist in China, in part because his visual imagery has changed over and over again,” says Nick Simunovic, director of the Hong Kong branch of the Gagosian Gallery, which represents Zeng outside China. “He’s never satisfied with a single identity and in many respects he’s getting better and better; his art really maps the development of China.”



1996: 'Mask Series No 6' ©Gagosian Gallery

About a year after arriving in Beijing, Zeng began working on the “mask” series that would eventually make him a multimillion-dollar artist. These pieces used a different style and technique from earlier works and reflected his feeling that people in the capital were hiding their true identities from each other and themselves. Although his mask paintings have been his most financially successful ones, in 2004 his style changed radically again as he directed his efforts to the study of Chinese traditional landscapes and calligraphy.

He lists Romantic painters, German expressionists, Cézanne, Picasso, pop art and Chinese traditional painters as influences but says his own life and experiences are the most important in shaping his work. His latest works are dominated by large, intricately painted landscapes distorted by forests of thorny lines while others contain direct references to some of Zeng’s favourite German painters.

The Chinese art market has been through a few gut-wrenching cycles in the past decade but the prices of Zeng’s work have stayed remarkably stable, Simunovic says. That is partly because he is so well-known in art circles outside China and because the bulk of his works are sold to international collectors.

“The financial crisis [of 2008] was very good for the Chinese art market because it cleared out the speculators and left the real art lovers behind,” says Zeng. “But it had no real impact on me because the price I sell my work for stays about the same no matter what happens in the secondary market.”

In 2011, Zeng’s auction record was eclipsed by a 1988 work from Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang that sold for \$10.1m in Hong Kong. But prices for modern Chinese art remain volatile and subject to waves of speculative buying, particularly from mainland China. In post-communist China, anyone who is wealthy is by definition new money, or *baofahu* (literally, “explosion of wealth people”), with all the materialism and conspicuous consumption that comes with sudden riches.

Zeng has clearly enjoyed the trappings of success – designer clothes, expensive watches – but like an increasing number of the country’s *nouveau riche*, he seems now to be searching for something more substantive. “When I started out I wanted to earn more and more money and spend it on expensive cars and airplanes but in the last couple of years I’ve really changed a lot,” he says. “I think if everyone is just doing everything for money then this society is finished.”

As he has become richer his life and his tastes have become simpler and these days, he says, his only real indulgences are Cuban cigars and costly Chinese tea. His biggest expense is the more than Rmb10m (£1.04m) he spends each year on running his own gallery, which is intended to support a new generation of young artists by allowing them to exhibit and build their own profiles.

The only point in our interview at which Zeng becomes cautious and uncomfortable is when I ask him about the role politics plays in Chinese art. The world-famous dissident artist Ai Weiwei lives just a couple of blocks away from Zeng’s studio, in a compound that is regularly besieged by goons from China’s ministry of state security. “It’s not that I don’t pay attention to politics, it’s just that I pay more attention to my art; I’m not a political artist,” Zeng says. “Ai Weiwei is my neighbour and I don’t resent or dislike him; he makes his choices and he has his reasons [for doing what he does].”

Zeng’s cigar is almost finished and our interview is drawing to a close but, before I go, I want to know what happened to the American tourist who made nearly \$10m from investing in this unknown artist in 1998. “I don’t remember his name but he came to Beijing to see me after he sold the piece at auction [in 2008] and he was very happy because it got such a good price,” Zeng says. “I guess he wanted to see what the artist looked like. I was also happy that he made so much money.”