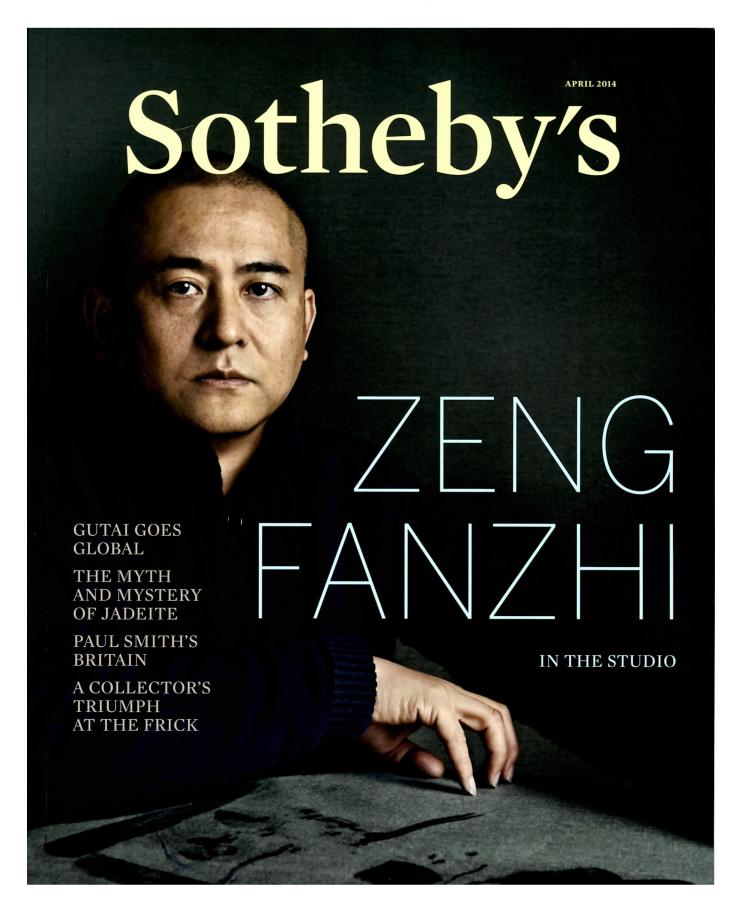
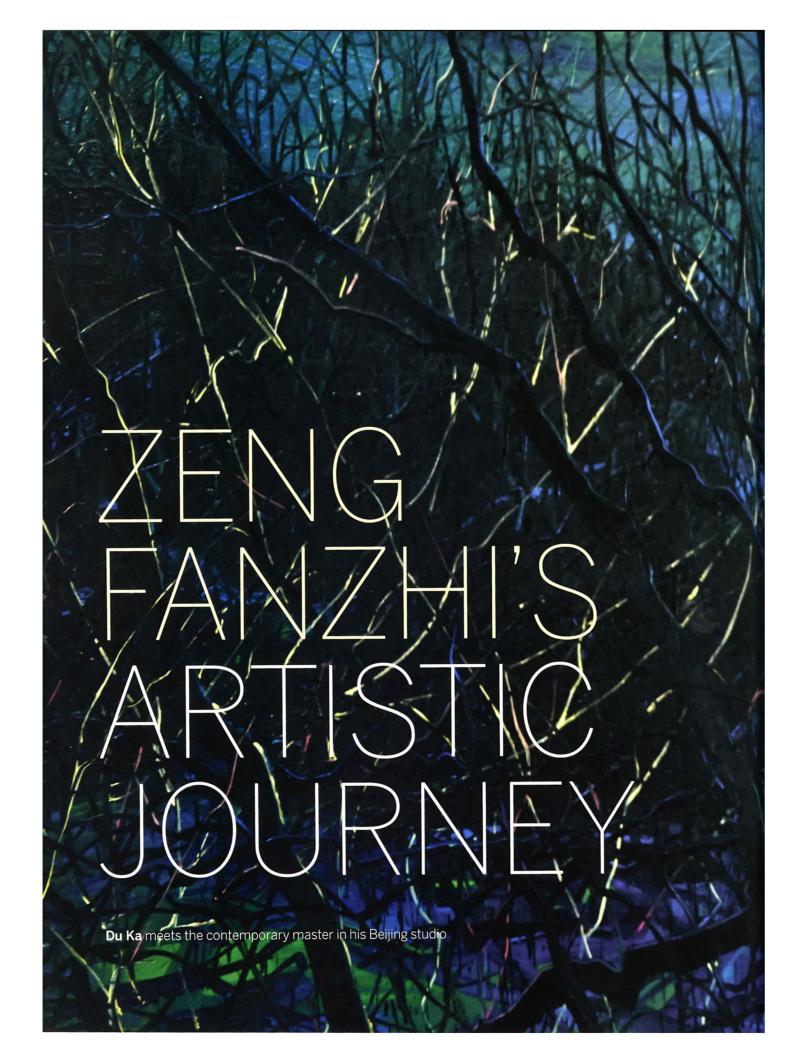
GAGOSIAN GALLERY







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hen Zeng Fanzhi painted *The Last Supper* in 2001, he never imagined that twelve years later, at Sotheby's Hong Kong 40th anniversary evening sale, it would sell for

HK\$180 million. While the new record quickly became a hot topic in art circles, Zeng seemed to deliberately avoid the limelight, remaining true to his initial belief that painting – and painting well – is where he should channel his thoughts and energy. What kind of artistic journey has he travelled? How does his landscape series fuse Chinese and Western painting? These are the questions that arose as Zeng retraced his path as an artist.

An elegant gentleman and native of Hubei's Wuhan city, Zeng Fanzhi was born in 1964. His early years were not joyful - an emotionally sensitive child with an active mind, he was quiet and taciturn, not a "good student" favoured by teachers. When nearly all his classmates were given the famous Red Scarves, symbols of pride and glory, he was excluded. Zeng once longed for such an acknowledgment, but he was quickly rejected by a system that valued collectivism. "In retrospect, it was a good thing," he says, "without the Red Scarf, I was singled out and experienced the cold reality of human relationships. I began observing and thinking about human nature at a young age." The Red Scarf also became an unfulfilled childhood desire, frequently appearing in his Mask series.

Unable to find an outlet of self-expression in school, at home Zeng focused his energy on painting. The canvas was a small piece of tranquil soil for his mind, and an inexhaustible source of joy. From the ages of nine to sixteen, he did not have an art teacher. Instead he painted from the heart, thriving and learning organically, while gradually developing his skills. His ideas were not bound by rules or principles, and such freedom proved to be hugely beneficial for his diverse creative activities as well as his tactful and flexible personality.

In 1990, Zeng graduated from the Oil Painting Department of the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts and subsequently created a series of vibrant and affecting works using subjects closely linked to his daily life –

(Top) Zeng's *This Land So Rich in Beauty No.6 (diptych)*, 2006, will be offered at Sotheby's Hong Kong this spring.

(Right) Zeng Fanzhi photographed in his Beijing studio earlier this year.

(Previous) Zeng Fanzhi in his studio with a new landscape painting in progress.



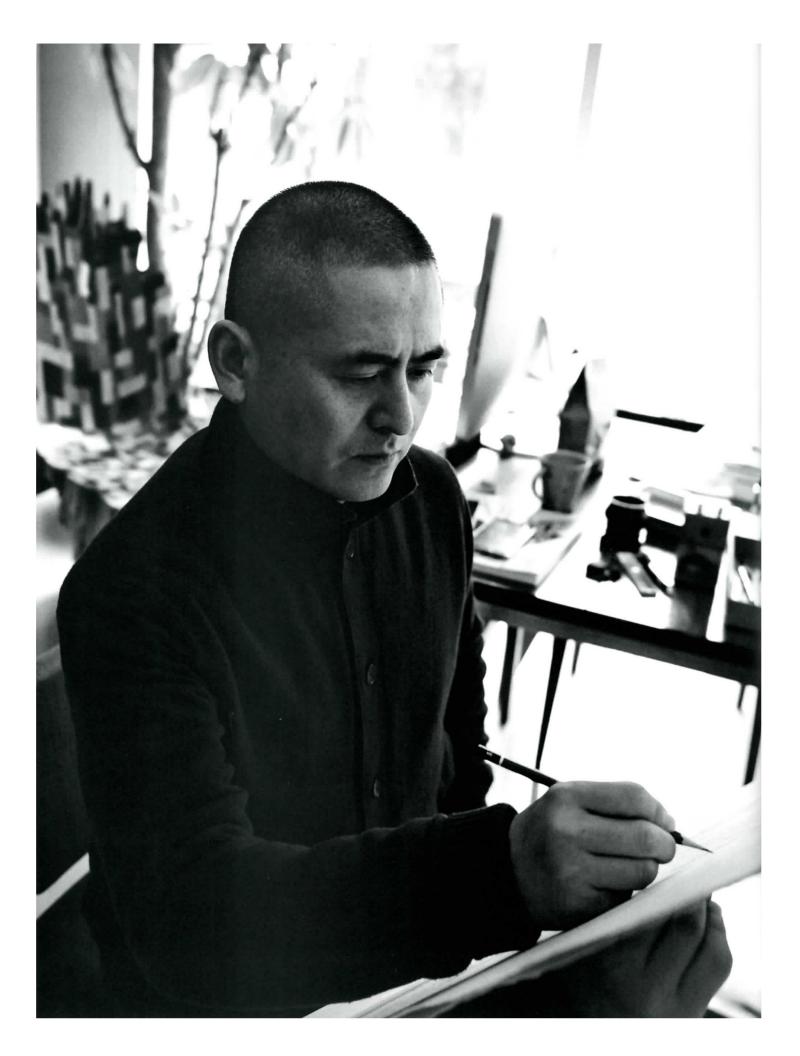




the hospital next door, masks, human portraits and the landscape. For the past ten years, he has focused on his landscape series, which quickly won over art lovers and critics in China, as well as earning enthusiastic acclaim across the globe.

Speaking of the initial inspiration for this series, Zeng recalls: "In 2002, I grew a pot of Chinese wisteria in my studio in Yanjiao. After the winter, all the leaves had fallen off, exposing the intertwining vines and branches in which I found a special beauty, and I felt inspired to paint a piece with 'chaotic brushstrokes.'" Underneath the disorderly arrangements of lines, such "chaos" in fact follows a subtle rhythm. He sensed a new beginning from this exploration. "Lines are rarely featured in Western oil painting. Instead, a picture is mainly comprised of planes, colours, light and shadows. In Chinese paintings, subjects are often outlined in ink with the

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(Left) Zeng in his Beijing

(Below) The Last Supper, which sold for a record HK\$180.4 million (US\$23.3 million) at Sotheby's Hong Kong last October, on view earlier this year at a Zeng Fanzhi retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris.

calligraphy brush. I have always wanted to look for a language that is uniquely my own. I think I might have found a small pathway."

Shortly after embarking on this new series, Zeng's right hand was injured in an accident and he was forced to paint with his left. It was awkward, yet the incident opened a window in his artistic vision: because his left hand did not offer a high level of control, he kept making mistakes. The more he attempted to correct them, the more new mistakes were made. This rarely ever happened with his right hand, and from this experience Zeng discovered the power and appeal of destruction. Upon his subsequent recovery, he continued developing such insights. He began using two paintbrushes simultaneously, like chopsticks: as he painted with one brush, he would use the other to create destructions. The result was an abstract landscape, at once within and beyond his expectations.

In fact, when Zeng was painting his landscape series, not only did he create landscapes on canvas, but also he developed a passion for gardening, experimenting in the garden outside his studio. Since a student, he had been keenly interested in Western art and spent little time exploring traditional Chinese art and culture. Through studying classical Chinese landscape design, he gained intimate and in-depth exposure to his cultural traditions, and by collecting *literati* scholars' rocks and historical Buddhist sculptures, and studying philosophy from Feng Shui to Zen, he refined his understanding of these subjects as he

practised. His increased knowledge of these traditions is reflected in his paintings, which began to reference Chinese aesthetic traditions, with an increasing display of Chinese *literati* sentiment.

In addition to demonstrating impeccable techniques, the landscape series also employs a significantly different palette from his previous works. For example, in the middle and later stages of his Mask series, he used bright, almost primary shades of red, yellow and blue, filling the canvas with a surreal sense of a staged event. In recent years, Zeng has tended to use a more harmonious palette, perhaps due to his spiritual return to Chinese cultural traditions. Of course, within the seemingly more uniform colour palette are layers of nuanced variations, reflecting Zeng's thoughtful choices and profound intentions.

Although nearly 50 years old, Zeng Fanzhi remains youthful looking. He has maintained a strong internal energy and spends most of his time making art. Painting is his means of cultivating personal advancements. "I have not reached my most ideal state yet, I keep feeling I can do better," he says. Undoubtedly, such a young heart and pure focus, constantly seeking innovations, will always light the path for him throughout his artistic explorations.

Beijing-based writer Du Ka reports on art and culture for a variety of magazines in China.

Works by Zeng Fanzhi, including *This Land So Rich in Beauty No.*6, 2006, will be offered in Hong Kong this April (page 82).

