

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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How artist Zeng Fanzhi has put his life in frame through his work *Chinese artist displays oil paintings and two sculptures in New York's Gagosian Gallery*

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He may be one of the most expensive living artists in Asia but Beijing-based artist Zeng Fanzhi insists his international success in the market has not interfered with his artistic process.

“When my generation of artists started out, there was no art market in China. We couldn’t even conceive of one back then. So the intentions behind our art were very pure,” the 51-year-old painter explains during an interview at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, where his latest exhibition “Paintings, Drawings, and Two Sculptures” is showing.

“The market came into being for us in the early 21st century, and the whole value system changed,” Zeng says. “But the artists themselves don’t have any influence over that. All we can do is continue to devote ourselves to our art – keep on practising, keep on studying, and keep on creating works that spring from our purest intentions. If we stick to that, I don’t think our art will be changed by external forces like the market.”

Zeng’s solo show features 25 works, of which the majority are in oil, his favourite medium. But two untitled branch-like works at the Gagosian are sculptures, as well as mixed-media pictures that echo Abstract Expressionism.

Zeng seems very interested in the latter works, describing them as his “new direction”.

“They are very different from the rest of the exhibition,” he says enthusiastically. “I consider them a breakthrough for me. The works are very ‘Chinese’ and show how traditional culture has influenced me during recent years.

“I have increased my artistic appreciation of Chinese culture recently, and this is leading me in a new direction. These works will go on to be part of a completely independent exhibition. This show is like a test to discover how people feel about them.”

As for the willowy sculptures, which are cast in silver, Zeng thinks they aren’t a big departure from his paintings. He intends them to be viewed as if they are two-dimensional objects, he says: “I hope that observers will look at them from a variety of different angles, and appreciate each unique angle as if it were a separate work in two dimensions.”

The sculptures were inspired by nature, he adds: “The idea sprang from my love of traditional Chinese gardens. I love gardens, and I’ve planted trees to make my own. I like looking at the trees from different perspectives as you walk around them, and I hope people will approach my sculptures in the same way.”

An untitled 2015 work that fills the wall of the gallery’s second room is a good example of Zeng’s recent landscape work. The deep blues, which remind of the classic German expressionist palette, are etched with dark branch-like strokes which distance the viewer from the subject.

The branches turn out to be lines. “They are abstract constructs. Oil is a great medium, as you can cover colours up with other colours,” says Zeng, who was born in Wuhan.

“But this layering process also allows you to go back and forth, bringing certain elements out and hiding others. The process is a cycle of discovery – it’s a playful process which allows you to construct an image not by showing something directly, but by creating a view of it between the lines.”

The influence of German expressionism on Zeng’s landscapes is well known. The dark blues and bright colours, as well as the textures, remind of Schmidt-Rottluff and Kokoschka. But Zeng, who studied at the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts from 1987 to 1991, now says that the influence of the German Expressionists was more inspirational than practical.

“I don’t see a direct link between me and the German expressionists,” he says. “When I was studying at art college, the teaching system was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union – it was a socialist way of teaching, so it was very conservative. The teachers focused on skills and technique.

“There was a moment that I decided to abandon everything that I had learned, as I wanted to choose my own way of being an artist, and I think that decision might have had something to do with the German expressionists.

“They taught me about expression, and the need for artists to express themselves, and that led to my transformation. So I think German expressionism influenced me spiritually.”

The change did not go down very well at school. Zeng found his time at art academy “interesting”, but adds that faculty members were not always supportive, noting that painting is best learnt by practice rather than tuition.

“The school had split up into two different sections,” he recalls. “One was to protect Chinese traditional art, the other to try to encourage some breakthroughs in art. It was a contradictory set-up. My graduation work was the series, paintings which were taken from observations in hospitals.

“Some people didn’t like them, and gave them very bad marks. They did not encourage me to continue painting in my own way. It was a conservative environment, but all the same, some of us realised that the times held a great opportunity to initiate some kind of change.”

The lack of artistic textbooks in art school accidentally influenced his choice of colours, he says: “The first book I saw about the impressionists – it was a catalogue, actually – was very poorly printed. All the colours were totally wrong. I realised this, but it was all I had. So I had to imagine what the colours were really like.”

Then when he saw the original paintings years later in the West, he couldn’t help feeling that some of the originals looked wrong, as he got used to his own imagined versions of them, Zeng says.

“I was always looking for a book with the right colours, so I could learn from it, but it just didn’t exist in China at that time,” he adds. “I didn’t have a book to teach me, but I did have the colours in front of me, the paint. The paint was tactile, it existed. So I decided that the way to learn to paint was to practise. That’s how I learned.”

Zeng has tried a number of different styles over the years, and as the Gagorian exhibition shows, is now experimenting with sculpture and abstraction.

His fluid approach is a reflection of the changes that have occurred in China during the 50 years of his life, he says.

“I was born in the 1960s into one political situation. By the 1980s we were living in a different political reality. Today, China is open, and it’s growing so fast. To work as an artist through all these changes, you have to be like a sponge. You must absorb all the different experiences, and take in all the different information. This helps you to find a style that is uniquely your own,” Zeng says.

“Everything about art interests me. That is all part of the learning process. Through learning about art, I have learned who I am. I have come to understand myself.”