

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Chinese Art Star Tests New York

BY KELLY CROW

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, Beijing artist Zeng Fanzhi's work has outsold that of Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly and Richard Prince combined in terms of their total values at auction, according to data firm Art-net. At 51, Mr. Zeng far outsells peers like Ai Weiwei by painting wall-size scenes of cryptic figures and thicket-like landscapes that hint at the psychological tension underpinning China's roller-coaster growth.

Two years ago, as China's economic crisis worsened, Sotheby's Hong Kong sold his 2001 homage to Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper" for \$23.3 million, a record for any artwork by a contemporary artist in China. To many in the art world, Mr. Zeng's career serves as a barometer for Chinese contemporary art overall, even though his base of collectors is geographically broad and less tightly tied than other artists to fluctuations in China's economy.

So it's a surprise that Mr. Zeng is only now getting his first solo show in six years in New York, "Zeng Fanzhi: Paintings, Drawings, and Two Sculptures," which opened Nov. 6 at Gagosian Gallery and runs through Dec. 23. The show includes a few familiar trophies like 2010's "This Land So Rich in Beauty No. 1," one of a pair of dystopian landscapes covered in vines and gnarled branches that belong to luxury executive François Pinault.

While those works are not for sale, many of the others on view are. Gagosian declined to disclose prices, but Mr. Zeng's bigger works have been selling for \$2 million to \$6 million. Mr. Zeng's first solo show in New York was at Acquavella Galleries in 2009.

The Gagosian exhibition coincides with a startling shift in the artist's oeuvre. Along with his apocalyptic landscapes, he has unveiled subtle drawings on handmade paper that evoke Song dynasty scroll paintings. They are too understated to dazzle on Instagram; in fact, he has asked gallery-goers to forgo photographing them at all, a turnabout from his earlier, flashier works.

What's more, he's arrayed these new works in a dimly lighted chamber tucked at the back of the gallery and decorated this room with traditional Ming tables and scholars' rocks from the artist's private collection. One of these basketball-size rocks is a black, Lingbi stone previously owned by one of the Song dynasty's top calligraphers, Mi Fu.

"I call it my 1,000-year-old Giacometti," he said during a recent gallery visit, casually clutching the knobby rock and turning it



over to reveal a tiny poem engraved by Mi.

China has a history of revering its scholars the same way Europeans love their tales of medieval knights, and Mr. Zeng said he has similarly studied the lives and works of

Chinese scholars, particularly from the Song dynasty, "as a way to find myself," he said. His own knotted landscapes, which he started painting a decade ago, are rooted in his attempts to conjure the spontaneous

DELAYED DEBUT An untitled 2015 painting, above, by Zeng Fanzhi; left, Mr. Zeng at New York's Gagosian Gallery before his 'Laocoön 15.'

naturalism of Song-era calligraphy.

Six years ago, Mr. Zeng took these experiments further and commissioned a paper maker to create narrow, textured sheets. He slathered them with a light tea-stain color and then studied their pulpy topography for weeks before spotting imperfections he could use as jumping-off points for his barely-there drawings of rocks and branches.

To spot them, viewers will now need to adopt the same squinty-eyed patience, a challenge he said was intentional. After a decade of rollicking growth, China's art scene needs to slow down and remember its artistic roots, he said. "Looking at these objects like the stones and the antiquities bettered my taste, and now I feel a responsibility to revive this spirit in China," he added.

The hero worship continues in other sections of the show, including a group of larger paintings of classical Western icons he admires like "Laocoön and His Sons," a marble sculpture that depicts a tortured Trojan priest and his sons being attacked by sea snakes. In his 13-square-foot painted version, Mr. Zeng zooms in on Laocoön's suffering face and sets it against a chaotic, jewel-tone background.

Other works evoke oversize statues of the Nativity and da Vinci drawings; one even shows the artist walking through brambles with 19th-century German Romantic landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich, one of the first Western painters he ever studied in art school in China during the late 1980s. In Mr. Zeng's version, he and Friedrich stumble upon a crane, a classic Chinese symbol for purity.

At times, the show can feel like Mr. Zeng is grasping for greatness—he's still better known for his auction records than his retrospectives—but the artist said his latest pieces spring from a genuine investigation into the qualities that make art endure for the ages, not just for the auction catalogs.

Zurich art adviser Grace Li, who attended the show's opening but does not buy Zeng paintings for her clients or her own collection, said it is this earnest aspect of his art that appeals to her most. As one of the first generation of Chinese artists to find success after the Cultural Revolution, Mr. Zeng could paint in his signature style until he retires. Instead, she said, "Whether the market is good or bad, he is always trying new things."

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