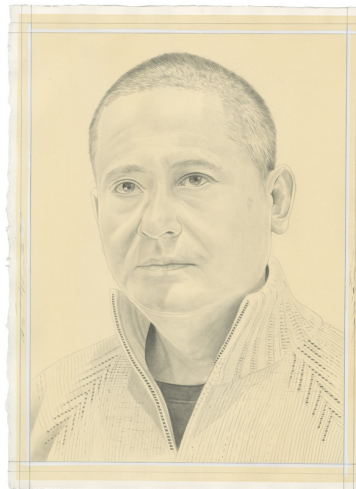


GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Zeng Fanzhi with Phong Bui

Phong Bui



Portrait of Zeng Fanzhi by Phong Bui. Pencil on paper. From a photo by Anthony Batista.

For me, one of the most rewarding experiences in working with the legendary Alanna Heiss was putting together the massive survey of contemporary art in Asia, *Spectacle*, for which she enlisted me and the late Wonil Rhee as co-curators. It was intended to be Alanna's farewell exhibition before retiring from her post as founder and director of MoMA PS1 from 1971 to 2008. Although *Spectacle* never materialized due to the 2008 financial crisis, our exhaustive studio visits in Seoul, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and other cities brought us deep pleasure. Zeng Fanzhi was one of a few painters whose work—whose breadth and size captures some of the seductive power of spectacle in the East, where China's ever-complex politics and nationalism are often expressed through cinema and sports—resisted easy classification, distinguishing him from other artists of his generation. I distinctly remember the afternoon when our mutual friend Mia Jin brought us together at Fanzhi's Beijing studio. The artist was as calm and focused as he is now. After seven long years, his exhibit *Zeng Fanzhi: Paintings, Drawings, and Two Sculptures* at Gagosian (November 6 – December 23, 2015) offered us an opportunity to discuss the new body of work.

Phong Bui (Rail): When I saw the first images from Tiananmen Square on June 4th, 1989, I, like many others, was shocked by the ordinary man, carrying two shopping bags, trying to stop the advancing tanks of the People's Liberation Army. We had never associated that sequence of action with Asia before. Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions emphasized the family and the greater social fabric, in contrast to Western thought, which emphasized individualism. We were all shocked because it resembled the Old Testament narrative of David and Goliath. That moment, therefore, signaled a tremendous shift toward the

eventual globalism of today. My first question is: How and when did you first notice there was a predicament in your work? Having trained in academic French painting, so to speak, you make visible references to Western art, especially in your works in the main gallery, while in the smaller gallery toward the back—a beautiful, dimly lit environment—your paintings are ghostly, palimpsest-driven images that compel one to look closely. Once you do, the images disappear before your eyes. Can you share with us what you had in mind with this pairing?

Zeng Fanzhi: When I was growing up, in the late '70s and early '80s, I studied Western painting; my entire training was Western art history. I wasn't looking at any Chinese art at the time because there was a definitive break in traditional culture during the Cultural Revolution. The beginning of economic reforms also meant the introduction of many Western schools of thought, which had immense influence on my generation. In the '90s there was a lot more access—previously, I'd only known Western art from a few translated books and catalogues—and I often traveled to see art, participate in exhibitions, and had exchanges with other artists.

Rail: Do you recall the early instances where you first exhibited with Western artists?

Zeng: That would be in the '90s, mostly group exhibitions in museums and institutions in the West. In May 1993, Jörg Immendorff came to visit my studio. He was the first Western artist that I had close interaction with. He was about to have an exhibition in Beijing at the time, and wanted to meet Chinese artists. Li Xianting (renowned critic, curator, and art advocate active since the late 1970s, and a key figure in Chinese avant-garde and contemporary art) suggested that he should speak with me. Immendorff liked my work. I was doing the “Hospital” series at the time, influenced by Expressionism, so there were points of connection in our painting languages. At that time, I had never traveled abroad. I was very local, if you like. And from then on, Western traditions, from the Renaissance to contemporary art, had an even greater impact on my practice. Around 2000, I started to revisit Chinese forms of art and spirituality, like Song Dynasty paintings, and explored more ancient traditions. My aesthetics have evolved since then, in a direction where I try to create dialogues between the East and the West.

Rail: From my own reading when I studied art history in college, I always felt that certain artists from the Western tradition had a deep affinity for the Eastern worldview. Like Bruegel in his “Four Seasons” series—take *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565), for example. He had a kind of animistic view of nature. This is not to say that Bruegel and a few other Western artists were similar in technical ability to the masters of the Song Dynasty like Cui Bai, or Fan Kuan, etc. However, one can say that their philosophical worldview was quite similar. Their emphasis is not on particular objects, but rather on a cosmic view of the connectedness of everything in nature. In fact, van Gogh's worldview is completely integrated. You see wind blowing through grass, the cypress trees, and the multitude of stars. Everything seems to belong to one rhythm of nature.

Zeng: Van Gogh and Cézanne are among my favorite artists. Yes, their worldview is two-dimensional, similar to the East. Previously, Western painting was interested in three-dimensionality. Cézanne rendered the world flat. Van Gogh saw colors rather than three-dimensional objects. In that sense they are very similar to Eastern painters.

Rail: Yes, in the East, descriptive renderings are less important than impressions. The ethos of Chinese painting, especially landscape painting, rests on the fact that you go to nature, observe the vista, absorb the spirit, then go home and paint later.

Zeng: Traditional Chinese painters started by imitating their masters from a young age, learning the rules of painting by studying the manuals of painting. To paint bamboo, one first mastered the techniques in the manuals before going into nature to observe. To be a great artist, the old rules must be transcended, and new rules established by one's own experiences, observations, and inner perceptions.

Rail: When was the first time that you felt you had broken the rules?

Zeng: I think I had broken the rules four times. After you established the rules and mastered the subject, whenever the heart doesn't move along with the painting hand, it is time to break the rules. Because if you can't be moved by what you're doing, it becomes meaningless repetition. You have to establish new rules and try to surprise yourself. I've gone through this four times, and I'm on my way to the fifth. The first time was in 1994 with the "Hospital" series.

Rail: What is your definition of anxiety?

Zeng: Anxiety? I think social situations and dealing with people give me a lot of anxieties. I'm not a talkative person by nature. If people insist on talking, I get even more anxious. It's not that I dislike people, but I feel unable to communicate.



Zeng Fanzhi, This Land so Rich in Beauty No.1, 2010. Oil on canvas, 98 7/16 × 413 3/4 inches. © Zeng Fanzhi Studio. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Rail: I bring up anxiety because I am interested in how your paintings are made, particularly in how you paint mostly wet onto wet, and in how you maintain a speed of execution that keeps pace with whatever manifests in the paint. It's no easy task.

Zeng: It takes years and years of practice, of course. I started with smaller paintings, and spent more than a decade trying to find an oil paint that dries more slowly. I have to paint very fast and almost without thinking. It's similar to the "Carving Up an Ox" parable from Zhuangzi—when your technique reaches a certain level, you're freed from yourself. You're already certain and accurate without knowing it. I don't have to look with my eyes to get my soul, body, and the canvas to reach a state of unity. It's the highest form of freedom.¹

Rail: That's quite amazing! At any rate, in recent years, as we all know, Chinese contemporary art has become more accepted worldwide and comes with greater visibility. But we tend to forget that, historically speaking, there were significant figures like Cai Yuanpei, who founded the China Academy of Art. The idea was to elevate modern Chinese culture to the standard of European thinking. It's interesting to think that it was happening in the first two decades of the 20th century before it was disrupted by the civil war between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party that lasted from 1927 to 1949. The irony is the Chinese government created a version of Communism shaking hands with Confucianism at first, then, in recent years, with both Confucianism and Capitalism at once. Portraiture is a genre that isn't associated much with

Chinese art, except for the occasional ink brush portraits of emperors, and lots of Mao's and Madame Mao's portraits. What is the impulse behind your portraits?

Zeng: I'm not sure how my portraits relate to the Republican period in China but, indeed, oil painting was first systematically introduced by Xu Beihong's generation of artists during that period. The Western system of art education, like sketching, figure drawing, and studies were adopted. In the early '80s, art academies started to accept students again, but they were still bound up by superficial understandings of French academic traditions that Xu Beihong imported, and passed down over generations to his students and disciples. So in the '80s, the Western pedagogical system we had was second-hand and incomplete. Then, of course, there was the whole Soviet school of Socialist Realism that prevailed in the '50s, like Maksimov and Chistyakov, among others. In the '50s, the Central Academy of Fine Arts held a Maksimov master class that the best artists and art teachers from all over the country attended. So the Soviet system was instituted along with the French, but they all have roots in the same group of early Impressionist artists. The Russian method wastes too much time on boring, lifelike details. The French system we had was only a bastardization of the real thing. Neither was authentic or correct, but we can only know that in retrospect. After the Cultural Revolution, when we picked up oil painting again and did portraits, they were just empty, thoughtless technical exercises. We were all very skilled, but no thought or feeling went into the work. The real enlightenment came with the '85 New Wave movement, which awakened people to truly engage with Western thought.

I started college in 1987, when the intellectual climate of the art world was already quite open. Academic training was still conservative and outdated, and we all suspected it wasn't going anywhere. The explosive world events in 1989 only confirmed our doubt. I was very unhappy during my first two years of college. I felt that I learned nothing, but I was able to unlearn all the technical skills of my socialist realist training. We'd be asked to draw nude models, and I'd make some abstract drawing instead. I wanted to renounce all that I knew about art making and become someone who didn't know at all how to paint, which is why I started making abstract art. Around 1989, I began to feel emotionally connected to the abstract paintings, and looking back at figure drawing and portraiture, I suddenly found a direction. When I made the portrait *A Man in Melancholy* in 1990, I felt that I could connect my inner world to the subject and fully express that synthesis. I was also painting myself when I painted him. I let go of all the rules of color, form, and chiaroscuro that were imposed on me by my teachers, and only focused on personal expression. It was a casual, relaxed, and liberating process, but you know the two of you are connected when you look at the painting.

Rail: So you found refuge in Expressionism? German Expressionism or Abstract Expressionism?

Zeng: At the time I was obsessed with Willem de Kooning. I'd never seen his work in person, only in reproduction, but I was obsessed with his brushwork. I also loved Max Beckmann's figures. There's something very theatrical, grotesque, and dynamic about them. And Francis Bacon's distortions of the figure. They were all hugely influential to me as a young artist. Later I also saw Lucien Freud's portraits, which instantly left me transfixed. The eyes of his subjects show an interiority that came to me like an epiphany. This was around 1989 – 90. No one could teach me anymore so I found my own teachers.

Rail: The color red is the official color of the Chinese Communist Party and artists were instructed to paint with it. Is there a sublimation in your use of red, especially in the portrait series?

Zeng: To be honest, this is not something I thought about when I painted. I used red because I found it stimulating and provocative. Beyond flesh and blood, the color red also has a sense of political correctness. Red could also be the color of skin. I painted skin, flesh, and blood together in the same red.



Installation view: Zeng Fanzhi: Paintings, Drawings, and Two Sculptures. November 6 – December 23, 2015. Gagosian Gallery, New York. Artwork © Zeng Fanzhi Studio. Photography by Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Rail: If the flesh is the prevailing pathos of the painting, you can perceive it as vulnerability, as expressionistic, etc., which brings us to Francis Bacon's *Study After Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953) which evokes Soutine's *Carcass of Beef* (1925), which was inspired by Rembrandt's *The Slaughtered Ox* (1655). There seems to be a continuity.

Zeng: Life for us was vulnerable. Vulnerable was how I felt in daily life. Soutine is also one of my favorite artists.

Rail: They were called "painters under a curse" in Montparnasse: Soutine, Pascin, Utrillo, and Modigliani. They never managed to become cosmopolitan Parisians and essentially died of poor health. Can we talk about the *Mask* series? How did it come about? They are essentially the same people from your earlier portraits, except for the wide physiognomic range of smile and laughter.

Zeng: I wasn't thinking about what each smile meant when I painted them. There's not much planning involved. I would just keep painting a certain kind of smile for a while and switch to another when I got bored, so there may be some variety there. I actually put more emphasis on the eyes. All the eyes are the same and impenetrable. They have no focus. You can never see through them, and you can't know whether they are looking at you when you look at them.

Rail: This is similar to *The Last Supper* (2001). And of course there's the Young Pioneers uniform. Why did you choose to paint the Last Supper as a subject?

Zeng: The faces followed the original painting more closely. I've always liked Leonardo, and *The Last Supper* (1495 – 98) is one of the best known paintings, so I thought I'd do something with it. I just did it without much rationalization.

Rail: How did the audience and the party officials react to it?

Zeng: I don't know if they have seen it. It wasn't a scandalous piece at all.

Rail: Can you describe the shift from the *Masks* series to the portraits of artists that you like?



Zeng Fanzhi, Yesterday, 2015. Oil on canvas, 157 1/2 × 157 1/2 inches. © Zeng Fanzhi Studio. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Zeng: I've been painting portraits all along—before, during, and after the *Masks* series. It's not a central thread in my work, just an area of interest that I explored from 1994 to 2004.

Rail: Do you think that the landscape series has roots in the “Great Men” portraits: Mao, Lenin, Stalin, etc.? They are almost all gray and monochromatic except for the red lips. On top there are these entangled lines that look more like pictorial punctuation rather than random mark making. They are disruptive but at the same time they command your attention.

Zeng: From 2002 to 2005 I was making a lot of portraits, but I was already thinking about the abstract landscape. I used the technique of the landscape to disrupt and destroy the portraits, like *Portrait of Andy Warhol* (2004).

Rail: What! How scandalous!

Zeng: They are just lines. You see, Chinese traditional paintings always use lines. Xu Beihong was the person who integrated, let's say, flatness into Chinese painting. It's the lines that make the painting look three-dimensional, but it's still a flat image. They are not subjects, but motifs and tools with which to construct the painting.

Rail: From what I can tell, in the recent catalogue, there seems to be different stages in making your paintings like *Hare* (2012), which is a direct reference to Dürer's *Young Hare* (1502). I can see that as soon as you painted the image, you began to paint over or scratch the surface to create a somewhat random network of lines, some of which extend to the side or on top. In other words, once you paint an image, you conceal it with lines as though to obscure it from the viewer.

Zeng: You're absolutely right. It's the constant, recurrent process of destruction and creation, during which many surprising things happen. In the end, it's just a few lines that anchor the image, but underneath it's something utterly different, something abstract.

Rail: You might be a peaceful man, but as a painter you're very aggressive, and quite fearless and unapologetic about your love for art history. The angel in *Yesterday* (2015), for instance, whose top half is intentionally left unfinished, is a direct reference to Leonardo's

painting *Annunciation* (c. 1472 – 75). If you look closely, you see different formations of brushstrokes: big brush strokes, small strokes, wet-on-wet, wet on dried paint, and so on. How long did it take you to paint this painting?

Zeng: About three weeks.

Rail: It looks like it was all painted in one day. And then you die. [*Laughs.*]

Zeng: It's all covered on the first day, but not finished. The next three days were very fast.

Rail: It looks as though Pollock was learning how to paint the figure. [*Laughs.*] How do you choose which images to paint? Does it come fast?

Zeng: Take Dürer, for example. I studied Dürer for a period of time and chose my favorite works, like the hands and the hare, as my subjects.

Rail: How about *Laocoön* (2015)? It's the most iconic representation of agony in Western civilization, but you only painted the lamenting face, not the serpent or the two sons.

Zeng: I have a strong preference for the 4 × 4-meter square. It wouldn't make sense to paint Laocoön's body in that aspect ratio. I want to emphasize the detail of the face because ultimately that's what's imprinted in my mind when I look at the sculpture for a long time.

Rail: Your entangled lines don't obscure the face as much in *Laocoön* (2015), is this because it's a painting of a sculpture rather than a painting of a painting?

Zeng: I didn't know the painting would end up like this. My intention was to disrupt and destroy it, like I did with other works, but the form was too strong and too complex that even rendering it was difficult. I got really carried away and pulled in by the forms and shapes. In the end I just couldn't break it, and the end result reflects my struggles and the struggles of the image. It was a very painful and valuable process, full of interesting conflicts.

Rail: What is your sense of light? Does it come from within or outside?

Zeng: The more you want there to be light, the more you need to use dark colors. So my answer is light comes from the inside out.

Endnotes

1. Found in the "Nourishing the Lord of Life" chapter of *Zhuangzi: Inner Chapters*, "Carving Up an Ox" tells the story of a marvelously skilled cook, whose approach to cutting up an ox is the synthesis of subjective intuition, technique, and sensory awareness, acquired through practice and performed with elegance, spontaneity, and ease, which locates ultimate freedom in a thin slice of space and time.