

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

STYLE

Artist Zeng Fanzhi portrays life amid a drastically changing China

Vivian Chen



Zeng Fanzhi at work in his studio in Beijing. Zeng says painting to him is meditation. Photo: Zeng Fanzhi Studio.

Like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and other great contemporary painters of our time, Zeng Fanzhi is an artist whose working process can almost be compared with performance art. Catch the maestro in action, and you'll find him going all-out while he paints.

Hopping on and off an elevated platform that lifts him high up to the centre of a giant, nearly two-storey-high canvas, Zeng drips, brushes and splashes paint to create spontaneous and chaotic strokes.

But as the pigments and curves come together, what unfolds are works of art that provoke thinking and resonate with emotions.

"Painting to me is meditation," Zeng says. "It's enjoyment, not suffering."

Born in Wuhan, Hubei province in 1964, Zeng is now one of the most globally recognised Chinese contemporary artists and the most expensive living Asian artist.

Sought after by collectors, Zeng's works continue to score astronomical prices at international auction houses. *The Last Supper* - a 2001 oil painting based on Leonardo da Vinci's work of the same title - was sold for HK\$180.4 million at Sotheby's Hong Kong in 2013.

Acclaimed also among art scholars, Zeng has exhibited his works in prestigious museums across the globe, including Paris' Musée d'Art Moderne, Kunstmuseum Bonn in Germany and Acquavella Galleries in New York.

Last year, Zeng collaborated with Louvre Museum's curator Henri Loyrette on a set of four paintings exploring the ties between classical art and contemporary art. His painting titled *No 4* - juxtaposing Eugène Delacroix's famous *Liberté Guidant le Peuple* with other romanticism masterpieces - was exhibited in Louvre's Denon Hall in October last year.

The full collection travelled to ShanghART Beijing in March this year - the first solo exhibition for the artist in mainland China in five years.

The artist has been actively painting since the 1980s. His works reflect the drastically changing Chinese society during its fast-developing years in a perspective derived from his own personal experience and heartfelt resonance.

"Life and art are closely intertwined," Zeng says. "I have come to realise this as I age."

His earlier figurative realism works such as the *Meat* series and the *Hospital* series depicted people from his neighbourhood in Wuhan - a major transport hub in central China. He observed mundane everyday life at nearby butcher shops and Xiehe Hospital. Zeng portrayed his subjects with exaggeratedly huge, sunken eyes and wrinkled, articulated hands, striving to survive.

"I have experienced the drastically changing environment in China and I cherish the experience because it has provoked emotions that are so intense," he says.

As Zeng moved to Beijing in the 1990s, he progressed to the *Mask* series, now a sought-after collection of works featuring urbanites hiding behind masks exuding a strong sense of alienation and solitude.

"Over the course of his oeuvre, Zeng has been interested in human existential condition," says Marcello Kwan, head of Christie's Asian Contemporary Art Sale. "[His works] explore universal humanity through his personal experience."

Zeng's earlier works stood out from fellow artists of his generation. While many of Zeng's classmates at the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts pursued then-trendy subjects such as landscapes and portraits, Zeng took a different path that was influenced by Western modern artists the likes of Picasso, German expressionists and pop artists.

"I went on trips to paint exotic landscapes with my classmates, but I wasn't inspired. I then decided to paint what's happening around me. Both series captured the lifestyle back then in Wuhan."

Zeng often speaks of travelling three days on a boat to see a French art exhibition in Shanghai during his college years. He had spent all the money he had on him, yet he found the sparkle of passion in the original works of European artists, and that sparkle has continued to glow ever since.

His more recent works - the *Sky* series and the *Landscape* series - have seen the artist progressing towards the abstract realm. Zeng concluded his famous *Mask* series in 2004 and has since been constantly reinventing and experimenting with different subjects and techniques.

"I'm used to working on different types of projects simultaneously - works of different themes and methods," Zeng says. "The chemistry of complementation and contrast creates new ideas."

Kwan says: "Zeng's subconsciousness is liberated in the *Sky* series, and a spiritual universe is created by chaotic strokes in the *Landscape* series, ethereal and mesmerising."

For someone who rarely holds back his passion in his creations, Zeng is an introvert in person. "He doesn't talk much, but the few things he says are very to the point," says Gladys Chung, a former art expert with Christie's and Poly Auction who now works closely with Zeng in his studio in the outskirts of Beijing.

Chung reckons that although Zeng often keeps his thoughts to himself, he is a prudent thinker. "He knows exactly where he is and what he wants to achieve," she says.

Looking back, Zeng has carefully paved his way to global success, though not without a bit of luck.

After a few prolific years at a government-backed advertising agency in Wuhan - a job he landed soon after graduation - Zeng decided to move to Beijing to pursue his career as a professional painter in 1993.

Back in the early 1990s, Zeng's works were shown in the hallways of Shanghai's Ritz-Carlton Hotel by Lorenz Helbling's ShanghART Gallery. Western tourists and foreign consulate officers bought some of Zeng's early works. Famous gallery owner Johnson Chang of Hanart TZ Gallery in Hong Kong, who also helped David Tang of Shanghai Tang curate The China Club's art collection, was one of the first collectors to acquire Zeng's paintings early on.

It was in Beijing that Zeng found his community of like-minded artists, dealers, curators and gallery owners. It's also the environment which inspired his *Mask* series that eventually launched him to fame.

Now his works are represented by Gagosian Gallery outside of China, landing him even broader exposure to global collectors and connoisseurs.

His thriving sales records in the art market, however, are of little concern to the artist.

"My passion is the driving force behind all my creations," he says. "Any thought [about whether they'd fare well at auctions] is denying my long-time effort."

Now at the prime age of 51, Zeng is working on documenting his works in the past two decades. He is expecting his own catalogue raisonne - a repertoire of all his works - to be completed in two to five years' time. "It's a common practice in the Western world but has yet to take off in China," says Chung, who's working on the project. "We hope it doesn't only benefit Zeng but can also help [strengthen] the art scene in China and Asia."

Talents aside, Zeng is disciplined when it comes to work. He only takes a month's holiday each year to travel with his wife and teenage daughter. "My perfect day is to feel relaxed and free, peaceful and blissful," he says. "I'm living a perfect day almost every day."

When he is working, Zeng puts on a playlist that's a mix of Western classical music the likes of Tchaikovsky and propagandist modern Beijing opera popular during the Cultural Revolution. And just like his fusion playlist, Zeng's works are a mix of East-meets-West and much more beyond just the label of superficial perception.

MILESTONES

1964 Born in Wuhan, Hubei province

1987 Admitted to the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts

1993 Moves to Beijing

1998 Stages solo exhibition, "Zeng Fanzhi: Works from 1993-1998", at ShanghART Gallery

2004 Concludes *Mask* series

2008 Exhibits at Groninger Museum in The Netherlands

2013 His work, *Last Supper*, fetches a recordbreaking price at Sotheby's Hong Kong

2014 His "Louvre Project" goes on display at Louvre Museum