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How China's most bankable artist, Zeng Fanzhi, found new way to make art

Monk-like self-portrait, part of his biggest solo exhibition yet, symbolises artist's turn towards minimalist sketches with echoes of classical Chinese brush-and-ink landscapes. 'I don't change for change's sake,' Zeng says, 'I was looking for a new way'

Enid Tsui



Zeng Fanzhi at his studio in Beijing. Photo: Simon Song

It is a visual command. The perfectly aligned square apertures that cut through the dividing walls at Zeng Fanzhi's biggest solo exhibition to date draw the eye inexorably to a painting hanging at the far end of the cavernous Great Hall of Beijing's Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA). The painting is Self-Portrait 09-8-1 (2009), a work which shows Zeng – whose works sell for more than those of any other living artist in Asia – dressed almost like a mendicant monk, barefoot and wearing a simple robe. Painting it, the artist recalls, was restorative. Zeng had just turned 45 and was already a successful artist. "But I still felt I was at a loss sometimes. I was looking for a new way ahead for both my art career and my life," he says at a coffee shop across from the UCCA in Beijing's bustling 798 Art Zone.

The picture's spiritual twin is displayed near the start of the retrospective exhibition. Boots, a still life of two black boots from the same year, is a more literal representation of Zeng's mid-life reboot. Taking off his boots represents the end of one journey and the start of another, he explains.

China artist Zeng Fanzhi admits "exhibition-phobia"

The two paintings are significant markers for the exhibition because they date from the beginning of a period of reflection which spawned Zeng's recent works – on display in a room set aside from the centre's Great Hall that is dimly lit and redolent with the scent of incense.

They are thus well away from Zeng's student pieces with their echoes of German Expressionism, well away from the famous Mask series from his days as a struggling artist in the 1990s, and well away from Zeng's later, abstract landscapes with their Jackson Pollock-like foreground and homages to Western art icons.

Portrait, 2004, by Zeng Fanzhi. Photo: Zeng Fanzhi Studio

What's on display in that dimly lit room is a series of understated, monochromatic sketches and minimalist sculptures of trees that are reminiscent of Rembrandt sketches and of the traditional Chinese ink landscapes Zeng keeps at his vast studio in the Chinese capital's Caochangdi art district. One has to peer hard to see what he has drawn on fibrous, specially made paper ordered from the Singapore Tyler Print Institute.

How artist Zeng Fanzhi has put his life in frame through his work

The artist in him has taken a step back, Zeng says. "About 30 per cent of the image has to be filled in by the viewers using their imagination. They are as close to a Chinese shanshui (brush-and-ink landscape) scroll as they are to a Renaissance drawing. I am interested to explore how the two meet."

It wasn't that long ago that the doomsayers were predicting the Chinese art bubble was about to burst following six or seven years of exceptional growth in prices – 2009, in fact, in the wake of the global financial crisis. That was the year Guy Ullens, owner of the UCCA, started selling down his Chinese collection.

Zeng Fanzhi: a portrait of the artist as a young man, taken at his studio in Wuhan, 1991. Photo: Zeng Fanzhi Studio

The doomsayers were wrong. Four years later, Ullens sold Zeng's Last Supper (2001) for HK\$180.4 million at a Hong Kong auction. The large work, featuring masked Chinese Young Pioneers in place of Jesus and his apostles, still holds the auction record for contemporary Asian art.

Having your work valued at a similar price to works by Monet and Kandinsky must be good for the ego, but Zeng says he has learned to tame his – and to forget about the trappings of fame and fortune. Instead he paints what comes naturally to him.

Artist Zeng Fanzhi portrays life amid a drastically changing China

"The auction world is too crazy. It has created this massive market for art because sales are held too frequently," he says.

Considering China's dramatic transformation and its profound impact on the world order, it is no surprise that the art market has embraced Zeng's generation of artists and their depictions of China's recent history.

Hospital Triptych No. 1, 1991, by Zeng Fanzhi. Photo: Zeng Fanzhi Studio

As a student at the Hubei Institute of Fine Art from 1987 until 1991, Zeng painted life as he saw it. The lack of tender, loving care expressed in his Xiehe Hospital triptychs only exaggerated mildly the attitudes on show in the hospital next to where he lived.

Later, as a struggling artist in Beijing, he came up with the Mask series out of a sense of isolation, insecurity and bafflement as he, like millions of others, tried to make sense of how China was evolving. The false smiles on the masks and the characters' awkward, oversized hands stem from the same bitterness found in the so-called "cynical realism" works by the likes of Yue Minjun and Fang Lijun.

In the early 2000s, just as the world started paying attention to what Chinese artists had to say about contemporary China, Zeng rather perversely decided to change tack altogether, switching to abstract landscapes with crazed, jagged lines that blatantly defied nationalistic boundaries.

Lucian Freud, 2011, by Zeng Fanzhi. Photo: Zeng Fanzhi Studio

“As a young man, traditional Chinese art simply did not interest me. I studied oil painting, and it was Western art that inspired me. I only started to like Chinese ink landscapes after the year 2000,” he says.

The UCCA exhibition includes portraits of two of his favourite artists – Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon – painted convincingly in their styles. There are also large canvases that feature icons of Western classical art: Durer’s rabbit, the head of Laocoon from the Roman statue.

These, he says, are all part of the artist that he has become.

Guy Ullens ‘attacked at board meeting’ for seeking profit from sale of gallery

Ironically, Zeng’s refusal to be bound by the art market’s expectations has helped him avoid the fate of many fellow artists who initially found fame with their satirical treatment of communist icons and their cynical reaction to China’s economic transformation, but have failed to create the same excitement with their new works.

Zeng Fanzhi works on Laocoön. Photo: Zeng Fanzhi Studio

Zeng’s post-Masks career is certainly helped by the fact that he has continued to create technically exquisite, strong images on a large scale that make them hard to overlook. His abstract landscapes, like the one hanging in the mezzanine floor of the Grand Hyatt in Wan Chai, are fetching millions of dollars at auction.

In fact, there is no artist in China who enjoys the same superstar status as Zeng, judging by the guests attending the banquet held in his honour on the day the Beijing exhibition opened. Henry Cheng Kar-shun and Angela Leong On-kei fly in from Hong Kong to mingle with Chinese collectors such as Wang Zhongjun and Qiao Zhibing. Auction house bosses vie for a seat at the top table in a hotel packed with Zeng works, from the abstract landscape behind the check-in counter to the oversized print of one of his new works on paper that hangs above the bed in every guest room. The artist escorts VIPs to a fleet of Mercedes-Benz saloons with his exhibition’s details emblazoned on the sides, ever the gracious host.

Once the guests sit down, they are shown a video of Zeng painting one of his abstract landscapes, the camera zooming in rather sycophantically onto his face as, to a soundtrack of classical music, he makes confident, impromptu brush strokes punctuated by puffs on a cigar. Asked if he enjoys all the attention lavished on him, Zeng’s reply is skilful.

“Life is not a performance. You can behave like how people expect an artist to behave but if you don’t put a lot of thought into what you do, your work will soon give you away.”

For now he will pursue his work on paper – creating art drastically different from anything he has done before. “I don’t change for change’s sake. I release a ‘mother theme’ once it has expired and move on to something else I feel passionate about,” he says.