

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Artist Zeng Fanzhi on the Evolution of His Work and China's Art Market

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Visitors at the opening of "Zeng Fanzhi: Parcours," the first solo exhibition of his works in Beijing, in front of a painting from his "Masks" series. QG.F/Zeng Fanzhi Studio

To get a sense of the remarkable growth of the Chinese contemporary art market, look no further than the artist Zeng Fanzhi.

Mr. Zeng, 51, has seen his work bring in the second-highest price for a living Chinese artist, according to Artnet. In 2013, his 2001 tribute to Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper" sold for \$23.3 million at Sotheby's Hong Kong, setting what was then a record auction price for a work by a contemporary Chinese artist.

Last weekend, the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing unveiled "Zeng Fanzhi: Parcours," a major retrospective that runs through Nov. 19. The exhibition covers nearly three decades and features works central to the artist's oeuvre, including his early "Hospital" series, which Mr. Zeng painted based on memories of a hospital where he used the toilet because he did not have one at home. It includes his "Masks" series, which depicts well-dressed urbanites wearing white masks, a commentary on China's rapid social transformation in the mid-1990s, and his haunting, thicket-filled abstract landscapes. And, for the first time in China, the show displays Mr. Zeng's most recent works — a series of ink on paper — which signal a shift by the artist toward an engagement with ancient Chinese painting.

In an interview, Mr. Zeng discussed traditional Chinese culture, China's art market and mixing politics and art.

Your latest works on paper suggest a turn toward traditional Chinese culture. Why the shift?

This shift came about for several reasons. For example, I like designing gardens, and to do that, you have to have a certain appreciation for the natural beauty of things like stones and plants. Emperor Huizong's painting "Listening to the Qin" is the most beautiful painting from the Song dynasty. For more than 10 years, I've been observing the beauty of the pine tree in that painting. And when I travel to Japan and elsewhere, I now pay special attention to the pine trees. So it's a combination of studying paintings and observing the real world.

Over time, I began to realize that traditional things have their own beauty. Perhaps it also has to do with my age. When you reach a certain age, you naturally begin to turn to a spirit of introspection.

What does the motif of the branches signify in your large-scale abstract landscapes?

People in the West initially thought of it as a type of expressionistic brushwork. Early on, I, too, thought of it like this. But later I began to think of the branches as being related more to traditional Chinese calligraphy. So when painting, I would pay special attention to the rhythm and the spirit of the brush stroke with the belief that each stroke has its own movement and its own internal beauty. It's different from Western expressionism, not because Western expressionism is superficial, but it is characterized more by an external view of the brush, whereas calligraphy has more to do with the internal state of mind.

Looking back at your career through this retrospective, is there a particular period of time that you feel nostalgic about?

Not really. Each of the works represents my life and feelings at that particular time, and all of the stages are closely linked. For example, I went from doing large-scale abstract landscape paintings to making small works on paper. All of these stages have a certain element of contrast.

If you look at my earlier works, there are also big differences. There are three early paintings in the show that I drew when I was in the third year of university. My teacher told me not to paint like this. Look at your paintings, the teacher said, you didn't use any color. According to them, you had to paint according to very strict guidelines. The colors had to represent what the subject really looked like in real life. But I didn't want to follow these guidelines. I thought if I did, I would be fenced in by them and there would be no way to explore creativity through my feelings.

So at that time, color wasn't that important to me. If you look at those early works, they seem a little dark. I used a lot of black paint and the people seem very gray.

In the beginning, most of the collectors who bought your work were foreign. Then you started to see more interest from Chinese collectors. Can you describe this shift?

I first moved to Beijing in 1993. The people who bought my works back then were mostly Western, like people who worked in the foreign embassies or taught at universities.

Then, around 2004 and 2005, we started to see more and more Chinese people buying art. I remember it very clearly because before no one was buying and for 10 or so years the prices for our works hadn't changed at all. We didn't really know these new Chinese collectors, and we couldn't tell if they actually liked the art.

But then, starting around 2007, we started to see a lot of people flipping works. At first I thought the buying was good, but when the market began to overheat, I went on alert. I didn't sell to a person who wanted to buy 20 of my paintings because I was suspicious.

And then what happened?

Then, in 2008, there was the financial crisis and all of a sudden a lot of galleries in China closed. Some people had bought so many paintings. One person even bought 100 paintings from one artist.

After having gone through 2008, most of the artists here have matured. The art market is something you can't mess with. Just take it one step at a time, develop slowly, and honestly work together with galleries to sell works to people who actually like art and not to people who are trying to speculate on art. Now that we've worked with a lot of international galleries and museums, artists here pretty much get it. It's not like 2007 anymore. We needed this time to mature.

Do you ever feel pressure either to avoid or to engage with politics in your work?

I think every artist chooses his or her own way of expression. I personally choose to create works on subjects that I am interested in. I won't make works on subjects that I'm not interested in just to appeal to more people.

But it doesn't mean that I'm not paying attention to society either. For example, in my early "Hospital" works, I was very interested in basic issues of humanity. I pay attention to society and to the lives of people around me. But I won't make something just for the sake of being provocative.