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The man behind China's million-dollar masks cares about art, not auctions

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Photos: Zeng Fanzhi: Parcours

Beijing, China (CNN) — Chinese contemporary artist Zeng Fanzhi made headlines in 2013 when his work, “The Last Supper” (2001), sold at a Sotheby’s auction for \$23.3 million (\$180.4 HK million).

Such a momentous sale could be considered a defining moment of ‘success’ in any artist’s career -- but not for the introspective 52-year-old.

Zeng deliberately left this signature painting out of the largest retrospective exhibition of his works to-date -- “Zeng Fanzhi: Parcours” -- which is currently on show at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing.

“I didn’t want viewers to think about auctions, price, and things less related to art,” says Zeng. “The secondary market is too excessive.”

UCCA director, Philip Tinari, who co-curated the exhibition, agrees.

“One thing we are trying to accomplish with this show is to give a sense of this artist beyond the discussion around the market for his works,” he says.

“I think on a certain level, people are always impressed and amazed that these objects made in real time can take on these immense values and that’s a piece of the story. But it’s just one piece, and it’s a piece that’s not in direct relation to what the artist is doing.”

Comprising nearly sixty works borrowed from collections around the world, “Zeng Fanzhi: Parcours” showcases three decades of Zeng’s remarkable career -- from his famous mask series paintings of the 1990s to a new series of exquisite handmade paper works finished just before the exhibition’s opening.

The exhibition space for “Zeng Fanzhi: Parcours” was designed by Tadao Ando Architect & Associates

The works, which span five distinct periods of Zeng’s prolific career, are presented in a simple, light-filled space designed by the artist’s longtime collaborator, Japanese architect Tadao Ando.

“Together the show is a portrait of him [Zeng Fanzhi] as an artist,” explains Tinari, one that has “continuously reinvented himself, throughout his career.”

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Georgia McCafferty and Serenitie Wang contributed to this report.