

GAGOSIAN

HONG KONG TATLER

Masters of Reinvention *Larry Gagosian & Zeng Fanzhi*

By Madeline Ross, interview by William Zhao



Photography by Chris Sorensen

They are two of the biggest names in the art world: Zeng Fanzhi and Larry Gagosian. Hailed by the New York Times as “China’s hottest artist,” 52-year-old Zeng holds the record for the most expensive Asian contemporary work sold at auction (The Last Supper drew US\$23.3 million when it went under the hammer at Sotheby’s Hong Kong in October 2013).

The straight-talking Gagosian is widely considered the world’s most powerful art dealer, with 16 commercial galleries across the US, Europe, the UK and Asia.

Zeng is the only living Chinese artist represented by Gagosian, whose stable of contemporary artists includes Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami and Anselm Kiefer. He has also exhibited the work of legendary figures such as Francis Bacon, Claude Monet, Jackson Pollock, Cy Twombly and Andy Warhol.

When Gagosian set up a Hong Kong gallery in 2011, one of the first exhibitions was a solo show of Zeng’s work. Since then the two have fostered a lucrative relationship. The famously prolific

artist has been described as a master of reinvention, the gallerist relentless in his pursuit of a deal.

The son of printing factory workers from Wuhan, Zeng dropped out of school at 16 to join his parents at work. Drawing provided a release from the daily drudgery, and a few years later he applied to study at art school. He failed the entrance exams five times but was finally accepted in 1987 into the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, where he developed a particular appreciation for German expressionism.

After a stint at an advertising agency, he moved to Beijing in 1993 and committed himself to art full-time. His 30-year career has been marked by diversity, from figurative realism to abstract landscapes.

His most famous series is Mask, which expresses the alienation he felt upon moving to Beijing and witnessing the rapid changes taking place in the newly rich society, and the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in Beijing recently staged a major retrospective of his work.

While Zeng was in school, Gagosian, a graduate of the University of California, Los Angeles, was working as the manager of a car park in LA. He noticed a man selling posters nearby and, with his keen eye for business, realised that he himself could sell posters at higher prices if he sold them in frames.

Soon he had his own poster shop and then began exhibiting the work of photographers, building a network of collectors and influential friends. It wasn't long before he moved into the world of fine art and his empire grew from there.

Asia continues to be a crucial market for Gagosian. This year he will greatly enlarge his Hong Kong gallery, taking another floor in the Pedder Building. He also intends to take on other Asian contemporary artists.

William Zhao (WZ): Larry, why did you choose to take on Zeng Fanzhi as the gallery's first Chinese contemporary artist?

Larry Gagosian (LG): Friends of mine, collectors I respect and museums were collecting his work and, since we were opening a gallery in Asia, I felt it was important that we represent a great Chinese artist. Looking at his work primarily through catalogues and online reproductions, I was impressed with his ability. He is a very talented painter and I found his talent very accessible.

There is other work that is more embedded in Asian culture—and maybe in time I will appreciate that more—but coming from my tradition, I found his technical ability and his development stylistically extremely impressive. It was also clear he had already developed a good market and that there were strong prices at auction.

And my good friend François Pinault [a veteran art collector and major shareholder in retail conglomerate Kering] had been a great supporter of Fanzhi's art for many years. I respect his judgment and I felt this was the right artist for our gallery.

WZ: And Fanzhi, why did you choose to collaborate with Gagosian Gallery?

Zeng Fanzhi (ZF): Gagosian is a good display brand. For me, their space is very good for setting up my large-scale works. I design every exhibit myself, and I always mock up the room to scale to see the relationship between the size of the wall and my work.

Many elements are carefully selected and specially tailor-made. This gallery is always able to meet my high standards and many requirements. Gagosian has given me a platform to experiment and to grow and develop as an artist.

Every time I set up an exhibition, I will study and explore the different levels of education, backgrounds and mentality of the viewers to see what their reactions are. I think it makes sense for an exhibition to have this mutual exchange. I cannot just draw at home not caring about anything.

Artists usually have a good strong self, a personal ideal, but in doing an exhibition you still want to create an interesting exchange with everyone.

WZ: And how would you characterise your relationship with Larry Gagosian?

ZF: We have a lot of respect for each other. In collaborating with Larry I meet many different, very interesting people. He has a good attitude as a gallery owner. He is sincere and we have established a good long-term partnership.

Basically, he gives me a lot of freedom and his team is very professional. Every time I create and design exhibitions, he believes in me and gives me ample support.

WZ: What does Gagosian have in common with other galleries who've featured your work?

ZF: The benefit of working with galleries like Gagosian is the quality of exhibitions they produce. I've absorbed and learned a lot from these exhibitions, getting different viewpoints from guests and other artists who visit.

Even within the same exhibition, one can gain different perspectives, explore different presentation methods—how artists are introduced to audiences—and how to set up works of art. Large organisations will take the time to do their research before launching an exhibition.

For example, when I saw an exhibition on Monet by one such gallery, I was so impressed by how the various works were displayed, emphasising the relationship between the colours the artist chose in each work. I thought it was very powerful—and this is the kind of relationship I'd like to have with galleries I work with, establishments that consider how and where to tell my story, and what kind of story I want to tell.

WZ: Larry, when you partnered with Zeng Fanzhi, the artist already had a lot of supporters in China. No doubt this helped your business flourish in Asia. On the other hand, the gallery introduced Fanzhi's work to a lot of international collectors. It seems like a mutually beneficial partnership.

LG: To a degree we took on Zeng Fanzhi to show goodwill to China's art-collecting public. It was a political statement. But I wouldn't have taken the artist on if I didn't like or wasn't impressed by the work.

I think our relationship also benefits Fanzhi because having a top-level international gallery like ours representing him gives Asian collectors more confidence in collecting his work.

WZ: Do you think Fanzhi's works are easily understood by Western viewers?

LG: I think that is one of the strengths of this artist; even if the Western audience doesn't understand how the culture is reflected in his work, the sheer beauty and technical proficiency is very seductive and compelling.

WZ: Ten years ago Hong Kong was not the art capital it is today, yet you decided to set up a gallery here. How did you know Asia would become such a big market?

LG: It had a lot to do with wealth creation in Asia, which has been amazing—new billionaires, new museums. It's a combination of factors. It's the same reason any market becomes stronger. There is a strong collecting base and there is a certain amount of competition between Asian collectors.

They go to somebody's house and see a Picasso, then they want a Picasso, which is normal. So I think it's a combination of more exposure and having the financial capacity to pursue it.

WZ: China's art market is still emerging and the collectors are still in need of education. As a leading international gallery, do you think you should play an educational role in China to ensure a healthy and sustainable art ecosystem?

LG: I don't really think so. I think doing exhibitions is a form of education. We don't do seminars or panel discussions, which could be something to think about in the future, but my role is not that of an educator. We exhibit art, we try to sell the art.

I think that because of our reputation worldwide, collectors have confidence in what we are doing. It's not like we're a gallery that opened six months ago, and that makes people more comfortable collecting the artists that we represent. I think they feel whatever they buy is more likely to become part of art history.

WZ: Today Gagosian Gallery has 16 premises around the world. Why did you choose Hong Kong for your first gallery in Asia instead of Beijing or Shanghai?

LG: I thought we would have the best chance of success in Hong Kong. I just felt more comfortable with Hong Kong's legal structure and tax structure. I'm not saying a gallery couldn't be successful in Mainland China, but I thought there would be fewer surprises in Hong Kong.

There's a more predictable economic structure and it seemed to me that, in terms of wealth creation and lifestyle, Hong Kong was ahead of the mainland.

WZ: Fanzhi, considering that Gagosian has been expanding around the world, and you've said that new spaces give you a lot of ideas, have you thought about organising exhibitions in places you haven't been yet?

ZF: Since I've just done a big one, it will take some time before I am able to generate ideas for the next. It takes a lot of creativity to prepare for an exhibition, and I want to take the time to study and hone new ideas. There are many aspects to an exhibition, and a concept or an idea will only succeed if your work is mature enough and you are ready to communicate it to others.

WZ: The Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in Beijing recently did a retrospective on you. Do you think you've come to a point where you've achieved what you've set out to do as an artist?

ZF: Not yet. As an artist I cannot rely solely on exhibitions and galleries to achieve my goals. For more people to recognise my work, I need to go slowly, and I need time. That retrospective was about a walk that took 30 years.

WZ: Many Chinese collectors who started by collecting Chinese contemporary art are now collecting more European and American art. Why the change?

LG: In my experience, when a collector starts collecting they very often collect local artists. Eventually you start to look beyond artists from your own culture. There is a great history of art in Europe and America, so for somebody investing a lot of money in art, that history gives them confidence. People have confidence in names. Andy Warhol is like a brand, just like Monet and Picasso.

WZ: Do you worry that the Chinese art market is in a bubble, like the bubble of the 1980s in Japan during which record prices were paid for pieces of Western art?

LG: To me the Asian market looks very healthy. I don't think about danger because if you become too cautious, you lose the momentum in the market.

The market now is really pretty strong and I don't think it's highly speculative. We are meeting more and more collectors, there's a great museum being built in Beijing and other museums in and outside of Hong Kong, so I think it looks good.

WZ: Do you have your eye on any young or emerging artists right now?

LG: I think now is not the best moment for young artists. It goes in cycles a bit and we are now in a period of consolidating. I think emerging artists were a hotter topic maybe six or seven years ago. Now people are deciding what really has value and what is not going to be around forever.

I've seen this cycle ever since I've been in business. There are periods where there are all these new galleries and new artists, and then it gets to a point where there are just too many artists and people go, 'Hey, slow down, there can't be a genius every month.'

People don't want to respond to the flavour of the month constantly. They say, 'I want to see who's going to make it to the next step,' and I think that's the phase we're in right now.

WZ: Now you have 16 galleries. Are you planning to launch any new galleries in Asia?

LG: I love Shanghai. I love Tokyo. We are very aggressive but we have to be careful and do a good deal of research for gallery expansion. I remember there were galleries that were going to open in Brazil because everyone made incredible sales there the first year of the [ArtRio] art fair.

Then all of a sudden the economy got slammed. If the Chinese stock market collapses, or if the Hong Kong stock market collapses, it will affect everything: art, Cartier wrist watches, etc. I try to follow what's going on in the world with economies; I'm not a genius but I try to keep an eye on it and try to make smart decisions.