

Zeng Fanzhi: Amid change, the art of isolation

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Jasmine Fine Arts collection, Singapore Art Museum

Many Chinese artists have embraced American pop culture and fused it with social realism to develop their own artistic style of social and political commentaries on the fast-changing Chinese society. Among the crowd, however, Zeng Fanzhi stands out for the introspective nature of his work, which often reflects his personal life and emotions.

From the red scarves - a symbol of achievement in Communist China, something he yearned for as a child, but never got - to his famed "Mask" portraits, his take on Chinese society in the mid-'90s, Zeng's work has always portrayed his own feelings.

The Beijing-based 43-year-old artist was recently in Singapore for the opening of a major retrospective of his work. In an interview, he pointed out, with the aid of a translator, that the ideological changes in China have clearly influenced him, but his work remains personal: "I grew up in the environment of the Cultural Revolution and all these ideologies take a lot of space in my mind, but when I paint I just want to portray my inner feeling and the people around me. I've never been interested in my art becoming symbols of political ideas."

In the current frenetic Chinese contemporary art market, where many artists are happy to stick to a working "formula," Zeng frequently alters his work and style.

"Zeng Fanzhi is one of the major artists shaping Chinese culture of today," said Lorenz Helbling, director of ShanghART Gallery, one of the galleries that represents the artist. "He is reinventing himself all the time, not afraid of letting/leaving behind great and successful works, which may now sell for a lot in auctions, to develop ever new, surprising, more mature works even if they often confuse people at the beginning."

"Idealism" - running at the Singapore Art Museum until June 3 - shows Zeng's artistic evolution through 36 paintings that have been chosen to reflect his entire body of work, from his graduation piece in 1991 to several new, never-exhibited paintings. "We chose the theme of idealism because there is a certain celebration of ideals in many of his works, yet a certain sadness it might not be achieved," said Kwok Kian Chow, the museum's director.

Zeng, who was born in Wuhan in Hubei Province in 1964, during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, said that his family encouraged him to take up painting "to keep him off the street."

While at the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts, he studied German Expressionism, which would have a strong influence on his work. The expressionistic style of his 1991 graduation piece, "Hospital triptych No. 1," with its wild strokes and fleshy colors, attracted the attention of the Chinese art critic and curator Li Xianting and was selected by Johnson Chang of the Hong Kong-based Hanart TZ Gallery to appear in "China's New Art, Post-1989" at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, a 1993 exhibition now famous for having brought several new contemporary artists international attention.

"I lived next to the hospital and because my house didn't have any toilets I had to use those of the hospital everyday. What I saw there left a strong imprint on me," said the artist, who used these memories for his Hospital series, which portrays doctors and scared patients in operating theaters and emergency rooms.

His second series, the Meat series, was also inspired by everyday experiences. Passing by a nearby butcher, he often saw workers laying on top of the frozen meat to cool down and sleep during hot summers. The artist remembers intense, mixed emotions: "Some feelings were of hunger, because I was hungry in those days, others were of horror, as the blood of the meat would stain the people laying on them. I think this is why I use a lot of red in my work, it fascinates me," he said.

In 1993, Zeng moved to Beijing. "I felt Beijing was the place where I could create art and where my work would be taken seriously," he said. "In Wuhan, when people looked at work they would smile, and in their smile I could see they thought I was crazy. In Beijing they saw I was a person with ideas."

Yet after he arrived, the introvert found it difficult to make friends and his feelings of solitude and isolation became the main theme for his next series, the Mask series, where the well-dressed urbanized population wear white masks, looking at the viewer with blank stares or puzzled eyes. "In the mid-'90s, China was transforming very fast. Chinese officials started wearing suits and ties," he said. "Everybody wanted to look good, but it also looked a bit fake. I felt they wanted to change themselves on the surface, and these are the feelings that I represented in the earlier Mask series. Later on, the series used more vibrant colors; I think it makes people look even more fake, as if they are posing on a stage."

The Mask series, which first appeared in 1994 and continued until 2000, brought Zeng to international prominence. "Mask 1999 No. 3" set the artist's world record at auction, selling for \$816,400 in November 2006 at Christie's Hong Kong. But it also pigeonholed him. "I didn't want to be tied down and I wanted to paint freely, which is why I started the chaotic strokes style," he said.

In 1999, Zeng started to paint people without the mask and by 2004 he had introduced helical strokes into his portraits, as evidenced in the exhibition in the Great Men portraits: five panels representing Karl Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao.

Most recently, Zeng has turned his interest toward landscape, which he is exploring in the Untitled (Night) series. Painting thick woods with or without people, Zeng is now using a technique of frenzied and animated lines.

"Sometimes I paint with two hands. Sometimes I use two brushes, sometimes four," explained the artist. "With this new technique, I create and yet I destroy. One of the brushes is creating, while the other three have nothing to do with me. I like such creation which happens by chance. Sometime I will lose control over the image, but after you lose control you look at what you have and you try to get it back again."

While his earlier work was influenced by German Expressionism, he said he has become more interested in Chinese cultural art since the late '90s, especially the paintings of the Song dynasty, which influence this latest work.

"Having moved away from the more rigid model of European Expressionism," Kwok said, "Zeng's recent works combine a calligraphic touch with a more romanticist view of man and his relationship with nature."

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