

Press Release

Zeng Fanzhi

2 February – 30 April 2023
Hauser & Wirth Downtown Los Angeles
South Gallery



Los Angeles...Beginning 2 February, Hauser & Wirth is proud to present the first Los Angeles solo exhibition of the renowned Chinese artist, Zeng Fanzhi. Featuring a series of monumental, abstract landscapes presented harmoniously within the distinctive soaring space of the South Gallery, this exhibition marks the latest in Hauser & Wirth's ongoing series of Los Angeles presentations conceived to introduce the city to the oeuvres of foremost international contemporary artists, further forging connections across geographical and cultural territories. A pioneer of contemporary Chinese art, Zeng is celebrated globally for his constantly evolving style and subject matter, and the works on view herald his latest artistic breakthroughs that contemplate the intersection of Western art and style with traditional Chinese subject matter and philosophy.

Consisting of ten works on canvas executed over the past few years – some of which are over ten feet tall – the exhibition documents Zeng's latest advances in brushwork and color, celebrating his intuitive approach to painting. Vivid yellow, cyan blue and vermillion are set as the dominant colors that define each painting, while tonal variations remain nuanced as Zeng's signature inky black brushstroke creates a vibrant network of patterning. Adding further complexity to his brushwork, the artist uses broad sweeping strokes that are impressed, layer by layer, upon thick coats of paint, forming a compact and rhythmic wave-like texture. This body of work represent a turn to introspection and deeper contemplation, in which the artist deploys a more diverse pattern of brushwork to explore human consciousness and convey different elements of the human experience.

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The effect that Zeng's technique creates is at once dramatic and intimate. In the paintings from the E Series, the artist creates an intricate, abstract landscape of sinuous lines that unfurl over a background of luminous cyan. A seemingly vast expanse of vibrant blue, closer inspection of the background reveals fan-like brushwork that Zeng intensifies with dabs of brilliant lilac, vermillion, and an inky black wavy texture that imbues the works with rhythm. By setting the blue in complementary contrast to the heavy, scarlet forms and the winding orange lines that grow brighter towards the center of the painting, Zeng demonstrates his fascination with 'mélange optique,' or optical mixing, a neo-impressionist color theory in which colors react with one another in a constantly changing and self-sufficient unity as they are simultaneously perceived by the eye, rather than being mixed into a single hue on the palette. In so doing, Zeng unleashes a symphony of visual texture, seemingly capturing tremors of light on canvas.

The works on view are deeply engaged with the centuries-old painting practices and literati aesthetic philosophy of the Song to Yuan dynasties that Imperial scholar-officials practiced as a means of self-cultivation, using painting to communicate human emotion. Indeed, Zeng states that the crux of his painting does not lie in formal likeness, but rather in his ability to reflect and transmit his own emotional experience through his brushwork. The artist explains: 'They are not real landscapes. They are about an experience of miao wu [marvelous revelation] ... Miao wu is a kind of revelation. Instead of making something obvious miao wu brought about an unmarked world, which underlies the deep strata of life, both novel and familiar ... Miao wu constitutes a restless journey of discovery.'

Accompanying the monumental series of paintings is a suite of six graphite drawings. Echoing the impressionistic abstraction of Zeng's paintings, these works on paper offer an intimate glimpse into the artist's process and technique.

On the occasion of the exhibition, Hauser & Wirth Publishers will produce a fully-illustrated publication with essays by Stephen Little, Barbara Pollack, and Carter Ratcliff, who explore the relationship of the body of work to the history of Chinese painting, developments in Chinese contemporary art, and American abstraction, respectively. The book will be released in fall 2023.



About the artist

Zeng Fanzhi was born in Wuhan, China in 1964 and graduated from the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts in Wuhan in 1991. One of the most celebrated artists working today, Zeng is lauded across the globe for his technical mastery and ability to conjure emotion from his subject matter.

During his early education in Wuhan, Zeng immersed himself in Western art, philosophy and the social realist techniques of the 1985 new wave movement in China. These interests informed his earliest series of paintings, Meat Series and Hospital Triptychs. Both bodies of work are characterized by an approach that is at once objective and tender. Zeng renders human figures as merely slabs of pink and red flesh indeterminable from the animal carcasses that surround them, while also capturing the agonizing pain of his subjects with an empathetic brush. These early works between 1989 and 1994 set the stage for an intensely personal and expressive painting practice that documents a prolific period of social and economic development in Chinese history.

Working in the wake of rapid modernization and urbanization in China, Zeng turned his attention to figures from the industries around him, and began to paint his protagonists in masks so as to disguise human pain and agony behind a 'socially acceptable' face. Inspired by artists as diverse as Francis Bacon, Willem De Kooning, Max Beckmann, these works, known as the Mask and Behind the Mask series, straddle realism and imagination to reveal a meticulous attention to technical detail, merged with a free and expressionistic style of painting.

Following a period of critical and commercial success, Zeng made the conscious decision to move away from formal figuration and rules guarding composition and representational painting, and entered into a new exploration of abstraction and expressive portraiture. In 1996 he embarked on a new series, removing the coverings from his subjects' faces to reveal their raw emotion and the reality of their suffering.

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Over the past two decades, Zeng has reacquainted himself with traditional Chinese ink painting, and art particularly from the Northern Wei to Song and Yuan dynasties from the fourth to fifteenth centuries. Informed by these new interests, Zeng has moved further into abstraction, creating highly gestural landscapes that share the same dynamic energy of his portraiture. These canvases are traversed by lines, blending with and obscuring the legible objects in the background. Over the past 10 years, Zeng has developed this series to investigate the complex tension between nature, wildlife and humanity.



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Gallery hours:
Tuesday – Sunday, 11 am – 6 pm

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Caption and courtesy information:

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Zeng Fanzhi
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Untitled
2022
Oil on canvas
240 x 400 cm / 94 1/2 x 157 1/2 in

Untitled
2019
Oil on canvas
400 x 260 cm / 157 1/2 x 102 3/8 in

E Series 2022 no.14
2022
Oil on canvas
373 x 223 cm / 146 7/8 x 87 3/4 in

D Series 2021 no.3
2021
Oil on canvas
250 x 250 cm / 98 3/8 x 98 3/8 in

Portrait:
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