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Press Release

Zeng Fanzhi In the Studio

Hauser & Wirth Zürich

22 September – 10 November Opening: 21 September

Hauser & Wirth London

2 October – 10 November Opening: 1 October

Hauser & Wirth Hong Kong

8 October – 10 November Opening: 8 October



Conceived as a single exhibition spanning three locations in Zurich, London and Hong Kong, Hauser & Wirth is delighted to present 'Zeng Fanzhi. In the Studio'. The unifying theme of these presentations is Zeng's investigations into the possibilities of painting in the contemporary era. The exhibition is reflective of a multi-layered approach since the artist works concurrently on several series. As a result a perpetual dialogue, between abstraction and representation across histories and cultures, is at the core of his practice.

The exhibition allows viewers the opportunity to gain an unprecedented and in-depth understanding of the bold development of the artist's creative process as each locale features new works which have not been previously exhibited. In Zurich the exhibition features abstract landscapes from the last two years; in London the focus is portraiture from the late 1980s to the present day; and in Hong Kong new paintings and drawings deftly draw on conjunctions of Oriental and Western artistic traditions reflecting Zeng's ongoing research and experimentation.

Over the course of three decades, Zeng has continually challenged convention to transcend a simple representation of the physical world. His approach is a highly personal search for a fundamental understanding of painting and its potential as a means of expression through the medium itself. In this respect elements of the artist's process – such as the painted gesture, the creation of pictorial space and use of colour – are at once a means of conveying human experience and a meditation on the inherently subjective nature of perception. As Zeng Fanzhi explains, 'Painting provides me with a gateway to stay in contact with the world. What I feel, see, hear, and think are all articulated through my paintings.'

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The paintings which feature in the Zurich section of the exhibition are an evolution of a series of abstract landscapes which the artist began in 2002. Zeng has developed new techniques, using diverse brushstrokes in vibrant hues against a darker ground disrupt and traverse the surface plane in intricate expressive skeins. Previously elements such as fire, water and sky appeared in this series, yet the recent works, such as 'Untitled' (2017), are resolutely abstract giving an impression of an indeterminate territory reflecting the artist's expressive plane, the scale of which envelops the viewer.

In this respect, Zeng is pursuing a prevailing line of investigation in Chinese aesthetics in which the forms of the natural landscape are used as a metaphor for the character and emotions of the artist. Zeng has an acute awareness of the dynamics which occur as the viewer continually adjusts the focal distance to arrive at their own ideal vantage point, and the configuration of the works in the gallery space forms a rhythm.



The human figure remains an essential theme throughout the artist's career and Zeng describes the genre as a means of observing 'the fundamental emotional state of humankind'. The figurative works on view in London reveal the aesthetic range of the artist as his approach has evolved, from early paintings 'Smiling Beck-ning' (1989) and examples from the renowned Mask Series which followed in the 1990s, to several new series of works and portraits featuring the cultural icons Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon and Victor Hugo created in recent years. This presentation aptly demonstrates Zeng's dedication to experimenting with a multiplicity of approaches over the course of three decades. In this respect it gives unprecedented insights into the artist's work by revealing how the process of painting itself takes precedence as a means of conveying meaning and experience over the subject matter depicted.

A thematic strand which emerges here is the artist's reflection on the creative act itself through forms of portraiture. In a new series Zeng returns to self-portraiture for the first time in a decade, portraying himself with a bowed head to suggest the meditative and repetitive nature of the processes which are intrinsic to his creative labour. Regardless of the thematic, pictorial, and stylistic variations, the artist considers portraiture an introspective and autobiographical subject and a means of reflecting on his state of mind, his contemplation of human emotions, imagined ideals, and perhaps even pessimism and compassion about human existence itself.

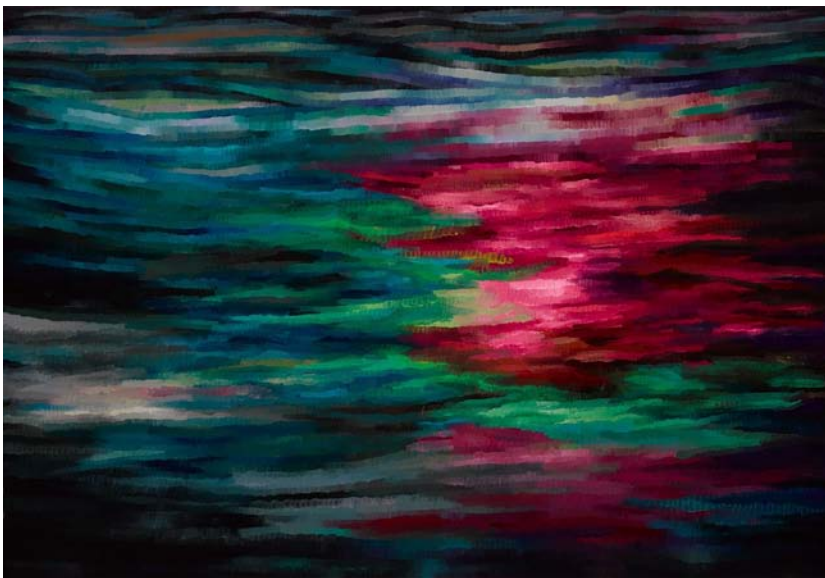
The presentation in Hong Kong emerges from Zeng's careful examination of, and reflection upon, the work of Cézanne and Zhao Gan, the 10th century Chinese artist. For Zeng the series of paintings and process of creating them are a means of undertaking acute observations on the methodology and perception of these artists. This

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experimental approach led the artist to explore the relationship between Zhao Gan's 'Early Snow on the River' (late 10th c.) and Paul Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire series in several paintings. Further works, pencil drawings on the book covers of ancient drawing manuals, again reference traditional Chinese painting practices and the expressive potential of landscape motifs as a reflection on a state of mind.

Further new paintings in this final section of the exhibition reveal the extent of the artist's experiments with composition and colour, with the scope of his research expanding to cover comparisons of Oriental and Western practices. The result of this progressive process is that the works featured in this section of the exhibition reflect the artist's changing colour palette and use of contrasting colours as exemplified by 'Untitled' (2018), a resolutely abstract work in which gradations in the hues appear to modulate the surface of the canvas. The study of Cézanne and Zhao Gan is here expanded to incorporate the work of Giorgio Morandi, giving a further insight into the dialogue between abstraction and representation which informs the bodies of work in all three locations.



The catalogue from Hauser & Wirth Publishers, with texts by David Anfam and Fabrice Hergott, will be available in November. The authors will be in conversation at 11am on Saturday 22nd September at Hauser & Wirth Zürich.

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. In a career spanning more than three decades, Zeng has repeatedly challenged convention to evolve his art, resulting in artistic breakthroughs, diverse painting styles, and an extremely rich oeuvre. Working across different genres, including abstraction, portraiture and figuration using oil and mixed media, each category presents a unique

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dimension of Zeng's work through which his multiple aesthetic quests are demonstrated. Central to his art is his exploration of the possibilities of painterly practice, brushwork, and medium, and their complex relations to different emotions and consciousness. Often, the artist situates himself at the juncture of Eastern and Western artistic traditions as well as at the intersection of ancient and contemporary times, where he reflects on the similarities and differences between these traditions and eras. He constantly seeks to shed light on new possibilities within painting using these references.

Zeng's work transcends a simple representation of the physical world; rather, it expresses with virtuosity the entire palette of human emotions—from sorrow and fear to hope and imagined ideals, from melancholy to anxiety, from pessimism to compassion, from intimacy to monumentality—ensuring its enduring impact on his audience.

Zeng Fanzhi has exhibited at a number of international museums. Recent solo exhibitions include: 'Zeng Fanzhi | Van Gogh', The Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (2017); 'Zeng Fanzhi: Parcours', the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2016); 'Zeng Fanzhi', Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris (2013); 'Zeng Fanzhi', Punta della Dogana, Venice (2013); 'Zeng Fanzhi: Being', Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center, Hong Kong (2011); '2010 Zeng Fanzhi', The Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai (2010); 'Zeng Fanzhi', The National Gallery for Foreign Art, Sofia (2010); 'Zeng Fanzhi: Idealism', Singapore Art Museum, Singapore (2007); 'Zeng Fanzhi', Musée d'art moderne de Saint-Étienne, France (2007); and 'i/We: The Painting of Zeng Fanzhi 1991–2003', Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai (2003).

Zeng's works are in the collections of several prominent institutions, including the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris; Singapore Art Museum, Singapore; National Art Museum of China, Beijing; Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai; M+ Museum, Hong Kong; Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka; Denver Art Museum, Denver CO; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

Press Contacts:

Chloe Kinsman (CH, UK)
Hauser & Wirth
chloe@hauserwirth.com
+44 207 255 8264

Matthew Brown (UK)
Sutton
matthew@suttonpr.com
+44 207 183 3577

Amelia Redgrift (HK)
Hauser & Wirth
amelia@hauserwirth.com
+1 646 236 5241

Tara Liang (HK)
Hauser & Wirth
tara@hauserwirth.com
+852 67383703

Hauser & Wirth

23 Savile Row
London W1S 2ET

Gallery hours:
Tuesday to Saturday, 10 am – 6 pm

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Untitled
2018
Oil on canvas
250×350 cm / 98 3/8 × 137 3/4 in

Untitled
2018
Oil on canvas
80×80 cm / 31 1/2 × 31 1/2 in

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Oil on canvas
80×80 cm / 31 1/2 × 31 1/2 in

Untitled
2018
Oil on canvas
80×250 cm / 31 1/2 × 98 3/8 in

Untitled
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Oil on canvas
180 × 260 cm / 70 7/8 × 102 3/8 in