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The man behind the masks

Elusive and something of an outsider in the Beijing art world, painter Zeng Fanzhi has shot to the head of the class, says **BARBARA POLLACK**

On a drizzly day in Beijing, Zeng Fanzhi is serving espresso in his studio, looking every bit as serene as the Tang dynasty stone Buddha stationed cross-legged on a nearby pedestal. As raindrops tap the skylights 7.5 metres overhead, Italian opera fills the newly built 460-square-metre space, designed by the artist himself. Beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows is a Suzhou-style garden with an array of monumental scholar's rocks surrounding a goldfish pond.

Inside the studio several of Zeng's latest paintings are propped against the wall, most depicting wild, almost menacing nighttime landscapes overlaid with dense thickets. "I think they are peaceful," Zeng says somewhat cryptically through a translator, looking at scenes that seem anything but. A group of these works will be included in a show at the end of this year at Acquavella Galleries in New York, the blue-chip dealership that recently signed Zeng to what is rumoured to be a multimillion-dollar two-year contract.



Zeng, here in front of his 2008 painting *Fire*, became the most expensive living Chinese artist when his *Mask Series 96 No 6* (above) sold for \$9.7 million in May

The deal is the latest step in the 44 year old's ascent from newcomer in the Beijing art scene 15 years ago to his position as a leader in the Chinese market. In May, his painting *Mask Series 96 No 6* sold for \$9.7 million at Christie's Hong Kong, a record for any contemporary Chinese artist.

Handsome and sombre, Zeng answers questions with carefully measured words. He's still something of a loner in Beijing's lively social network of artists, and he is reluctant to share personal information or give



Tiananmen Square period.

Instead of moving to the artists' village near the Old Summer Palace in northwest Beijing – where Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun and other current art stars had formed a bohemian outpost – Zeng found a small courtyard-style residence in the embassy district, then a quiet part of town. There he began his renowned Mask series paintings in which the characters wear skintight white masks, their huge, bulging eyes staring out from behind.

In early paintings from the series, the figures are dressed in school garb,

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opinions on the changes in China over the last three decades. He also seems uninterested in discussing business, though he's not entirely free of arrogance about his success.

“Sometimes these supercollectors come to my studio and say, ‘I own every bit of Chinese art except your work,’ but I will never sell to this kind of buyer,” says Zeng. Such collectors, he believes, lack the taste or connoisseurship to truly appreciate him as an artist. “Though I have deep regard for Chinese culture, as you can see from my garden, I never wanted to be merely a Chinese artist in my paintings.”

Zeng grew up in Wuhan, in the central province of Hubei, where his parents worked at a printing house. As a student at the nearby Hubei Academy of Fine Arts, Zeng found himself drawn toward Western masters such as Francis Bacon, Willem de Kooning, Raoul Dufy and Max Beckmann. It is this amalgam of influences that resulted in his expressionistic paintings, which were quite different from the Pop Art styles of many of his Chinese contemporaries in the early nineties.

In the beginning Zeng painted slabs of meat as if they were human characters and, later, people as if they were piles of meat – two series inspired by a butcher shop and a hospital near where he lived. One of his first major works, *Hospital*, a triptych depicting a group of the dead and suffering in an arrangement modelled on Michelangelo's *Pietà*, was painted for his senior show at the academy in 1992. It caught the attention of Li Xianting, the country's leading art critic of the period, who brought it to Johnson Chang, owner of the Hong Kong gallery Hanart TZ. Similar early works were featured in Chang's 1993 exhibition “China's New Art, Post-1989”, which essentially introduced this generation of Chinese artists to the outside world.

In 1993 Zeng left Wuhan for Beijing, which he'd visited several times to see exhibitions like the influential 1985 Robert Rauschenberg show at the National Art Museum. Once there, in a huge city full of strangers, he experienced profound loneliness and alienation, even as the country embarked on its tremendous economic advances of the post-

including the famous red kerchief, occasionally in groups coalescing as a team. Zeng had grown up at a time when every schoolchild aspired to receive the red kerchief, a sign of acceptance and achievement in the Little Red Guard. Years later Zeng still felt the sting of being denied this reward by a cruel teacher at his elementary school, leaving him as one of the only children without it.

In later Mask paintings the dress shifts to the latest fashions, reflecting the emergence of young yuppies in Beijing by the late nineties. Throughout the series the figures appear happy and relaxed, superficially, at least. But they seem distanced from each other, bound by social conventions that make it impossible for them to be genuine. These works were a personal representation of Zeng's emotional state at the time. “I was lonely and a total stranger in this big city, which led to very introverted feelings,” he recalls. “These paintings were about being afraid to show myself, about hiding, so that I wouldn't get hurt.”

For most of the nineties, Zeng worked without much recognition. A 1995 solo

show at Hanart TZ in Hong Kong generated only modest sales at very low prices. A couple of years later Zeng began his long association with Lorenz Helbling of Shanghart, essentially the only contemporary art gallery in Shanghai then.

Around 2001 Zeng began to move away from the Mask series and started doing large-scale portraits. Sometimes he painted close-ups of faces composed of circular brush strokes not unlike Chuck Close's famous portraits. In others he painted Communist icons such as Marx, Engels and Chairman Mao with stray lines and expressionist brush strokes nearly eclipsing their visages. While many Chinese artists repeat themselves as their work gains in popularity, Zeng is a rarity, constantly experimenting and pushing his imagery in new directions.

"Zeng Fanzhi's works often have to do with the society he lives in, the situation in China for his generation," says Helbling, who showed the artist's latest works this summer at Shanghart's new Beijing gallery, right next door to Zeng's studio in Caochangdi Village. "I think he follows this sensibility quite accurately yet with a lot of intuition."

The artist's recent works are his most imaginative and abstract yet. The scenes are desolate – glowing landscapes glimpsed through dense thickets. Wild animals have also crept into his paintings. "The elephant, in particular, is a symbol of stability," says Helbling, suggesting that these works may be about a hope for inner stability amid China's relentless economic boom and Zeng's own surging career.

In 2006 his *Mask Series 99 No 3* brought \$816,400 at Christie's



Unlike many Chinese artists who repeat themselves, Zeng has constantly pushed in new directions. Here: *Mask Series 98 No 6* and a 1996 self-portrait, below

The Mask paintings, says the artist, "were about being afraid to show myself, about hiding, so that I wouldn't get hurt"



Hong Kong. Just a year later his 1992 *Hospital* triptych fetched £2.8 million at Phillips de Pury in London. Around the same time Zeng had solo shows at the Singapore Art Museum, the Musée d'Art Moderne in St.-Etienne Métropole, France and Gallery Hyundai in Seoul. As a result of his success, he was able to lease the plot of land in Caochangdi and build his new studio.

Collectors have been coming ever since. New York collector-dealer José Mugarbi, who met the artist through Fabien Frys of F2 Gallery in Beijing, had bought few Chinese works. "Honestly, I received many propositions from Chinese artists," Mugarbi says, "but the only one who really interested me was Zeng Fanzhi."

Mugarbi played a key role in Zeng's deal with Acquavella. The gallery would seem a great fit for the artist, who first visited it two years ago to see a Lucian Freud exhibition. Only when he returned to the gallery in December to negotiate his own show did Zeng remember it was where he'd first encountered the British master, another key influence on his work.

Tentatively slated for December, the show will cover all periods of the artist's career. "Serious collectors are likely to find it much more compelling than they expect, given their wariness about Chinese contemporary art being trendy," says gallery director Eleanor Acquavella. "Zeng Fanzhi is above and beyond the trend." ■

Zeng Fanzhi is represented by Shanghart in Beijing and Shanghai (shanghartgallery.com) and Acquavella Galleries in New York, which is planning a show for December. 8 East 79th Street; +1 212 734 6300; acquavellagalleries.com.