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Zeng Fanzhi tells **CHEAH UI-HOON** about the influences that shaped his art

IN CHINA'S seemingly unstoppable move towards a market economy, discussions about political ideology and the country's political past appear to have taken a back seat. "Everyone's talking only about development; no one talks about politics anymore," observes artist Zeng Fanzhi, 43.

It's something which strikes him as surprising, given that he grew up with government edicts and propaganda which encompassed almost every aspect of life. "Growing up in China, political symbols have always been there. You can't escape or run from it, it's a part of life," he recalls.

Now that these symbols have been passed over for economic development, Zeng finds it "meaningful" to bring them up. "Not that I'm making a social comment. Politics might not be prominent in the Chinese psyche now, but it still constitutes a major part of my memory — I bring it up because I think it's especially meaningful," he says.

To be fair, questioning Zeng on the political directions of his art might be slightly off tangent. It isn't what got him noticed initially — which was his gorier *Hospital* series he painted for his degree show. Nonetheless, his very representative portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao (in ascending order) have this tension of unspoken meaning behind them, given also the matter-of-fact way he's portrayed their likenesses. They're neither mocking, nor done tongue-in-cheek, but when you look closer, there are fine, chaotic strokes and scratches obscuring these portraits as well.

These paintings — grouped under "Great Men" — line the stairway of the Singapore Art Museum's gallery space. *Idealism* is the title of Zeng's exhibition, a solo retrospective of his 16-year career since he graduated

from Hubei Academy of Fine Arts. This Beijing-based artist is celebrated for his expressionist works, and best known for his *Mask* series, which he undertook exclusively between 1994 and 2000.

Zeng's retrospective here is a selection of 36 major works from his four major series — *Hospital*, *Mask*, *Portrait* and *Night* — with the works chosen not in chronological order but rather for their interaction with the museum's gallery space. It includes works from his latest *Untitled* or *Night* series — marked by the use of *luan pi*, or chaotic strokes — some of which are being exhibited in public for the first time.

Recounting the influences on his art-making, Zeng says that major exhibitions of Western art in Shanghai and Beijing in the early 1980s gave him insight into Western art. "Exhibitions of works by Edvard Munch and Robert Rauschenberg had a big impact on me, and they made me think."

Lucky start

Attending art school later, he stayed clear of national art competitions and exhibitions. "At that time, to get an award at one of these national competitions shot you to fame. But then, the artists tended to be very concerned about drawing what they thought the judges wanted to see," he says.

"If you didn't participate, you didn't get noticed. You'd be off the radar screen. And when you're like an underground artist, you could do what you wanted. A lot of artists in China are like that — they prefer to do their own thing."

Despite that, Zeng did get noticed early on — which helped to kick-start his art career, something he humbly attributes to luck. His graduation work was acclaimed by an eminent Beijing art critic, and then spotted by a Hong Kong gallery owner, who later chose his triptych in the *Hospital* series

to be part of an international art exhibition of works by post-'89 Chinese artists. "I was lucky. Some artists can work for three to five years before they get noticed — or even a lifetime," he says.

But he did have his short stint as a "starving artist" before international recognition translated into monetary returns. The *Hospital* series, of which there are only three sets of triptychs in public and private collections, is a short-lived series because of financial constraints — basic materials like oils and canvases were expensive for a budding painter who worked as a graphic artist by day. "In those days, a metre of imported canvas would cost 30 renminbi. I had to pay rent, buy clothes and food, paint and take girls out — all on a pay of 100 renminbi a month," he says.

His preliminary paintings were, in fact, done on canvases which he has painted several times over. "I would say I've done 200 paintings in the *Hospital* series, but on some 20 canvases which are now in my workshop. These are works which I didn't sell, or recently bought back," he discloses.

On the path to fame, he's also been duped — once, by a Taiwan-based art gallery owner who sent him only the freight charges for 20 paintings, created between 1989 and 1994, as Zeng was never paid even though the paintings were sold.

But Zeng looks back on his early years as an artist with fondness. "We were young, we didn't have any responsibilities, and nobody bothered us." Development is necessary, and it's timely too, he says. "It's still meaningful — and inspirational — for an artist based in China."

Zeng Fanzhi: Idealism is on from now to June 3, organised by the Singapore Art Museum together with Jasmine Fine Arts, Singapore and ShanghART, Shanghai.



Part of the Mask series: Works by Edvard Munch and Robert Rauschenberg had a big impact on Zeng, who says they made him think