

The background is a complex, abstract composition of dark, gnarled, and tangled branches, possibly from a dead or dormant tree. The branches are rendered in shades of black, dark brown, and deep purple, creating a dense, chaotic web. The background behind the branches is a vibrant, textured wash of colors, primarily deep blue and purple, with some lighter, yellowish-green highlights that suggest a light source or a break in the canopy. The overall effect is one of intense, almost claustrophobic energy and a sense of being lost in a thicket of darkness.

Zeng Fanzhi

Zeng Fanzhi

Acquavella Contemporary Art, Inc.
April 2–May 15, 2009

18 East Seventy Ninth Street, New York, NY 10075, 212 734 6300
www.acquavellagalleries.com
Gallery hours: Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

ACQUAVELLA



Foreword

Zeng Fanzhi earned critical acclaim and the attention of museums and collectors world-wide for his now-iconic “mask” paintings. Moving further into startlingly personal portraiture and landscapes of the mind, he continues to challenge the traditions of figurative painting. This is the artist’s first solo exhibition in the United States and the first time these works have been shown.

My thanks to Eleanor, Nicholas, and Alexander Acquavella for their enthusiastic support, work and travel that made this exhibition possible, to Michael Findlay for his interview with the artist, Emily Salas for her work on the catalogue and Garth Szwed for the installation.

Mr. Zeng’s assistant Liu Huaming has been an invaluable help throughout the planning of the exhibition. Most of all our thanks go to Zeng Fanzhi for these remarkable works.

—WILLIAM R. ACQUAVELLA

An Interview with Zeng Fanzhi

BY MICHAEL FINDLAY, DIRECTOR OF ACQUAVELLA GALLERIES

The panoramic landscapes seem mysterious. Do you see them this way? Is there a narrative?

They are not real landscapes. They are about an experience of *miao wu* (marvelous revelation). *Miao wu* does not fall into the common categories of cognitive process. Nor has it anything to do with reason. *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. In this respect, the *miao wu* type of revelation concerns a disclosure of what is already embedded in the artistic ego—the revealed world is there, but it is unfamiliar and amazing. *Miao wu* constitutes a restless journey of discovery.

What inspires you more—what you see or what you feel?

My inspiration comes from every aspect of life, such as my childhood memories, my life experiences as well as sounds and smells. They make a variety of mental images for me. These experiences are a kind of *miao wu* experience, which consists of two different conditions—the “objecthood” of the subject matter and the “equilibrium” of an artistic ego. The “objecthood” comes both before and after the “equilibrium.” The “equilibrium” thus ends up being less abstract contemplations than tangible images. Although a subject could throw its projection onto the artistic ego, it nonetheless becomes the latter—the artistic ego and the subject matter are distinct from each other. The subject is merely a trigger for the desires and calculations of the ego. It can only perfect itself through the imposition of the strong artistic ego upon the subject. The subject and the artistic ego belong to two different realms of the external and of the internal.



ZENG FANZHI AT WORK IN HIS STUDIO IN BEIJING, 2009



What has been the biggest change in your work over the last ten years?

In the last decade I became increasingly reliant on introspective representation. My sentimental fluctuation leads to the periodical differences among my works.

Have any particular historical works of art motivated or challenged your development?

I have been consistently studying masterpieces that are art historically important. I embraced different masters, ranging from Jan Van Eyck to Pablo Picasso, in various periods of my life.

Do you see any conflict between the different traditions of Chinese painting and Western art in technique, meaning or spirit?

Su Shi, the well-known poet of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127), stated that “only children would judge a painting with its faithfulness to nature; one who is only able to compose the poem must not be a real poet.” He meant that if a painting becomes a dull duplication of reality it would be considered only as primitive. A painting has to capture the essence of its topic. A principle central to Chinese art is about the uncertain status of “likeness of form(s).” If a representation gets too close to its prototype it may look rigid. On the contrary, if it goes too distanced from its life model it becomes a fake. The perfection swings, then, between the “like” and the “not-like,” the abstract and the concrete, the full and the empty. The key issue is not so much about the “like”-“not-like” as about how to approach the issue of “formation.” It is the responsibility of an artist to regulate the form with his spirit and to have the meanings embodied in the form, to an extent that the spirit and the form are perfectly combined and complement each other. “Should you not be lavish in the moonlight but rather enjoy the subtle fragrance?” The verse tells the secret of classical Chinese art that strives for a spirit to transcend its physical constraints. Traditional Chinese painting employs only very basic materials and devices, such as light paper, soft brushes, plain ink and simplistic lines, for an extraordinarily rich mindscape of literati. In comparison, Western painting reveals strong curiosities about craftsmanship. It relies on heavy canvas, metal knives, opaque oil paints and elaborate palettes for spectacular chiaroscuro contrasts, vivid perspectives and analytical knowledge.

You have been grouped with Chinese contemporary figurative artists. Do you feel any affinity with their work? Do you consider yourself part of an ethnic, national or generational movement?

I am interested in their works, but tend not to be judgmental.

I was born in the 1960s and witnessed the change of the country in each crucial decade. I am more concerned with ordinary people's life experiences. In my works, the natural revelation of contemporary thoughts and sentiments is far more important than those articulated Chinese icons and iconographies.

In the past you have painted images of Mao Zedong and your prototypical "man" image appears to allude to a fusion of Asian and Western stereotypes. Do you see your work as political and/or cultural critique?

As a Chinese artist, the socialist discourse and education is an intrinsic part of our life. It has made a deep impact on our artistic endeavors. The socialist realist way of doing art unfolds our journey as young artists. Meanwhile it is also a departing point for our future pursuits. This is a matter of fact and should not be bypassed. Regarding historic reforms and artistic expressions, we choose to face the reality and be true to our feelings that the reality brought about. This concerns both our primary trainings and a potential way to get out of and move beyond them. The unique social circumstances and ideologies enrich the artistic spectrum of contemporary China. While more and more artists pay attention to societal and political issues, there are also some people who are more concerned with the life experiences of ordinary persons. The former may help remind the observers of the existence of a "China," or "Chinese Contemporary Art," as in their capital forms. But I am certainly prone to the latter. I have a deeper concern with the substantial life experiences of ordinary people.

Some artists enjoy working alone, others in a busy studio with assistants. What is your preferred work environment?

I got used to working alone while listening to music.

You are now one of the pre-eminent artists of your generation in China; your work is bought by major museums and collectors world-wide and has sold for extremely high prices at auction. How do you measure success for yourself and what type of success would you like to achieve in the next ten years?

The auction prices were beyond my expectations. I was not even aware that my works were marketable when I was in college. At the time I only wished to paint with my heart. Painting is part of my life.

In the future, I hope that people will not be so concerned with the price of my work as with its interpretations. I wish that my works would be able to resonate with different nations and people, and that their influence will endure.

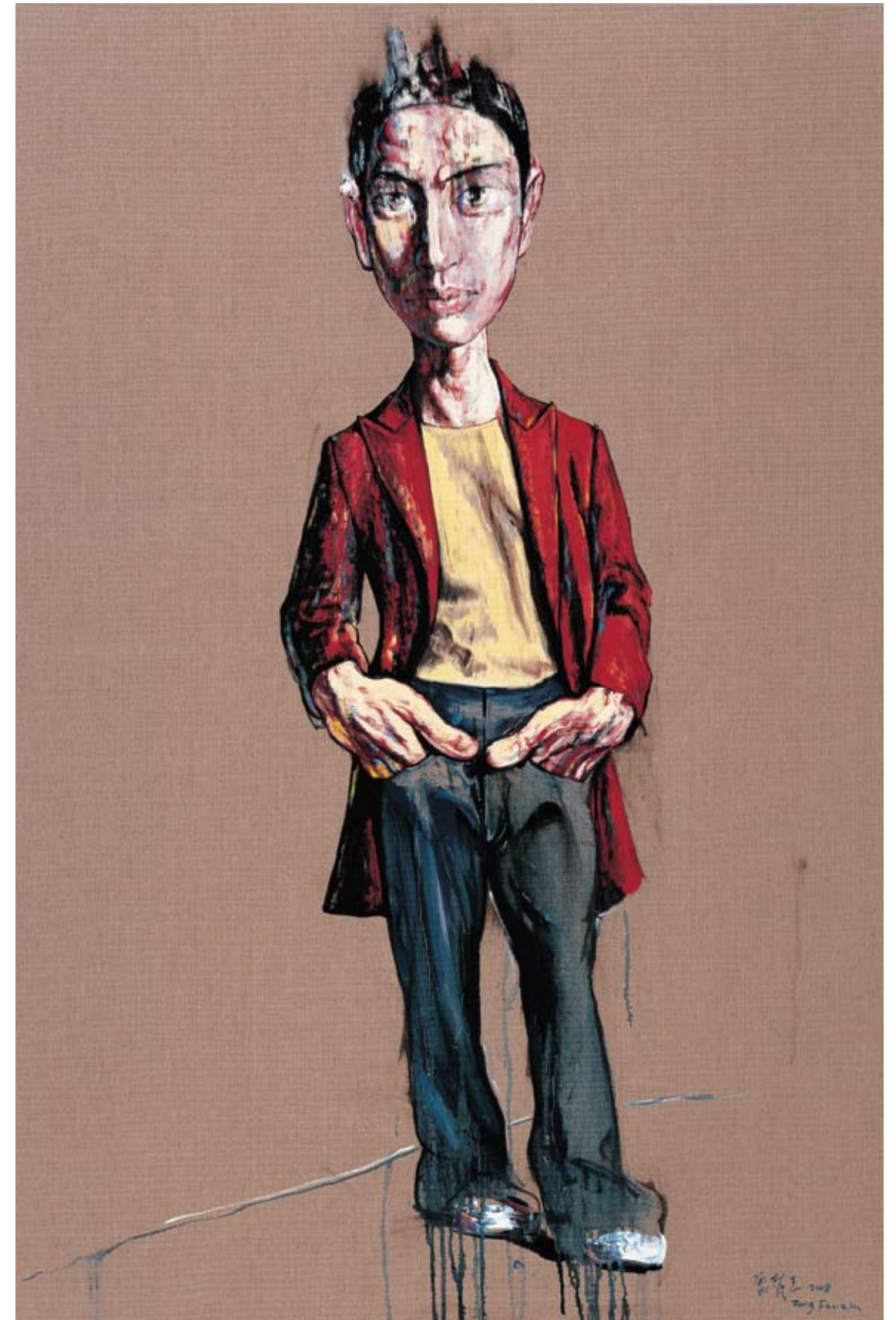
If you could choose to be an artist working in any milieu in any country at any period in history other than today, what would that milieu be?

I would like to find myself around the turn of the 20th century in France, sitting with Paul Cézanne, doing still lifes with him.

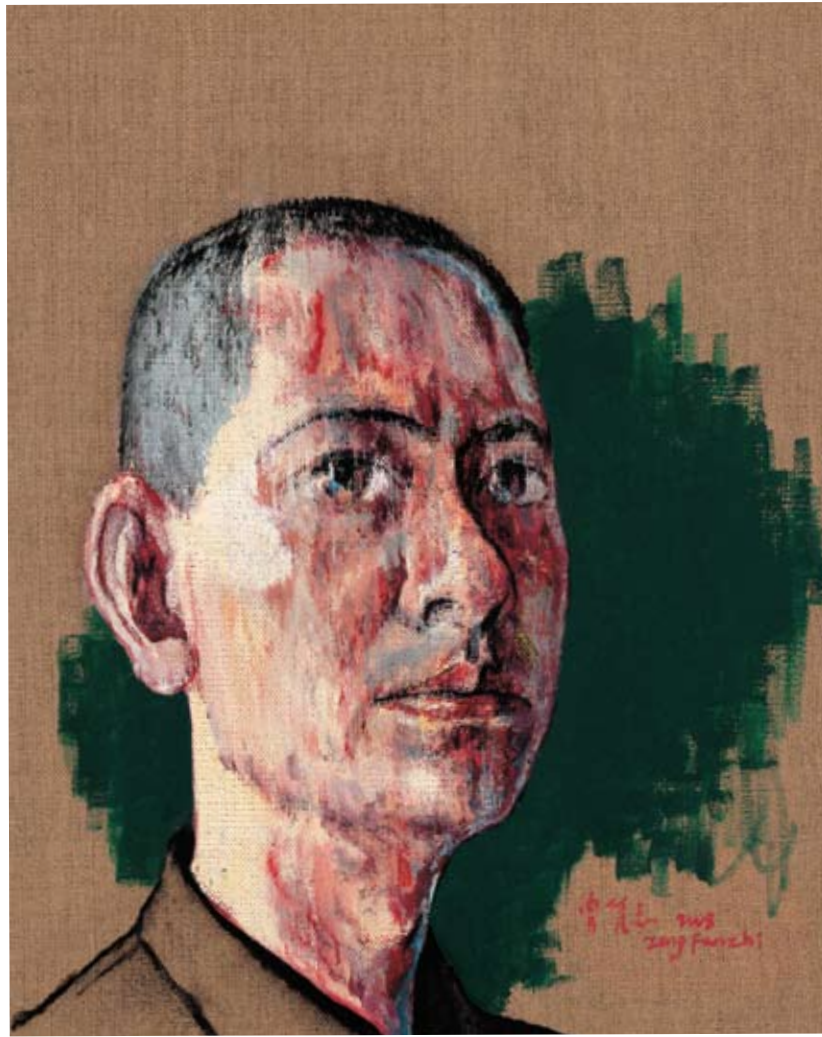
1

Portrait 08-12-6, 2008

59½ x 41⅝ inches







3
Self Portrait I, 2008
17 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches



4
Untitled 08-4-9, 2008
110 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 70 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches

Lion, 2008
110¼ x 212⅝ inches



6

Untitled 08-4-1, 2008

31½ x 43¼ inches





LEFT TO RIGHT

7

Portrait 08-12-7, 2008

17 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 14 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches

8

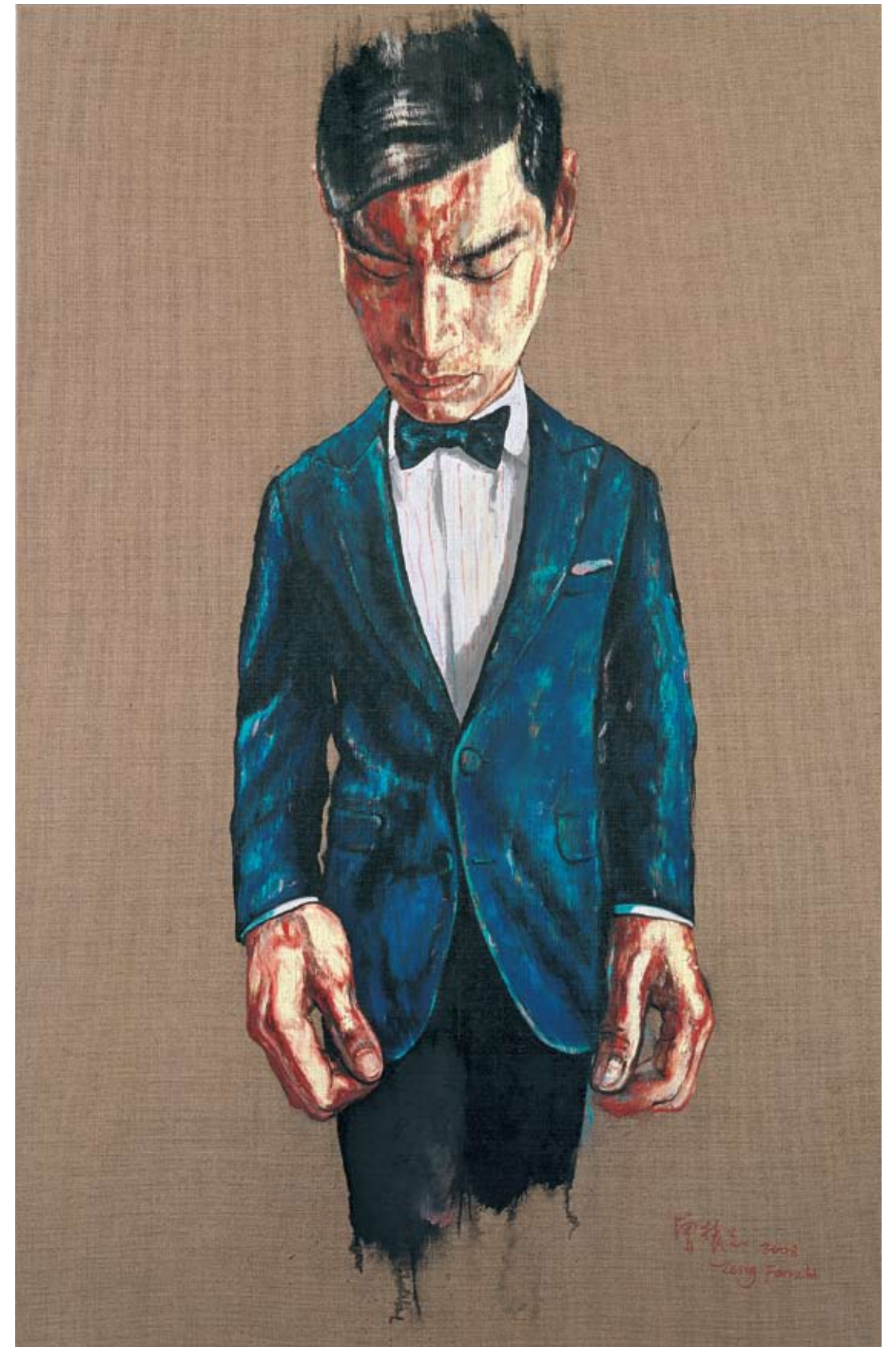
Portrait 08-7-6, 2008

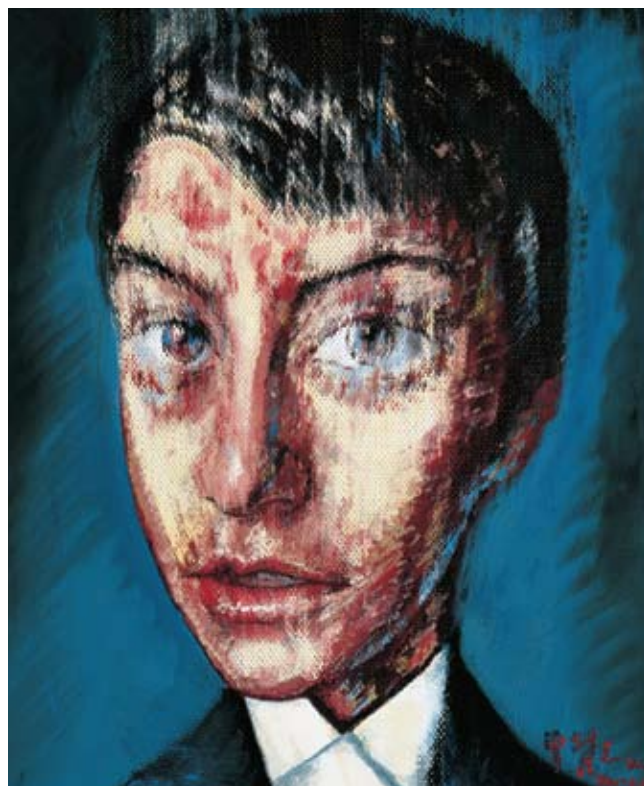
10 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches

9

Portrait 08-7-2, 2008

43 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 28 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches





LEFT TO RIGHT

10

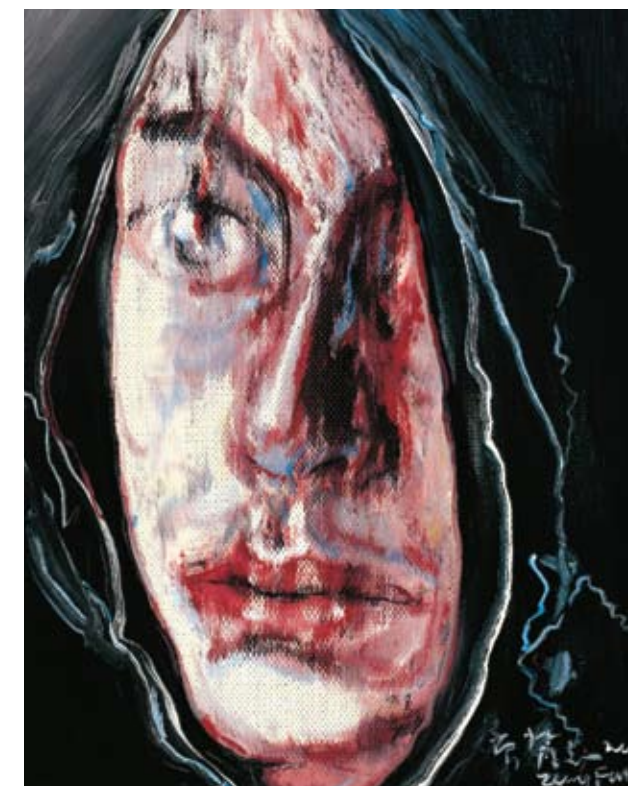
Portrait 08-7-8, 2008

12¼ x 10 inches

11

Portrait 08-7-7, 2008

12¼ x 10 inches



12

Portrait 08-12-1, 2008

43 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 31 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches



13

Untitled 08-12-19, 2008

78¼ x 78¼ inches





14
Portrait 08-7-1, 2008
98³/₈ x 66⁷/₈ inches



LEFT TO RIGHT

15

Portrait 08-12-3, 2008

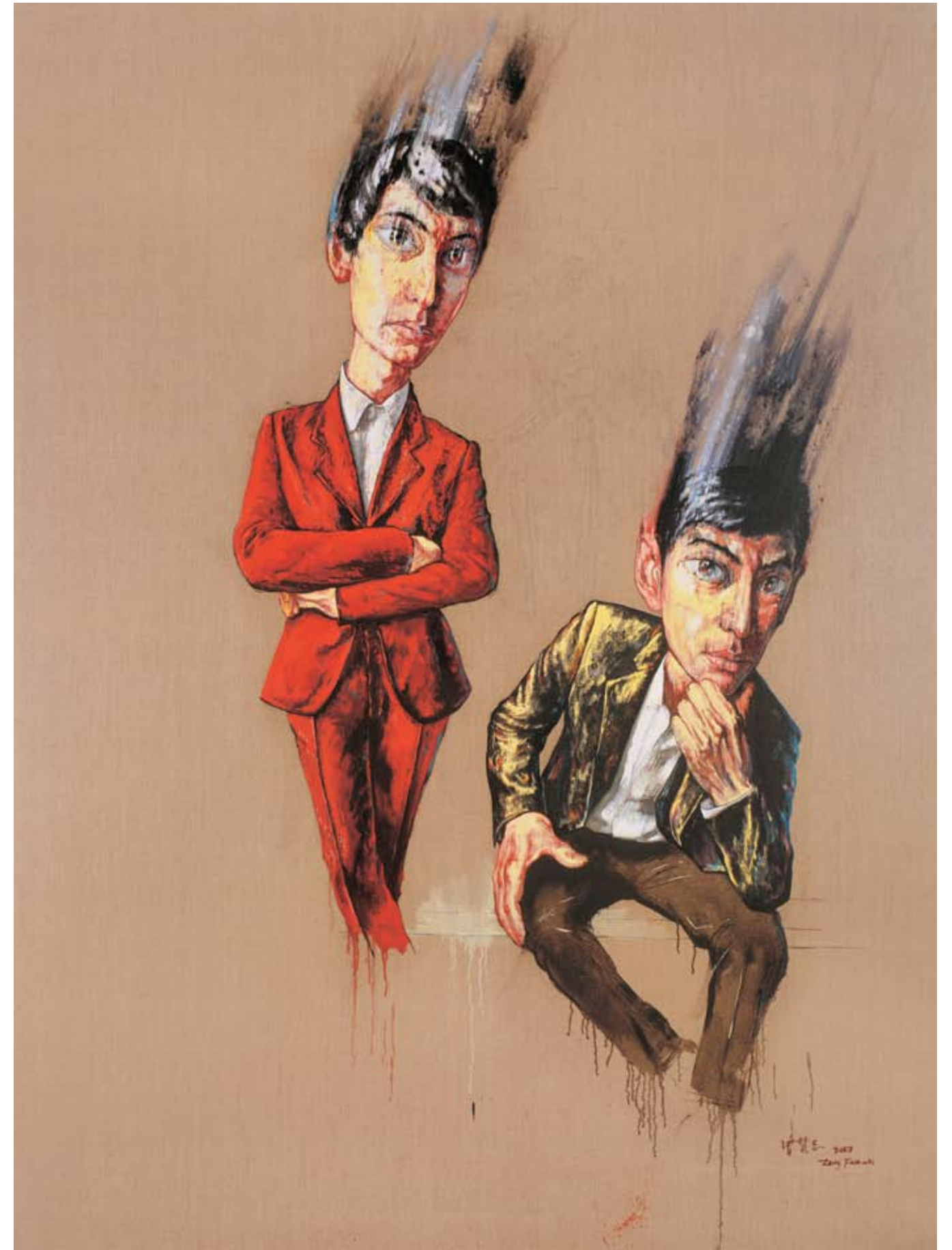
14 x 10⁷/₈ inches

16

Portrait 08-12-2, 2008

23⁷/₈ x 19⁷/₈ inches







18
Untitled 07-18, 2007
102 3/4 x 212 3/4 inches



LEFT TO RIGHT

19

Portrait 08-7-3, 2008

19 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 16 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches

20

Portrait 08-12-4, 2008

16 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 15 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches

21

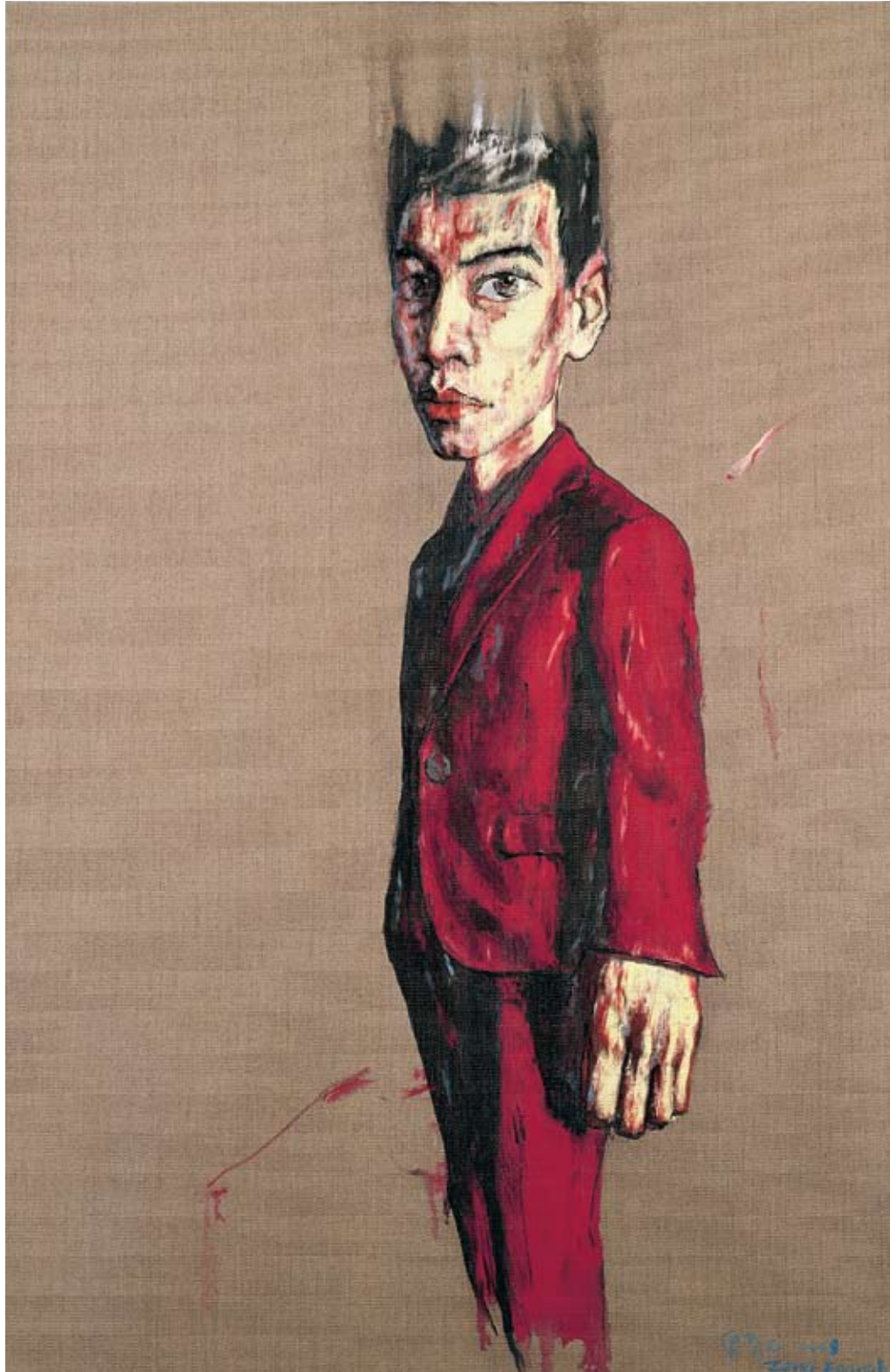
Portrait 08-12-5, 2008

86 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 59 inches





22
Self-Portrait, 2008
42 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches



23
Portrait 08-4-1, 2008
43¼ x 28¾ inches



25

Untitled 08-3-2, 2008

47 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 41 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches

PREVIOUS PAGE

24

Untitled 08-4-6, 2008

84 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 129 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches





Zeng Fanzhi

1964

Born in Wuhan

1991

Graduated from Hubei Academy of Fine Arts

2009

Currently lives and works in Beijing

Solo Exhibitions

2008

“Tai Ping You Xiang,” ShanghART Gallery Beijing, Beijing

2007

“Zeng Fanzhi,” Musée d’Art Moderne De Saint-Étienne Métropole, Saint-Étienne, France

“Idealism,” Singapore Art Museum, Singapore

“Zeng Fanzhi 1989–2007,” Gallery HYUNDAI, Seoul, Korea

2006

“Zeng Fanzhi’s Solo-Exhibition with New Paintings,” ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai, China

“Zeng Fanzhi Paintings,” WEDEL, London, England

2005

“Sky,” Fine Arts Literature Arts Center, Wuhan, Hubei, China

“Zeng Fanzhi,” Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong

2004

“Scapes—Zeng Fanzhi works from 1990–2004,” He Xiangning Art Museum, Shenzhen, China

“Face,” Soobin Gallery, Singapore

“Unmask the Mask—Zeng Fanzhi,” Gallery Artside, Korea

2003

“I/We,” ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai, China

2001

“Raw Beneath the Mask,” ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai, China

1998

“Zeng Fanzhi Works 1993–1998,” CIFA Gallery, the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing; ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai, China

1995

“Behind the Mask,” Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong

1990

“Zeng Fanzhi,” Hubei Institute of Fine Arts Gallery, Wuhan, China

Group Exhibitions

2008

“21st Century China, Art between Identity and Transformation,” Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Roma, Italy

“China Gold,” Musée Maillol, Paris, France

2007

“Floating—New Generation of Art in China,” The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, Korea

“Thermocline of Art. New Asian Waves,” ZKM (Center for Art and Media), Karlsruhe, Germany

2006

“Zhou Chunya, Zeng Fanzhi and Ji Dachun,” LONGRUN ART, Beijing China

2005

“China, Contemporary Painting,” Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio, Bologna, Italy

“Mahjong, Chinesische Gegenwartskunst aus der Sammlung Sigg,” Kunstmuseum Bern, Switzerland

2004

“Exhibition of Nominate for Art Documentation,” Art Gallery of Hubei Academy of Art, Wuhan, China

“Face to Face—Six Artists and One Era,” Robert & Li Art Gallery, Tainan, Taiwan

2003

“Left Hand and Right Hand—Group Exhibition of Chinese and German Contemporary Art,” 798 Art Space, Beijing, China

2002

“Paris—Pekin,” Espace Pierre Cardin, Paris

“The First Triennial of Chinese Arts,” Guangzhou Art Museum, Guangzhou, China

“Korean and Chinese Painting—2002 New Expression,” June 1–30, 2002, Seoul Arts Center, Korea

2001

“Toward a New Image: Twenty Years of Chinese Contemporary Painting,” China Art Gallery, Beijing; Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai; Guangzhou Museum of Art, Guangzhou; Modern Art Museum, Chengdu, China

“Academic and Un-Academic,” Yibo Gallery, Shanghai, China

2000

“Futuro Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art,” The Contemporary Art Center of Macau (CACOM), Macau

1999

“Open Entrance,” Dong Yu Museum of Contemporary Art, Shenyang, China

“Fifty Years of Chinese Oil Painting,” International Exhibition Center, Beijing, China

1998

“It is Me,” Forbidden City, Beijing, China

“Chinese Contemporary Art,” Nikolaus Sonne Fine Arts, Berlin

1997

“Quotation Marks,” Singapore Art Museum, Singapore

1996

“China!,” Bonn Art Museum, Bonn, Germany

“Reality: Present and Future,” International Art Palace, Beijing, China

“First Academic Exhibition of Chinese Art,” China Art Gallery, Beijing, China

1995

“Out from the Middle Kingdom: Chinese Avant-Garde Art,” Santa Mònica Art Center, Barcelona, Spain

“Beyond Ideology: New Art From China,” Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Hamburg, Germany

1994

“Exhibition of Works Nominated By Art Critics,” China Art Gallery, Beijing, China

“Chinese Oil Painting Exhibition,” Fung Ping Shan Museum, Hong Kong University, Hong Kong

1993

“China’s New Art, Post–1989,” Hong Kong Arts Center, Hong Kong

“New Art From China,” Marlborough Fine Arts, London, UK

1992

“Guangzhou Biennial—Oil Painting of the Nineties,” Guangzhou Convention Center, Guangzhou, China

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