

Interview: View of Art

Cheng Zuo 程卓

Biography

Cheng ZUO, an artist mainly focus on oil painting. He is a member of Henan Artists Association and director of Oil Painting Research Association. He has repeatedly won national oil painting awards.

程卓，1970年出生于河南，毕业于河南大学美术学院，现为中国美术家协会会员、河南省美术家协会理事、河南省油画学会理事、河南省油画研究会会长。主要从事油画创作，作品多次在全国美展、中国油画展、中国油画双年展等国内外重要展览中展出，并多次获得国家级、省级油画奖项。

Interview

Jackie GAO: In this talk, we left out the identities of teachers and students. Taking the pandemic as the central topic, we have made a subjective interpretation from the perspective of the artist. Before the conversation started, I prepared a few topics in advance to facilitate the development of the topic:

Art creation transformation, the exploration of the artist’s self-positioning, the profound experience during the period, the trend of Art turning to online.

These topics have been already informed to Mr. Cheng ZUO in advance, so the following dialogues were all naturally occurred around these topics.

程卓：这次疫情对艺术创作的影响，是一个非常值得探讨的话题。在疫情期间，艺术创作面临着许多新的挑战和机遇。首先，艺术创作的场所从线下转向线上，这为艺术家提供了更广阔的展示平台。其次，艺术创作的题材和主题也发生了变化，许多艺术家开始关注疫情下的社会现实和人性百态。最后，艺术创作的传播方式和接受方式也发生了改变，观众可以通过网络随时随地欣赏到艺术家的作品。这些变化不仅考验了艺术家的创作能力，也考验了他们的应变能力和适应能力。

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The names would be abbreviated as “Jackie” (Jackie GAO), and “ZUO” (Mr. Cheng ZUO)

(□□□□□□□□“□□□”□“□□”)

ZUO: Okay, let's start with the first question, the impact of the pandemic on my life and art creation. In fact, the pandemic hasn't affected my life that much. Art creation is a very private thing to me, so I usually stay in the studio alone, regardless of the outbreak. However, some things during this period, such as seeing people wear masks, the temperature checks before entering public places, etc had an impact. These things always reminded me of its cruelty, that is, facing the nature of it, like these sudden public health incidents, human beings are really fragile and insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

[illegible]

Regarding the extraordinary events, it was not only the pandemic that has touched me the most, because, during the SARS period (China once suffered from SARS which was a serious infectious disease in 2003), I was in Beijing at the time, so as a result, I already had experience of facing a sudden emergency. What the pandemic reminded me of is when, a few years ago, I was in Côte d'Ivoire, Africa, there was a military coup d'état, so that we could suddenly hear the gunshots or see the riots in the streets. Every night we dared not even turn on the lights, and then we could see orange-red in the sky, anti-aircraft guns, and the streets were full of light and heavy weapons such as machine guns. All the experiences mentioned above have similarly inspired me, making me feel there it is only a moment between life and death.

[illegible]

这种经历对于艺术家来说，实际上会变得更深，更痛苦。我会思考生命的价值。因为经过许多事件，我感到人类的生命是短暂的。疫情的爆发再次刺激了人们对人类地位的思考，包括政治体系、人权等，当然还有人类与自然的关系。事实上，在绘画、装置或视频等形式上，他们都在社交媒体上从艺术家的视角进行了长时间的反思。比如人类在社会活动中的位置，他们扮演了什么角色等等。由于有无数这样的作品，我可能不会给出具体例子。

This kind of experience would actually become deeper and more painful for an artist, I would think about what is the value of our lives? Because after a lot of incidents, I felt that our human lives are short. The outbreak of the pandemic has once again stimulated these thoughts of the position of people, including political systems, human rights, etc., and of course the relationship between human being and nature. In fact, in the form of painting, installation, or video, they were all have reflected on social media taking the perspective of art for a long time. Such as what kind of position human beings had in social activities, what role they played, etc. Since there are countless such works, I might not give specific examples.

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Jackie: Right, everyone was still operating on the basis that human beings are at the centre of the universe before the pandemic but after the outbreak, the focus of our thoughts might have shifted, that is, in the future, humans would view things more from the perspective of post-humanism, which means taking the view of all things as equal. This might be one of the inspirations that we could have obtained during this period.

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ZUO: I agree with your point that all things are equal, all beings are equal. All beings are not only humans, but everything in the world. Although we are at the top of the so-called “food chain”, we must not blindly exploit this and take

too much from other beings, we should always be grateful, and we can't get something for nothing.

The virus is merciless, it treats everyone equally, regardless of whether they are rich or poor. Therefore, I have always hoped that everyone could understand a point, that is, human beings are a community with a shared future on earth, and our destinies are connected together, so no matter what kind of discrimination, it should be cast aside.

[illegible]

Jackie: Exactly! To be honest, it is very hard for us to achieve the equality of all beings like post-human view. First of all, let alone all the other things that exist on earth, there are still inequalities around race, gender, culture, religion, etc. among us, which we need to overcome.

[illegible]

ZUO: Yesterday my son talked to me about watching a movie, called the darkness of human nature or something. And I told him that in places where the sun couldn't shine on, that was, dark places. Where we can't see, there is actually a lot of little things and creatures still living, which are also worthy of our serious consideration. I watched a documentary before. It was about the multitude of mice on the earth today than we humans but, we couldn't see them because they are all underground, in dark places. So I suddenly understood a truth, that was when you are standing in the sunshine, in fact, there are many other things that happen in many places you can't see. This is a deep but helpless realisation. For example, during the pandemic, many experts in the medical field were treating patients day and night, but there were still a large number of people who couldn't be treated every day. We have

witnessed the development of science and technology to this advanced state, and sometimes we are still unable to cope. This always makes me aware of the struggles of mankind. Therefore, as an artist, I always want to record these things. If possible in the future, use some form of images or videos, audio, etc., to leave some hints and warnings for future generations.

[illegible]

At the same time, the pandemic has caused many exhibitions and art activities to move online. This is an invisible opportunity and a test for the emerging digital media and so on. Because many exhibitions, museums, art galleries, etc., now have online exhibition halls, this allows us to browse a lot of works without leaving home, which is a good thing in itself. However, physical exhibitions would actually be more real, because we could go to all-round viewings of the artwork. The feeling is completely different when you are standing in front of an object versus looking through an electronic screen. What's more, through the pandemic, we are finding that the Internet brings us more convenience, and many exhibitions can rely on the Internet for wider publicity. This is a positive aspect of pandemic life.

[illegible]

Jackie: Agreed, to give a very simple example. Perhaps it is because of the spread of the *Mona Lisa*'s image that lead more people want to go to the Louvre to see the physical work. This

can indirectly prove that the artwork cannot be replaced but, using new media as a means could make it spread farther, including the values and concepts of the work itself, and even the story of the work, and so on.

[illegible]

I have also thought about such a problem before, that is, whether physical exhibitions would turn to be totally online. However, to a certain extent, much of art's power is just derived from its authenticity in the real world, which helps its resonate with the audience, or the visual experience of the viewer when witnessing its physical form. So I think that once we have the opportunity, we will return to the physical world, because the charm of Art itself comes more from the sensory experience it brings to people.

[illegible]

ZUO: I agree. Offline and online can definitely coexist, so that artworks can be spread more widely and seen by more people which is quite good. From this point of view, online sharing of work is faster but, offline exhibitions are also not replaceable. For example, when we're facing the **David** sculpture or other Michelangelo's works, when we're looking at figurative three-dimensional artworks, and even some sculptures can be touched, we can almost feel its soul inside. The texture, including the folds of clothes, etc., these are the things that can't be experienced when we view the image online. The image is flat, and when we're standing in front of the work in reality, the experience it brings to us is beyond description.

[illegible]

Actually, artists firstly come to be human, he might have other positions of his own, such as a teacher, or a postman, etc. I don't think this prevents him from becoming an artist. Artist is not just a tag. Like, who doesn't define himself/herself as an artist, but he/she has some conscious artistic activities, then I might think he/she as an artist. In my process of creating, I always believe that technique as a part of painting is not the soul of Art. Because no matter what tools and materials are used, even drawing on the ground with a stone, to a certain extent, it is to convey something with technique. So the most important thing is thoughts which are inspired by some social activity.

In fact, this pandemic has also given me a lot of inspiration. Although people are getting more and more alienated, this very difficult time still could reflect our unity. For example, when the pandemic in Wuhan (the first city suffered from pandemic in China) was severe, because everyone was in isolation, they were very depressed, and as a result they would sing the national anthem or some nursery rhyme together through the window on to the street. And hearing from my students in Italy, when they were quarantined, they held small community concerts at home coordinated between neighbors, like someone would play the violin, someone was in charge of other things, and so on. These things made me suddenly aware of the beautiful and kind side of the human nature, which might not be fully highlighted in normal times. And in this crisis of the pandemic, the brilliance of these human qualities I was even more remarkable, and it's really touching.

perspective, it seems to have some artistry that we will pass on.

[illegible][illegible]

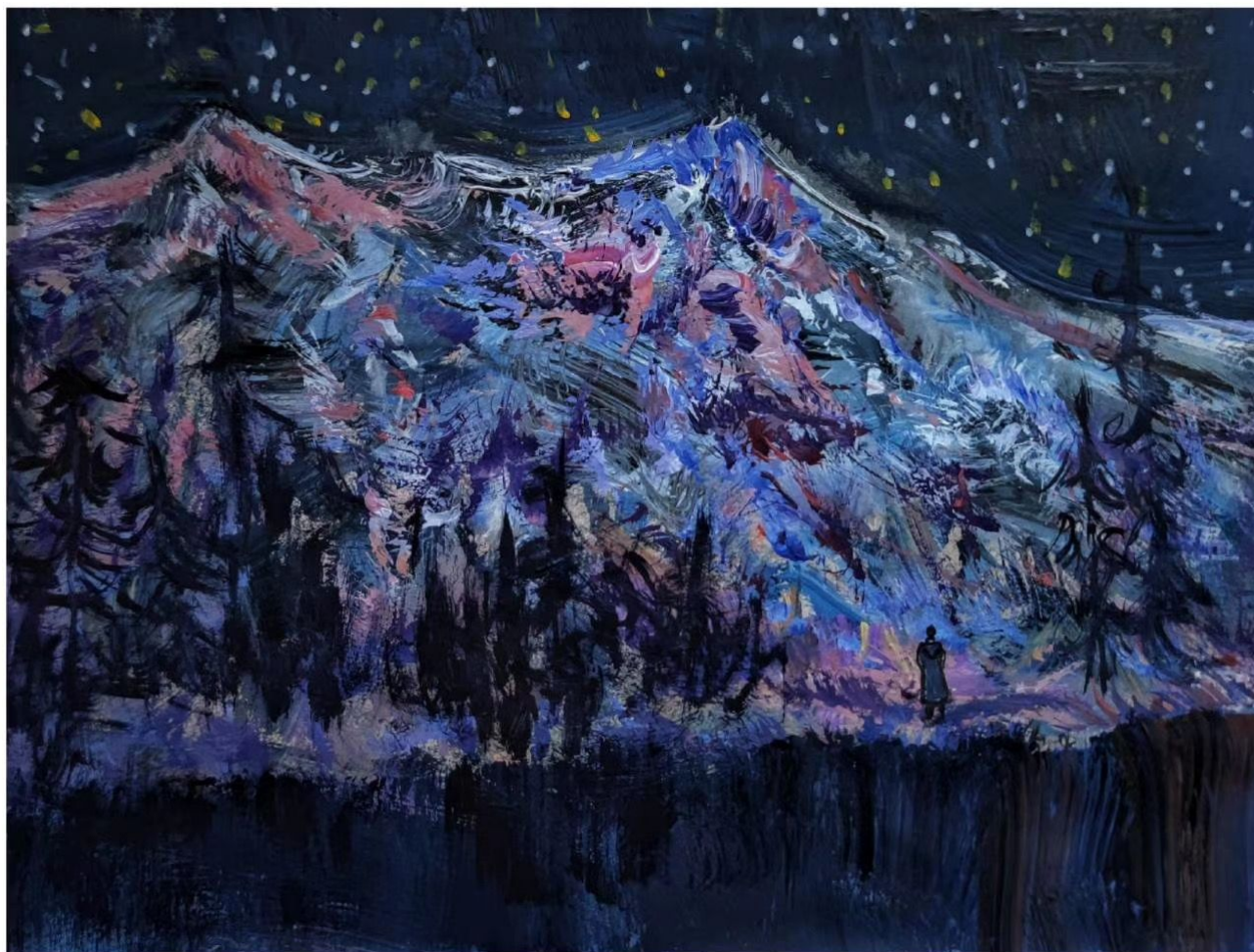


困境中的Z-12

21x27cm

左程 2020.7.17

The Z in trouble-12 Cheng ZUO



困境中的Z-8

21x27cm

左程 2020.7.15

The Z in Trouble Cheng ZU0



困境中的Z-13

21x27cm

左程 2020.7.17

The Z in trouble-13 Cheng ZUO



大地--202019

21x27cm

左程 2020.7.16

The Ground 202019 Cheng ZUO



大地--202015

21x27cm

左程 2020.7.12

The Ground202015 Cheng ZUO



无尽江山--1

21x27cm 左程 2020.7.17

The Endless Landscape Cheng ZU0



Everything about the X
Cheng ZU0

Honestly, the happiness of artists lies in here. During the lockdown, I can integrate myself into my works like an actor,

and I could be in a variety of environments, such as spaces that we couldn't go to, this is interesting. Just like we are reading a novel, 1,000 people have 1,000 Hamlets in their minds. As a result, I hope I could turn thousands of small people into paintings, going to different places and trying different lives instead of only having a single life track stuck in reality.

[illegible]



白鸟---5

55x55cm

左程 2020.4.27

The White Bird-5 Cheng ZU0



寻塔---5

50x50cm

左程 2020.4.28

Looking for the Tower-5. Cheng ZUO



寻塔--月下

30x40cm

左程 2020.5.7

Looking for the Tower—Under the Moonlight



曾经有一场雪---3 40x60cm 左程 2020.5.5

Here used to be Snowing-3 Cheng ZUO



寻塔---2

55x55cm

左程 2020.4.24

Looking for the Tower-2. Cheng ZUO



童年时光---3

21x27cm

左程 2020.6.17

Childhood-3. Cheng ZUO

As far as I am concerned, the pandemic has brought me both

sadness and warmth. The emotion is like half sea and half flame, which is also same as our real lives. It would never be dull, there could always be ups and downs, tossing and turnings. In fact, this kind of life is relatively rich, too smooth or too bland would be too simple.

[illegible]

Jackie: Yes, I think half is seawater and half is flame. This description is particularly good. It seems that you are standing on the central axis, and you can see from both sides, but the situation and scene in front of you may change. For example, the seawater may wet your trousers, or the heat of the flame may blow your face. But in fact, in many cases, it is more about where we are willing to look. You may see the sea or see the fire, which is deeply depending on your visual angle. Various situations would arise, but only your mind would be the absolutely influential factor. Although we would also be changed by the situation's many factors, our status would always depend on our subjective will.

[illegible]



困境中的Z--16

53x78cm

左程 2020.11.28

The Z in Trouble. Cheng ZUO

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Jackie: Exactly, this involves the issue of the status quo of the artist, because if some artists do not commercialize their works, they might have no way of sustaining their own lives, so many artists would have a part-time or a side job. This reminds me of a problem, that is, artists have largely deviated from the field of career, and appear more as an identity, that is, taking art as their lifelong goal and pursuit. From the moment you recognize yourself as an artist, many of your perspectives would be changed. You would also stand in the position of an artist to observe your life and the surrounding world in an all-round way, and integrate art into your whole life. I also find that very interesting.

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ZUO: So I said an artist should come to be a person firstly, and real artists wouldn't worry about their identity. If you could still use your artistic potential as you are in a normal living and working environment, this is admirable, due to you have to live a life firstly, I think these two were not contradicted with each other.

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Jackie: Right, an artist seems to be in a lifelong pursuit. I think this is great. He has a perspective and a positioning, a lifelong aspiration, which is beyond the scope of many careers, and it's closely related to life.

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As when we were talking before, our identities were not particularly clear. It may be due to our teacher-student relationship or the chat environment. Our discussions were always mixed with many identities. However, today our conversation is completely about an interviewee and an interviewer, and we are developing around your identity as an artist. I think this becomes more interesting and gives me more in terms of the art of refining space.

This interview has benefited me a lot, thank you, teacher.

[illegible]

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Cheng Zuo is a great mentor and my helpful friend. He has not only brought me artistic enlightenment but also helped me to resolve the confusion and difficulties in my life. Everyone has a “mentor” in your life. He/she may be your friend, you parents or families, they could always clarify the difficulties for you and resolve your confusion.

This period has brought us a lot of negativity and anxiety. Therefore, maybe it's time for you to have in-depth communication with your mentor based on art, in order to find yourself a bright light and dispel the haze.

[illegible][illegible]

Please share your experience of conversation on the comment section below! We'd like to hear from you!

[illegible]

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