



IV

Encounters

# Zhu Jinshi

## ON THICK PAINTING

Text by Andrew Spyrou  
Portrait by Eric G Powel



To stand in front of one of Zhu Jinshi's colossal 'thick paintings' is an experience of sensory seduction. Layered with kilos of rich oil paint, the canvases invite textural temptation and even inspire olfactory stimulation.

Several months or even years after completion, much of the oil may still not have dried, continuing to shift and morph under its own weight. The colours, also changing with the passage of time, can be at once reminiscent of a lily pond and violent wrath, fresh icing or a forested mountain set ablaze.

As we conclude our discussion, Zhu Jinshi, one of China's foremost abstract artists, leaves me with a question: 'Can this thickness alone become a visual experience?' And then, almost immediately, he suggests: 'Confront my paintings whilst facing your emotions and you will have the answer to the question.'

We meet in Zhu's large warehouse studio on the periphery of Beijing's expansive metropolitan area. The first question I ask him is about the process of creating these artworks, and the relationship between the creation and the final piece itself. He carefully explains that his method has necessarily had to change: 'Due to physical discomfort in recent years, it became necessary for me to pay attention to my state during the painting process, so that work could progress normally – creation now occurs during a process of meditation. This has certainly affected the act of creation: the original proposition of a work is often related to ideas drawn from deep contemplation.' While such contemplation and meditation may have become central to Zhu's creative process, such quantities of oil paint still necessitate the use of force, compelling him to engage in physical

action rather than painting at the slow speed that may come more naturally. 'Often I enter into a sudden, rapid, energetic scraping of large areas of paint, resulting in occasional late-evening suffering for my neighbours downstairs.'

Born in Beijing in 1954, Zhu Jinshi did not follow a traditional path to an artistic career. He did not attend art school. Rather, while working at a factory during the 1970s, he took lessons in painting from a professor who had been forced to leave the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts. But abstract art was banned from being exhibited in China. 'Before I left China in 1986, my paintings were still banned from public display. However, at that time, nothing was known in China other than painting. We had no idea about the evolution of Western art after the 1960s.'

#### Occidentalism

Zhu is well placed to comment on the state of art in China in the early 1970s. The country and its population underwent a tremendous change under Mao Zedong and during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976. Zhu tells me that it is not through an aesthetic gaze that we must view Chinese art from the period, but rather that it is the art's theoretical and political importance which must be focused upon. 'To observe Chinese art of the 1970s, first, we need to avoid the pitfalls of aesthetic discourse.'



Only through the perspective of social analysis can we determine the role played by avant-garde art in major historical events. In the early 1970s, internal divisions appeared in the Chinese political structure. People lost their faith almost overnight.'

Even though painting during the Cultural Revolution had been confined within the very specific boundaries of socialist realism, the cultural tradition of painting in China nonetheless remained. 'Painting had long been the spiritual support of life,' he tells me. At the advent of Chinese abstraction in the late 1970s, with the 'Stars' group of artists – so named to individualize themselves after the fall of the ubiquitous uniformity of the Cultural Revolution – being the most obvious and oft-cited proponents, socialist realist art disappeared almost immediately. Zhu notes that a pursuit of Western ideology and culture swiftly became the great trend of the era, explaining how 'a 1979 painting exhibition featuring the work of ten or so young artists', one of several notorious exhibitions by the 'Stars', was able to cause a strong reaction in China. 'Rather than saying that avant-garde art in China opened a window on society, it can be said that a group of Chinese intellectuals were moved to promote social reform, with avant-garde art leading the charge in this reform.' Importantly, alongside the democracy campaigned for by others, avant-garde artists also demanded artistic freedom.

I suggest to Zhu that post-Cultural Revolution China saw a 'rebirth of painting'. Zhu, however, disagrees and says that in fact when we today discuss the rebirth of painting, it is not a discussion about artists rising again from the ashes, having discovered a new outlet or new talents, but rather a discussion about a rebirth embodied in a new questioning of existing art criticisms. Zhu warns us of the tendency to understand abstract painting through the theoretical past and suggests that is a fragile and changeable genre: 'The abstract painting of today is like a child, needing an adult's

care and supervision.' Nevertheless, Zhu says that 'the consequence of the rebirth of painting in China was extreme astonishment. The reason for this at the time was that my fellow artists and I began to treat Western painting as a competitor. In order to achieve this goal, we turned our attention to Chinese traditional aesthetics, calligraphy and freehand painting, hoping to derive their energies to contend with Western abstract painting. This attitude came to apparent fruition in the mid-'80s, and the calligraphic characteristics of my abstract paintings remain clear today.'

Throughout our discussion, Zhu prefers to talk in abstract terms, always answering in a measured and careful way. He is clearly well versed in the theoretical and critical language of the art historian. He tells me that 'the discussion about abstract painting has been suspended for half a century. Opinions on the matter have been heard in the various cultural fields occasionally, but it was as though they were lone voices amidst the mainstream hum of the art world.'

I insert here some of Zhu Jinshi's thoughts on abstract painting as well as the importance of the thickness of paint. They come from *On Abstract Painting: Thickness, Object, Paint and Space*:

'The thickness of paint brings unto painting a unique artistic form, one which arouses new ideas about visual art. Considering that conceptual art fears and rejects the expression of feeling in painting, I want to emphasize that this new insight has nothing to do with concept, but nonetheless I believe thoughts run through consciousness. Furthermore, I believe emotions and feelings do not interfere with a profound understanding of art; on the contrary, art devoid of all feeling is what is truly terrifying.'

'The theories about two-dimensional and three-dimensional paintings arise from discourses on the thickness of paint. We can more or less be satisfied that Realist painting represents reality in three-dimensional form, while two-dimensional abstract art is regarded the quintessential or



Power and Jiangshan, 2008, ten tons of paint and one Mercedes car, courtesy of the artist and Pearl Lam Gallery

## To observe Chinese art of the 1970s, first, we need to avoid the pitfalls of aesthetic discourse

elite art form. However, when the added dimension of paint thickness has been brought into abstract painting, it would appear meaningless to repeatedly emphasize the purity of the two-dimensional. We need to reacquaint ourselves with the characteristics of abstract painting. It is not only three-dimensional, but, beyond this, it can be seen as an object, an installation or a sculpture.

'The thickness of paint gives rise to another question: what are the criteria for determining an aesthetic standard under these circumstances? Is it the thickness? The thickness is neither the dots and lines of Kandinsky, nor the contrasts of colours in Impressionist paintings. It is also not merely brushstrokes.'

Breaking free from iconographic representation affords the abstract artist a unique creative freedom. By its very definition, abstract art cannot deal directly with any particular subject or item, though increasingly artists insist that their so-called 'abstract' work is grounded in something tangible and inherently non-abstract. Zhu's work, though on the surface perhaps obscure and impenetrable, is in fact thematically accessible.

### Exploration/Immersion

Zhu's work cultivates discussion about the harmony of beings, as well as emptiness and nothingness: through the

medium of painting, the blending of colours and the intersection of blocks of oil paint, Zhu highlights the order present in the natural world, reimagining rivers, forests and mountains as abstract smears. Much of Zhu's work is reminiscent of organic and material forms, though he prefers not to discuss any conscious effort to force a recognition of these in the viewer. While a richness of colour and texture is pervasive throughout Zhu's paintings, his installation works are just as immersive, though they are often stripped of colour, perhaps to emphasize the purity of the subject matter they deal with or the complexity of the cosmos.

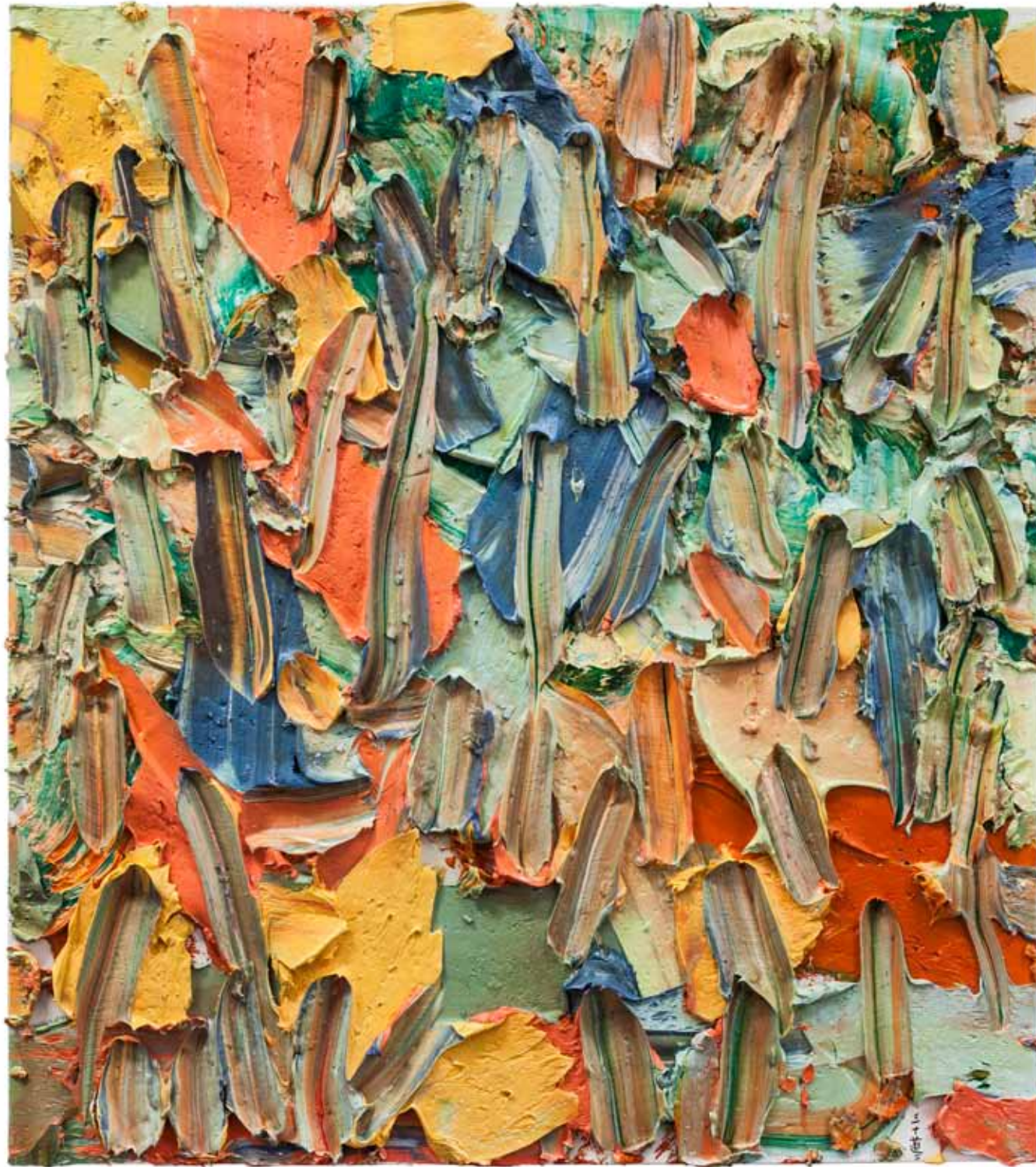
Zhu does not acknowledge that he is seeking to 'connect' his painting and installations in any way, but tells me: 'I am engaging in a broad exploration of each of their "limits".' Nevertheless, one can draw comparisons between the two: the thickness Zhu talks about is obvious not only in his paintings, but also in his installations. Using huge quantities of Chinese xuan or rice paper, the installations represent forms (man-made objects like boats) and concepts (like hardship and toil) central to the Chinese tradition.

The director of the German National Gallery suggested Zhu come to Germany in 1986. 'Living in the West gave me the opportunity to learn about and grasp contemporary art, and this was of critical importance to my artistic career.' His first installation work was made then: a cubic metre of linen in Berlin placed in diametric opposition to a cubic me-



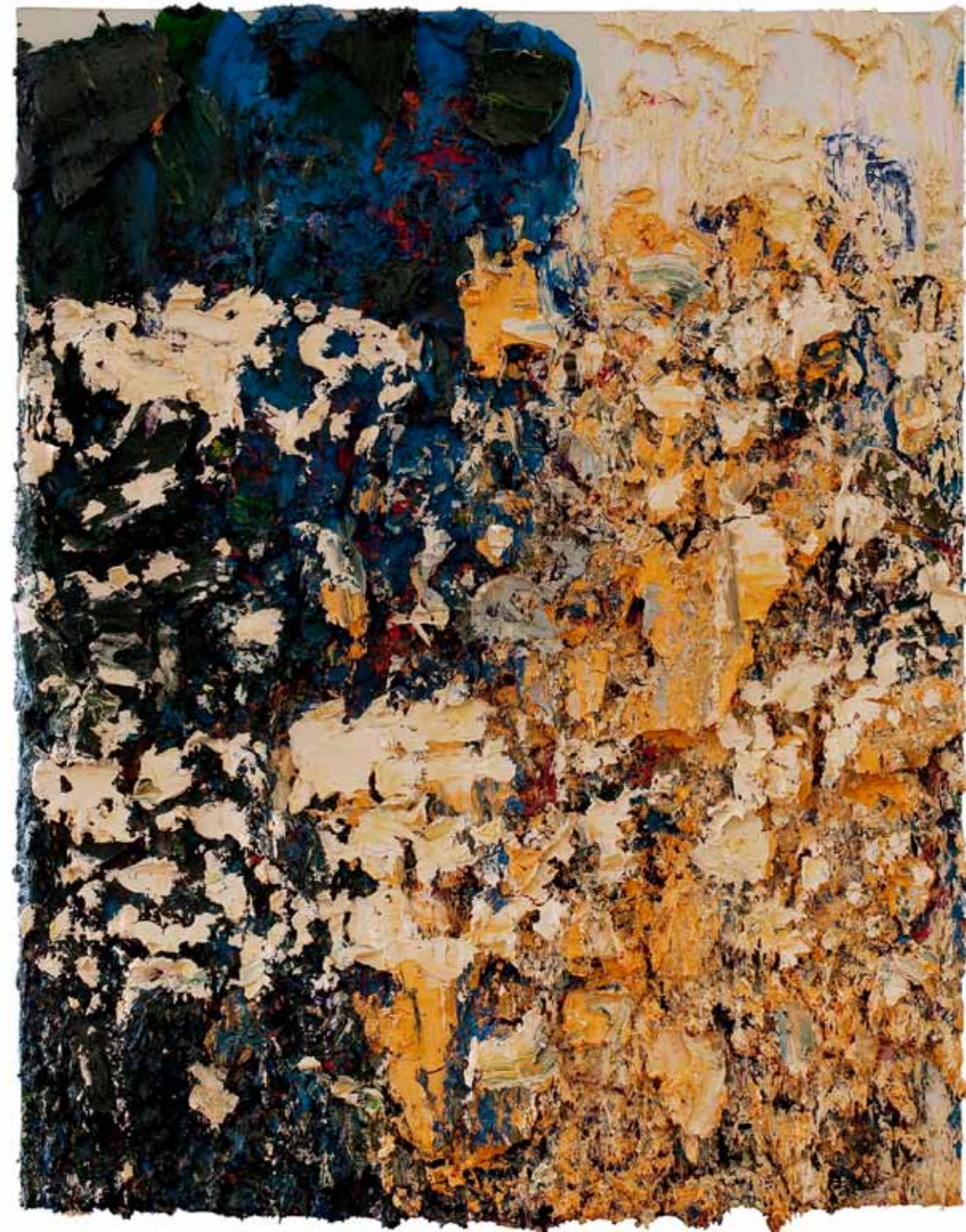
Wave of Materials, 2006, cotton, bamboo, stone and xuan paper, courtesy of the artist and Pearl Lam Gallery

Thirty Ways No. 2, 2013, oil on canvas, 180 x 160 cm, courtesy of the artist and Pearl Lam Gallery



Transcribing the Buddhist Diamond Sutra I, 2013, oil on canvas, 180 x 160 cm, courtesy of the artist and Pearl Lam Gallery

Several months or even years after completion,  
much of the oil may still not have dried,  
continuing to shift and morph under its own weight



Temple in the Wind, 2009, oil on canvas, 250 x 200 cm, courtesy of the artist and Pearl Lam Gallery

tre of xuan paper in Beijing. This installation inspired Zhu's obsession with the paper, which continues today.

From *Soaking*, a large stack of xuan paper soaked in a vat of Chinese ink, to *Work*, a vast collection of half-dipped strips of xuan paper, each the height of a man, organized to surround the viewer, we are given a simply organized but intrinsically complex and abstract rendering of a Chinese experience. While Zhu tells me that he feels the process of creation and its result are linked merely by a 'mutually imagined relationship', I would say instead that they are unique features of instinct in an artist, reflecting and interpreting his experiences and the world around him. It can be difficult to separate Chinese art from Chinese culture, as they are inherently linked.

Zhu cites both his Oriental heritage and Richard Serra's work as influences for his monumental *Boat* installation, made from 10,000 pieces of xuan paper and requiring 30 people and five days to install. 'At present, the regional characteristics and distinctive traits of contemporary art in different areas and countries are undergoing shifts at their very root. In the 1990s, the boundaries between the centre and edge, the West and East, were the central issue of contention and debate. More than 20 years later, there is now a new tendency that causes us to view art with different attitudes. I became interested in the notion of time, using other methods – tracking the subtle changes of oil paint as a visual language and as material through time, for instance.'

With such personal themes running through his art, I asked Zhu whether he worked in one emotional state, or whether he could work in a variety of emotional circumstances. 'I maintain a great amount of respect for the philosophies of American minimalist art, where the exclusion of mood, emotion and association is seen as the epitome of the genre. But this does not prevent me from freely allowing emotions to enter my work and giving them prominence.'

When asked whether he recognized any philosophical references in his work, Zhu replied that 'in Chinese art circles, the 1970s was the literary wave; the '80s, the philosophy wave; the '90s, the social-activism wave. I kept up with all of them, and could even be counted an enthusiast, so if philosophical influences appear in my work it is not unusual. However, I think the fundamental reason is that when one accepts contemporary art, one is bound to go in search of its sources, and while the influence of Western ideas on art is self-evident, once one clarifies their association, one will inevitably rethink this issue. At this time, the surfacing of Zen Buddhist thought, to a Chinese artist, is not an interest in Buddhism, but an ideological experience.'

Zhu Jinshi's work encompasses and transcends cultural references, and shies away from theoretical definition. While theoretical and conceptual analysis are valid forms of comprehension, ultimately it is in the visual world in which art is rooted, and Zhu's paintings calculate a sensory balance so often forgotten in the realm of contemporary art.



Jinshi 4 (triptych), 1990, oil on canvas, 65 x 195 cm, courtesy of the artist and Pearl Lam Gallery