

“Using the past to serve the present”: China’s Zhu Wei – artist profile

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Artist’s fusion of traditional ink wash technique with modern narrative takes unapologetic look at contemporary Chinese society.

Zhu Wei participates in an exhibition at London’s Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery with nuanced pieces using an ancient painting method.

Zhu Wei, ‘Ink and Wash Research Lectures series’, 2016, ink and colour on newspaper, signed Zhu Wei, with two seals of the artist: Yu Shi Ju Jin, Zhu Wei Shu Hua, 32 x 28 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Zhu Wei utilises a 2000-year-old method known as *Gongbi*, which the artist says effectively allows him to “use the past to serve the present”. *Gongbi* (in Chinese, 工笔) is a technique of painting layers of ink wash upon paper or silk with different contouring and colouring brushes. This method produces highly detailed results, as art historian and museum educator Kealey Boyd penned for [an article](#) on *Hyperallergic*:

The gongbi brush line is more like a pen line than calligraphic. It is uniformly thick, even wiry, defining boundaries around figures and objects.

The technique dates back to the Tang Dynasty (618–906 CE) and is considered the oldest form of painting in China. Zhu adds a decidedly modern twist on the technique by painting upon common, everyday newsprint and producing work in sharp contrast to **traditional literati paintings**.

Zhu Wei. Image courtesy the artist.

Born in Beijing in 1966, **Zhu Wei** is known for being one of the first contemporary Chinese artists to have been recognised on an international scale. As an artist who has consistently produced work for nearly three decades, he entered the military as a teenager and then produced propaganda art before studying at the Beijing Academy of Film and China Institute of Art. His work has been exhibited worldwide, with over 20 solo shows.

Zhu Wei, ‘China China’, 1997, ink and colour on paper, signed Zhu Wei, with two seals of the artist:

The artist's work is currently being exhibited in **"Everything Exists Now"** at the **Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery** until 18 February 2017. In 2016, his work was included in the 9th International Ink Art Biennale of Shenzhen (China) and was shown at the **Asia Art Center (Taiwan)** and **Tobin Ohashi Gallery (Japan)**. As gallerist Kristin Hjellegjerde told *Art Radar*, Zhu's work in the show strikes a chord for both its distinctive Chinese narrative, as well as one that is much more universal:

I am terribly excited about showing the exceptional Chinese artist Zhu Wei in January, an artist deeply rooted in the history of the country but who brings the story further into the future. With his deep use of red colours that he masters as draperies in the background off the "Lecture" series that will be exhibited, we immediately place ourself in a Chinese context. When we further delve into the work seeing the way his figures or animals are marked out, we dig into a narrative that echo the times we are living in where the media is controlling the politics.

With his mastery of the ink and wash classical technique, we get to see an artist who does not need to depart into newer forms but brings much forth from what is inherited. The work is therefore bringing us into a state of a slower more quiet contemplation, a rebel artist with a flair of ultimate sophistication.



Zhu Wei, 'Ink and Wash Research Lectures series', 2014, ink and colour on paper, signed Zhu Wei, with three seals of the artist: Zhu Wei, Yin Jian, Shen Pin, Zhu Wei Shu Hua, 96 x 63 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

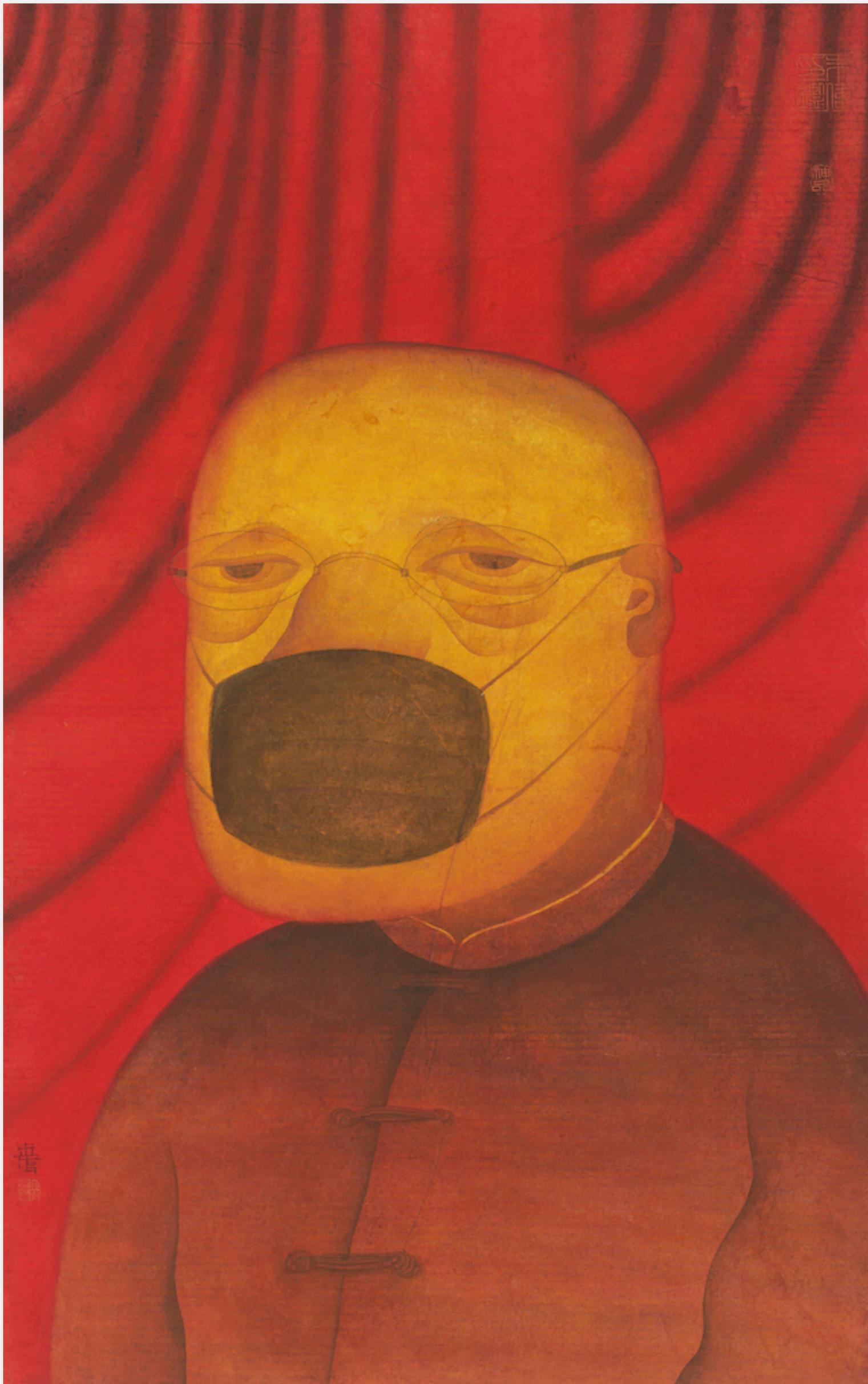
Zhu's rich palette of crimson drapery "implies an inevitable and collective consciousness that exists in the **great Chinese reality**", while the lush, colour-dense portraits capture the conditions endemic in modern day life, harkening back to China's revolutionary times complete with the ubiquitous *Zhongshan*, tunics also known as 'Mao jackets'. The artist's characters remain for the most part, anonymous, identity-less. The everyman in Zhu's *Ink and Wash Research Lecture Series*, as noted in **IART**, depicts individuals helpless in the face of China's rapid move towards an ever-connected society:

The dress of the characters shows a special era and identity, while the tired and helpless expression on their faces delivers a new meaning which is totally different from his previous series. It is a true and general psychological reflection of today's Chinese as well. "Nowadays people are coerced by the ongoing large-scale economic movement, by the commercial Great Leap Forward, and by the inflated exaggerations in commerce, while every family has mortgage loans and inexpensive car, pop music and jazz, computer, cell phone and internet, however, the foundation of the society has never been slightly changed but has been strengthened. This is the present condition of Chinese society which makes people feel helpless."

Zhu Wei, 'Ink and Wash Research Lectures series, Sheep', 2014, ink and colour on paper, signed Zhu Wei, with two seals of the artist: Zhu Wei Yin Jian, Shen Pin, 22 x 14 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

As an artist who has seen many changes in Chinese society since his beginnings in the late 1980s, Zhu told *Art Radar* in a recent studio visit about the transition that many Chinese artists have made from a more local, organic version of contemporary art to something that is primed and envisioned for sale in a highly competitive, globalised contemporary art market:

Contemporary art emerged in China in the 1980s. Around 1985, Chinese contemporary art was mainly a local version of Western contemporary art, which was simple, immature, and inferior – but full of passion. After 2005, Chinese contemporary art entered both Asian and Western auction markets. In the last decade, Chinese art has become commercialized at a high speed. Even if the artists themselves do not really understand what contemporary art is, they know what sells and have been effectively kidnapped by the market and its demands.



Zhu Wei, 'Ink and Wash Research Lectures series', 2015, ink and colour on paper, signed Zhu Wei, with three seals of the artist: Zhu Wei Shu Hua, Shen Pin, Zhu Wei Yin Jian, 97 x 61 cm. Image

Initially, works from contemporary Chinese artists were primarily purchased by Western collectors, who were interested in adding one or two pieces to their collections from a country that had been previously closed off to the outside world. With the emergence of a burgeoning Chinese Middle Class, this shifted, as the artist told *Art Radar*, to a homegrown audience with a history of collecting that dates all the way back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279):

After 1978, China's Middle Class appeared and some of these families started to purchase art. Throughout Chinese history, wealthy families had the habit of collecting paintings. This particular habit was quite popular during the Song Dynasty. As reported in some historical documents, these early art collections were established to satisfy their personal interests, as well as to improve their family's status. Compared to the historical dynasties which lasted mostly for hundreds of years, the history after 1949 is a mere 60 years – not to mention the 30 years of complete destruction of the economy.

The behavior of the Middle Class, who have just emerged and is still unstable, towards their art collections, is undoubtedly to preserve and appreciate their wealth. When many collectors come to Beijing's 798 Art Zone to purchase paintings in the art galleries found there, they ask the gallery owners to ensure that their collection will make money.

Zhu Wei, 'Ink and Wash Research Lectures series',

2013, ink and colour on paper, signed Zhu Wei, with five seals of the artist: Zhu Wei Yin Jian, Shen Pin, Zhu Wei, Zhu Wei Shu Hua, Pictorial seal, 90 x 56 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

To date, the focus of where to find the best contemporary artworks has changed with over 200 auction houses vying for a piece of the pie, giving the Chinese consumer even more opportunities to see how far their purchasing power will take them, and what sells is not always in the direction that one would expect. Interestingly, as Zhu told *Art Radar*, some local artists actually have sold for more money than the stalwart blue chip artists from Europe:

Now there are more than 200 auction houses in China, and they are doing the same business as the gallery does in the primary market. Collectors will come to gallery, auction house and artist's studio to buy art, generally at a price lower than 100,000 Yuan. Of course, this is the latest price today. A few years ago, an artwork by a twentysomething new young artist might be priced higher than a well-known European master, and comes with a beautifully printed large retrospective catalogue.



Zhu Wei, 'Ink and Wash Research Lectures series', 2012, ink and colour on paper, signed Zhu Wei, with three seals of the artist: Shen Pin, Zhu Wei Yin Jian, Zhu Wei Shu Hua, 93 x 64 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Despite Zhu's work being seen as "**Western due to the abstract painterly style**" in China and due to its

content being seen as Chinese abroad, his work is widely collected and shown throughout the world. He considers his works a joining of past and present, something that can bring together the somewhat fractured parts of tradition and modernity. This provides Zhu's work with a powerful punch – something that transcends culture or ethnicity. As Tokyo gallerist Robert Tobin commented, his works are to be savoured and are “not easily forgotten”:

Zhu Wei is someone who excels at everything he does whether it be ink painting which he is best known for, prints or sculpture. And an encounter with his works, whether in the gallery or in a public space, is not easily forgotten. It stays with you. He goes his own way. He does not follow trends. He forges ahead creating works that have meaning not only for him but for the many people who see his works.

There is something hidden and mysterious in all of his works – and it's often in the smile – almost like the smile of the Mona Lisa. What are the people in these works thinking, what is the setting? There is a sense of irony, and the smiles and stares seems to hide a kind of knowing that the viewer can only imagine.

Lisa Pollman

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