

Art Radar: 'Beetween painting and sculpture: Zhu Jinshi at Inside-Out Art Museum', by Tianmo Zhang, 15th January 2016

Chinese artist Zhu Jinshi explores the architectural and sculptural dimensions of painting. Strongly influenced by European and American art movements, abstract painter Zhu Jinshi presents his oeuvre spanning 30 years of his career in painting throughout the Beijing Inside-Out Art Museum.



Left to right: Zhu Jinshi, installation view of 'The Plantain Poet', 2007, 'Go Grandmaster', 2009, 'Shi Tao's Theory', 2006, at Inside-Out Art Museum, 2015-16, Beijing, China. Image Courtesy Zhu Jinshi Studio.

"Performance in Paint: Zhu Jinshi" currently on view at Inside-Out Art Museum in Beijing until 31 January 2016, is the Chinese artist's first solo museum show in Mainland China. Curated by Melissa Chiu, the exhibition reflects Zhu Jinshi's continued engagement with Chinese abstract painting in the last three decades throughout his time in Berlin and Beijing.

Showcasing a combination of early and recent paintings and installation works, including his rarely-seen canvases of the early 1980s (1983-86), the exhibition aims to highlight the architectural and sculptural dimensions of Zhu's paintings by integrating the museum space into its very conception. In fact, this curatorial strategy is particularly relevant to the artist's richly-textured works by accentuating their inherent physicality and muted coarseness.

Occupying three floors of the art museum – each devoted to a particular period and specificity of the artist's over 30-year practice – the exhibition traces the evolution of Zhu's painting style from his early dark-hued compositions of the 1980s to his signature explosive canvases of post-2005. As the viewer enters the exhibition on the main floor, one comes into contact immediately with this latter body of work, which has undoubtedly become Zhu's most defining and recognisable series to date.



Left to right: Zhu Jinshi, installation view of 'The Legend of White Snake', 2015, 'Grassland 2', 2013, at the Inside-Out Art Museum, 2015-16, Beijing, China. Image Courtesy Zhu Jinshi Studio.

His exuberantly colourful strokes, whose boldness and precision reciprocate the weight of their texture, take on a presence of their own. Wrapped inside the white cube of the museum, each painting could almost occupy an entire room by itself so as to allow for his sculptural applications of paint to breath, expand and perhaps even to dry further.

Within their luscious layers, one occasionally makes out silhouettes of Chinese landscape painting, such as tree branches in Wu Hou Shrine (2005) and nuances of spatial depth in Grassland 2 (2013), whereby certain areas of the canvas were intentionally left blank to achieve contrast and harmony in the overall composition.



Zhu Jinshi, 'The Plantain Poet', 2007, oil on canvas. Image Courtesy Zhu Jinshi Studio.

In comparison to his recent series, Zhu's earlier works of the 1980s demonstrate his initial engagement with German Expressionism, conceptual art and performance. Displayed on the third floor of the museum, these rarely-seen works point to an interesting transitional period in the artist's career during which he experimented with new hybrid forms, while maintaining the particularities of modern Chinese ink painting, such as harmony, balance and surface depth.

Employing a limited colour range – predominantly black and white – Zhu aimed to achieve compositional symmetry through the pairing of abstract figures and the juxtaposition between heavy strokes and blank space. For instance, in *Green Screen* (1986), an overall stability is manifested in the intertwining shapes of black and green as well as in the even distribution of the six-panel painting from left to right. While a constant state of contrast pervades both Zhu's earlier and later works, here it is manifested through the opposition between colours rather than texture.



Left to right: Zhu Jinshi, installation view of 'Green Screen', 1986, 'Exhibition of Scribbles', 1985, at Inside-Out Art Museum, 2015-16, Beijing, China. Image Courtesy Zhu Jinshi Studio.

On the second floor, set between the two series, curator Melissa Chiu proposed a four-part installation, Wall of Air (2007-2015), which consists of canvases, metal frames, neon lights and ready-made objects of various kinds. According to Chiu as quoted in the press release,

this curatorial intervention is intended to strengthen the relevance between painting and architecture as well as to challenge the traditional viewing experience.

The artist adds, in an earlier interview with B Beyond, that the goal is to "represent painting and space at the same time in order to achieve an embodiment of oneness." As for the viewer, this multi-part installation seems to draw a metaphor to the material profundity of Zhu's works by hinting to their inherent physicality, which increasingly negotiates the barrier between painting and sculpture.

Yuan Zuo, Director of Inside-Out Art Museum, writes in his essay The Progression of Painting, the Preface to the exhibition catalogue:

Zhu's technique treats paint as an object. While the two-dimensional, descriptive qualities remain, the result is a three-dimensional sculptural object. This change in the physical state of the painting is a further development in the concept of painting.



Zhu Jinshi, 'Wall of Air', 2015, at Inside-Out Art Museum, 2015-16, Beijing, China. Image Courtesy Zhu Jinshi Studio.

As Zhu Jinshi's abstract painting style evolves throughout the years, and across the three levels of the museum, his canvases become noticeably thicker and denser. This can be perceived as a changing attitude towards his painting material, which becomes not merely a tool but a singular subject matter, inheriting a contemporary identity.

With a strong curatorial framework that guides through the organic transitions in Zhu's practice, each floor can be seen as an independent exhibition, from his recent works that are most familiar to his audiences today, to his earlier engagements that are revealed to the public for the first time in this show. Together, all three sections intrinsically complement each other and lead the viewer towards better understanding the intricacies of his practice.



Zhu Jinshi, 'Avant-Garde Rider', 2007, at the Inside-Out Art Museum, 2015-16, Beijing, China. Image Courte-

Furthermore, as Zhu's first museum solo show in Mainland China, it is interesting to consider the artist's diasporic identity in relation to local audience reception and the expected output of his work. Will the Chinese public develop an affinity for his cultural mixture and his "Western" abstract painting style? How has the artist's early involvement with the avant-garde Stars Group in the 1970s led to his subsequent abstract painting series? How was the artist's complex relationship with his homeland translated in his work and do local audiences expect to trace signs of Chineseness?



Left to right: Zhu Jinshi, 'The Legend of White Snake', 2015, 'Grassland 2', 2013, at the Inside-Out Art Museum, 2015-16, Beijing, China. Image Courtesy Zhu Jinshi Studio.

Across these series, a same determination and spontaneity govern his strokes on the canvas. As for the implications of cultural roots in his practice, Zhu argues in his interview with B Beyond:

This [cultural] mixture is a dilemma but also a connection; it is a confrontation but at the same time a harmony. We can't escape from this mixed feeling – it is like this shore and the other shore, but it is not just a definition of East and West geographically speaking. There is no direction between the shores.

Tianmo Zhang