

Zeng Hong

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2015



Zeng Hong returns to the basic template of his 2011 diptych *Public Laundry No. 1*, further exploring its schematic possibilities in a new series of paintings. In that work, Zeng draws on familiar sights at China's older industrial and residential complexes—patterned brick walls and latticework window frames—organizing them into trapezoidal fields painted in perspective. In his new paintings, Zeng keeps the trapezoidal outlines but shrinks the proportions of interior windows; by shortening the field of depth, he accentuates the mosaic effect while altering color and brush effects to mine potential variations on this theme.

In *Three White Blocks* (2013), Zeng shows the rich variations in color or intensity and paint thickness that can be achieved within just one color. First he draws a grid using marker pen, then applies layers of pigment to cover up the trapezoidal shapes in the background, creating three distinct white blocks of varying gradations. The e

ffect is that, within each block, the color has a unique cadence and rhythm. Zeng paints the space between the trapezoid and the edge of the canvas in broad strokes of gray. Outside of the trapezoid, the light touch of the brush evinces the artist's presence, contrasting with the studied and layered interior. A thin, uneven outline in blue treads the narrow zone between the two different approaches.

Even when Zeng does not use perspective to exhibit spatial relationships, his painting achieves a flattened depth of field. In *Red on Green*, another variation on *Public Laundry No. 1*, he repeatedly paints yellow and black mixed together and in alternating layers in the narrow stripes of canvas outside of the trapezoid, creating an effect where the two colors compete against and quash one another—the black appears airy, whereas the yellow is not as vibrant. Two colors with opposing characteristics do not form a cohesive whole, but rather remain free flowing in complicated spatial relationships.

When the artist intentionally reduces the connection between painting and reality, the results inevitably veer into the territory of an abstract visual representation. Whether Zeng is using the symbols of abstraction or realism, he remains committed to the goal of a dispassionate and controlled return to scenes from his memory. Zeng was born in the 1970s, in the city of Ziyang. In his youth, the winds of reform had not yet arrived at this impoverished land in the Sichuan basin. The livelihoods of many were then still tightly wound around the third-tier state-owned enterprises of the region. These strong impressions of his early life leave Zeng wanting to show the essential qualities of scenes that were once familiar to him.

In these paintings and their larger framework, every small window pane expresses distinct moments—a metaphor for the common condition of humanity. In *White on Red*, a large square hovers above a black background, like a monument. Compared with Zeng's earlier paintings of workers' dormitories, public laundry rooms, and storefronts at coal mines, these paintings are more abstract. Zeng intentionally inserts his personal experiences as an intermediary between reality and his audience. By extension, his method of painting becomes packaging for the commercialization of pers

onal identities. Yet this painstaking meticulousness can also be viewed as an interrogation of his generation's blind search for individual experience.

Also included in the exhibition is a three-channel video work titled *Sequence*, of which one screen shows a video for which Zeng places a low-fidelity camera on a mobile mechanical platform on tracks in a factory. By substituting the machine's movement for his own eyes, he invites the audience to enter into an illusion where subjectivity has been usurped; the visual noise of the video also acts as a counterpoint to the precision of painting. When the mechanical din in the video suddenly stops, viewers are roused out of a trance, returning from a lifeless object back into the existential self—the pain of recognition is indelible.