

Interview with  
Zhong Tianyue

鍾天悅專訪



## About the Artist

### 關於藝術家

Zhong Tianyue (b. 1994, Chengdu, China) depicts figures and forms that linger between abstraction and figuration in her painting-centered oeuvre. Interweaving delicate lines, canvases, Zhong is interested in ephemeral, bodiless matters that span fire, smoke, and ghosts, among others. Often drawing references from classical Chinese poems and rarely-encountered historical photographs of 20th-century modern China, she delves into the ambiguous, inexplicit correlations between past events and present experiences, exploring the intuition in her painting process as well as investigating the truthfulness of historical documentation.

Zhong Tianyue obtained her BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2018 and her MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art in 2020.

The artist currently lives and works in San Francisco, US.

鐘天悅(生於1994年·中國成都)以繪畫為媒介·描繪徘徊於抽象和具象之間的人物和形體。在她的作品中·鐘天悅熱衷探索火、煙和鬼等瞬變而無形的事物·交織呈現微妙的線條、色彩的痕跡和瞬息的陰影。她經常引用中國古詩詞和二十世紀中國近代史上鮮為人知的照片·深入研究歷史事件和當下經歷之間模糊的相關性·探索繪畫過程的自發性和歷史紀實的真實性。

鐘天悅於2018年獲得芝加哥藝術學院純藝術學士學位·並於2020年獲得皇家藝術學院繪畫文學碩士學位。

藝術家目前生活和工作於美國舊金山。



Zhong Tianyue in front of *Orange II*

鍾天悅於《Orange II》前



"Pause, Arise" installation view

「憩息·升起」現場圖

On the occasion of Zhong Tianyue's solo exhibition "Pause, Arise," the gallery team had an in-depth discussion with the artist, highlighting the thoughts and concepts behind her creative practice. The exhibition opened at MOU PROJECTS in Hong Kong on January 7, 2023, featuring a selection of paintings that evolve from figuration to abstraction. Encapsulating the re-enacted historical eras and her contemplative wrestling with the passage of time, painting, for Zhong, entails ceaseless upward movements in a metaphorical and phenomenological realm.

值鐘天悅個展「憩息·升起」之際，畫廊團隊與藝術家進行了一次深入的探討，談及了藝術家的創作理念以及創作過程中的所見所想。展覽於2023年1月7日在MOU PROJECTS 香港空間開幕，呈現了藝術家最新創作的由具象表現轉變至抽象的繪畫作品，繪畫所給予鐘天悅的，是當她游走在一個隱喻和現象無窮的領域中時，使她保持不斷向上運動的能量，這種能量凝聚了被重現的歷史，以及對時間流逝的沉思角力。

## MOU PROJECTS (MP):

The exhibition is titled "Pause, Arise." Could you elaborate on what these two works entail for you and your creative process?

### Zhong Tianyue (Zhong):

The exhibition title primarily concerns the meaning of time or movement as abstract concepts. For instance, photography, text, or image may be considered as paused or static, from which I may draw some questions, expressive painting language, and new perspectives—all these processes may be viewed as an upward momentum or energy that converges to a single spot and then diverges. The word "pause" mostly speaks of the quiet environment in which I have been working and living ever since I moved away from the city lately, while "arise" refers to that which allows me to develop new connections with the world by way of painting in order to further and better understand the culture and history of my own country when I live overseas.

### MP:

Speaking of "time" as a concept, we are curious about what you think of "the past" versus "the present"—are these two relatively fixed terms or can they indeed exchange functions and statuses—how the history or the past may affect the way you paint and look at paintings, as well as how time is contained or laid down in your works.

### Zhong:

I think that working alternately on wet and dry canvas surfaces per se is a way of preserving time as well as capturing transient emotions. I often draw references and inspirations from historical photographs as well as classic Chinese literature. Certain events that took place in history might be quite similar, even causational, to that which is happening at this instance—these connections sometimes can be rather arbitrary or imperceptible. Similarly, some steps in the early phases of a painting might

## MOU PROJECTS (MP):

此次展覽名為「憩息·升起」，可以展開講講它背後的含義以及這兩個詞於你和你的創作而言的意義麼？

### 鍾天悅 (鐘):

擬定展覽標題時，我主要在思考時間或運動作為抽象概念的意義，例如攝影、文字、畫面等可被視為暫停或靜止的，我會從中借鑒提取一些經過思考得出的問題、表達性的繪畫語言以及新的創作角度。這些過程可被視為一種上升的能量，向同一處匯聚後又擴散。「憩息」這一詞主要指我近期與城市分隔開來後，在安靜的地方創作與思考的環境，而「升起」則是我生活在非自己母語國家時，以繪畫的形式與世界產生聯繫，從而進一步對自己國家的文化與歷史產生新的理解。

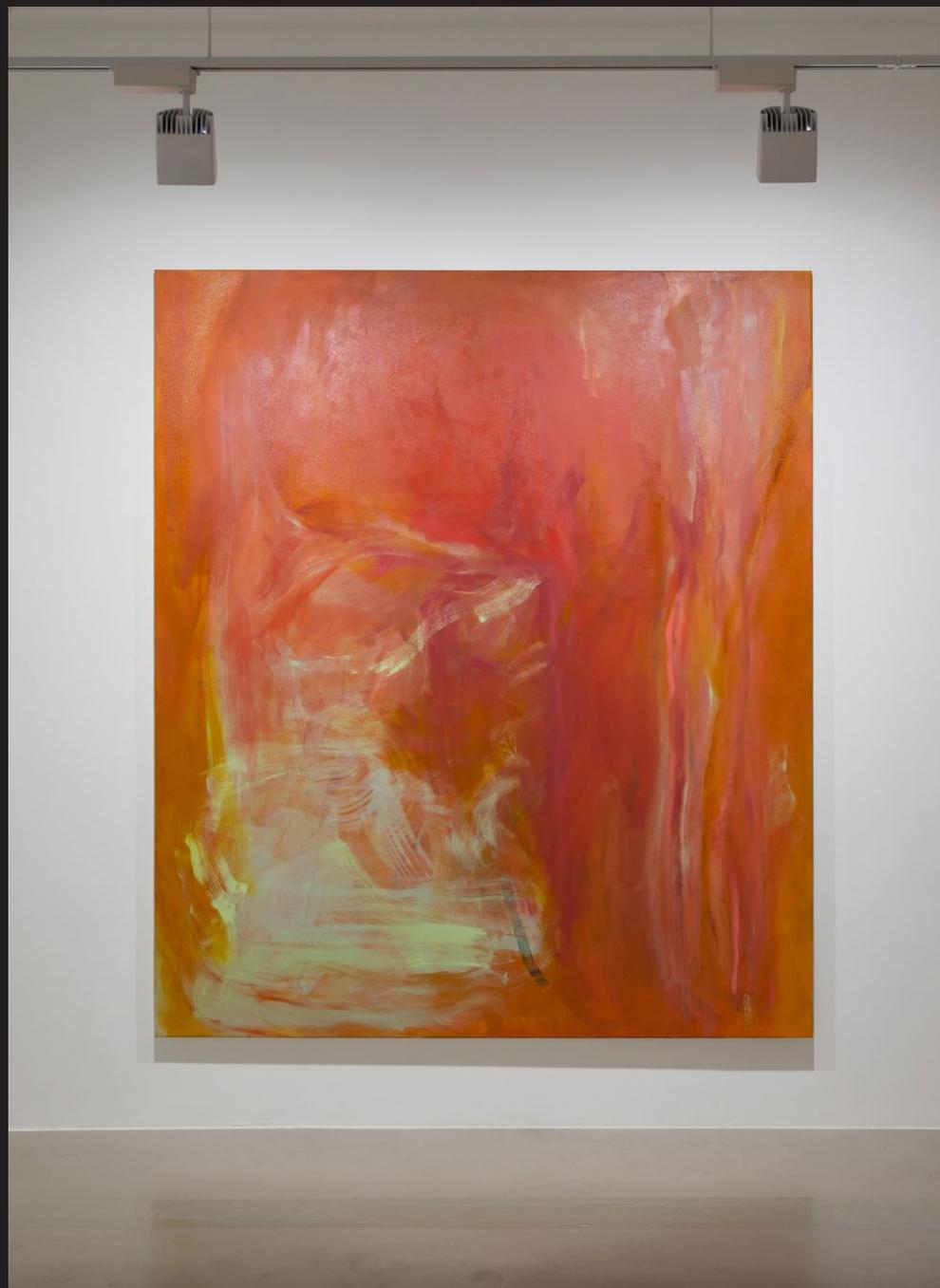
### MP:

談及「時間」這一概念，我們很好奇你對「過去」與「現在」的看法，你認為兩者是相對有着固定的含義，還是能夠互換功能甚至是地位？歷史和過去怎樣影響了你觀看以及創作的方式，而「時間」又是如何在你的繪畫中呈現的呢？

### 鐘:

我認為交替處理濕與乾的畫布表面本身就是一種保存時間的方式，同時也是記錄轉瞬即逝的情感的方式。我時常從歷史像片或古代文學中汲取靈感或素材。一些發生在歷史中的事件可能與此刻正在發生的事件極為相似，甚至有因果關係，這些聯繫有時是隨機或難以察覺的。類似地，繪畫過程中一些初期的處理可能是隨機的，在經過不斷加工後，有時那些由「潛意識」主導的處理可能成為了完成作品中的點睛之筆，而有時則被覆蓋且不會出現在最終的畫面中。

我認為無論是繪畫還是探索歷史，反復思考以及判斷的過程都是相似的體驗，當我用手去記錄這些重疊的過程時，心中便會開始對「已知」事實不斷推敲甚至懷疑，這些過程對我來說是奇妙、



*I See Fire, Reaching to the River, 2022*  
Oil, acrylic on canvas  
198.1 × 167.6 cm

《我的視線跟隨火苗匯聚成河》· 2022  
布面油畫、丙烯  
198.1 × 167.6 cm



*Bury in Twilight II*, 2022  
Oil, acrylic on canvas  
167.6 × 198.1 cm

《長眠於明晨 II》· 2022  
布面油畫、丙烯  
167.6 × 198.1 cm

include random elements; after continuously working on it and layering up, some of the processes guided by "subconsciousness" eventually sometimes may become a curious finishing touch yet other times get covered up and are excluded from the final image.

Whether it is painting or exploring history, I consider it a rather similar experience with regards to the processes of judging and contemplating. When I record these overlapping processes with my hands, I begin to scrutinize and develop suspicions toward the "known facts." For me, such processes are curious, eerie, yet fascinating. I do not get obsessed with the idea of a "finished" image in that my aim is to preserve and present the spontaneity within painting and the truthfulness of emotions, in the hope of visceral feelings and genuine expressions may be recorded as holistically as possible. In turn, every decision I make at each step is made more prominent, and all the historical events or lived experiences can thus be rejuvenated through the energy of painting.

MP:

In *Orange II* (all works 2022) four figures dressed in cheongsam are braiding the iconic Manchu queue for the person in front, drawing connections to the culture of the Qing Dynasty; the two figures smoking opium in *Bury in Twilight II* also brings to mind the history of The Opium Wars in the late Qing Dynasty. Do these two paintings have specific references, and why did you choose to focus on this particular historical era?

Zhong:

Both paintings reference historical photographs taken by foreign missionaries during the early 20th century; *Orange II* references *Making Braids* (ca. 1902-1905), and *Bury in Twilight II* references *Two Men on an Opium Bed* (ca. 1902-1905). The final years of the Qing Dynasty remark the conclusion of the Fengjian system; this is a dynasty that started with a quest and ended with one as well. The chaos and havoc at the downfall of a dynasty, to an extent, seems

怪誕而不可思議的。因為我的目標是保留並呈現繪畫中的隨機性和情感的真實性，我希望直觀的感受與表達能夠盡可能地被完整記錄下來，所以我不過多地去追求一個「完成的」畫面，這也使得我的創作過程中每一個決定的存在顯得更為突出，那些歷史事件或發生過的經歷也因此可以透過繪畫的能量而重獲新生。

MP:

此次展出的雙聯畫《橙 II》(所有作品 2022)中，四位身著長衫的人在為自己前方的人編織滿族髻發髮型，令人聯想到清朝文化，同時，《長眠於明晨 II》中的兩個抽著鴉片的人也使人回想起清末鴉片戰爭的歷史。請問這兩幅畫是否有借鑒的素材，又為何特定選擇清朝這一時代呢？

鐘:

兩幅畫都參考了 20 世紀初西方傳教士在中國拍攝的歷史像片，《橙 II》參考了《*Making Braids*》(約 1902-05)而《長眠於明晨 II》參考的是《*Two Men on an Opium Bed*》(約 1902-05 年)。清朝末年昭示着封建制度的尾聲，這個朝代始於徵程，也閉幕於「徵程」。落幕時刻的混沌，某種程度上彷彿將現代中國人與世界用一層紙窗隔開。屋內的人朝外看，屋外的人往里瞥，所看到的事物是光投影在紙上的輪廓，好似輕佻的邀約，又好似轉瞬即逝的鬼魂。描繪這些具有時代代表性的人物特徵時，我試圖透過繪畫抓住某個動態的瞬間，並希望給予開放的角度，同時我也着重將照片人物背後代表的一些信息模糊化，加強展現不確定性，模糊個體的身份，從而展示他們為一個群體。

繪畫過程中，我會運用畫面里的正負空間來展現圖像中隱晦的邏輯，比如人像的邊界有時是以開放的線條組成，由正負空間同時構成人物的體積，形成流動的筆觸與漸進的冷暖。往往人物在畫面中會越來越模糊，甚至轉變為更純粹的抽象形態。人物的僵硬或變形是有意而為的，因為我不是在描繪活生生的人物，而是透過歷史像片將這些人物轉化為一群人，一種符號。透過一種富有表現力的繪畫手法，我在描繪這些人物時將事件放在了一個平行時空里，在已知的素材中不斷對比。

to have isolated the modern Chinese from the world, each side merely able to peek at the other—everything seen or witnessed is indeed a silhouette or a shadow, like a superficial enticement or a fleeting ghost. When depicting the characteristics of these figures representative of their times, I try to capture an instant moment of dynamic movements through paintings and hope to thus invite open-ended interpretations. At the same time, I also focus on obscuring some of the information specific to a figure in order to emphasize the elements of uncertainty, conceal individual identities, and ultimately present them as a people.

I use positive and negative space in an image to reveal its innate, hidden logic. For instance, the contours of the figures are sometimes composed of discontinuous lines, as the positive and negative spaces simultaneously build up their shape, forming flowing brushstrokes and gradual progression in hues. The figures typically become increasingly blurry, even at times turning into pure abstracted forms. The rigidity or distortion of the figures are intentional inasmuch as I am not depicting living persons but transforming these persons into a people, a symbol via historical photographs instead. When depicting these figures, I am placing the associated events in a parallel space-time through an expressive painting language. The persistent comparison between the found and known materials enables me to discover connections between the processes of reviewing these histories and myself, which are subtle and continuously repeated over the course of time. The painted figures, albeit containing historical references, are not representing that thread of history but rather depicting the here-and-now that is still under the ever-present influence of that particular history. Consequently, these painted figures appear ghostly, possessing no solid volumes and only contours instead. The silhouettes are imprecise, even interrupted by other elements, thus questioning if our perspectives toward the past changes over time as well as whether the impressions of these particular events will affect our perception and judgement toward current events or not.

從而找到自己與回顧這段歷史的過程之間的聯繫。這些聯繫是微妙的，也是在時間的推進中不斷重復的。這些帶有歷史借鑒的人物繪畫並不是在展現這段歷史，而是在描繪仍受這段歷史影響的現在，因此畫中人物彷彿鬼魂一般，沒有實體而只有一些輪廓。這些輪廓的描繪不是精準的，甚至是被其他元素打斷的，從而質疑我們看待過去的角度是否隨時着間的變化而改變，這些對於特定的事件產生的印象又是否會影響我們對於當下事件的判斷。

MP:

一些作品如《我的視線跟隨火苗匯聚成河》、《金色的煙》和《安靜地啜泣直到燃燒殆盡 II》似乎都與「火」這一元素有關，而且頗為抽象，可以闡述一下其中的原因及用意麼？

鐘：

火與煙有着因果關係，也同時有一種不變性。無論在任何時代，火和煙給人的「印象」似乎都是類似的，它是不受社會環境、政治因素或科技發展等所影響的，我將它們視作種普世的關於時間的探討。而在中國的習俗里，人死後的祭拜和追悼方式也與火和煙息息相關。它們在繪畫里作為元素和意象，從而展現出生命的力量。持續的、簡短的、互相矛盾的、痛苦的等等。這些感情在繪畫語言里趨於抽象的表達，而透過畫面建立的從上至下、旋轉的以及左右反復的運動是我無法用文字表達的比喻。這些作品中，我透過發散式的筆觸來描繪由模糊的「印象」而產生的律動，這些印象包含我以往的經歷和此時此刻的體驗，是我的感知與我創作過程中進行加工或用來自我消化的片段，同時不僅僅是視覺上的感官，也包括聽覺、嗅覺和觸覺等在我腦海裏形成的印象，還有從不同的學習角度而得到的對歷史的認知。這些相對抽象的作品與具象表現的作品相比，更是一種由外部世界到內心世界的一種轉變，繪畫與表達的最終一定要回到內心，要回到我們自己的狀態。



Untitled I, 2022  
Oil, acrylic, paper on canvas  
71.1 × 91.4 cm

《Untitled I》· 2022  
布面油畫、丙烯  
71.1 × 91.4 cm



Sad Purple Jade I, 2022  
Oil, acrylic on canvas  
61 × 55.9 cm

《傷痛的紫玉 I》· 2022  
布面油畫、丙烯  
61 × 55.9 cm



MP:

Some works, namely *I See Fire*, *Reaching to the River*, *Golden Smoke*, and *Gently Weeping till the Fire Stops II*, seem to be related to the element fire and are quite abstract. Could you share your thoughts and intentions behind that?

Zhong:

There is an invariant causal relationship between fire and smoke. In any given era, fire and smoke seem to give people the same "impression"—they are never affected by social progress, political turbulence, or technological development. I regard them as part of a universal discourse about time. In Chinese culture, the ways in which we worship and mourn death are also closely related to fire and smoke. In my paintings, they are presented as key visual elements to manifest the power of life, which may come across as persistent, brief, contradictory, or painful.

These feelings we may experience in life are expressed in an abstract manner in the works, leaving marks that seem to move from the top to the bottom, the left to the right, or across a rotational composition—they are metaphors that cannot be communicated via words. I use divergent brushstrokes to capture the rhythm generated by vague "impressions." These impressions are drawn from my past and present experiences, fragments of my perception, and self-digestion in my artistic process. At the same time, they are not merely the outcome of visual sensibility; rather, bringing them forth are the impressions formed in my mind through hearing, smelling, and touching, as well as the cognition of history from various epistemologies. Compared with the figurative works, my abstract ones are more related to the transformation that takes place when moving from the external world to one's inner terrain. Painting and expression must return to the latter, to our own mindset.



*Velvet Blanket*, 2022  
Oil, acrylic, paper on linen  
94 × 63.5 cm

《絲絨毯》·2022  
亞麻布面油畫、丙烯、宣紙  
94 × 63.5 cm



*Golden Smoke*, 2022  
Oil, acrylic on canvas  
91.4 × 71.1 cm

《金色的煙》·2022  
布面油畫、丙烯  
91.4 × 71.1 cm



*Gently Weeping till the Fire Stops II, 2022*  
Oil, acrylic on canvas  
132.1 × 88.9 cm

《安靜地哭泣直到燃燒殆盡 II》· 2022  
布面油畫、丙烯  
132.1 × 88.9 cm

MP:

What are some of your future goals with regards to your painting practice?

Zhong:

I will continue to explore the painterly expression of the same subjects and carry on studying relevant historical events. I would like to remain acute sensibility and sufficient curiosity. As city life will inevitably affect my practice, I am excited to see which meaningful and stimulating experiences will be brought out by my new studio in Los Angeles.

MP:

對於接下來的藝術創作，你有哪些展望？

鐘：

我會繼續探索同一題材的繪畫表達，繼續對相關歷史事件的研究。也許會透過更多的寫作來保持敏銳的「嗅覺」和好奇心。城市的環境也會影響我的創作，相信在洛杉磯的新工作室會帶給我更多有意思、刺激的經歷。



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