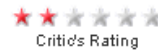




## Art

Time Out New York / Issue 709 : Apr 30–May 6, 2009



### Art review

## Zeng Fanzhi

[Acquavella Galleries](#), through May 15



*Portrait 08-7-3*  
Photograph: Courtesy Acquavella Galleries, New York

Zeng Fanzhi's claim to fame is that a painting of his sold for \$9.7 million at Christie's Hong Kong in May 2008, a record for Chinese contemporary art. Go figure. Zeng has never been as popular as Zhang Xiaogang or Zhang Huan, two artists who've had recent shows here at Pace Wildenstein. Nor is he on par with Western artists in a similar price range, like Lucien Freud. Instead, he makes strange yet ultimately superficial paintings that come from his own uniquely pessimistic perspective.

Two sides of Zeng Fanzhi are on view. His moody landscapes—ranging from modest to monumental—all feature impenetrable undergrowth glowing in moonlight. Most of these compositions are devoid of life, and in *Lion*, the artist even sticks in the titular beast, a kitschy creature not nearly as haunting as the one in Rousseau's *Sleeping Gypsy*.

"Kitsch" is also the best way of describing Zeng's bug-eyed portraits, which owe a great deal to Francis Bacon and Egon Schiele. Like Schiele, Zeng centers his subjects, allegedly to heighten their emotional tension. Like Bacon, he smears the paint from the top of the head upward, repeating this gesture in every painting. Even though these are supposed to be psychological studies, only one, *Portrait 08-12-5*, a young boy staring angrily from the canvas, is at all disturbing. Zeng Fanzhi has distinguished himself from other Chinese painters because he has varied his technique and subject matter from one body of work to another. Even so, he appears to have run through his limited bag of tricks, and his stature should invite scrutiny, especially now that he represents the top of the market.—*Barbara Pollack*