

Firstsite

Zhang Enli

Gesture and Form

11 March – 4 June 2017

Preview: Friday 10 March 2017, 6pm – 8pm



Tension, 2013, oil on canvas, 200 x 230 x 4 cm © Zhang Enli, Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth and ShaghART Gallery. Photo: Birdhead

Firstsite, Colchester, is delighted to present *Gesture and Form*, a major solo exhibition by acclaimed Chinese artist **Zhang Enli**.

The presentation marks the start of the gallery's year-long focus on identity; a key component of Zhang's artistic practice, from his depictions of commonplace objects, such as cardboard boxes, to his observations of the ordinary rituals of everyday life.

Gesture and Form is comprised of thirteen works in oil, as well as a 'Space Painting', a monumental,

site-specific installation that will be created by Zhang over a 16-day period before the show opens on March 11th, 2017, remaining at the gallery for one year before being ‘unmade’.

The Firstsite commission will see Zhang cover the gallery’s 140-metre curving wall with swathes of pulsating colour, washed, scrubbed and stroked into place with expressive brushstrokes. The scale of the work, which sees the artist deliberately blurring his abstract and figurative practices – many Chinese and British trees will be featured – draws the viewer into an imaginary environment, inviting them to consider not just the spectacle of the painting, which is rendered in watercolour, but also the aesthetic enquiries behind its creation.

Zhang began this series in 2007 – other works have been seen at London’s Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), and the Muse Duarte Contemporaneity di Villa Croce, Genoa – with the aim of challenging and ultimately conflating the relationship that exists between an artwork and the space it inhabits.

The same stylistic trajectory of the ‘Space Painting’ is manifest in the thirteen figurative and abstract paintings that feature in the show. The figurative works are inspired by the painter and calligrapher Jin Nong (1687-1764) whose own depictions of branches and blossoms, like Zhang’s, often waved in the wind. Rendered in oil, the artist’s mark-making is invariably underpinned by a faint, pencil-drawn grid. This structures the rapid expressionistic gestures, coiled tendrils, perforated sheets and majestic tree trunks that are depicted.

In *Red-Green Brushwork* (2016), for example, sketchy patches of carnelian red, forest green and muted, rusty orange are delineated across the canvas. The grid is still discernible amid chaotic brushstrokes that swirl and blend into one another, with watery rivulets of pigment travelling down the surface plane, creating further, unpredictable marks.

In contrast, *Tension 1* (2013), in shades of teal and juniper green, channels a mass of tangled lines wrapped around two thin brown arches. These are seemingly pulled together under the dynamic tension of what could be coils of vine, water-hoses or string. These same lines reappear in *The Transparent Fabrics* (2014), threading through the holes of a translucent turquoise veil, and again in *The Tree Stump (2)* (2015), where they loosely fall from and curl around severed branches.

In all of these works, from the ‘Space Painting’ to the joyful, colourful abstracts and carefully-rendered figurative canvases, Zhang references Buddhist philosophy, and the way it mediates ‘sentience’ (the ability to feel or perceive) and the ‘material’ (our spatial relationship to our environment), exploring what unites humanity rather than what sets it apart.

Says Firstsite Director, Sally Shaw: ‘*Firstsite is truly delighted to be staging this show of recent works by Zhang Enli, and honoured that he will be creating a Space Painting of such monumental scale for the gallery, which we feel sure will captivate everyone who comes to see it.*’

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Notes to Editors:

About Zhang:

Zhang Enli was born in 1965 in the province of Jilin in China. In 1989, he graduated from the Arts & Design Institute of Wuxi Technical University and relocated to Shanghai to teach at the Arts and Design Institute of Donghua University, a transition that greatly affected his artistic practice and the evolution of his painting. Zhang continued teaching at the university until 2008. He continues to live and work in Shanghai and is represented by Hauser & Wirth. His paintings have been featured in numerous important exhibitions, including solo exhibitions at Hauser & Wirth Zurich (2016); Moca, Taipei, Taiwan (2015); Hauser & Wirth London (2014); Villa Croce, Genoa, Italy (2013); Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, England (2013); Hauser & Wirth Zürich (2012); Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China (2011); Hauser & Wirth New York, 69th St (2011); Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai, China (2010); and Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England (2009), a presentation which travelled to Kunsthalle Bern, Bern, Switzerland (2009). His work was also featured in the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Kochi, India (2012); 'On Contemporary Era – The First Chinese Oil Painting Biennial', The National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China (2012); 'The 6th Curitiba Biennial: Beyond the Crisis', Instituto Paranaense de Arte, Curitiba, Brazil (2011) and '10,000 Lives, 'The Eighth Gwangju Biennale', Gwangju, Korea (2010).

About Firstsite:

Firstsite is a public contemporary art gallery in Colchester, Essex. Over the last fifteen years it has gained a strong reputation, presenting ambitious work to new audiences in the East of England and beyond. Situated in Colchester's 'cultural quarter,' the present building was designed by Uruguayan architect Rafael Viñoly, and opened in 2011. Firstsite is a partner of Plus Tate, which uses Tate's resources to contribute to a network of arts organisations across the country, and to increase public access to the national collection of British and international modern and contemporary art..

Firstsite opening hours: Monday – Sunday, 10am – 5pm

Please visit the Firstsite website for more information: www.firstsite.uk

