

## The Timeless Body of Work called "Grandfather, Father and Son" An Essay on the Paintings of Zhao Zhao

By Heinz-Norbert Jocks

Zhao Zhao is known as a non-conformist conceptual artist far beyond the borders of China thanks to his sculptures, installations and paintings. After so many years spent in fearless as well as brave and uncompromising examination of societal themes and phenomena and social areas of conflict, in particular of the complex question of individual freedom in a strictly anti-subjectivist country, he has suddenly created a 36-part series of portraits which represent a surprising break with the conceptual. This project, realized over the course of two years, may at first not really correspond to the image of him that we have so far made or assumed. Nor does the fact that, as he set about to observe and question himself while brilliantly transferring the contours of his face to the canvas in paint, he would go on to complement this impressive as well as varied series with additional ones. For he additionally created not only images of his father but also of his grandfather, paired with frightening, possibly even disturbing pictures of an evildoer with devil's horns, who, by breaking in like a troublemaker, reveals the ideal of familial harmony as the foul trick of an illusion.

How does the one go together with the other and why did he combine these so apparently contradictory and confusing parallels? Taken together, the three series refer to the social networks and lived understanding of interpersonal relationships in China which have been handed down until today. They form a loose trinity and cite a classic chain of tradition which reaches from the son through the father he will one day be to the grandfather he will eventually become. In Chinese culture, the father-son relationship counts as the most central one. In it, the son is bound to respect, defer to and subordinate himself to his father out of thanks for the life he has been given. Zhao is anything but a supporter of this old understanding determined by coercion which still lives on today. He criticizes it in the most subtle way, because, on the one hand it is molded on patriarchy, and, on the other hand, it negates individualism as well as the possibility of self-realization. However, this does not become apparent to us immediately, but rather step by step.

Zhao has completed this series with sensual depictions of peaches and bamboo sprouts. Here, the representations of these fruits of the earth are not middlebrow and presented, as is usual, as a pure still life, nor are they arranged as one from the outset. Rather, they are in the center of the picture, sometimes isolated, sometimes set together in front of differing fields of paint. In this way, one's entire attention is drawn to the diversity of shapes and colors. The peaches, sometimes furnished with green leaves, occasionally have something erotically seductive about them with their bright, almost cloying chromaticity in front of a black or greenish-yellow background and their feminine, gentle and soft curves. The shapes, set clearly apart from the black background, combined with the image of the grandfather, bring to mind shapeless heads. In contrast to them, Zhao selected dark, almost sweet shades for the bamboo sprouts, switching between black, red and brown and making their shapes so smudged that the transitions between the bamboo forms and the

background almost blur together. It appears as if here he rather has his sights set on the dark, night side. In fact, something uncanny and somber emanates from these conical shapes ripening under the earth. The subtle manner, in which the interplay of colors and shapes is balanced here, leaves no doubt that the painter does not understand the peaches and bamboo sprouts as reproductions of something naturally beautiful but rather has in mind the mythological symbolism of their images. They are borrowed from Chinese culture which he has always occupied himself with. According to it, peaches stand for immortality among the gods and for longevity among people as well as for luck. Here too, bamboo has a deep symbolic meaning due to its special characteristics; its uprightness (zheng) typifies truthfulness and the regularity of its knots (jie) dependability and integrity while its jade-colored purity signifies integrity. The fact that it maintains its leaves even in winter and is ever green suggests resilience. And its longevity corresponds with the human desire for a long life. That it is empty or hollow inside (kong) can be interpreted according to Buddhism as the embodiment of the “lesson of emptiness” and as humility according to the Confucian tradition. And its flexibility is a sign of its consistency and indestructability, for it is capable of being bent without breaking. According to Buddhist beliefs, the mind should be as empty inside as the bamboo is hollow, that is to say, it should not be attached to things. At the same time, the lesson of emptiness implies the rejection of all observance of rules. We will see how, by reaching for these iconographic allusions which he appropriates, Zhao brings about a transformation in interpretation. This culminates in a questioning of the father-son relationship which has been elevated to an ideal.

It is indeed no coincidence that the self-portraits are the starting point for the series that follow them. Could it not be, that it was only the intensive look at himself, accompanied by a listening inside, that led him to occupy himself in his own way with the meaning of this - unfashionable for him - contradictory chain of tradition? Ultimately, the one appears to have only gradually developed out of the other, to the extent that Zhao has not followed any preconceived conceptual plan, but rather his intuition. Nothing is first predefined and then correspondingly carried out. “I spontaneously have an idea that leads me to paint. I don’t begin with a definition in search of a fitting solution” is how Zhao formulates it. He adds: “I am very careful when it comes to making something concrete. The things which finally emerge only become definable after the completion of the painting.”

This could explain why only the image of the son is furnished with a concrete face, namely that of the painter, while the portraits of the father and the grandfather – not nameable and therefore nameless – represent something general, namely a father and grandfather in principle. The fact that Zhao combines self-portraits with paintings that do not refer to his biological father and grandfather but rather the image of a father and grandfather in Chinese culture, warns us against interpreting the pictures primarily biographically, even if the possibility that something personal is concealed behind all of this and his own experiences and history with his father resonate subliminally cannot be dismissed. For it can not fail to be the case that in the hours in which Zhao works on his self-portraits, memories arise within him and his painting is accompanied by a stream of consciousness. This is already evident through the fact that, as a rule, he does not paint from photographs. In addition, the self-portraits were not produced in front of a mirror. In this way, they are,

sort of speak, portraits from inside out of the artist's conception of his own face, and at the same time they are cut off from exterior influences. Ultimately, they have to do with the products of his imagination. Perhaps one could even speak of auto-fictions or interior images here.

The author of this essay asks himself what indeed was the catalyst that caused Zhao to turn towards self-portraits, and, in doing so, speculates about whether it might not be that, due to the car accident he suffered in 2007, he suddenly became aware of the fragility of his physical existence and whether, through the impact of his head against the windshield that shattered under it, he was literally thrown back upon himself and, was thus confronted with the essential questions of "who am I" and "where am I going". Yet the accident, which he integrated into his work in the series "Fragments" and later in "Constellations" lies years back in the past and can only be conditionally drawn on as a contributing factor here. Therefore, this causal connection between accident and self-portrait purely represents conjecture from a psychological perspective. Zhao vehemently resists, this, indeed, he primarily wants to cast his eye on the general rather than on his own individual circumstances.

Indeed, that he repeatedly reached for brush and paint to represent his self and its countless "surfaces" (Zhao) appears like a consciously antagonistic act in the digital age of "frantic standstill" (Paul Virilio). In fact, he left himself enough time to the extent that he did not force himself daily to complete the series. Rather, he always continued the work then when he felt an inner motivation or inspiration to do so. Like someone who lets himself be spontaneously guided by his impulses and allows himself to be roused to action in the moment he feels like it. When he speaks about how he doesn't have fixed working hours which are spent, self-disciplined, in a studio like other painters do, he also does so in order to distance himself from other painters and to present his own understanding of painting. Someone who, like him, yields to an inner drive, senses the notorious urge to sweep outside what has been dammed up and pre-formulated. Only by beginning to translate into shapes and shades what had before simply vaguely resonated, slumbered before itself and still lay in darkness, is it revealed into sight and light in its entirety. This calls to mind the slow emergence of a photograph on the white paper in the darkroom of an analogue photographer. In such a way, this form of painting without a concept resembles an archaeology of the self as well as a hesitant dive into nebulous uncertainty. It is expected or it can be surmised that such listening to his inner impulses has had an indirect influence on his self-portraits. Now, why does he go to such lengths in painting them with such determination? Especially nowadays, when it has become a collective obsession to photograph oneself with one's mobile phone in every conceivable and impossible situation whether in little or large company as well as in the most varied spots on earth? Reaching for the constantly available mobile telephone has also become so ubiquitous worldwide because the transmission of digital data from mobile phone to mobile phone occurs in real time. The dispatching of pictures and messages around the world at lightning speed has long since supplanted the sending of postcards and letters which take days to arrive.

He rejects photography with its unsurpassable speed and makes use of the sustained slowness of painting and thereby of a classical medium, of which it is said every year again that it is old-fashioned and has reached the end of its possibilities. In this special case there appears to be good reasons which are not, however, communicated in and of themselves and which doubtless do not correspond to the usual ones. Yet what are they?

A mere fleeting glance at his self-portraits demonstrate that while they allow one to clearly recognize who is represented there they do not depict a true or close to life reproduction of his face and his expression but rather one more freely formulated. It becomes clear that what matters to him is something other than a seductive or striking faithfulness to nature or reality and it is also not to scale the heights of realism as a painter. Therefore, he does not aim to achieve an optical illusion. Sometimes, it is important to him to approach the facial expression as closely as possible. Other times, he takes the approach to his own visage only as far as it is absolutely necessary to allow identification of the person represented in the picture as the painter. A few brush strokes are sufficient for Zhao to adequately sketch his own facial features as well as the physiognomy of his mouth and eyes which can be interpreted in many ways. He succeeds at doing so with great lightness, incredible accuracy and mastery. The self-portraits lie between these two extremes, here the clearly recognizable and there the mere blurred indication.

From the outset, Zhao makes it clear that, although he has the artistic capability to capture them, he is not primarily concerned with attention to detail and precision nor with expression but, rather, according to him, with “transgression and formal expansion”. At the same time, it appears a striking contradiction that he does indeed remain eternally loyal to his motif but continually changes his style of painting like others change their clothes, so that the pictures never resemble each other in spite of their unchanging subject. Through this repetition which effects change, our gaze is subjected to renewed tension. We see the distinctive side profile of a man in his prime, who, resting his head in his right hand, lets his gaze sweep past us to somewhere else. Where and on what it is directed to is hidden. Precisely because Zhao places his likeness in the picture without any contact to others and removed from everything, he grants the scene something intimate. He shows himself from the perspective of a person who imagines himself unobserved, alone and completely apart and who has apparently retreated into the shell of his being.

In addition, this figure, which comes into being under his hand, transmits the impression that the person who views himself is surrounded by an emptiness which emerges from the suddenly perceptible distance to the outer world, as it is felt in a condition of absolute peace and seclusion. It is striking that Zhao avoids defining the space around the figure which refers to him. The gap occasioned by the missing interior and exterior is only closed or filled by the impression of the walls of paint. They form the background for the figure, but not in such a way that the background sets itself apart from him. In drawing the image of himself outside of a concrete spatial situation, Zhao imagines instead a no-man’s place which could be here as well as elsewhere, and by focussing exclusively on the facial expression he not only banishes the world from the paintings but contrasts it with the hidden depths of his inner world. Things which could be perceived as additions infected by

meaning or symbolic attachments to what is represented, are also eliminated. Everything here is reduced to the view of a face with a hand encompassing it, as well as the surfaces which are shaped in ever different ways through paint, conjured up by a few strokes. It is these which help the mien and the facial expression achieve an ever new appearance, through the oscillation between lightening and darkening, between daylight and the darkness of night, so that the self-portraits, transformed in this way, animate us to always different interpretative assumptions. It is as if by jumping from one style of painting to another, what Zhao was concerned with was preventing or escaping a clear definition not only in respect to painting but also in view of the being which continually transcends itself and is therefore not identical with it.

Through his complete fixation on the facial expressions, he builds up an atmosphere like the one which flashes up for us for mere seconds, when, for example, we glance in the mirror in the morning. In such still moments of unexpected confrontation with ourselves, something of our inner life becomes accessible; drowned out by the overly complex outside, having hardly grasped it, we push it away again and it disappears. In light of our inner relationship to the exterior world, the temporary removal from it and the reflection on the self are determined by a will to asceticism. When asked what his intention was in painting himself over and over again in the same pose and whether he wanted to bear witness to the passage of time - the way Roman Opalka did when, until the end of his life, he photographed himself daily via timer in always the same way with always the same as neutral as possible facial expression under the same light conditions - Zhao came to speak of the effect of "monotonous repetition, which enables self-knowledge" as well as of the mode of "undistracted concentration on a subject", of the "procedural and the temporal process, that has to do with zen. Consequently, my approach" Zhao says, is "a different one to that of Western artists. I am neither concerned with the questions of modernity nor with de- or reconstruction. My self-conception and my path as a painter are formed by Eastern culture to the extent that I project myself on a certain level into a specific environment. It has to do with which dimension one touches through the act of repetition in the different paintings."

This is what Zhao had to say in a conversation in which there was also talk of the beneficence which he also felt upon approaching the self-portraits, no doubt because the practice lacking a concept appeared to him like the return to a point of origin in the sense of an emptied consciousness which only fills itself again when - without any pre-planning - the painter strikes lucky and stumbles upon ideas. In relation to this, the stone Buddha figures, which Zhao has collected and which he negates by having cubes of stone cut out of them, appear before the inner eye of this writer. Purely on the surface they call to mind minimalist art and in content they refer to the history of cultural destruction, marking as their point of origin the once-again unknown. While the antique figure loaded with meaning is destroyed, it is, at the same time, transformed into a shape which no longer has significance out of which something new can emerge. The absence of a concept appears to have not only been a relief to him. It has additionally granted him a different freedom of expression and new possibilities and "developed resources. The conceptual elements which can be read into the relationships between the paintings and the series only evolved

during the painting process, that is to say, after the fact. They were not pre-programmed. The series of self-portraits actually has to do with a self-examination, and they allowed me to immerse myself in the context and the other world of painting. In general, painting presents a special challenge for me. Among all the media with which I work, painting is the one which I can control the least. I do not know the result of a painting when I begin. In the other media which I utilize this is not the case. There, I already perceive the end result before I begin its execution. For me, this uncertainty is what is actually interesting and stimulating.”

It is rewarding to pursue these hints, given that Zhao does not just understand how to develop a different style of painting for every self-portrait. In this manner, he additionally wants to escape classification in the same way that he refuses to define people to death. Furthermore, the portraits have a stylistic variety; their countless surfaces correspond to the breadth of Zhao’s changing moods which are literally drawn into his face. Sometimes they are elucidated in the tiniest details like the wrinkles in his forehead or neck, so that his body language is entirely in control. At other times, they are so completely covered in black that only the tip of his nose, his eyes and the sides of his ears peak out as if from behind a mask. Yet another time, his visage is shrouded in darkness and only perceptible thanks to a feeble source of light. That Zhao employs all his talents in order not to develop a clear style that becomes synonymous with his name appears like an act in parallel with the constant changes in the representation of his countenance. At times he allows them to emerge in all clarity and at others he lets them almost disappear into a void. This oscillation between appearing and disappearing, comparable with the transition between high and low tide, is directed against the idea of a human identity like the one discussed in the existential philosophy of the West.

Like a master of eternal changes in style, jumping between concretization and abstraction, Zhao always achieves new variations and through them ever deeper insights, with the aim of blocking a fixation on just one gaze and a reduction in the complexity of the facial expressions. In this way, the series permanently relativizes his expression and transforms his face into multiple apparitions with permanently transitioning expressions. His eyes, which are either wide open or completely closed and occasionally appear as if frozen, signalize different states of mind. In view of the self-portraits, one inevitably asks oneself whether the man being depicted is staring aimlessly into the distance, oblivious or absorbed in thought? Is he daydreaming or reflecting on something? Has he succumbed to tiredness? Or has his helplessness run to melancholy? Now again, one feels one can sense his determination, the self-doubt that plagues him or the suffering due to the world in which he is caught.

The multitude of perspectives which Zhao paints into his face can also be found in the faces of the fathers and grandfathers. Thus, the gaze of the father down on the child in his arms, bears witness to the care, goodness, tenderness, love and devotion directed towards the new-born baby in need of protection as well as attention. The self-reflection which the self-portraits represent transforms itself here into a selflessness concentrated on the needs of the new arrival. To this extent, in the archetypal image of the father, Zhao

examines above all his relationship to the child who, through the responsibility instantaneously bestowed on him, lets his life immediately enter a new stage. What is unusual about his father-child paintings is that they are created as a counterpart to the image of the mother with child that is usually a theme in art history. Through his dedication to the father with child, a subject which has so far been neglected by artists throughout history is introduced into painting and a new chapter is opened. Alongside these images of father with child, whose mood appears to proclaim silent understanding as well as the peace that prevails between the two, there are also those where the atmosphere leads one to suspect not just discord but also a latent gulf, a distance. In one painting, completed with a minimum of investment in terms of color and shapes, only fragments of both bodies appear. The right half of the head of the bald father looking down at the child he is carrying is shaded through a deep black. It is almost as if it were burnt. And the shoulder of the man is merely sketched with a line. The child, of whom also only the head can be seen in addition to the two little fists protruding from the cloud of paint, does not yet have any facial features. The nose is blurred and the eyes are screwed shut. The silhouettes which emerge from the painted background can be read as ciphers for figures which stand for the uncertainty of the course of a childhood. Will it be a happy or an unhappy one and will the relationship between the father and the new-born baby be a warm-hearted or a cold one? Everything is as undetermined as the future.

In combining the series of the adult who has become a father with that of the grandfather, Zhao now and then directs our attention to the child and indirectly also anticipates its development. Still standing at the beginning of its life, the “still speechless child, whose future is yet uncertain, will one day grow up and later have become a father who passes his knowledge on to the child”. This is how Zhao describes the cycle of life and its inherent continuity which endures through all time thanks to inheritance and tradition. This lesson of permanence is not one that is determined by the highs and lows of history, but rather, one which speaks of the human, all-too human. All in all, it has more to do with anthropology. Asked about what role the grandfather takes on in relation to this, Zhao emphasizes that his observations have nothing to do with the chronicle of Chinese history. “Naturally the era of my grandfather, who was born in the time of the late Qing dynasty, is very complicated and complex. However, in the series of the old man, who tells stories because he has such a wealth of experience, I am not taking any particular epoch as my theme, and I am also not occupying myself with a specific generation. I don’t view the subject of the generations from the perspective of the modern history of China, but rather from the background of my personal experiences and in regard to the significance of education” he says. Therefore, the mode of representing the grandfather appears timeless and epic and leads one to suspect that Zhao has in mind a lesson in a mythological sense. We do not encounter any faces which could be assigned to a specific time but rather faces which come from another time, radiate into the present time and can be read as archetypes. Therefore, it is self-understood that the portraits of the old, wise men with long, grey beards and high foreheads who, looking back at a long life, have accumulated knowledge and gathered experiences, are not realistic representations but rather mythological figures whose physiognomy Zhao has freely copied in loose reference to classical depictions of the Daoist deity Shou Xing. This “Old Man in the South Pole”, as this

god of longevity is also called, belongs to the trinity “Fu, Lu and Show”. In Chinese astronomy Shou Xing stands for the star Canopus in the constellation Carina, which is referred to as the Star of the South Pole in China. As it belongs to a southern constellation, Canopus can only rarely be seen in Northern China, twinkling red in clear skies. As red represents luck and a long life in China, the Star of the South Pole is known as the star of old age not just there but also in Korea, Japan and Vietnam. It is said of Shou Xing that it has the power to influence the lifespan of mortals. For Zhao, the old man - whose eyes appear to us as ambiguous as they are confusing - is a storyteller who passes on his experiences to the following generations and his enlarged head is the expression of the unbelievable wealth of his wisdom and his high degree of insight.

All in all, he is a noble man, who enjoys high esteem amongst everyone due to his wisdom, regardless of whether he had “a good or a bad character” in his earlier life. What counts at the end is only that, thanks to having lived so long, he has knowledge he can pass on that the next generation could profit from. The grandfather, who has enjoyed the fruits of life, is like the peach which he holds in his hands, as if he would reach for happiness whether it is good or bad. “He symbolizes wisdom and simultaneously a malignant tumor.” Ultimately, both good and evil are brought into balance. “That is what we [understand] in the Buddhist sense under the age of moderation” Zhao claims. This gives us hope and sounds like a gentle utopia birthed by the spirit of an artist who is simultaneously aware that “the evil one has smashed peaches and innocent faces”. In Zhao’s eyes, bamboo is an evident example that good is never only good and evil is never only evil, but both are sides of the same coin. “As long as it grows under the ground, it is relatively soft. It grows incredibly fast, develops a strength and power which first allows it to break through the earth and reach the daylight. There is something aggressive in it which can be seen through the fact that other plants have no chance of survival where it grows.” The gentle and the aggressive are characteristics which bamboo embodies equally and in the same way human nature is one which can not be understood dualistically as is normally the case in the West. The faces of the old man, whose high forehead has the shape of a peach, reveal that Zhao is no blind daydreamer but rather a melancholy skeptic. He contrasts the kind-hearted wise man who, at one with himself, has found inner peace, with paintings of an old man at the end of his life, whose face bears the traces of injuries and memories of the inauspicious times he has lived through. Paired here with the image of the evil-doer, who has brought harm into the world, the myth is contrasted with the reality. In this way, Zhao casts doubt on the ancient myth of Shouxing which symbolizes luck. In doing so, the old man tells the story of happiness as well as unhappiness.