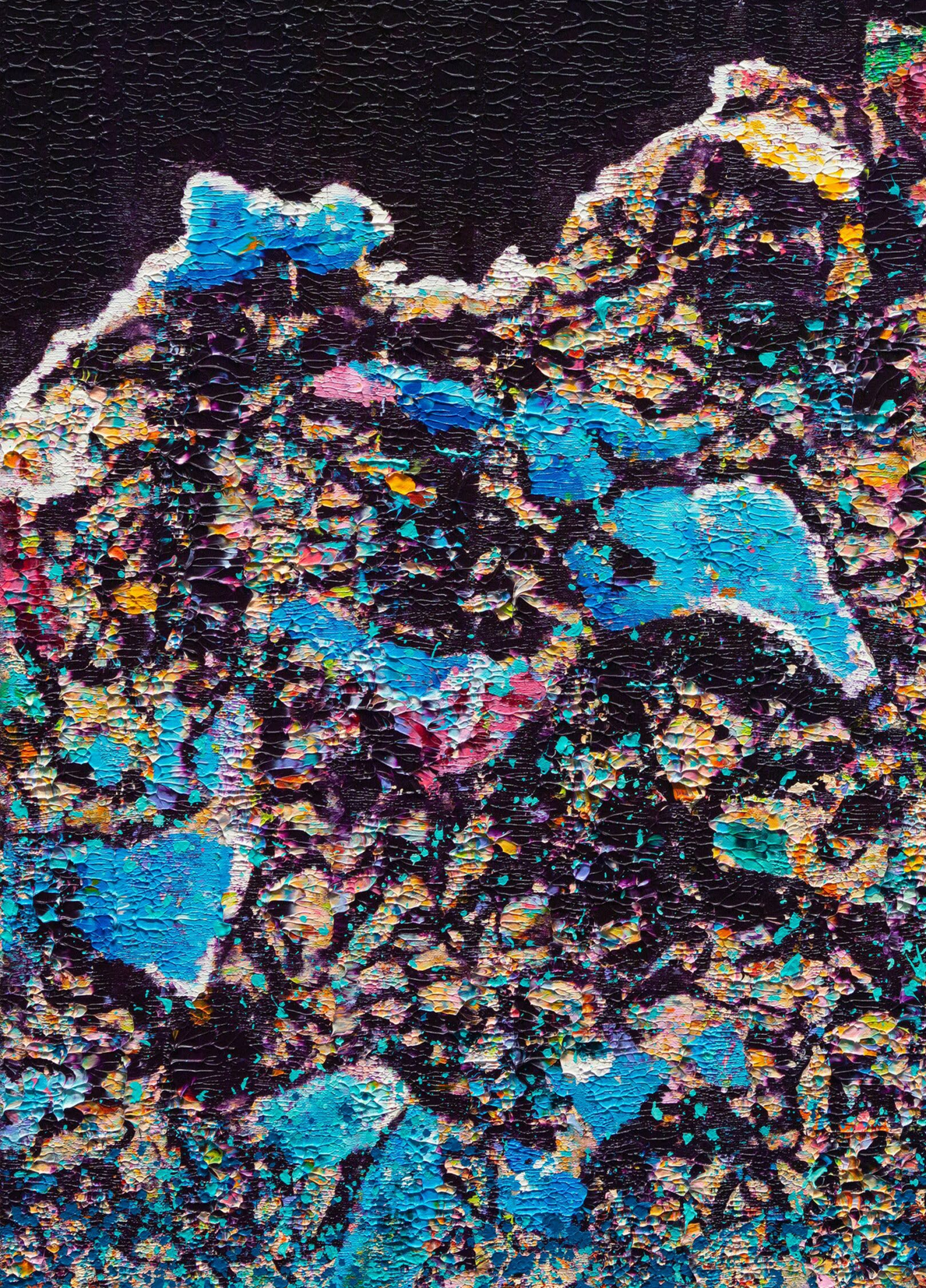
HAUSER & WIRTH

ZENG FANZHI

5 NOV 2026 – 23 JAN 2027
NEW YORK, 22ND STREET



To see mountains as mountains; to see mountains not as mountains; to see mountains still as mountains. This Zen motto encapsulates my journey of exploration in painting, starting from phenomena, through questioning, negation, inquiries and finally back to the truthful.

ZENG FANZHI



Above: Untitled, 2024, oil on canvas, 8 panels, overall: 300 × 600 cm / 118 ⅛ × 236 ¼ in
© 2026 Zeng Fanzhi. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Next: Untitled (detail), 2025, oil on canvas, 180 × 270 cm / 70 ⅞ × 106 ¼ in
© 2026 Zeng Fanzhi. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth



NO SECRETS

RICHARD SHIFF

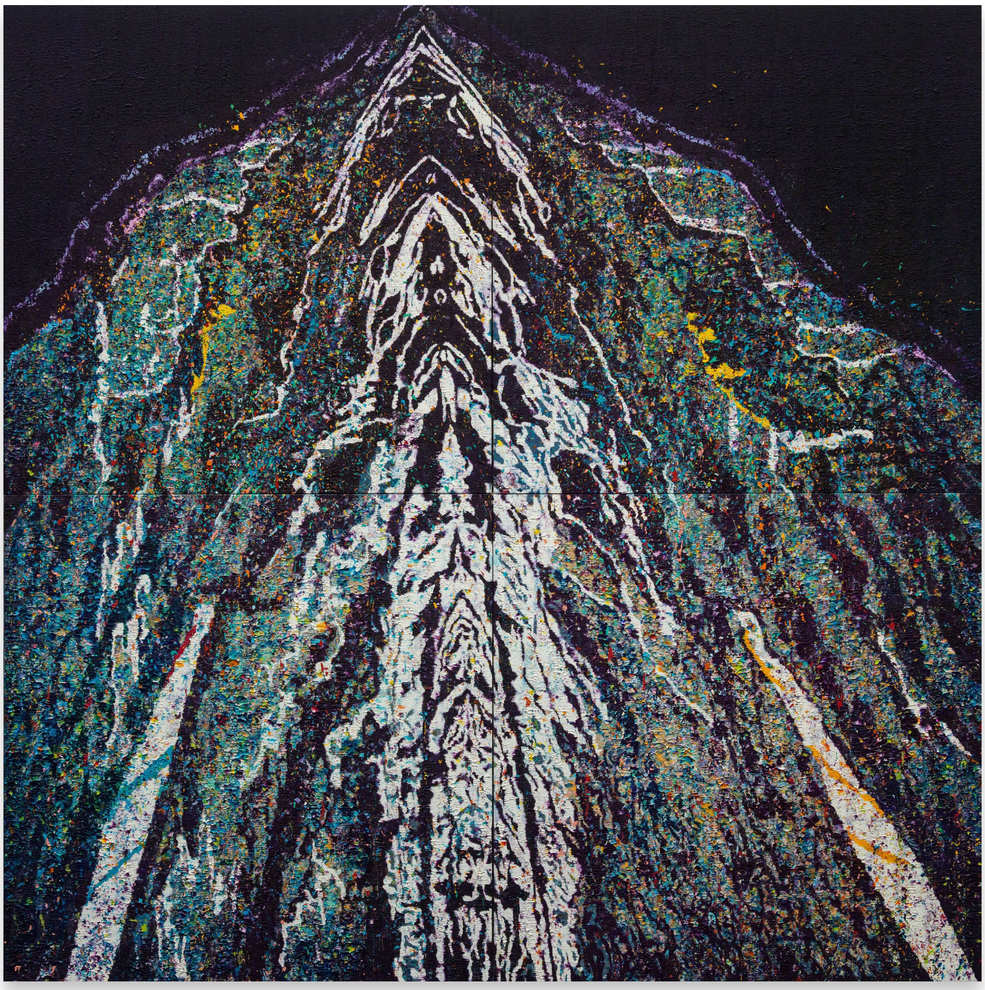
In Shanghai, January 2024, I visited the exhibition *Zeng Fanzhi: Old and New (Paintings 1988-2023)*. Newest were a number of distinctively textured paintings, projecting vibrant effects of reflected light and color. Zeng tentatively associated these works with the optics of sparkling. I viewed a different manifestation of this mode of painting three months later at the Misericordia in Venice, a cavernous sixteenth-century building. Using cut-outs in partition walls, Tadao Ando adapted the space to render Zeng's large paintings visible both close-up and from a substantial distance. To me, Ando's organization of multiple perspectives evoked the present electronic environment, in which outsized digital displays compete with cell phone miniaturization. Contemporary digitization is so flexible that imagery loses all sense of inherent scale. Yet the Venice installation demonstrated that Zeng's paintings retain their material specificity and scale through every perspectival transformation. They seem "digital" only in relation to an additive structure of many small elements, extended over multi-paneled canvases of grand dimensions. The sparkling surfaces of these works have an arresting impact, whether near or far, deriving from the tiniest gradients of reflected illumination.

Zeng's new paintings are so alive that I sometimes think of them as effervescent, like the sparkling water we drink. The sparkle *in* water (as opposed to *on* water) is not only seen but felt. Effervescence releases energy. The enveloping scale of Zeng's art induces a feeling of sensory immersion in atmospheric light, or in water, or in earth-like, rock-like geological formations. Light, water, and earth live in the recent paintings, like

elemental forces continuing to evolve. Little holds still in Zeng's stilled pictorial constructions. An untitled painting of horizontal format is divided diagonally, roughly in half, with a moraine of multicolored rock-like forms at the base and a very dark violet area above, relatively empty of incident. But the dark area, which connotes atmosphere or even a void in space, has its own sparkle and glint, the result of the fine network of textured marks continuing throughout this area of the canvas. The entire surface is energized.

Zeng resists settling on a designation for the recent works. Critics have associated their qualities with European pointillism, yet Zeng's idiosyncratically varied marks hardly resemble the regularizing facture of Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, or Henri-Edmond Cross. In my view, the descriptive characterization "sparkling" approximates the luminosity that Zeng has been achieving. As either verb or noun, "sparkle" connotes not only sun on water but everything from the complex glint of a finely cut gemstone to the grandest displays of constellations and planets in the night sky. At times, the planets appear as sparks, transient flashes of illumination. On Earth, a flintstone sparks, ever so briefly, while the sparkling, as a phenomenon of light, seems independent of the materiality of the stone. Like color, we experience sparkling as a quality or attribute of something other than itself. Lustrous effects become properties of images as they are seen, not of substances as they exist. Yet such optical qualities, however superficial, contribute a certain substantiality to surfaces, analogous to the energy of effervescence.

A question must follow: Do Zeng's new paintings present an *image* of optical sparkling? Or do they simply sparkle? The deeper issue here pertains to



distinguishing images from reality. In what sense is an image real? Is reality itself accessible only as a sequence of sensory images? The problem has a long history in speculative thought, with numerous notable contributors to its paradoxical essence. Some statements leave me so deeply in doubt that I wonder whether the propositions should have been ventured. Ovid observed that “an image is more than it appears,” despite images being nothing but appearance. Diane Arbus referred to a photograph as “a secret about a secret, the more it tells you the less you know.”

Both statements, although confounding, have obvious validity. An image is more than it appears because an image, as an evocative representation, initiates endless interpretative possibilities. Each act of interpretation furthers speculation in several additional directions; we quickly realize

---

Untitled, 2025, oil on canvas, 4 panels, overall: 300 x 300 cm / 118 ⅛ x 118 ⅛ in
© 2026 Zeng Fanzhi. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

that while interpretation leads to a conditional state of knowing, inklings of the residual unknown continue to affect our consciousness. What we remain certain of knowing (if anything) seems like a diminishing fraction of the sum of what we might potentially know. Certainty breeds uncertainty. The matter-of-fact quality of a photograph instills suspicion that there are secrets we would never have imagined existing until we saw the photograph. Every image solicits interpretation—but to what end? As Arbus said, “the more it tells you, the less you know.” We may nevertheless learn more from images than from reality itself. Images are like transparent screens, forever revealing other images as alternative paths to discovery. Reality remains stubbornly opaque.

A photograph can be adjusted to look this way or that by the operator of a camera or by a process of printing. A painting, however, is a thoroughly fabricated image from the ground up. Its materiality is no sleight-of-hand projection but lies open to sight on a hand-rendered surface. I wonder whether the accentuated material factor in Zeng’s constructions introduces a special kind of knowledge. At times, his activated light, a product of texture, becomes a transparent mask, seeming to hover in front of the painted surface that generates it, as if it were reflecting back on its material source to expose its secrets. For want of a better strategy, I’ll explore this possibility through an anecdote.

In Shanghai and Venice, while viewing the results of Zeng’s new mode of painting, I asked the artist how he handled his materials to create such distinctive effects. I had my own thoughts about how a palette knife or some kind of impressing device (like a cylindrical rod) might produce the slightly concave markings, perhaps in a single

action of pressing the viscous paint down and pulling it up, leaving raised edges. Although many of the constitutive marks are themselves multicolored, I fantasized that the units of paint operated like miniature conical prisms, generating not only luminous sparkle but rainbows of spectral hues. Because Zeng's marks are inverted facets, it seemed to me that the paint texture itself, regardless of color, could create this unusual luminosity; the little depressions would catch ambient light, adjusting the chromatic values by reflection and refraction.

The paintings stimulated my professional curiosity. I wanted to know at least some of their secrets. On several past occasions, Zeng recorded the progress of a work from blank canvas to completion. He nevertheless seemed resolved not to reveal his new technical process. In Shanghai, as if to compensate, he opened his cell phone and showed me a brief video fragment from the beginning of a De Beers promotion for the company's diamonds. In its entirety, the video compares flashes of light reflected from water to the light reflected and refracted from cut stone. The advertisement, titled "De Beers presents Water," deploys both moving images and animated passages of stills to market its line of sensory luxury. But to me, this 18-second video recalled an argument advanced by theorist David Campany, that cinema "was not just the invention of the moving image, it was also the invention of the stillness of photography." In other words, it required cinema to cause still photography to appear truly still. I wonder whether Zeng's new manner of painting might affect conventional practices similarly. As a product of gesture, a conventional painting projects a degree of movement; we sense empathetically the hand that once directed the brush. Yet, representations

The enveloping scale of Zeng's art induces a feeling of sensory immersion in atmospheric light, or in water, or in earth-like, rock-like geological formations. Light, water, and earth live in the recent paintings, like elemental forces continuing to evolve.

RICHARD SHIFF

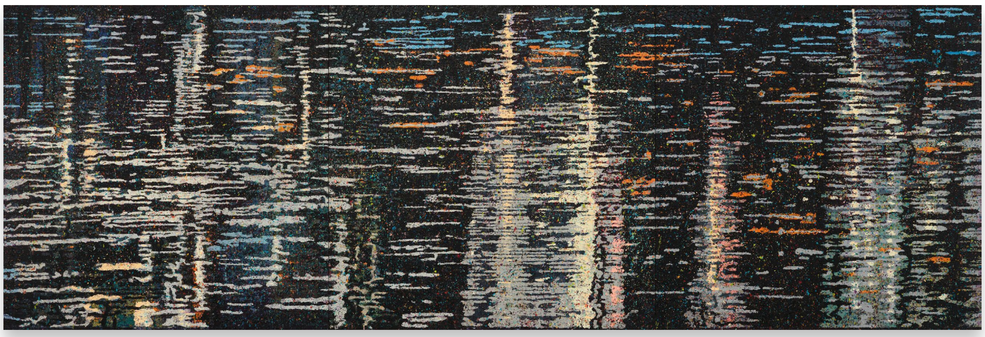


Untitled, 2025, oil on canvas, 180 × 270 cm / 70 ⅞ × 106 ¼ in © 2026 Zeng Fanzhi. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

in both Eastern and Western styles might seem utterly still if viewed beside Zeng's presentation of comparable themes. Though his new works clearly contribute to the lineage of modern and contemporary painting, they relate just as well to the moving image of light on water featured in the De Beers video.

I've mulled over Zeng's pseudo-explanatory response to my inquiry about his painterly technique—his refusal to elaborate, followed by the offer of a video surrogate. I accept this sideways gesture as a master's mode of teaching. If Zeng is teaching, what am I learning?

We continually perceive images, to be processed mentally. Images are memorable visual sensations, whether originating in the environment of real events or in the musings of the psyche. To know an image as an image is to know something about it, usually *of what* it is the image. This factor of identification renders an image memorable, that is, classifiable in relation to all things classifiable. An unmemorable image is something less than a true image: for example, an optical sensation that finds neither adequate description nor a fixed place in the narrative of a life, a perception about which the perceiver remains uncertain what has in fact occurred. Zeng's recent paintings usually have readily identifiable representational subjects, such as celebrated works of art from both Eastern and Western traditions, ripples and eddies in water, clusters of rock, and trees with picturesque branching. Such motifs are shared among the world's image-makers. So, Zeng's versions ought to be classifiable and memorable as variations of



the known. At least in a general way, we already know these images.

Think of the situation a bit differently. The readily identifiable representational content of Zeng's paintings renders their classification so unchallenging as to be forgettable. The presence of a familiar motif in a work of art opens it to becoming something both less and more of an image. A representational type that is easy to remember (a Vanitas still life with a skull, a mountain pinnacle) is also easy to forget because its character is generic. When Zeng uses his new technique to represent a Vanitas or a Madonna or rippled water or rocky terrain, I'm induced to ignore the motif, the nameable "image." I perceive instead the specific luminosity of the surface as it projects itself forward. I feel as if I'm *seeing*, even though my vision is not settling on a scene or object. I don't transfer my sensation of the light to the recognition of a classifiable image. Classification would dim the light.

If I see no more than sparkling, glistening or shining, I see less than a fixed image because I fail to identify what it is that bears this luminosity. Yet I see more than a mere image because—as C. S. Peirce or John Dewey might say—I have an experience, *tout court*. A painting (or any other constructed image) is designed to focus attention, removing itself from the flow of happenstance events. Such removal or bracketing encourages

---

Above: Untitled, 2025-2026, oil on canvas, 3 panels, overall: 220 × 660 cm / 86 ⅝ × 259 ⅞ in
© 2026 Zeng Fanzhi. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Next: Untitled (detail), 2026, oil on canvas, 2 panels, overall: 220 × 440 cm / 86 ⅝ × 173 ¼ in
© 2026 Zeng Fanzhi. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth





perceiving no more than what is there, just the fact of it. Yet what is there must connect, like a deadpan but evocative Arbus photograph, to all the world's secrets. Except when it doesn't connect. Except when it confines itself to the sensory—glowing, shining, sparkling.

Zeng shatters the bond between representation and image, allowing a representation to, as it were, revert to a phenomenon better understood as something other than a common image; it becomes an *ur*-image or an image-zero-degree or an image-in-the-making, with its light caught in the act of finding its proper form. When Zeng refused to explain his process to me and instead showed me a video of sparkling (of only two seconds duration), he may have been suggesting that I continue looking, just looking, without any ulterior aim—without looking to uncover a secret.

If all images are fictive in the sense that we construct whatever they may mean—and in the process, provide them with their secrets—then an image that remains in a sensory state, outside the web of interpretation, must constitute the non-fictive, that is, the Real. In Zeng's art, we

---

Above: Untitled, 2025, oil on canvas, 2 panels, overall: 220 × 440 cm / 86 ⅝ × 173 ¼ in
© 2026 Zeng Fanzhi. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Next: Artist working in the studio © 2026 Zeng Fanzhi



experience Reality. Yes, but the experience cannot be as absolute as my summary statement implies.

Let's say that in Zeng's art, we experience an image for which the Reality component is dramatically increased, and the Fictive component is dramatically diminished. The Real and the Fictive vary in relation to each other by degree. Ordered by convention, guided by habit, instructed by culturally ingrained patterns of thought, I live like others in a world of the Fictive. As an exceptional experience, Zeng's art confronts me, shocks me, with its Reality. His images do not refer elsewhere but are what they are. They have no secrets.

Dr. Richard Shiff is the Effie Marie Cain Regents Chair in Art at The University of Texas at Austin. An internationally recognized scholar and critical theorist, his scholarly interests range broadly across the field of modern and contemporary art and theory.