



ZENG JIANYONG (b. 1971)

Spare Time 16

Signed and dated lower right.

ink and watercolor on handmade paper

35 1/2 x 28 3/4 in. (36 3/4 x 30 x 2 3/4 in.)

90.17 x 73.03 cm (93.35 x 76.2 x 6.99 cm)

2007

CNLS2603

Jianyong Zeng was born in 1971 in Chengdu, in the Sichuan Province of China. He originally trained as a illustrator for children's books, completing several for Warner Book Publications before choosing to focus on his own paintings.

Zeng has a unique style and subject matter, both of which he exploits to their fullest potential in his Header Series. This group of paintings depicts children with disproportionately large heads and wide eyes. They stare out from the canvas with expressions that suggest a combination of innocence and anxiety. One is reminded of the travails of childhood and of the difficulty children face in learning to navigate a world that operates beyond their understanding and without their consent.

These portraits also have a more particular meaning. The term Header, refers to the title that is granted to the highest-achieving children in each class at school. To be a Header is a coveted position and parents often pressure their children into working extraordinarily hard to win this title. Zeng seems to imply that although Headers enjoy a certain level of prestige, they are often envied by their classmates, who taunt and bully them. In the paintings, the children's frightened eyes and sprawling red marks, suggestive of physical abuse, attest to the realities they face.

Zeng's interest in this subject arose from the very personal experience of watching his young son attend school. As a result of this close encounter, Zeng developed a sense of sympathy and compassion for these youth who spend their time seeking to appease their parents, rather than enjoying a carefree childhood. In spite of the pressures they face, however, the children in his paintings still retain a measure of childhood innocence that will not be overcome. The Header Series is compelling because it captures this tension of childhood by creating portraits that are intimate and very honest.

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