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Memories, Dreams and Refractions

by HELEN NOAKES · in [FEATURES](#), [PAINTINGS](#), [REVIEWS](#)

Some of us look at our microchip-run world as a mixed blessing, wondering if social networks, which keep us “talking” but at a distance, and cyber relationships, which permit “contact” both mundane and most intimate, will destroy any real human interaction—the face to face, hand to heart exchanges of the old-fashioned variety.

If we spend almost every waking minute cell phone to ear, text messaging as we walk, tapping away at our computers in cafes, do we drown out the rich universe of ideas and images, the world of questions and answers that lies within? Do we stop seeing what goes on around us, noticing who is walking past or towards us?

If you, like me, wonder about such things then [Zhong Biao](#), the Chinese artist whose work was recently shown at Frey Norris Gallery in San Francisco, will dispel your concerns.

Zhong Biao was born in 1968, in Chongqing, Sichuan Province, China. An Associate Professor at The Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, he made his American debut at a solo exhibition at Frey Norris, San Francisco, and has had solo shows world-wide. He is a graduate of the Department of Oil Painting of the Zhejiang Academy of Arts, now the China Academy of Fine Arts.

This explains the manner in which he uses acrylics, applying the pigment to his canvases in layers, adding nuance and substructure that gives the paintings a feel of traditional oils. His technique imbues his work with a luminous depth.

Every artist, with the exception of the painters in the caves of Lascaux and their contemporaries, stands on the techniques of his or her predecessors, evolving a chosen medium into a new vernacular. And while Biao's vision is unique, his style is evocative of masters such as Breugel, Vermeer, Caravaggio and others.

ON THE HORIZON

WANT TO STAY UPDATED?



In some of his earlier work, he pays homage to masters whose iconic figures he incorporates into his work. The pieces are deftly executed, and the homage made with humor and grace.

Biao works from photographs, juxtaposing realism with a cacophony of laid on brushstrokes. The result is as logical and as baffling as the incongruity of dreams. He plays past against present, tugging at shadow memories and universal themes of wonder, loss, hope and the ever-present human need to see the future. His deft interplay of the real and the surreal compels a longer look and evokes feelings ranging from humor to discomfort.

All of Biao's work is thought-provoking, some of it disturbing, as in *Times To Come*, where a small boy crawls towards an ominous jagged "landscape".

Common to Biao's theme is floating. The realistically portrayed figures float on, over, around or into his recurring multicolored explosions of ordered chaos. There is a sense of the unfinished or, more precisely, the almost finished, the almost there, so common to dreams and germinating ideas.

Mr. Biao, understandably, expresses a preference that his work not be over explained. The fact is that although his art requires no words, it elicits them.

He is a story teller whose medium is paint and whose language is art. Like all good story tellers he creates possibilities of interpretation and conjures emotional as well as cerebral responses.



Blank Pages (2011) Zhong Biao

Image courtesy of the artist and Frey Norris Contemporary & Modern.

Arguably, all art speaks to the subconscious. Biao's work consciously compels a dive into those dream-image depths and re-interprets archetypal images to conform to our current perspective—our new, emerging language, driven by the devices which I mentioned at the beginning—devices which both unite and separate us.

Blank Pages, a large canvas that dominated the show, is a bird's-eye view of two children—or possibly two views of the same child—who look like little boys with shaved heads, wearing saffron robes, barefooted, gazing down intently on books with blank pages. The child in the foreground is the larger of the two. Overlaid along the back of his skull is the now familiar mass of chaos Biao incorporates into his work. It seems to rise from the boy's mind, this swath of multicolored brush strokes that flows across the canvas, the colors subtle and energetically applied.

One wonders if it's chaos emanating from the mind of this child. Does the artist intend for the figure to look like a Buddhist acolyte? And is the child's tugging at a corner of the last page of the book, an attempt to look into the future, which seems to be another blank page?

Perplexing, too, is the meticulously rendered vulture flying between the children. Its wings magnificently hide what we know to be a hunched and less than magnificent torso. We know what vultures do. Introducing this carrion bird between two children is

an unexpected twist, a sly little quip on what lies ahead.

To the left of the boy in the foreground is a black, abstract outline reminiscent of the children's pose. At the end of the extended left "arm" a book disappears into grey vapor, its pages, too, are blank.

As in so many of the paintings in this show, there is a sense of waiting for something that will come, or will erupt.

Fragmented shows a young woman reclining on a russet pillow, supported by an explosion of fiery and dark splinters. A lethal snowfall of round pebble-like dots punctuates the jagged forms. Beneath this floating mass of menace, a pale-suited man runs on nothing into a gathering dark cloud-like form which emerges out of nowhere. The book in this painting has blank pages – a recurring theme.



Fragmented (2011) Zhong Biao
Image courtesy of the artist and Frey Norris Contemporary & Modern.

In this show, women are depicted on three canvases, and in each one they dominate and control the paintings. They are powerful, whether walking away, as in *Home is Where*, nude and sprawled seductively in the foreground, as in *Walking on Sunshine*, or dreaming, as in *Fragmented*.

There is a sense that their presence is essential – that the world in the canvas could not

exist without them. Intriguing is the fact that their faces are either non-existent (*Walking on Sunshine*), turned away (*Home is Where*), or half-hidden (*Fragmented*). On one level this renders the female as archetype, on another, as a device.

Biao’s is the art of the now, the yesterday, and the unknowable tomorrow, gliding around each other, colliding, merging and emerging.

In the artist’s own words, “I have only one dream, that the people created under my brushstrokes will bring along this world of confusion, and many years later, visit the people of the future on my behalf.”

Mr. Zhong Biao is an artist to be watched. I look forward to the next chapter of the story he has to paint.

A special thanks to Melissa Bernabei, and her staff at the Frey Norris gallery, who so generously supplied me with information and materials for this article.

Frey Norris Contemporary & Modern is at 161 Jesse Street, San Francisco, CA.

To read more essays by Helen Noakes, see her column, “**Waking Point**” at *The Weekly Hubris*.

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