

VILLEPIN

# THE LOSS OF HUMAN FACE?

June - November 2022

Throughout art history, from the works of Rembrandt to Modigliani, Van Gogh and Freud, the human face has long been both a source of attraction and repulsion, an expression of humanity and fraternity but also portrayed with primitive violence and savagery. Across all its figurative and abstract representations, the portrait has been used as a mirror to the world.

**The Loss of Human Face?** will feature masterpieces by **Francis Bacon** in dialogue with contemporary artists **Adrian Ghenie**, **Zeng Fanzhi**, **George Condo**, and **Yukimasa Ida**.

Igniting a conversation between the past and the present, the exhibition explores the significance of human faces as seen through these five artists. Showcasing twenty major works in a transformed gallery space, visitors will be confronted with the bold canvases of these artists displayed in dialogue with each other. As one of the most influential portrait painters of the early 20th century, Francis Bacon sets the scene for the exhibition as his raw and unsettling canvases distort his subject's faces while unveiling their inner psychologies. Ghenie's portraits are likewise contorted in gestural brushstrokes to reexamine our collective history and memory, while works from Zeng's 'Mask' series depict the social tensions and anxieties the artist observed in modern China. Conversely, Condo's characters are rendered flat on the picture plane in grotesque and whimsical configurations, and Ida's thickly painted canvases continue the historic medium with a futurist perspective. This exhibition will also be the first presentation of Ida's work in Hong Kong.

All these artists bring their contribution to the global understanding of what humanity means. Through their diversity and varied backgrounds, they reveal the intense rage, anxiety, passion, and ambition of our current time through their own unique visions.

# FRANCIS BACON

Renowned for his vehement and often disturbing imagery, the Irish-born British figurative painter is revered as one of the giants in the contemporary era, having conjured up some of the most iconic images depicting agonised humanity in the post-WWII period. Bacon steadfastly rejected various attempts to classify his work, instead describing himself as a “post-traditional painter”, one who rendered “the brutality of fact”.

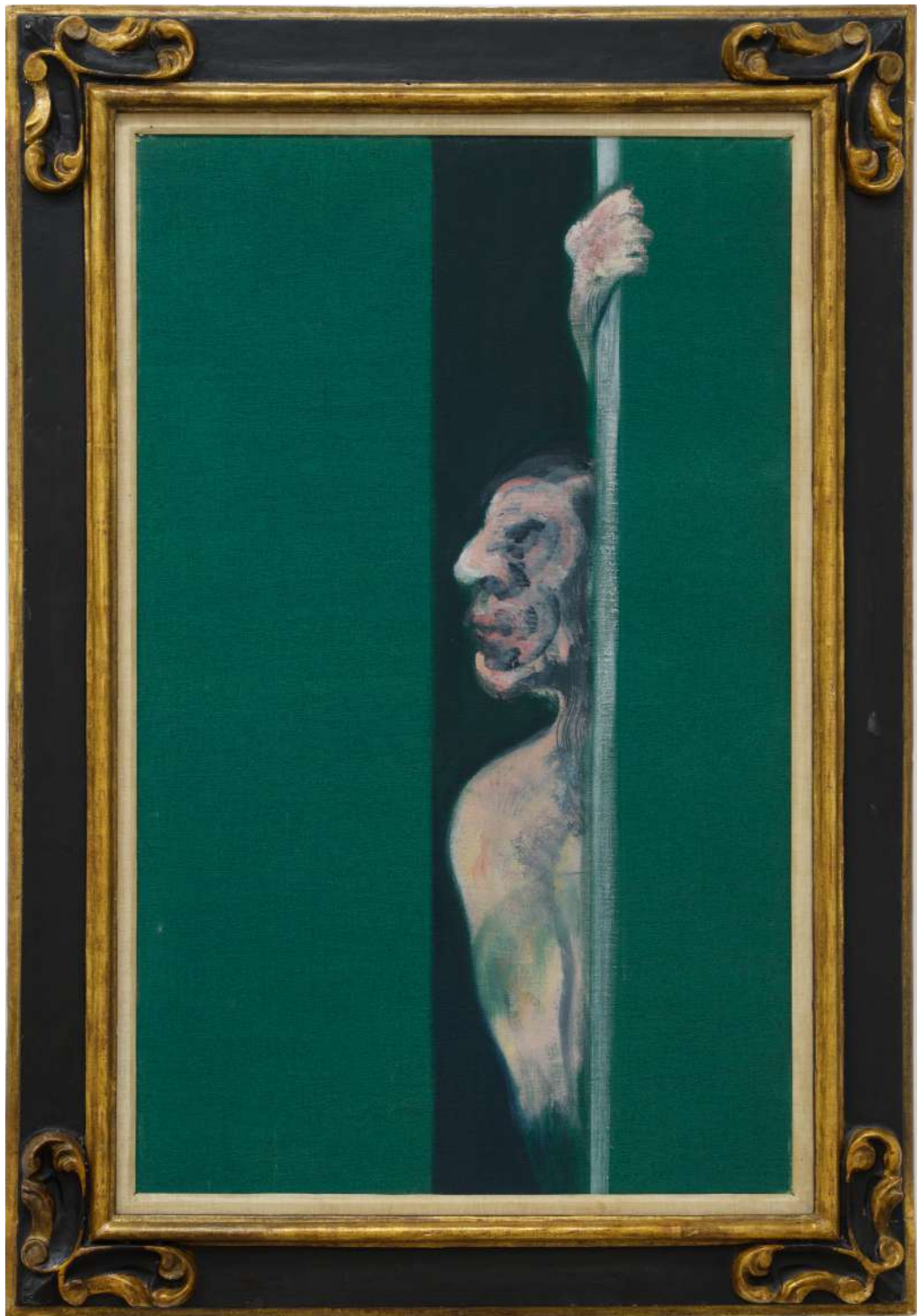
Drawing inspirations from cinema, photography, and not least the Old Masters, he created an idiosyncratic style combining the grotesque and the ethereal, thereby symbolising human suffering since time immemorial. Entirely self-taught, Bacon did not begin to paint in earnest until his late 20s, having spent years on finding subject-matters capable of sustaining his interest. It would appear that much of his art was born out of coincidence and serendipity: a chance viewing of the Soviet cinema pioneer Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) in Berlin in 1927, followed by the casual acquisition of a hand-coloured book illustrating oral diseases in Paris in 1935, would prove to be the sowed seed that reaped a hundredfold. Bacon employed such an extensive range of materials as paint, pastel, pigment, aerosol, fixative, turpentine, dust, sand, roller sponges, cotton wool, and even cut-off ends of corduroy to add depth and volume to his paintings.



Francis Bacon  
*Three Studies for a Portrait of John Edwards, 1984*  
Oil on canvas  
101.6 x 63.5 cm



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Photo: John Edwards



Francis Bacon  
*Man with arm raised*, 1960  
Oil on canvas  
101.6 x 63.5 cm

An apparently naked, gnarly-looking human being extends and bends his left arm around the door frame, while his thickly impastoed face suggests captured motion. Peeking from behind the door, the figure is largely hidden, hence the lurking mystery. It remains restricted by the claustrophobic interior, whereas the doorway symbolises the portal to the abyss. Separated from any relatable scene, the figure is implicitly cut off from the communal environment of shared experience, alluding to the existential state of individuals inhabiting isolated microcosms, indeed what Bacon called the “brutality of fact” or “violence of the real”.

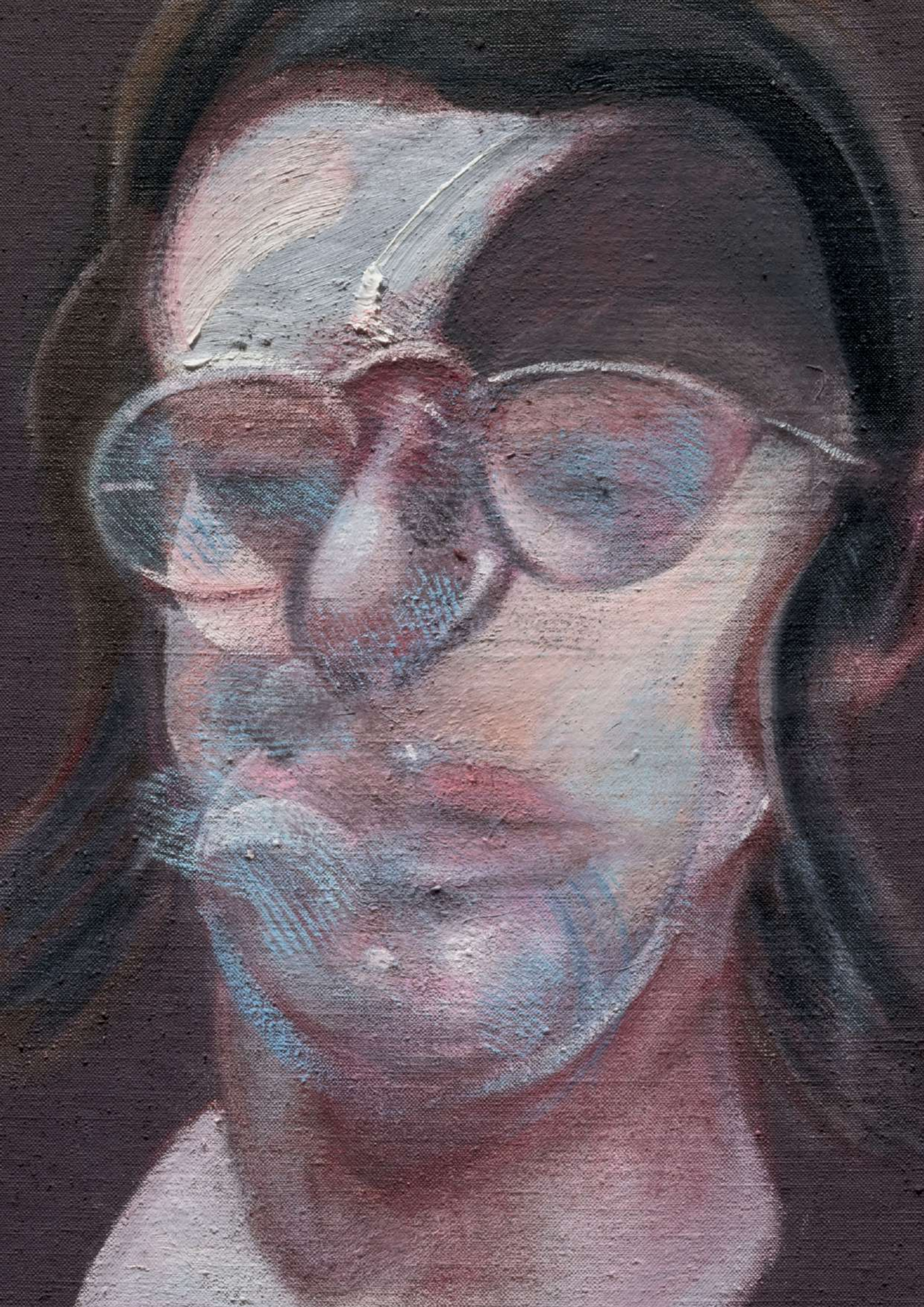


In this diptych, representation is deconstructed to the point that facial features become almost indistinguishable, and individual aspects of the subject are depicted with an intensity not often seen in real life. The face becomes a portal as much as a mirror, evoking the visual amalgamation of two viewpoints, amplified by Barker's glasses. The two canvases echo with each other and yet maintain their individual difference, plunging the viewer into a spontaneous puzzle of spot the difference.



Francis Bacon  
*Two Studies for Portrait of Clive Barker, 1978*  
Oil on canvas  
35.6 x 30.5 cm





# ADRIAN GHENIE

Born in Baia Mare, Romania, and now based in Berlin, Germany, the Adrian Ghenie is a graduate from the Art and Design University of Cluj-Napoca. Growing up under the iron-fist rule of communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, Ghenie would frequently portray macabre scenery and defaced figures, via which to investigate the violent aspects of European history.

He is well-known for his depictions of 20th century figures, particularly strongmen associated with genocide and mass suffering, in gnawed and slashed, blurred and speckled forms. Ghenie draws on a sense of national identity in his work to bridge the gap between the abstract and the figurative, while continuing to explore the possibilities of the media at his disposal, merging major themes and narratives of classical and contemporary painting. His reinterpretation of painting by analogy and idiosyncrasy, whereby the indifference between the portrait and the surface remains constant, has been compared to Francis Bacon. Ghenie often isolates the subject-matter against a neutral backdrop and limit his brushstrokes to within the figure's profile, at times from a classical perspective, other times tilting the background by working on the surface, to the extent that it becomes distinguishable from the foreground. Rather than traditional tools, Ghenie paints primarily with palette knives and stencils.



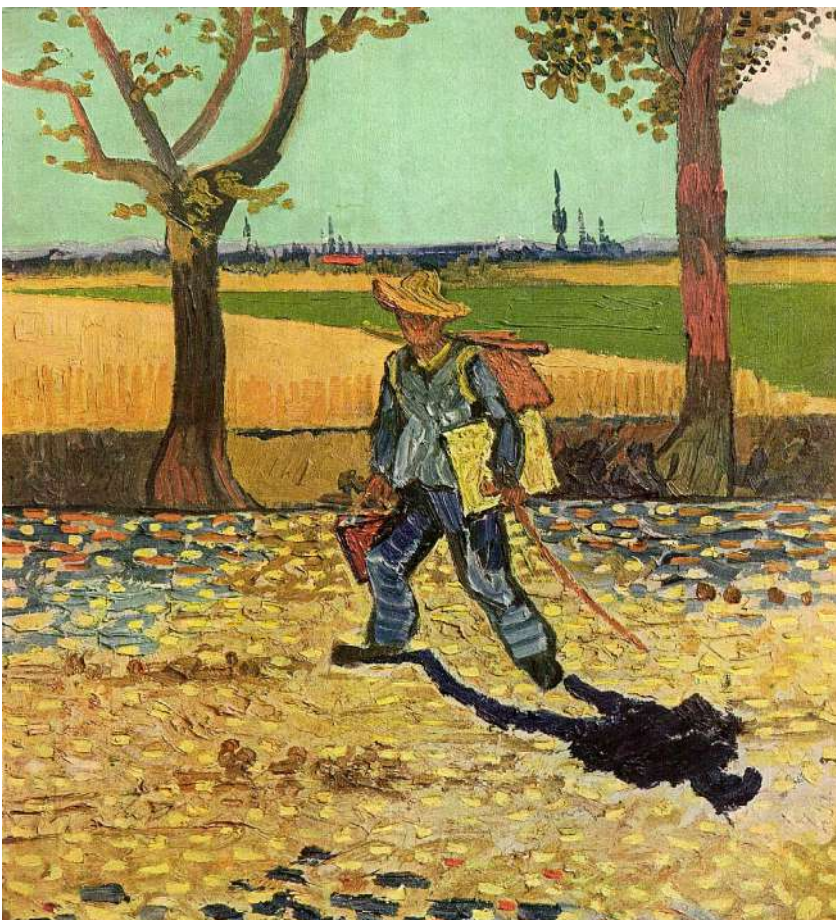


Adrian Ghenie  
*On the Road to Tarascon 2*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
210 x 160 cm

**“I AM INTERESTED IN HISTORY THAT IS LINKED TO THE HUMAN FIGURE...” A CERTAIN TYPE OF DECONSTRUCTION INTERESTS ME, THE SAME WAY IT INTERESTED PABLO PICASSO AND FRANCIS BACON.”**

On the Road to Tarascon 2 (2013) is his pious tribute to Vincent van Gogh, who not only inspired but also shaped his artistic style. Ghenie’s eponymous series is based on the Dutch master’s lost self-portrait *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon* (1888), a forlorn painting denounced as “degenerate art” and seized by the Nazis in the 1930s, as the Führer attempted to purge modern art from Germany.

The influence of both van Gogh and Bacon looms large in this canvas. Fascinated by what he called the “texture of history”, Ghenie peels off the dusty layers of time, filters the original image through his idiosyncratic language, thereby conjuring up a surface of fleeting colours, complex patterns, and illusionary textures.



Van Gogh, *On the Road to Tarascon*, July 1888. Stolen by Nazis; destroyed. (work not exhibited)



Adrian Ghenie  
*Elvis*, 2009  
Oil on canvas  
41 x 31 cm



Zeng Fanzhi in his studio © Ben McMillan

## ZENG FANZHI

Born in Wuhan and now based in Beijing, Zeng is one of the most artistically acclaimed and commercially successful living painters from China. Growing up during the Cultural Revolution, he was fascinated by painting and drawing at an early age, and would go on to attend the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts. A diligent student of both Western and Chinese art histories, Zeng adeptly combines elements of German Expressionism with communist Social Realism, the confluence of which is apparent in the raw corporeality of his Hospital series and Meat series since the 1980s.

His Mask series skilfully juxtaposes antipodes, whether poker faces that conceal versus exaggerated hands that reveal, or the red scarf symbolising collectivism and communality versus the suit representing capitalism and individualism. The existential fatigue of the contemporary experience, as well as the lonely instability amidst rapid modernisation, is expressed in an emotionally direct and intuitively psychological way, in a subtly unsettled mood. Citing Francis Bacon's work as a major source of influence, Zeng is nevertheless much more thorough than his inspiration, making frequent use of life models in his compositions. His artistic focus in recent years has shifted to landscape paintings, as a notion of permanent escape and an attempt to inhabit the uninhabitable.



Zeng Fanzhi  
*Mask Series No. 26, 1995*  
Oil on canvas  
200 x 180 cm

The men's nearly identical masks, almost appearing as the organic epidermis of their faces, have all but failed to conceal their anguish and agony. Unlike many other works in the same series, where the mask succeeds in putting up a defensive shield to hide true emotions asunder and counteract any sense of individualisation, the subjects in this painting are visibly gripped by disturbing emotions, culminating in this impressive work symbolising the spiritual vacuum amidst modernisation at break-neck speed.





**“WITH MASKS, PEOPLE KEEP A CERTAIN DISTANCE FROM EACH OTHER, CLOSING THE PATH OF REALLY KNOWING ANOTHER. WHEN EVERYBODY IS HIDING THEIR TRUE SELVES AND DESIRES, WHAT THEY SHOW TO US IS IN FACT NOTHING BUT A MASK.”**

**– ZENG FANZHI**



Zeng Fanzhi  
*Mask Series No. 4, 1997*  
Oil on canvas  
169 x 199 cm

Zeng Fanzhi, *Mask Series*, 1999, oil on canvas, 149.5 x 129.5 cm





George Condo © Mr Adrian Gaut/Trunk Archive

## GEORGE CONDO

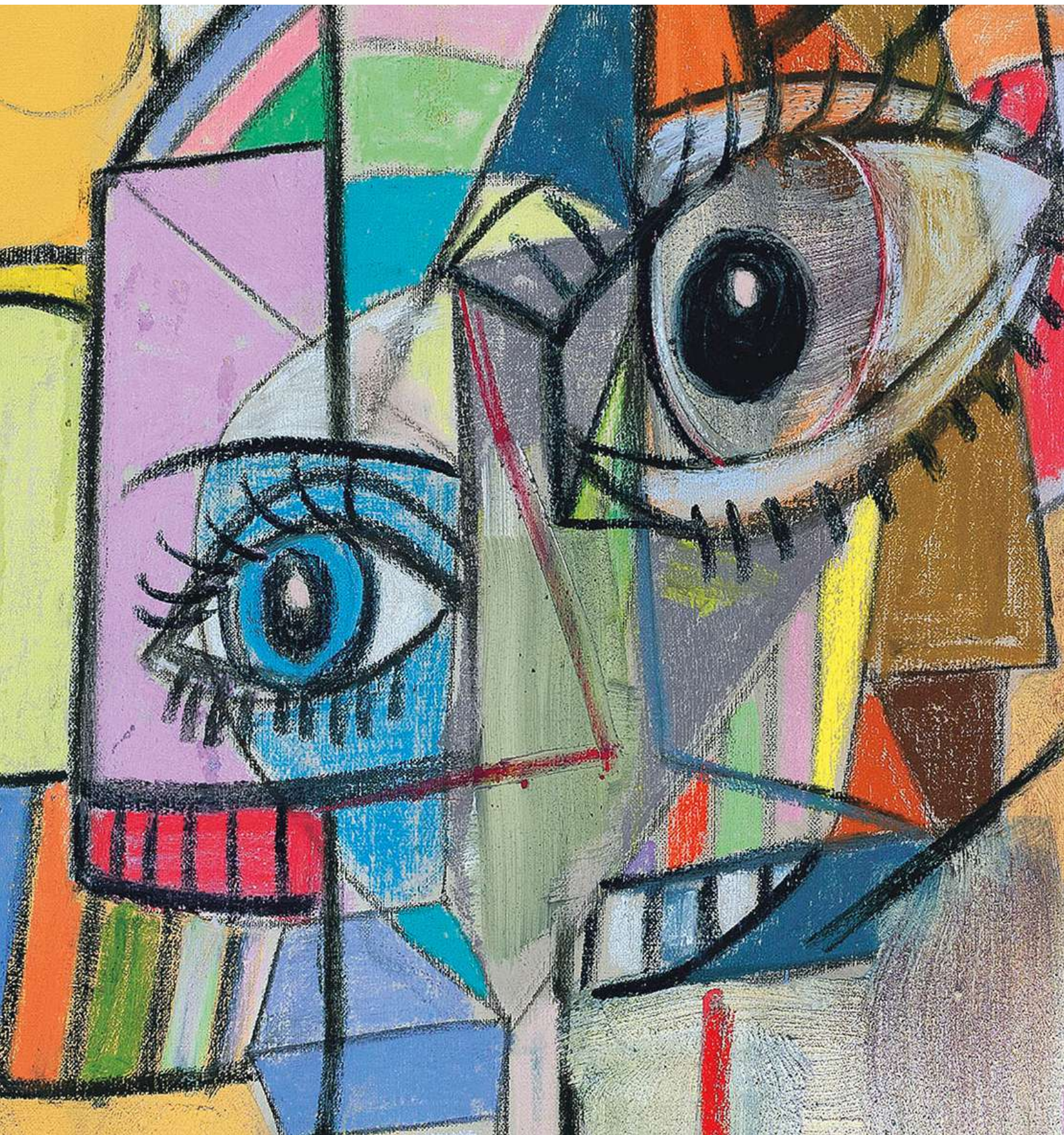
The New-Hampshire born painter, sculptor, printmaker, illustrator, and designer is modern syncretism incarnate. Having received formal academic training in art history and music theory at the University of Massachusetts, he became variously involved in the rock and punk scene in the late 1970s, and met fellow artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, who convinced him to relocate to the Big Apple. In this most American of metropolises, Condo spent nine months working as a diamond duster for Andy Warhol, indeed the only artist he has ever worked for.

Emerging as a budding talent in the East Village art scene in the early 1980s, Condo developed his unique approach to painting, one that merges influences from Cubism, Surrealism, and other 20th century avant garde movements with American pop and cartoon, culminating in what he christened “Artificial Realism” or, in his own words, “the realistic representation of that which is artificial”. Condo’s career blurs the line between fine art and practical design, drawing and painting, as well as figuration and abstraction, as he primarily uses pastel, pencil, charcoal, and acrylic paint on canvas, typically in improvisation. He has over the years been commissioned to create numerous artworks for books and music albums alike.



George Condo  
*Multicolored Portrait*, 2014  
Acrylic, charcoal and pastel on linen  
128.3 x 108 cm

Viewers may instinctively approach this composition through the lens of Pablo Picasso's paintings from the 1930s, notably *Female Bust – Dora Maar* (1938), whereby he elevated Cubism to prismatic heights, but Condo's artistic experiment focuses on the psychological perception of the subject, rather than Picasso's multiple ways of approaching the same figure. On top of depicting an object from different angles, he digs deep to capture the internal, often self-conflicting feelings of the human psyche, thereby furthering the inquisitive dialogue with art history, with Picasso as the source of wisdom and influence.





George Condo  
*The Violinist*, 2019  
Oil and pigment stick on linen  
182.9 x 177.8 cm

# YUKIMASA IDA

Born and raised in the idyllic seaside town of Tottori in southwest Japan, the Millennial painter is perhaps best known as the message-bearer of the Zen-influenced Japanese philosophy of “ichi-go ichi-e”, which originated in the island nation’s elaborate tea ceremony. Literally meaning “a once-in-a-lifetime moment”, the four-character idiom encapsulates the transience of life, and hence the importance of cherishing the unrepeatable nature of a fleeting moment, for it never comes around twice. Ida’s distinctive style has its roots in his hometown of “ocean, mountain, and rivers”, while his artistic outlook was further informed by a horizon-widening trip to the Indian subcontinent, as well as the loss of close friends and family members.

He trained himself to draw quickly, at once disassociating and reappropriating traditional painting techniques. With a spatula or his bare hands, Ida stretches paste on the surface to capture the moment, the ephemeral. In so doing, he intentionally leaves the subject-matter, background, and indeed composition in the limbo between completion and incompleteness. Ida crystallises the moment by distorting forms and figuration, for memory has no form other than fluidity. Exhibiting rich impasto and flurries of vibrant colours, this burgeoning young artist’s paintings are vivid snapshots in time.

Portrait of Yukimasa Ida. Courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim





Yukimasa Ida

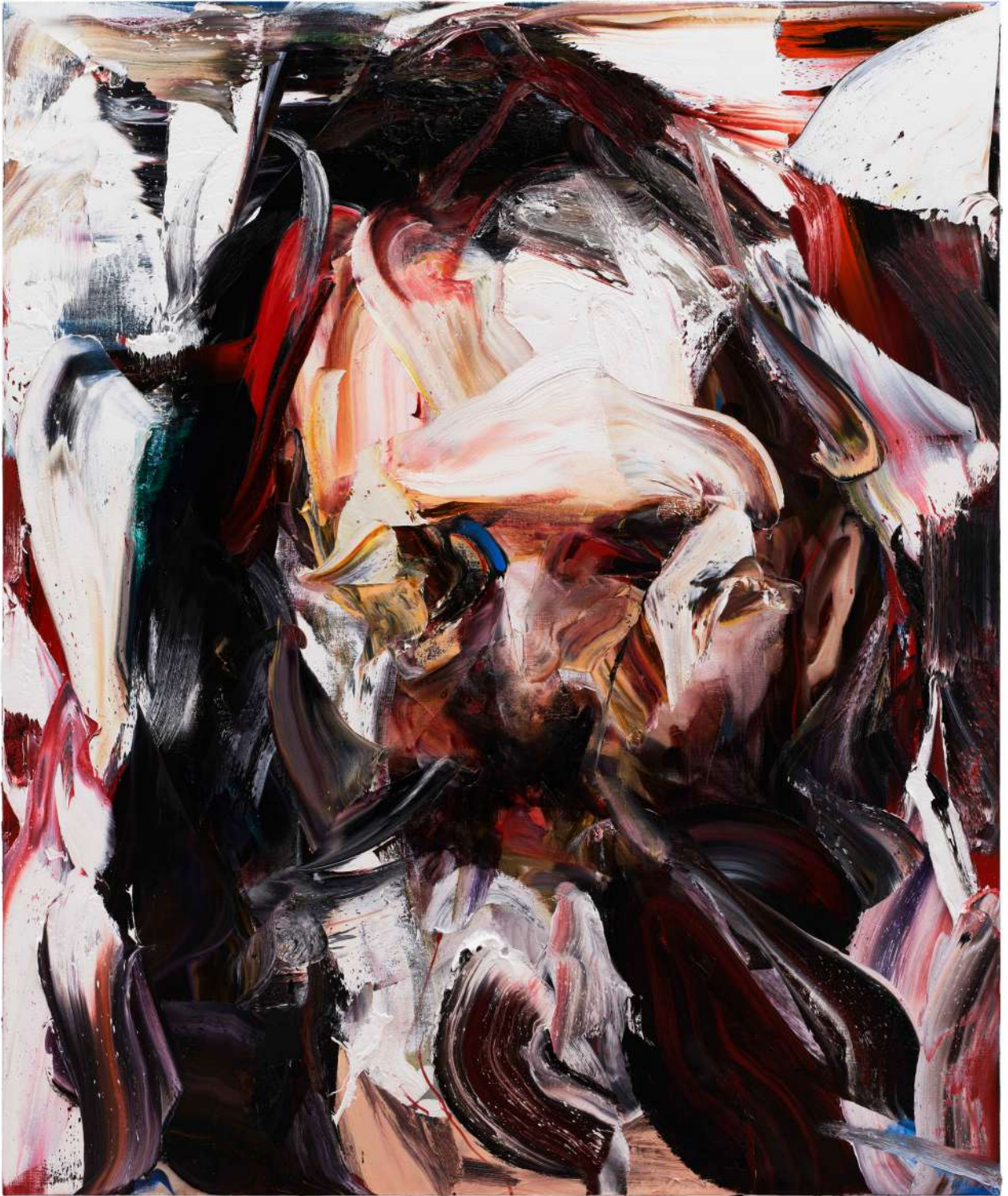
*End of today - 4 16 2022 Study for the scream - , 2022*

Oil on canvas

33.3 x 24.2 cm







Yukimasa Ida  
*Bob*, 2022  
Oil on canvas  
194 x 164 cm



Yukimasa Ida  
*End of today - 3/12/2022 A head - , 2022*  
Oil on canvas  
33.3 x 24.2 cm



Yukimasa Ida  
*End of today - 4/8/2022 Woman -*, 2022  
Oil on canvas  
33.3 x 24.2 cm

# VILLEPIN

## Gallery

53-55 Hollywood Road, Central, Hong Kong

## Opening Hours

Tuesday - Saturday 11:00 - 19:00

Sunday 11:00 - 18:00

[www.villepinart.com](http://www.villepinart.com)

For any enquiries, please email to [info@villepinart.com](mailto:info@villepinart.com)