

# THE DAILY CALIFORNIAN

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## ‘Beyond Confinement’: An Interview with Zheng Chongbin



ZHENG CHONGBIN | COURTESY

BLUE FAY | ARTS REPORTER

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Zheng Chongbin is an artist who can see between light and space.

In an interview with *The Daily Californian*, the installation artist talked about his two upcoming works at the Asian Art Museum: “I Look for the Sky” and “State of Oscillation.” The works have been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but Zheng is optimistic that the project is moving forward and that the nature of his installations may even work well with social distancing practices.

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Technically, the show should have been completed by now, but given the scope of the global public health crisis, the project has been temporarily put on hold. Zheng recognizes that this is a reality every program and institution is facing, but he does not see it as an insuperable barrier to his work.

"Everything is ready," Zheng assured. "In a few weeks, we will start installing."

Zheng is deeply connected to the way art interacts with light — in terms of both materiality and meaning.

"Light became media, and media became the light, in that kind of alternation," Zheng explained. "And what about us? Are we part of that alternation too?"

Zheng positions his audience as the third dimension of his installation. As the light changes throughout the day, so too does the image of the installation, and by extension, the experience of the viewer. Zheng's work is driven by a keen interest in geometry, mathematics and ordered systems — and ways to disrupt them. The first of his upcoming works at the Asian Art Museum is formed by the architecture of the museum itself, but it also creates a uniquely nonsymmetrical space of its own.

"I Look for the Sky" is a site-specific installation suspended in a corridor of the museum. Zheng described how the seven modules that make up the installation come together to create different shapes and patterns and draw from the natural light of the museum.

"I use the carbon tube to build the structures, but there is certain spaces missing, certain spaces suggested," he said. "When you rotate the modular, you view looking at different rotations and you have a different experience looking at the geometry. You won't recognize one side from the other."

Zheng's promise that no single view of "I Look for the Sky" is the same as any other may in fact be what makes the installation a good fit for these strange and harrowing times. When asked if he is concerned about the possibility that restrictions around social gathering might significantly alter museumgoers' abilities to experience the piece, Zheng explained that the nature of the installation might actually lend itself to social distancing.

"(The installation) is a highly suggestive movement, and audiences will be walking and viewing it from different positions," he said. "The piece has generated the kind of suggestion that encourages you to walk through the piece, looking in different directions rather than just staying in one place."

Zheng imagines his installation not only as a movement, but as a conversation, something capable of making suggestions to its viewers and guiding them to explore new facets of its anatomy.

He went on to liken the experience of moving through "I Look for the Sky" to experiencing an outdoor space.

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"It's also same thing, you walk in a garden, especially along a path. In this case, it's open lobbies, but it does generate the kind of experience you want to move around," Zheng said. "That is kind of the unity of the work, and the viewers are actually a flowing kind of elements."

Zheng also explained how viewing "I Look for the Sky" is different from experiencing art in a traditional gallery setting. Normally, the viewer stands in front of a work of art and views it perpendicularly.

"This piece has every face surface, every shape, every angle that you can engage with," he added. "They are all changing in different layers and dimensionalities and in the way you perceive (them). Even going to the second floor on the bridge, you won't see the light, but you will see the anatomy of the piece."

The anatomy of the piece contains chaotic elements, which can be experienced from different levels. The piece contains elements that resemble organic structures — fractals — and geometric shapes. These elements manifest a relationship of order and chaos, especially when viewed from higher levels in the museum.

Zheng describes the piece as something "you walk into." This entrance into a work of art reflects Zheng's larger philosophy about why he makes art — as a way to evolve and go beyond one's own experience.

"With my painting, I'm not really painting pictures," Zheng explained. "I want to see what the painting becomes. It's something of a suggestion."

Zheng's art harnesses the power of suggestion with the ability to extract the viewer from their immediate circumstances in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"You can go beyond what confinement is," Zheng said. "Art is a kind of vehicle."