

# SOLUNA

FINE ART

## Zang Zong-Son Critic Writing by Stuart Shils

I'm looking on my screen (as one often does in the 21<sup>st</sup> century), at a painting by Zong-Son Zang called, *Morning Studio*, a dazzling and quite sophisticated narrative of carefully constructed color shapes, an image that at first pass doesn't necessarily identify itself as subject matter; nor does it need to, nor do I want it to. And yet, because of the compellingly, dynamic visual relationships within its abstract structure, I can't stop looking. Even though I've returned to this painting many times, it still feels fresh as if at first pass. It takes me in and it takes me places.



Zang Zong-Son, *Morning Studio*, 2021, Mixed media on wooden panels in 3 parts, overall: 30 x 90 cm

To speak about how I see and feel painting, my memory returns to a seminal event way back on my timeline that unexpectedly illuminated what being fully present in the rich dimensionality of an immersive moment felt like.

The Moscow Circus came to America when I was a child, the year 1963, and the circus tour that opened in Philadelphia was part of a cold war cultural exchange project. 4,000 of us filled the arena and as the wild array of colorfully costumed performers entered the ring with their gyrations, acrobatics and music, I was completely hypnotized, swept away in a tidal wave of sensory pleasure. But when Valentin Felotov's bears came out to perform, whoa, that really did it, because could anything have been more engagingly captivating than huge bears riding bicycles? Within that moment time stood still and the absolute wonder of it all carried me like when wind takes a sail.

I'm 70 now and looking back on that high water mark of childhood I understand how being riveted within that richly saturated visual and sensory moment set the stage for a decade later. At 18 years old another unexpected doorway opened: the quieter and more private presence of paintings and their aura, that similarly and magically, held and pulled on my eyes within the grip of enchantment, wonder and time.



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I met Zong-Son 10 years ago and we've pursued a long line of ongoing conversation. And her paintings have evolved in a way that early on I couldn't have imagined and while the work is still in motion on its way to where it's going, I feel she has reached a moment where a clarified and authentic voice is coming into focus. Zong-Son is attentively feeding the slow, emergent process of painting and in return painting is carrying her forward into a place that is step by step, hard won and worthy of our attention. And her work, like the triptych above, is in its own way, making a place of visual enchantment.

Zong-Son's paintings are sensuous enticements. Just as poets organize verbal language to offer an experience different than how we typically use words day in and day out, so painters engage us with constructions of color, shape and line that describe and refer to the pleasures of being alive. Color, shape, line and the footprint of the hand /the movement of the brush might be the foundational tools of the trade, but paintings are also, hopefully informed by something unnamable, that for lack of a better word, we might call spirit. And increasingly, Zong-Son's painting is assuming a quality of spirit that is her voice.

The choreographic architecture of her shapes really cooks, and holds us in the grip of time, providing a kind of delight and fanfare for the senses, an intentionally constructed landscape of form, within which we are asked to imaginatively travel.

I began earlier by saying that *Morning Studio* takes me in and takes me places. But now it's up to you, the viewer, it's your turn to pay attention to where and how you feel with these paintings and how they take you and to where. And the way to do that is like when standing on the shore of the sea, remove your beach shoes, dive in and enjoy swimming.



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## About Stuart Shils

Stuart Shils, native of Philadelphia, has painted outside for 31 years and over the past 21 years has had numerous solo shows in New York, Philadelphia, Tel Aviv, Boston, Scottsdale, Richmond, San Francisco and Cork (Ireland).

Critical review and commentary has appeared in newspapers, journals and magazines, including: The New York Times, The New Yorker, The New York Sun, Haaretz, The Jerusalem Post, Art Critical.com, The Boston Globe, The Boston Phoenix, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Irish Times, Art in America, The New Republic, The New Criterion, Art New England, American Artist, The Hudson Review and The Philadelphia Daily News.

Shils has been an annual visiting critic at the Vermont Studio Center for many years, teaches master classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, is also a visiting critic at PAFA, and has lectured widely on painting and drawing. He also conducted the Landscape Marathon at the Jerusalem Studio School in 2004 and 2005, taught painting at the International School in Montecastello, Italy in 2007 and in 2008, taught and painted with the Jerusalem Studio School Summer School in Italy.

