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## Zheng Lu's Reflections on Still Water – exhibition review

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Close-up *Water Dripping* sculpture. Photograph Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

During the artist talk at Sundaram Tagore Gallery (STG) on 16 April, the Chinese sculptor Zheng Lu shared with the public views about his artistic process, inspiration and some of his concerns about contemporary art practice. For instance, the artist mentioned that in contemporary art fairs nowadays one cannot really tell from where an artist is really from just by looking at the work, without reading the labels. The growing influence of Western art makes it hard to spot the nationality and cultural identities of the artists through their work. This loss of identity is a major concern for the artist and in his search for uniqueness he tries to immerse into Chinese traditions. As he said, 'if you are digging on the root of tradition, you will be saved from the current trend.'

Some of you may recall his work at Art Stage Singapore earlier this year. His huge water dripping stainless steel sculpture displayed there can now be seen at STG in Gillman Barracks, together with other pieces from Zheng Lu's *Water Dripping* series. In the artist's view, his sculptures respond dynamically to space instead of just sitting there on a corner, as classical sculptures normally do.

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Chinese Ink Works  
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Lee Kong Chian Gallery

Sculpting Life  
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NUS Museum

Archaeology Library  
01/06/2015 - 31/12/2016  
NUS Museum

NUS Baba House  
01/06/2015 - 31/12/2016  
NUS Museum

Convey  
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Red Dot Design Museum

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**Artist talk @Sundaram Tagore Gallery. Photograph Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.**

The same way poets during the Ming Dynasty learned their trade by studying and transcribing classical poems, Zheng Lu grew up transcribing texts for his father. Coming from a family strongly rooted in literature, Chinese traditional calligraphy was a craft learned early on, and that has clearly influenced his artistic practice. The Beijing-based artist describes his work as 'giving a new form to old traditions'.

Each piece in the series is composed of numerous stainless steel ideograms that are laser cut, hand-welded and polished in the shape of a water splash. The use of ideograms that shape his water inspired sculptures allow us to see through it, which make them seem very light weight when in fact a small piece can weight up to 10 kg and take 3-4 months to be made. The entire preparation of a larger piece can take one year to be completed. In this process, Zheng Lu refers to himself as having the same role as a movie director, which in this case means he develops the concept that will be executed by his team, while he oversees the entire work.

Even though, the Chinese characters that shape the sculptures are hard to identify in the final object, the essence of the poem they represent is carried on in each piece. In the series presented in Singapore, the poem used is called *Reflection on Still Water* from Bai Juyi (Tang Dynasty), whose title also gives a name to the exhibition.

《玩止水》唐·白居易

动者乐流水,静者乐止水。  
利物不如流,鉴形不如止。  
凄清早霜降,淅沥微风起。  
中面红叶开,四隅绿萍委。  
广狭八九丈,湾环有涯涘。  
浅深三四尺,洞彻无表里。  
净分鹤翘足,澄见鱼掉尾。  
迎眸洗眼尘,隔胸荡心滓。  
定将禅不别,明与诚相似。  
清能律贪夫,淡可交君子。  
岂唯空狎玩,亦取相伦拟。  
欲识静者心,心源只如此。

### Reflections on Still Water

The active enjoy water when it flows,  
but those who are quiet find pleasure when it is still.  
Nothing is keener than running water,  
nor is there any better mirror than still water.  
Early frost falls on a lonely morning,  
with wind rustling leaves softly.  
In the center red leaves spread  
and green duckweeds float in the corners.  
A pond is no larger than eight or nine *zhang*,  
and an inlet has edges too.  
One can see clearly the bottom of the pond  
about three or four *chi* deep.  
Even the rising claw of a crane is clearly visible,  
one can also see fish swimming.  
The eyes are purified when we see still water  
and the heart is cleansed even when it touches the chest only.  
It is as still as Zen and clear as honesty.  
Limpid it can cure a greedy man of any avarice;  
fresh it helps to build friendship with a gentleman.  
It is not merely playing,  
for comparisons are also made.  
If one wants to understand a peaceful mind,  
he should know that our nature cannot be otherwise.

—Bai Juyi (Tang Dynasty)

**Poem Reflection on Still Water from Bai Juyi (Tang Dynasty). Photograph Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.**

When thinking about the use of the poem's title, *Reflections on Still Water*, to also entitle Zheng Lu's exhibition, we can perceive it carries an interesting contradiction. According to the artist, the title also refers to a philosophical concept from Confucius that says 'A man can see the reflection of his face not in flowing water but still water.' However, in the case of Zheng Lu's sculptures, they do represent a still moment, but a still moment of splashing water in its most sinuous restless form. Therefore, our own 'reflection' on it cannot be seen, only felt through its vibrancy. This apparent contradiction reverberates on our contemporary society frenetic rhythms, in which we are always running and not giving time for the 'water of life' to rest still. In this sense, the title becomes appropriated and reveals once again the combination between tradition and contemporaneity that Zheng Lu explores through his artistic practice.

The artist believes that technology changes the way we observe nature and can provide us with more ways to present an idea. As his sculptures remind us of the shape of real water splashes, Zheng Lu revealed his research process to define their final form: he started by observing water, initially through pictures from the Internet, but was not satisfied with the results so he started to film water splashes himself using a high-speed camera. When finding an interesting splash shape, he would 'pause' the video and use the image still as a reference for the construction of his sculpture, with a few changes here and there. The selected shape was then transformed into a tri-dimensional clay model that served as the basis for the stainless steel mold to be inserted with the poem's ideograms. Therefore, the high-speed camera technology, in this case, has an active role to empower the artist to see in detail what otherwise would be just a fleeting moment, a fragment of time.



Photograph Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

As fragments of time captured and shaped as water splashes, his work plays with gravity and transforms something ephemeral into permanent. The powerful presence and meaning that water carries in the Chinese tradition and culture are an undeniable presence in his work. The water and the metal are considered two of the five elements that represent the constant flow of matter. In representing water in steel, Zheng Lu overcomes the physical limitations of water as a medium by shaping it in metal. At the same time, he overcomes the rigidity of metal by giving to it a more fluid shape.

### Zheng Lu, Reflections on Still Water

April 15 to May 19, 2016

Hours: Tuesday – Saturday 11am – 7pm

Sunday 11am – 6pm

Sundaram Tagore Gallery

5 Lock Road 01-05

Gillman Barracks

Singapore 108933

tel +65 6694 3378

[http://www.sundaramtagore.com/exhibitions/2016-04-15\\_zheng-lu/](http://www.sundaramtagore.com/exhibitions/2016-04-15_zheng-lu/)

Bai Juyi   Gillman Barracks   Reflection on Still Water   Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Zheng Lu   Zheng Lu's 'Water Dripping'

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### About Christine VERAS (5 Articles)

Christine Veras is a maker who enjoys experiencing and creating art, devices and texts. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. on 'Animated Installations' at the School of Art, Design and Media in NTU.