

Beyond Colour

ON THE EVE OF HIS SOLO EXHIBITION IN HONG KONG, ONE OF CHINA'S GREATEST LIVING ARTISTS, ZAO WOU-KI, TALKS TO DIANA D'ARENBERG ABOUT A VIBRANT CAREER SPANNING MORE THAN SEVEN DECADES



AMONG THE SEA of big-ticket Chinese artists one regularly encounters at auction – all colourful grimaces and big-eyed white masks – Zao Wou-ki's paintings are examples of elegiac elegance and timelessness. His atmospheric brushes of colour have become iconic and so sought-after that China's *Hurun Report* places him in the top three of China's top living artists by auction results. But Zao's influence and significance extends well beyond the secondary marketplace. He has enjoyed exhibitions and retrospectives at some of the most prestigious institutions in the art world, was decorated as a Grand Officer of the French Legion of Honour and was elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts in France. It's no aggrandisement when architect IM Pei refers to Zao as "one of the greatest artists on the European scene." This month, Zao will present an exclusive collection of his watercolour works at Hong Kong's Feast Projects in Ap Lei Chau.

MODERN
MASTER
FROM LEFT
Untitled (2008),
Zao Wou-ki

Zao Wou-ki



The 91-year-old Zao has spent more than six decades away from China. As much as his work imbibes elements of his homeland, it also owes a debt to the works of the modern Western greats. When Zao made the move from China to Europe as a youth, it made him something of a cultural trailblazer. Today he has undoubtedly become one of the most revered and respected Chinese-born artists, and is often addressed as *maître* ("master") in his adopted Paris.

Born in Beijing in 1921, Zao grew up surrounded by art in his parents' home. But as a student of painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, Zao found himself at odds with the favoured Chinese pictorial style. He wanted to break free of conventions, to learn how "to represent the wind, how to paint emptiness, or the clarity and purity of light," and to discover the works of the European masters. Zao moved to Paris in 1948, at the very moment when European abstract and American expressionism began to flourish.

In Paris, he enjoyed the bohemian lifestyle that the era yielded for artists, including friendships with Matisse, Miró and Picasso. Early paintings hint at Picasso's structure and deconstruction as well as Miró's spatial skill.

But it was Paul Klee's ability to convey an inner emotion and transcendence that had the greatest resonance with Zao. Like Klee, he took to employing invented symbols and motifs that would set the stylistic foundation for much of his future work. His immersion later in the New York abstract expressionist art scene enabled him to develop a more abstract approach to his work. This

proximity to Western art also helped Zao deepen his awareness of Eastern art, as well as redefine his role as an artist bridging East and West.

"I think I can say that painting with marks is a Chinese invention," Zao remarks. "But Chinese painters have never taken it seriously, and for a long time I was mistrustful of the facility that came to me from my long apprenticeship in calligraphy. It had remained an exercise in style – a kind of virtuoso demonstration that I mistrusted." Despite this, a distinct visual vocabulary emerged. Extensively incorporating natural elements into his work, Zao developed an expressionist take on Chinese landscape painting, with loose brushwork and pockets of textured paint.



Flowers, trees and rocks are rendered in loose fluid and indistinct brushstrokes, reminiscent of Turner. The marks become merely suggestive of a shape, not revealing their nature upon cursory glance. "I saw spaces come into being, made or unmade according to my whim, in an invasive impression of lightness: lightness of brush and colour, the lightness of the moment of time passing. If you make an artwork and you are not happy with it, see it as a chance to experiment," he instructs. "Set yourself free – something wonderful might happen!"

Zao approaches his subject matter with the awe of an animalist, in thrall of nature and the inspiration it can yield. "Sometimes it is more interesting to

try to capture the sound of the wind in a tree's leaves, or the movement of light across them, than to actually paint the tree," he instructs.

"Being an artist is never about becoming famous," Zao stresses. "You do it because you have to – because it is your life. If you don't love it, you should not be doing it. If it's about making money or being famous, you are on the wrong path. And besides, there are easier ways to achieve both." It's a far cry from the market-oriented discourse we've come to associate with contemporary art today. Each of Zao's paintings is emotion parlayed into material works, brought to life by texture and boldness of colour, revealing another world beyond the paint. ■

LIVING LARGE

Following a string of high-profile exhibitions, including those at the Jeu de Paume in Paris, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate in London, Hong Kong will also have the chance to experience the works of one of China's greatest living modern masters. Fifteen Zao Wou-ki pieces, part of a series of large-format, watercolours that dominated his pictorial output from 2004 to 2009, will be exhibited for the first time at Feast Projects in Ap Le Chau from October 4 to December 15. A few works will be previewed during Fine Art Asia, held from October 4 to 7. The exhibition will be punctuated by art talk at the Asia Society on November 20 featuring Françoise Zao, Zao's wife and the former curator of the Paris Museum of Modern Art, and Aileen Weiss, an associate professor of Art and East Asian Studies at Colby College in the US state of Maine.

STROKE OF
GENIUS
FROM LEFT
Zao and his wife,
Françoise,
Unleashed (2007)