

Each work a crucible of East and West

by **Helmi Yusof** helmi@sph.com.sg @HelmiBT

The late Zao Wou-Ki left a legacy of extraordinary abstracts on prints and paper, now on show at STPI.

ZAO WOU-KI is one of the top-selling Asian artists in the world. His abstract paintings combine traditional Chinese ink aesthetics and modern Western sensibilities, reflecting the late artist's own journey in 1948 from China to France where he lived out most of his adult life.

While his paintings on canvas typically fetch between US\$1 million and US\$2 million, his cheaper works on print and paper are notable for their distinct experimentation with the medium.

Here he was able to work with ink, ink wash and watercolour, which created more diaphanous colours and scumbled effects.

No boundaries

Approximately 42 of his works, mostly prints, are now on display at Singapore's premier paper and print centre STPI. The exhibition is titled Zao Wou-ki: No Boundaries, referencing his own name "Wou-ki" (or "Wuji" in standard hanyu pinyin) which means "no boundaries". The works all come from a private collection.

Among them are several early prints from the 1950s whose simple yet lyrical stick figures reflect the influence of abstract giant Paul Klee.

Later prints, however, show Zao coming into his own with bold strokes and striking collisions of colours - the style he is best known for.

There are also a handful of oil on canvas and watercolour on paper works.

Zao was born in Shanghai in 1920 to a well-to-do family. His grandfather was a scholar-official who encouraged the boy to pick up calligraphy. However, Zao eventually abandoned Chinese ink, claiming that it had "lost its creative impulse since the 16th century because the works thereafter were stifled by the repetitive and mechanical imitation of the Tang and Song dynasties".

Nevertheless, his background in Chinese ink would serve him well when he moved to Paris in his late 20s to expand his artistic practice and perspective.

On the very day of his arrival, he made his first visit to the famous Louvre Museum. There, he took to the revolutionary aesthetics of the post-Impressionist artists such as Picasso, Matisse and Klee, visiting the museum regularly.

He found a small studio in the artists' district of Montparnasse, where he became good friends with Alberto Giacometti, Joan Miro, Joan Mitchell, Hans Hartung, Pierre Soulages and Sam Francis - all of whom were on the path to becoming notable figures in the art world.

Zao became enamoured of the visual vocabulary of Western artists and started experimenting with their styles and forms.

Ironically, his passion for Klee's simple and distilled aesthetics made him regain his appreciation of Chinese calligraphy. He saw beauty in its pictographic characters and lyrical strokes.

For decades, his canvases became mini-crucibles of Eastern and Western styles. Art critics found strong Chinese influences in his ostensibly Western expressions.

As critic Jonathan Hay put it, Zao's colour fields frequently "recourse back to a black that recalls ink".

In a 1961 interview, the artist himself admitted that, through the process of reinventing himself, he had "gradually rediscovered China".

Artistic evolution

His quenchless thirst for new forms also saw him working with paper and print. He took art courses at the Académie de la Grande Chaumiere where he became fascinated with the process of lithography.

He became life-long friends with printer Edmond Desjobert and created several prints and lithographs throughout his career - several of which can be seen in the current exhibition.

Though relatively small, the exhibition allows one to trace his artistic evolution over 50 years. The four most recent works - executed in 2007 when he was 87 - offer the clearest indication of his Chinese roots.

- **The exhibition runs from now till Aug 27 at STPI, 41 Robertson Quay**



**Li Ka-shing is biggest
Brexit loser in Hong
Kong as shares slump**

**Temasek may take
SMRT private: sources**

Breastmilk baubles

FROM AROUND THE WEB



**Gorgeous Diamond
Cuts You Will Love**

LUXURY-INSIDER.COM

**Cinque cose da
chiedersi prima di
investire nei mercati**

CONQUER MEDIA

**Jaw-dropping Photos
of 'UFO Clouds' Over
Cape Town**

YAHOO TRAVEL INSPIRATIONS

Recommended by

SUBSCRIBE TO THE BUSINESS TIMES NOW :CALL +65 388 3838 | BTSSUBSCRIBE.SG

SPH DIGITAL NEWS

© 2016 SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS LTD. REGN NO. 198402668E