

## A STPI ANNUAL SPECIAL EXHIBITION **ZAO WOU-KI: NO BOUNDARIES**

7 July – 27 August 2016



*Untitled, 1987, Etching with aquatint. Image © Zao Wou-Ki ProLitteris, Zurich, 2016*

STPI Gallery is pleased to present 'Zao Wou-Ki: No Boundaries', an extraordinary selection of over 40 prints, ink works, watercolours and paintings by the late French-Chinese abstract painter, on loan from a private collection. Charting the evolution of Zao Wou-Ki's illustrious career from 1950s to the early 2000s, this concise retrospective highlights how the artist renewed his art through various forms and influences, unveiling in particular, a lesser-known side of the painter whose printmaking practice reflects his ceaseless creativity and growth. Like his paintings, his prints display the strength, versatility and development of one who straddled two traditions to produce seminal works of great art historical value and significance.

Notable for having pushed boundaries in his lifelong quest for new artistic forms, Zao's impressive career spanning decades is marked by an oeuvre that unites the cultures and aesthetic traditions of the Orient and the Occident on a single painterly surface. This synthesis, which caused the critic Wim Toesbosch to contemplate the ambiguous placement of Zao's visionary and cultural identity—whether one ought to refer to the maestro as "[the] most Western of all Chinese painters..." or more rightly so as "the most

### **VIP OPENING**

6.30PM – 8.30PM  
TUESDAY 5 JULY 2016



*Guest of Honour*  
*H.E. Mr Benjamin Dubertret*  
*French Ambassador*  
*to Singapore*

*Individual interviews with Emi Eu,*  
*STPI Director are available on request.*  
*Contact [diana@suttonpr.com](mailto:diana@suttonpr.com)*  
*+852 2528 0792*

Chinese of all Parisian painters,”—distinguishes his prolific body of work as one that stands peerless today in the world of 20th century Chinese contemporary art. As the artist once said, “Everybody is bound by tradition. I am bound by two.” This lifelong narrative of reconciliation across cultural boundaries, between old and new, is foregrounded in the exhibition, and is one that will resonate soundly within the deeper consciousness of audiences in Singapore and around the world.

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Zao Wou-Ki (b. 1920 – 2013) left Shanghai for Paris in 1948 on a journey that would radically expand and sharpen his unique artistic voice. Abandoning the Chinese ink of his youth, believing it had “lost its creative impulse since the 16th century because the works thereafter were stifled by repetitive and mechanical imitation of the Tang and Song dynasties,” Zao gravitated towards the styles and forms of the Western visual aesthetic heralded by figures such as Cezanne, Matisse and Picasso, and the Abstract Expressionists like Paul Klee. Particularly intrigued by the latter’s “half representational and half surreal” world, Zao pined for a poetic and imaginative visual language of his own, setting him on a pursuit that would eventually lead him to discover abstraction within Chinese calligraphy and primitive forms of writing, adapt these motifs and surpass these traditions by forging Western and Eastern approaches.

It was with this penchant for experimentation that Zao maintained a permanent fixation on the medium of print and paper, alongside his extensive repertoire of paintings. Following his arrival in Paris, the young Zao attended courses at the Grande Chaumière, where he marveled at the technique of lithography with the printer Edmond Desjobert, with whom he would share an enduring partnership as he pursued printmaking in the great tradition of French *peintre-graveurs* (“painter-engraver”) throughout the rest of his career. And even within the processes of printmaking, Zao’s habit of tweaking methodologies never escaped.

In a 1961 interview, the artist admitted that he has nonetheless “gradually rediscovered China” in the process of his reinventions, and that “paradoxically, it is to Paris that (he) owes this return to (his) deepest origins.”

“Indeed, he needed to disengage himself and break free from every ritualized process among which the act of painting in ancient China was trapped. It was essential, in order to recognize himself finally and freely as a Chinese painter. The imprints left by his early childhood, for a while faded, became more prevalent with age. The earliest memories, all the legacy of hereditary culture, imperceptibly returned from his innermost being,” wrote French historian Georges Duby, in the foreword of the catalogue for the artist’s retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts of Kaohsiung, Taiwan in 1996.

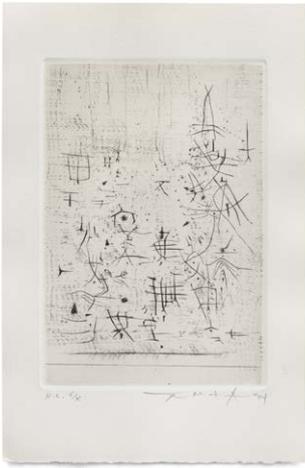
“Zao’s return to tradition, rather than a simple emulation of style or form, took place at the higher level of his philosophical and aesthetic outlook... Zao also displays superb craftsmanship in his ability to meld such calligraphic lines with the free application of colour... With his understanding that Chinese art derives its basic visual elements from the energy of the brush, Zao injects calligraphy’s rhythmic energy into his work. His lines leap and fall with great sweeps of energy, or rest within the lingering appeal of graceful curves, so that the fundamental symbols and gestures of his work acquire the same dignity and grace as great calligraphy... His great breakthrough was to reinterpret these aesthetic elements... Nature and the universe, the great energies of life, and the flow and shift of time became his subjects; his paintings build up spaces that are highly abstracted and hold deep philosophical implications.” – Christies, Lot Notes.

On the artist’s influence, New York Times journalist Paul Vitello noted that he was “embraced by artists and influential cultural figures in Paris” such as close friends Alberto Giacometti, Joan Miró and the poet and painter Henri Michaux, who wrote a series of poems about his work. His other close friend, the former president of France Jacques Chirac wrote the preface to his catalogue for his first major 1998 retrospective in Shanghai and appointed him to the *Grand Officier de la Legion d’honneur* (Legion of Honour), France’s highest recognition in 2006. His paintings, which are in major international public art collections such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim and the Tate Modern, have sold for up to two million dollars in the market. Art dealers referred to him as the highest-selling Chinese painter of his generation back in 2011, with painting sales totaling up to USD90 million. To date, Zao remains one of the most commercially successful Chinese artists, raking in large demands for his work after his passing in 2013.

“My paintings become an indicator of my emotional life, because in them I revealed my feelings and state of mind with no inhibition whatsoever,” said Zao. As Specialist Julia Grimes noted, Zao’s given name “Wou-Ki” (or “Wuji” in the standard Hanyu Pinyin Romanization used in China), means “no boundaries,” which fittingly describes his “insistence on a personal and aesthetic identity in the face of the vagaries of borders and time” that has propelled his art forward.

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*The Annual Special Exhibitions give audiences in Singapore the rare opportunity to encounter a remarkable scope of prints created by the most significant artists of modern art history. Talks and programmes are designed to provide insight into the various themes and practices of the artists represented. Past blockbuster exhibitions include ‘200 Artworks 25 Years’ Editions for Parkett’, ‘Henri Matisse: Works from 1917-1952’, ‘Pablo Picasso – The Vollard Suite’, ‘The Mystery of Picasso’s Creative Process: The Art of Printmaking’ and ‘Edo Pop: The Graphic Impact of Japanese Prints’.*



Untitled, 1954, Etching with aquatint



Untitled for *Les compagnons dans le jardin* by René Char  
(*The companions in the garden*),  
1957, Etching with aquatint



Untitled, 1968, Etching with aquatint



Untitled, 1974, Etching with aquatint



Untitled for *Moderna Mästare, 33 Konstnär från 33 Länder*  
published by Galery Börjeson,  
1979, Etching with aquatint



Untitled, 1987, Etching with aquatint



Untitled, 1961, Lithograph



Untitled, 1965, Lithograph



Untitled, 1969



*Untitled, 1970, Lithograph*



*Untitled for Hommage à Federico Fellini presented by Georges Boudaille, Jean Lescure and Hélène Parmelin, 1976, Lithograph*



*Untitled, 1978, Etching with aquatint*



*Untitled, 2000, Lithograph*



*Untitled, 2006, Watercolour on paper*



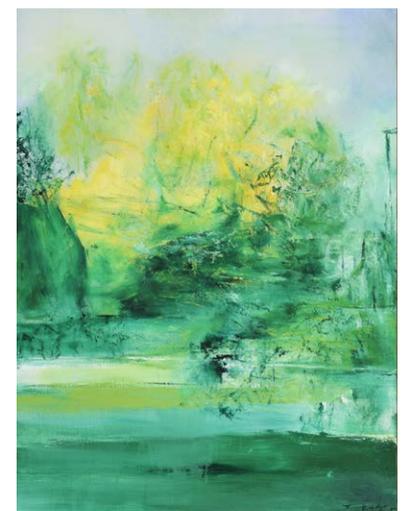
*Untitled, 2007, Ink and ink wash on paper laid on canvas*



*Untitled, 2007, Ink and ink wash on paper laid on canvas*



*25.03.2004, 2004, Oil on Canvas*



*Untitled, 2005, Oil on canvas*



In his Parisian studio, circa 1958  
Reserved rights



Portrait, 1973  
Image © Mohror



In his Parisian studio in 1996  
Image © Jeff Hargrove

## ZAO WOU-KI

Born in Beijing on February 1st 1920, the French-Chinese artist Zao Wou-Ki spent his years of boyhood in Shanghai. Growing up in a family of respectable means provided fertile ground for his artistic sensibilities to take root—as descendants to the House of Zhao, they boasted an illustrious ancestry that could be traced back patrilineally to the ancient Song Dynasty (10th- 13th century AD), and remained ensconced within the ranks of the Chinese gentry. It was his own grandfather, a scholar-official (or *xiucai* as they were known according to the local tongue), who laid the bricks and mortar of Zao's fundamental skills in calligraphy. In his youth, he was taught that the tradition could be harnessed as an art, so long as it was made to seem alive and effectively convey emotions.

As his professional practice and surviving legacy attests, this philosophy had embedded itself within the heart of Zao's enduring, yet constantly reinventing creative visions. His timely departure from China, in part egged on by the persuasions of the Cultural Attaché of the French Embassy in China, Vadime Elisseeff, had an impact on his career's progression for it signalled the true starting point of his artistic awakening. It was in Paris that Zao discovered his personality, considering himself at this point to have only undergone a "mere training in painting" in his homeland. His place in France was cemented in 1964 when he received French citizenship, and his artistic pursuits for the next two decades remained firmly planted in the European sphere.

The 1970s and 1980s marked a shift in Zao's career, as his outreach and source of inspiration began to tend towards Asia once again. It was not until 1972, when Zao suffered a personal tragedy in the loss of his second wife May, that the established artist would make his first return to China since his exit 24 years prior. During the 1970s Zao repeatedly went to China and produced a series of ink paintings following Chinese traditions after he rediscovers the medium. Beyond this, his exhibitions spanned cities worldwide such as Paris, Belgium, London, Washington, Chicago, Basel, New York, Milan, Rome, Geneva, Tokyo, Kyoto, Madrid, Austria, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Montreal, Quebec, Helsinki, Beijing, Taipei, Hong Kong and Mexico—even Singapore, at what was known at the time as the National Museum Art Gallery. Zao would not present his work in his native land until 1983, when the Chinese Minister of Culture invited him to showcase his work to the National Museum in Beijing as well as his alma mater, the Hangzhou School of Fine Arts.

Key appointments came in rapid succession—in 1980, he was appointed as a professor at the "Ecole Nationale supérieure des Arts décoratifs"; and he was made an *Officier de l'Ordre de la Légion d' Honneur* at the proposal of the French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang. During the 1990s Zao Wou-Ki received numerous honorary doctorates and the Japanese Premium Imperial Award; his works were shown at large international exhibitions including the Venice Biennale in 1996.

At 80, Zao showed no signs of slowing down; he continued to blaze into the 21st century, remaining productive through to the end of his life. A string of retrospectives emerged in this period, including ones exhibited at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dunkirk, Musée du Dessin et de l'Estampe in Gravelines, and at the Musée Fabre in Montpellier, Ishibashi Foundation at the Bridgestone Museum of Art in Tokyo, Palais Benedictine in Fécamp. He was also a part of the two important group exhibitions in 2006 - the "Homenaje - Homage to Chillida" at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, and "Edgar Varèse" at the Museum Tinguely in Basel. Most notably, he is made a *Grand Officier de l'Ordre de la Légion d'Honneur* in 2006 and decorated at the Palais de l'Elysée by President Jacques Chirac. By 2008 Zao abandons oil paints, opting for watercolours only; he creates his last in the spring of 2011.

Zao's eventual passing in 2013 was met by a great tide of grief from arts practitioners and admirers alike. Posthumous exhibitions, publications and retrospectives continue to emerge in honour of his legacy today.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMMES

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### **SPECIAL FEATURE FILM: ZAO WOU-KI**

SATURDAY 9 JULY 2016

3.00PM - 4.00PM

### **MID WEEK FILM: THE SILENCE OF ROTHKO**

WEDNESDAY 20 JULY 2016

7.00PM - 8.00PM

### **“THE HANDMADE PAPER & OTHER PROJECTS” TALK BY GORDON KOH, STPI WORKSHOP SENIOR PAPERMAKER**

SATURDAY 23 JULY 2016

3.00PM - 4.00PM

### **MID WEEK FILM: “SILENCE OF AN ANGEL” - PAUL KLEE**

WEDNESDAY 3 AUGUST 2016

7.00PM - 8.00PM

### **STPI WORKSHOP OPEN HOUSE 2016**

SATURDAY & SUNDAY 6 - 7 AUGUST 2016

1.00PM - 5.00PM

### **“ZAO WOU-KI: PRACTICE & TRENDS” LECTURE BY JOYCE CHAN, CHRISTIE’S SENIOR SPECIALIST**

SATURDAY 13 AUGUST 2016

3.00PM - 4.00PM

### **COFFEE & CONVERSATIONS:**

#### **ALFREDO & ISABEL AQUILIZAN**

SATURDAY 20 AUGUST 2016

3.00PM - 4.00PM

### **LITHOGRAPHY DEMONSTRATION**

#### **BY EITARO OGAWA, STPI CHIEF PRINTER**

SATURDAY 27 AUGUST 2016

11.30AM - 12.30PM

### **INTERPRETING ZAO WOU-KI**

#### **BY LASALLE DEPARTMENT OF DANCE**

SATURDAY 27 AUGUST 2016

3.00PM - 3.40PM, 4.30PM - 5.10PM

### **REGULAR EXHIBITION TOURS IN ENGLISH**

TUESDAYS & THURSDAYS, 11.30AM

SATURDAYS, 2.00PM

### **REGULAR EXHIBITION TOURS IN JAPANESE**

SUNDAY 7 AUGUST

1.00PM - 1.30PM

MONDAY 22 AUGUST

11.30AM - 12.30PM

## UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

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### **SHINRO OHTAKE: SOLO EXHIBITION**

#### **SUPPORTED BY FRIENDS OF STPI**

25 SEPTEMBER - 5 NOVEMBER 2016

### **STPI YEAR END GROUP SHOW**

19 NOVEMBER 2016 - 2 JANUARY 2017

### **ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH**

1 - 4 DECEMBER 2016

### **AMANDA HENG: SOLO EXHIBITION**

#### **SUPPORTED BY FRIENDS OF STPI**

15 JANUARY - 4 MARCH 2017

## ABOUT STPI

STPI is an internationally renowned space in Singapore with a creative workshop focusing on innovative print and paper techniques. We offer a dynamic residency programme for leading artists from around the world, where they can experiment and push the boundaries of artistic creation with alternative methods and materials. The combination of a critically acclaimed residency programme, gallery and exceptional workshop expertise make STPI one of the most cutting-edge destinations of contemporary art in Southeast Asia.

### FOR MEDIA ENQUIRIES:

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