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# 'No Limits: Zao Wou-Ki' Review: East and West Fused in Paint

A hybrid abstraction drawn from Chinese and European Modernist painting practices.

By **LANCE ESPLUND**

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*New York*

In 1964, the painter Zao Wou-Ki stated: “It is not easy to break free. Everybody is bound by a tradition—I, by two.” Zao (1920-2013) was a Chinese-born artist who became a French citizen, and who immersed himself in both ancient Chinese and European Modernist painting practices. He sought and sometimes succeeded to fuse these disparate influences into an inimitable hybrid abstraction that touches on Eastern and Western aesthetic traditions yet hovers, elusively, outside of them.

An East-West fusion of this sort was difficult for Zao, who was pulled equally toward—and revered—the meditative, atmospheric, all-over openness and unstructured “emptiness” of Eastern landscape painting; the frontal, “alive,” pictographic presence and narrative storytelling of Chinese calligraphy; and the various practices of Western representation and abstraction, specifically the Abstract Expressionists’ calligraphic gesture and the structure and flatness of



'Signs in Motion' (1957), by Zao Wou-Ki. PHOTO: HERBERT F. JOHNSON MUSEUM OF ART/CORNELL UNIVERSITY

the Modernist grid. The complications, strengths, triumphs and shortcomings of his artistic undertaking are evident in “No Limits: Zao Wou-Ki,” Asia Society’s uneven though occasionally beautiful and enchanting traveling retrospective of 60 paintings, drawings and prints from 1943 to 2007.

Born in Beijing, Zao studied and then taught at the National Academy of Art (now the China Academy of Art) in Hangzhou. In China, he learned English, practiced Chinese ink painting and calligraphy, and was introduced to European Modernism through Western magazines. Zao immigrated to Paris in 1948, and quickly became a prominent figure in the School of Paris. He showed alongside

European and American masters, and was collected widely by patrons and museums in Europe, America and Asia.

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**No Limits: Zao Wou-Ki** Zao arrived in Paris just as many midcentury Western abstractionists were looking to Asian art, and especially calligraphy, for inspiration. Zao, in turn, was greatly influenced by Paul Klee, an artist inspired by all forms of world art, and it was through Klee that Zao rediscovered his own Asian roots. Klee

*Asia Society*  
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absorbed, combined and reinvented his sources anew on his own abstract terms. Zao, on the other hand, was influenced by Japanese folding screens, Cimabue, J.M.W. Turner, Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, Jackson Pollock and Klee's abstractions. But these sources, at odds with his aesthetic heritage, could prove combative on the canvas.

Examples here include Zao's radiant "Homage to Henri Matisse I—02.02.86" (1986), a translation of Matisse's interior "Window at Collioure" (1914). Matisse's version pares down a window and shutters into flat, torqued planes of color; Zao's "Homage" transforms and relaxes those planes into floating, overlapping vapor and mist. Missing the structural tension of the original, Zao's abstraction walks the line between interpretation and misinterpretation.

Co-organized by Michelle Yun, senior curator of Modern and contemporary art at Asia Society, and at Colby College Museum (where the show opens in February 2017) by Colby College's Melissa Walt and Ankeney Weitz, this is the first Zao retrospective in the U.S. But, judging by the best pictures shown in the exhibition catalog, it is not definitive. "No Limits" establishes Zao's artistic trajectory and his aesthetic influences and methodologies, but the handful of strong, mature works here, such as "Red Pavilion" (1954), "Chestnut" (1955), "Water Music" (1957), "Signs in Motion" (1957) and "Untitled (Fire in the Sky)" (1965) ultimately do Zao little favor beyond that of introduction.

“No Limits” presents a skilled, determined, ambitious and inventive painter mired in his myriad sources. Despite the 20-plus captivating works here, Zao often produces pictures that, though attractive for their atmosphere, color and subtle brushwork, occupy a realm of cultural and aesthetic ambiguity.

The show’s smaller of two rooms is dedicated to Zao’s Western roots. Strong ink and pencil drawings here include a landscape reminiscent of Courbet; a Rembrandtesque lion; a seascape suggesting Van Gogh; a girl with a flower, recalling Picasso’s classicism. Here, too, are pastiches of Cézanne, Arshile Gorky and Klee.

From Klee, Zao learned how to transform the canvas into a realm redolent of stone, fresco, manuscript or aquarium. The dynamic colored etching “Signs in Motion” combines calligraphy and pictographs into a teeming universe that ultimately resembles a bloody shroud. The mostly white oil painting “15.04.77” (1977) suggests snow blindness. The oil-on-canvas “Chestnut” feels like an Asian distillation of one of Corot’s silvery-gray trees. Zao’s gorgeous blue-gray, maroon and cream watercolor “Untitled” (1953) recalls a Klee-like castle drifting like a mirage.

Unfortunately, a number of pictures here feel tentative, fragmentary, between destinations. The same refusal to settle into a cultural niche that gives Zao’s artworks their restless power often keeps them from a pictorial wholeness.

There are numerous exceptions. In the second, larger gallery, Zao often combines actual and invented calligraphic characters, setting them afloat in moody, abstract dreamscapes. In the apocalyptic “27.02.98” (1998), black calligraphic forms smolder in a blood-red caldron. Recalling Titian, Abstract Expressionism and the mist of Asian landscape painting, Zao’s forceful picture evokes a hell mouth or abstract forest fire. Born of two cultures, it is built out of freneticism, delicacy and deep feeling. Here, as with many of Zao’s Abstract Expressionist-inspired pictures, the canvas suggests not only what the critic Harold Rosenberg describes as “an arena in which to act,” but primarily a realm for reflection, contemplation.

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