



# ART REVIEW: De Kooning and Zao Wou-Ki Paintings Trace Paths to Abstraction

February 7, 2017

by Charles A. Riley II

East meets West is an ancient theme in the arts: Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" and "Turandot"; Frank Lloyd Wright's Japanese interiors; [Brice Marden](#)'s "Han Shan" series; would-be Zen ascetics turned on by D.T. Suzuki in the 1960s; and any number of other examples. And now, at [LG Lévy Gorvy Gallery](#) on the Upper East Side, [Willem de Kooning](#) and his Chinese contemporary [Zao Wou-Ki](#).

On view through March 11, 2017, "Willem de Kooning|Zao Wou-Ki" features more than 20 paintings from the two artists' absolute peak decades, the '40s through the '70s, enough to fill three stories of the newly expanded Lévy Gorvy gallery and offering surprising variations on this time-honored theme. Hung for harmony, the paintings progress through dissonance to a revealing counterpoint that left the two artists (who never met in life) far apart. Nobody is likely to mistake a Zao Wou-Ki for a de Kooning after this exhibition.



Installation view of "Willem de Kooning | Zao Wou-Ki" at Lévy Gorvy, New York, 2017. Photo by Tom Powel Imaging Inc.

If viewed as a singing contest, Zao manages to capture center stage at the outset, letting loose a soaring aria with cobalt blue blaring fortissimo in the immense (roughly 102- by 78-inch) painting *01-10-73* that faces the gallery door. To its right, a pair of de Kooning works from 1960, *Door to the River* and *A Tree in Naples*, are far too commanding to be deemed backup voices. Together they offer the most satisfying wall in the building. And this was only the first of three floors.

The initial presentation certainly makes the case for one of the intellectual premises for the exhibition. This is the assertion that, as the catalogue essay by Dominique de Villepin observes, these "involuntary heirs of two traditions of landscape painting" found a way while living in exile—de Kooning the Dutchman in New York, Zao the Chinese in Paris—to soar free of the constraints of "stifling tradition."

The two artists also offer a significant lesson in the subtle gradations of mixed blue tones in the hands of technical masters. In the case of Zao, the billowing liquid blue at the core of this monumental painting calls to mind the great watercolor and ink abstractions of that renegade of

Chinese Modernism, [Zhang Da-Qian](#).

While paying a second visit to the exhibition, I was fortunate to tag along as Brett Gorvy, who just left Christie's after 20 years to become Dominique Lévy's partner, gave a VIP tour of his first gallery show. Gorvy decoded the function of the black lines in the small de Kooning painting, *Sail Cloth*, that pairs with an untitled and similarly modest in scale Zao painting near the opening of the show, both made in 1949 and as handy an introduction to the similarities and differences between artists as any juxtaposition in this exhibition.



"Sail Cloth" by Willem De Kooning, 1949. Oil, enamel, charcoal, and graphite on board, 27 x 32 inches. Courtesy of Lévy Gorvy, New York.



"Untitled" by Zao Wou-Ki, 1949. Oil on cardboard, 17 7/8 x 21 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Lévy Gorvy, New York.

One pointer is particularly illuminating: De Kooning's firmly inscribed black lines were often guides to the shapes, including silhouettes borrowed from Dutch still life, that offer structure to the seemingly impromptu "action" strokes in high-volume colors that are the most obvious compositional elements in his work. Noting Gorvy's emphatic repetition of their "formalist" aspect, I could see how *Sail Cloth* follows the linear basis he laid out. This presents a notable contrast to the secondary role of the lightly brushed, floating black "calligraphy" in most of Zao's paintings, which surmounts the stained-in blue, red and gold blending in pools that interact in an intermediate space. This kind of composition is quite unlike the "built" positive space of the de Kooning paintings, such as *Untitled IV* (1978), a muscular construction of stout verticals and undulating horizontals on the second floor that is one of the absolute highlights of the show.



"Untitled IV" by Willem De Kooning, 1978. Oil on canvas, 70 1/4 x 80 1/4 inches. Courtesy of Lévy Gorvy, New York.

The exhibition is documented in the substantive trilingual catalogue, with its rhapsodic essay in French and English by Villepin, the former Prime Minister of France. Villepin's essay is translated

into Chinese, a marvelous gesture not just because the show will travel to Hong Kong but also because the readership for art books in Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China is ravenous.

The catalog's most valuable contribution to scholarship is the parallel chronology, allowing the progress of the artists to be tracked in detail. De Kooning's picaresque life story is relatively well-known, particularly to East Enders who rightly regard him as a local legend: the Dutch stowaway who became the leader of the AbEx pack through sheer force of painterly power. No less exciting is the tale of Zao's rise to prominence in the Parisian art world while in exile.



Willem de Kooning in his Long Island studio, November 1, 1987. Photograph by Robert R. McElroy. © Robert R. McElroy/Getty Images. Opposite: Zao Wou-Ki in his studio, 1982. Photograph by Martine Franck. © Martine Franck/Magnum Photos. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of LG Lévy Gorvy Gallery.

Zao Wou-Ki (the last two characters translate as “no limits”) was raised in a prosperous mansion just outside Shanghai, where his father, a banker, held him to a strict regimen of calligraphy and scholarship. Architect [I.M. Pei](#), a close friend and author of a great catalogue essay on his work, had a similar childhood.

The “no limits” name was conferred on him by his distinguished and archly traditional family, descended from an imperial court official in Beijing. These officials were among the nation's leading calligraphers, a hereditary detail that has its significance in reading the artist's paintings. The works often incorporate fragments of the ancient “oracle bone” script of the Shang dynasty, broken and manipulated in a manner that is similar to the approach of the contemporary Chinese artist [Xu Bing](#).

His father agreed to send the 15-year-old Zao to the top Chinese art academy in Hangzhou, during the chaotic days when the Japanese, Communists and Kuomintang were struggling for control in China. In 1946, Zao's paintings were part of an international exhibition curated by the French cultural attaché at the [Musée Cernuschi](#). In 1948, with the Communists looking like the eventual winners (a bad omen for a wealthy family), Zao left for Paris, where his teacher [Lin Fengmian](#) had been part of an earlier generation of expatriate Chinese artists. These included [Pan Yuliang](#), whose Jazz Age paintings were eventually exhibited with Zao's in Paris, and [Xu Beihong](#).

Zao hit the ground running on April 1, 1948, spending his first afternoon in France at the Louvre and quickly securing a studio in the same building as [Alberto Giacometti](#). He also befriended [Joan Mitchell](#), [Sam Francis](#), [Nils de Stael](#) and the poet/painter [Henri Michaux](#), with whom he collaborated on a brilliant suite of prints.

I see the influence of Giacometti particularly in the large vertical paintings by Zao on the second

floor at LG Lévy Gorvy, especially the vaporous 05-12-69 and the spectral, silvery 04-06-62 (date titles in the European sequence of day, month, year), which even shares the foggy grey palette of a Giacometti portrait.



"04-06-62" by Zao Wou-Ki, 1962. Oil on canvas, 36 x 28 1/8 inches. Courtesy of Lévy Gorvy, New York.

What was meant to be a two-year stay in Paris turned into permanent exile, thanks to the victory of the Communists back home. Zao left his first wife for a stunning actress, Chan May-Kan, who moved from Hong Kong to Paris in 1958. She committed suicide in 1972, the same year he first revisited his homeland. Like de Kooning, Zao had his stellar career—including New York shows at the Kootz Gallery, an Ab Ex stronghold—slowed by Alzheimer's, and his final years were spent in Dully, near Geneva, with a view of Mont Blanc.

The finest of his paintings in the show is the incandescent *Montagne Dechiree* (1955-56), on loan from the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The tricolor red, white and blue of this volcanic work owe as much to the Romanticism of Delacroix as to Paul Klee, Zao's acknowledged favorite. The color fields are shot through with fragments of text (the character for "fire" is among the few that are decipherable), misshapen ripostes to his family tradition of orderly calligraphy that place this free spirit on the same stage as de Kooning, one of Abstract Expressionism's most vibrant rebels.



"Montagne déchirée (shattered mountain)" by Zao Wou-Ki, 1955-56. Oil on canvas, 51 3/16 x 79 3/4 inches. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Gift of T.B. Walker Foundation, 1956. Courtesy of LG Lévy Gorvy Gallery.

---

**BASIC FACTS:** "Willem de Kooning | Zao Wou-Ki" is on view from January 18 through March 11, 2017 at LG Lévy Gorvy Gallery, 909 Madison Avenue, New York 10021. [www.levygorvy.com](http://www.levygorvy.com)

---