Zao Wou-Ki

by Robin Starr, Vice President, American & European Works of Art, Skinner, Inc.

Zao Wou-Ki is well known for the ability of his abstractions to blend both Eastern and Western styles into works that seem to embrace both cultures. What is less well known, is that Zao, rather than feeling at home in both cultures, has felt dislocated and ambivalent about his cultural identity for much of his career. Dora Vallier contends that “Printmaking is less complex than painting, and this is the reason why it reveals the core of an artist.” While printmaking can certainly generate a synopsis of a career, printmaking can be incredibly complicated. This is especially true for an artist who aims for spontaneous gestural expression while juggling a cultural duality.

Zao Wou-Ki was born in Beijing to a well-to-do family. At the age of 10 Zao created at least one woodcut for spontaneous gestural expression. His grandfather, thus ending civil war in China. In October of 1949 Mao Zedong formed the People’s Republic of China, with Lin strongy encouraging his students to study abroad, particularly in Paris. This advice directly jibed with Zao’s rejection of his own country’s artistic traditions, and in 1948 Zao went to Paris. He was eager and excited to explore a world that was utterly new to him. It is said that the moment he arrived in Paris, he went straight to the Louvre to see first hand all of the works he had known previously only through reproductions. Never still were the works of the Cubists and the subsequent Modernist “isms” of which Zao had only a vague notion. Most of Lin’s teachings of Western art held to the Western academic tradition. Zao threw himself into the French language and the artistic and intellectual life of Paris as best he could.

In October of 1949 Mao Zedong formed the People’s Republic of China, thus ending civil war in China. The implications for Zao were immediate and severe: he could not safely return to his home country. He was suddenly in exile. Zao created at least one woodcut while attending Hangzhou, but he took up printmaking seriously in 1949, at the moment he became marooned in the West. He began with lithography under the tutelage of Edmond Desjebert. While the medium came naturally to him, he instinctively used more water than was typical; he manipulated the ink just as he had when practicing calligraphy as a boy. Desjebert warned Zao that his generous use of water was likely to backfire, but the results were effective and Desjebert was impressed. The irony of this moment is that Zao had consciously decided to avoid using the brush and ink of his Chinese heritage due to his animosity for the Chinese tradition, yet this very knowledge shaped his printmaking techniques.

Zao continued to infilrate French artistic circles, and by extension, French culture. It would still take decades for him to feel as though he fit in to the Western world. Even the way in which he signed his name indicated his strange position between Western and Eastern cultures. His “first” name, Wou-Ki – which roughly translates to “no boundaries” – is the same way that many of the Surrealists had turned to Primitivism as a more pure form of expression in their art. Klee had favored such forms of visual expression – especially those drawn from tribal art and the art of children – unsullied as they were by cultural baggage. Furthermore, Klee had his own Eastern influences: he had been drawing on Chinese poetry for inspiration since at least 1918.

Zao’s synthesis of Klee is apparent in his Paysage avec encadrement (Landscape with Frame) of 1951. The central figures of man and woman stand in a landscape filled with plants and birds with rounded mountains in the distance. All elements are composed of lines rather than forms. Most of these are jagged and angular rather than soft and organic, thus unifying them and creating an environment that seems to be ancient: Arcadian or Eden-like. The frame referenced in the title is composed of simple figures and shapes that read like pictograms of human, animal, and plant forms: read like pictograms of human, animal, and plant forms. 

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human, leaf, bird, sun, and moon. This clear reference to landscape was utterly in keeping with his Chinese roots, although he might well have attributed it more to his observations of his Western contemporaries and Klee in particular.

Les Cerfs (The Deer) of 1954 employs a similarly Klee-like vocabulary. The view shows deer both standing and running, and the greens and browns recall landscape. The picture shows deer both standing and running, and the greens and browns recall landscape. The picture suggests a landscape that is both ancient and dynamic, with the deer depicted as if caught in mid-movement. The composition is complex and multi-layered, and yet the overall effect is one of spontaneity. Further, the artist can also change his mind: if more rust needs to cover ochre, the artist picks up the brush and adds it. Thus the act of layering can be spontaneous.

Zao's use of color derives from the Western tradition and gestural mark-making is an integral part of both Abstract Expressionism and Lyrical Abstraction. While black was often used by his contemporaries, for Zao it was inherently reminiscent of the ink of Chinese calligraphy, thus the inclusion of black was inherently charged with cultural conflict for Zao. His reshaping of traditional Chinese painting techniques demonstrates the way in which he was able to integrate his Eastern elements resulting in unique and expressive works, which are complex and multi-layered, and yet ultimately delicate and subtle. His use of color is abstract, and looks almost as though it is brushed into the composition.

The members of Paris’ artistic avant garde were very aware of the rise of Abstract Expressionism in New York. Their response to it was Lyrical Abstraction. Like Abstract Expressionism, Lyrical Abstraction was a broad umbrella of abstract styles, though it was inherently reminiscent of the ink of Chinese calligraphy, thus the inclusion of black was inherently charged with cultural conflict for Zao. The palette of Untitled, 1963, is complexly layered, creating a substrate to support Zao’s gestures and spontaneous. Furthermore the artist has to anticipate what color combinations will result as he overlays his inks. Zao's aquatint layers are translucent, so that the gray areas sitting over ochre take on a green cast. This harmonizes well with the olive ink that appears only in the top third of the composition. The gray marks that seem immediate and gestural: utterly unencumbered with the foresight and planning that printmaking necessitates in such a composition. The black marks that float over a swirl of red and orange have grown bolder. While several still look like the fine lines seen in the earlier works, most look like calligraphic brush strokes of ink. The result is more bold than his earlier work, and is indicative of his growth.

In printmaking, Zao attempts to create the same sense of the immediacy, but every placement of line and color must be planned in advance: the process is anything but spontaneous. Furthermore the artist has to anticipate what color combinations will result as he overlays his inks. Zao's aquatint layers are translucent, so that the gray areas sitting over ochre take on a green cast. This harmonizes well with the olive ink that appears only in the top third of the composition. The gray marks that seem immediate and gestural: utterly unencumbered with the foresight and planning that printmaking necessitates in such a composition. The black marks that float over a swirl of red and orange have grown bolder. While several still look like the fine lines seen in the earlier works, most look like calligraphic brush strokes of ink. The result is more bold than his earlier work, and is indicative of his growth.

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**Printmaking is Huge in China** (continued from page one)

Many Americans have participated in the Guanlan Printmaking Base, including Craig Cornwell, Evan Summer, Michael Goro, Art Werger, Lynne Allen, Hugh Merrill, David Jones, and a host of others. It is a cooperative facility which provides and supports its artists, however, each participating individual happily leaves a percentage of their work as a donation to the center. Artists generally stay between one and two months, and have little or no expenses while in China.

The Base is an ‘invitation only’ center where renowned artists create and edit their own work, sometimes with the assistance of technicians. The collection has achieved the staggering number of 60,000 works in their 37 studios and galleries.

The “Base” consists of 346 acres with over 150 employees, including technicians, administrators, housekeepers, gardeners and guards. There are more than 15 full time printers, plus assistants, in the multi-disciplined 1008 square meter work space, plus a second level of approximately 300 square meters of private studio space for the artists.

Over five million visitors have enjoyed the serenity of the park like atmosphere, viewing the Moon Lotus Pond, The Hakka Village (where the artists reside) and, of course, the printmaking workshop. Occasionally tours are allowed entry to the private work areas of the artists, providing interesting experiences at Guanlan itself.

The facility is equipped with presses of all sizes for one or two months to work with their technicians. Over the world come for a specified time, typically one or two months to work with their technicians.

Over the years, the Guanlan Original Printmaking Base has been a three-time recipient of the Guanlan residency and has represented the United States in several award ceremonies.

Guanlan
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**Wielding the Knife**

Curated by Long Island master printmaker, Dan Welden, an exhibition of large-scale woodcuts by Li Kang, one of China’s most celebrated printmakers, will be seen for the first time in the United States at the Jeanie Tengelsen Gallery of the Art League of Long Island from February 1 to March 8, 2015. A reception for the artist, who is coming to Long Island for the occasion, will be held on February 8, from 3 – 5 pm.

Dan Welden, Artist/Printmaker and frequent contributor to The Journal of the Print World, has been an invited participant in the Guanlan Original Printmaking Base, providing him with the opportunity to work with local artists and have a project in mind. Participation is by invitation only, and master printmakers from all over the world come for a specified time, typically one or two months to work with their technicians.

The facility is equipped with presses of all sizes for lithography, intaglio, silkscreen and relief printing. Mr. Li’s woodcuts of nature imagery produced either by hand rubbing or on a large etching press, measure upwards of four feet square and are stunningly detailed. His work has won awards throughout China as well as at the Taiwan International Print and Drawing Biennial. His prints are in the collections of the National Museum of China, numerous regional museums in China, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, the South Korea Print Museum, and the British Woodcut Foundation.

Dan Welden, from Sag Harbor, has represented North America at Guanlan annually since 2011. While working at the Guanlan Original Printing Base, Welden got to know and witness Li Kang’s work. Welden will discuss his exciting residency and experiences at Guanlan in a lecture scheduled to take place in the gallery on February 17 at 7:00pm.

The Jeanie Tengelsen Gallery is open free of charge Monday through Thursday 9am – 5pm, Friday 9am – 4pm and weekends from 11am – 4pm.

The Art League, 107 East Deer Park Road, Dix Hills, (631) 462-5400
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