

# Zao Wou-Ki, Lately

by Jonathan Hay



*Untitled (4), 2003*

India ink on rice paper, mounted on wove paper  
16 3/4 x 18 7/8 in., 42.5 x 47.9 cm.; paper size: 27 1/8 x 26 3/4 in., 68.9 x 67.9 cm

Zao Wou-Ki, now 82, found his distinctive voice and vocabulary in his mid-thirties, having by that time lived in Paris for a decade. By the end of 1957 he had committed to abstraction, on terms which from the beginning set him apart from the other artists of his circle—Mitchell, Riopelle, Vieira da Silva, Soulages—as much as from his great supporter Henri Michaux. His cypher-like signature, to which he has remained faithful for over fifty years, gives his first name in Chinese characters and his last in a Western orthography. It is emblematic of a stranded cultural identity, recognized from the first by sympathetic critics as the key to his artistic direction. The recognition, however, took the form of a view of Zao's painting as an exemplary reconciliation of Chinese and

European aesthetics, in which the language of modern Western abstraction is enriched by a Chinese sensibility rooted in the past. At the risk of disturbing a consensus that over the years has too often, perhaps, replaced criticism with mythology, it is worth pointing out that this congenial view has the disadvantage of eliding all sense of the anxiety and contradictions confronted by the artist as he created his own ever-provisional sense of belonging. The implicit and sometimes explicit characterization of Zao's work as a gateway for Westerners to age-old Chinese wisdom—a characterization that exoticizes the work even as it honors it—created in its time a receptive environment for the paintings. Today, however—and especially on this side of the Atlantic—it is probably more likely to prevent full appreciation of his extremely difficult achievement, and of the way his paintings can speak to us differently, more humanly, of coming to terms with the in-betweenness of a dual cultural heritage.

For New Yorkers a reassessment of Zao Wou-Ki's work is long overdue. Since the last of the sixteen solo shows that he held in the United States from 1952 until the retirement of his long-time New York dealer Sam Kootz in 1968, Zao has had only limited exposure in the United States. His ink monochromes were seen at Jan Krugier Gallery in 1998; the last exhibition of his oil paintings was at Pierre Matisse in 1986, following an earlier show in 1980. In contrast, during the last thirty-five years his profile elsewhere in the world, especially Europe and Asia, could hardly have been higher, with a constant flow of solo shows, not to mention retrospectives of which the first was held at the Grand Palais in 1981. Several factors combined to marginalize his work in the United States: the conceptual turn that painting took here in the 1960s, a concomitant suspicion of transcendentalist ambition in painting that could only be confirmed by the discourse around Zao's work, a more general sidelining of Paris-based artists, and the more limited prevalence in New York of the intense fascination for China from which Zao benefited in France. Today, however, the circumstances are more propitious. New York is in the midst of rediscovering the painting of post-war Paris, and enough time has passed for it to be possible to look afresh at the sublime visions of high modernist abstraction. Above all there is now for the first time a generalized awareness of intercultural experience as an independently complex, formative factor in the styles of countless modern and contemporary artists. Let us hope that these factors conspire happily in Zao Wou-Ki's favor because, far from being a living monument, he is a vital painter whose work of the last twenty years represents, in this writer's view, the height of his achievement.

The evolution of his painting came, as Zao has said, by stages. The commitment to abstraction followed his only extended stay in the United States, where he encountered Abstract Expressionism first-hand at the height of its prestige. Freed by its example to commit himself more physically to the painting, he developed an art in



which the seeming gestural performance was in fact painstakingly constructed, its role ultimately subordinate to the atmospherics of each work. Until about 1972 Zao explored the multiple possibilities of this approach, in paintings that were latterly sometimes on a very large scale (as large as two meters by five). The remainder of the 1970s, however, were a period of reorientation, from which survives a body of work divided between two approaches. On the one hand, he pushed his earlier mode to extremes of dramatic effect, almost as if seeking to persuade himself that it could hold his interest for ever. But concurrently he took up ink painting again—he had learnt to handle the Chinese brush in his youth—with enormous success and with a decisive if intermittent impact on his practice of oil painting. In the paintings of the mid- to late seventies that register this impact most fully, he laid aside the sharp gesturalist rhetoric that had been his trademark, replacing it with a softened, blunted markmaking that fused image and space in a new, arguably more subtle way that recalls the alchemy of ink and *xuan* paper. In the course of 1979 Zao abandoned his older approach altogether and devoted himself entirely to the new stylistic direction that he had traced out for himself in a few key paintings of the 1970s. Out of this shift came a decade of work that attains a state of grace: a quality of gesture that is stripped of all hurriedness and creates a more powerful “bone-structure” (to use a term from Chinese calligraphy and painting), a luminosity extending from infinite softness to enveloping darkness, a topography of form that opens itself to stillness and silence. Crucially, the artist expunged his earlier voluntarist effort to control the pictorial space through directive brushstrokes, allowing now a more active structuring role to fields of color and pattern as a counterweight to the brushstrokes and the image fragments created by them. Around 1990, he further calibrated this late approach, extending the parameters of his worldmaking to include ravishing compositions dominated by saturated hues where he largely eschews the infinite possibilities of his beloved black. As if to commemorate this new-found coloristic freedom and acknowledge one of its sources, in 1991 he painted the triptych *Hommage à Monet*, a clear predecessor to the equally monumental triptych included here, *Hommage à mon ami Henri Michaux*, painted nine years later.

The oil paintings in the present exhibition date from 1993 to 2002. Some, like *01.02.1997* and *11.8.99* (an undeclared homage to Monet), join the triptych in coloristic hedonism. These paintings have rich, sensuous surfaces that repay the closest attention, dense as they are with pourings, splatterings, wipes, accretions, and marks of all sorts. Contrastingly, several other works favor understatement, with muted harmonies that are sometimes pointed up by a touch of more intense color (*28.10.2001*; *15.11.01*; *24.02.2002*). Here the surfaces tend to be less worked and there is a particular lightness of touch. Between these two poles are situated all manner of hybrids in which Zao searches for an equilibrium between a saturated hue—a vermilion, an acid yellow—and more muted harmonies of color built around

black/grey/brown/white brush traces that hint at an image (*10.01.2001 – 08.03.2002*; *01.07.2001*). The exhibition also includes certain works in which he looks back to his own earlier styles. His approach of the late nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties is reinterpreted in the roiling rhythms of *27.02.98* via a less impetuous brush-trace. And *21.08.95* alludes to work from the mid-nineteen-fifties when he was still engaged with a project of ideographic sign-making. The character-like forms dropping from the sky revive the columns of pseudo-characters in *Hommage à Qu Yuan* (*5.05.55*), in both cases evoking without imitating them the archaic inscriptions cast into the ritual bronze vessels of China’s ancient past.

Zao himself speaks often of his horror of “chinoiserie,” and has repeatedly stated that it was this above all that kept him from the medium of ink painting until the early 1970s. Yet at the same time he has frankly acknowledged that at each stage of his career he has drawn heavily upon his knowledge of Chinese ink painting in order to advance his own practice of oil painting. Both the ambivalence and the engagement are visible in every work. The fundamental elements of intercultural dialogue that inform his paintings today can be traced back to the late 1950s. A use of color that comes out of the Western oil painting tradition is—most often—complicated by the recourse to a black that recalls ink. Brute markmaking is reconciled with an aesthetic of the trace that derives from the sharp-tipped Chinese brush. As in the work of his abstractionist contemporaries in Paris, the image field (to borrow Meyer Schapiro’s term) pulls the eye laterally, vertically, obliquely; however, Zao’s image fields also depend on the creation of a textural depth—a depth in surface that tends to confound both matrix and gravity—for which ink painting is the model. Within the surface environments that are thereby created, the image is able to take on an inscriptional, non-architectonic character. Moreover, whereas a familiar Western compositional dynamics sets the macrocosm of the image against the microcosm of pictorial incidents and seeks a unity within the boundaries of the frame, in Zao’s work this is forced into dialogue with a specifically Chinese approach to the edges of the painting, where the edges are negated by the energy flow of the composition: what we see is a fragment of a larger continuum. And the light of Zao’s painting, though it makes full use of hue and tone on a Western model that internalizes the qualities of external light sources, also aims at something else entirely—an internal luminosity that treats light as one of the defining properties of things: an expression of their interior energy. Still, if the elements of dialogue are constant, the terms have evolved over time. In Zao’s late work, the Chinese side carries more weight than before.

Central to the resolutions achieved by Zao’s oil paintings has always been a fluidity and transparency that he seems to have mastered first in lithography, where he made unusually extensive use of water from the beginning. Is it possible that lithography played the same role in relation to his oil paintings of the late fifties and



sixties that ink painting plays for his late work? It is not irrelevant that the two mediums are linked by their paper support, the prestige of which contrasts so strikingly in Chinese and Western art. One may even wonder whether lithography did not in fact function as an acceptably Western stand-in for ink painting at a time when Zao still found it necessary to reject the Chinese medium. His later embrace of ink painting as a separate (if, in the artist's eyes, secondary) practice was made possible by years of success as an oil painter: it reflects a confidence that is as much cultural as strictly pictorial.<sup>1</sup> The subsequent role of ink painting as a touchstone, as this writer sees it, has enabled Zao to establish successful dialogues between the formal heritage of oil painting and an organic logic of form as interacting solid and void—form in process—that finds its model in the textural depth and surface alchemies of classical Chinese ink painting. (A particularly obvious example in the exhibition is *11.11.1996* where the electric storm of black spatters above the buttermilk yellow void seems drawn directly from the artist's ink painting repertory). Just how successful these dialogues are is not always evident in gallery lighting, which betrays the natural north light in which they were painted and leeches the subtleties from the colors. Nor will it be evident to the viewer who is unfamiliar with classical Chinese painting just how difficult it is to achieve a comparable degree of lightness and movement in the alien medium of oil paint. Stranded between two histories of painting, Zao Wou-Ki inhabits his self-defined dialogue in an impressive aloneness; yet this very isolation is the condition of resonances that lie as much in the direction of Joan Mitchell and Pierre Soulages as of the Chinese masters, both classical and modern.<sup>2</sup>

Abstraction is somewhat misleading as a description of Zao's paintings; it would be more accurate to say that their image field hovers between nature and abstraction, once in a while slipping over the edge into the reminiscence of a Chinese landscape schema (*12.12.2000*, for example, or *19.10.2001*). Faithful to a fundamental Chinese aesthetic assumption, he paints an *experience* of the world in which he himself is implicated; the world he summons up is never entirely separate from him. For this reason his paintings can always be read in two directions, either as evocations of the macrocosmic environments of experience or as articulations of a deeply private emotional topography. The latter dimension is an aspect of abstraction about which contemporary artists in the West tend to be coy, perhaps fearing the accusation of an *arrière-garde* romanticism. For Chinese artists, on the other hand, as partial heirs to an explicit literati practice of self-fashioning, the emotional self-reference is fundamental to meaning. Although the artist's practice of entitling the paintings by their date of completion obscures the connection between this image-field topography and his own emotional force field, he has unequivocally acknowledged its existence for a few paintings that register moments of great personal upheaval.<sup>3</sup> But the connection has general significance for his work. If Zao Wou-Ki has always had the privilege of financial comfort, and has led a career so successful as to seem charmed,

his private life has been marked continuously by long-term and short-term emotional dramas with which the artist still contends today. These he has described in his autobiography with a moving simplicity and frankness, just as he has written eloquently of his windowless studio's role as a sanctuary from psychological fears that go back to his childhood. It is clear that the palpable anxiety, even turbulence of certain works, and the beautiful dreams of others, almost always shadowed by darkness and loss, have their roots in the accumulation of specific experiences (though the paintings never, in Zao's words, "tell stories").<sup>4</sup> Most of his dramas have been directly related to his self-displacement from China to Paris, which had unintended and uncontrollable consequences for the artist and those closest to him. Equally, the complex sense of solitude that is evoked by so many paintings is indissociable from a life lived between countries and cultures.

Two fundamental realities of the self-displaced artist are often underestimated. First, (s)he is always stranded and the reconciliation with this experience is always provisional. Second, for such artists the "I" of painting is a psychic necessity; thus what may seem like a delayed romanticism (even, in Zao's case, to the artist himself) is not quite what it appears.<sup>5</sup> Zao Wou-Ki has created an immense world of his own, unique belonging into which we are freely invited—though what we see depends on how willing we are not to be tourists.

1. Zao's account of his return to ink painting in his autobiography (Zao Wou-Ki and Francoise Marquet, *Autoportrait*, Paris: Fayard, 1988) includes the following passage (p. 169):

The practice of ink painting [*encre de Chine*] became beneficial for me personally, just as Michaux had written twenty years earlier in reference to my painting. A longstanding feeling of guilt with regard to what I had left behind in China began to dissipate.

2. Among the modern Chinese masters of ink painting with whose work Zao Wou-Ki's own resonates distantly is Pan Tianshou (1898-1971), with whom Zao clashed at art school in the 1930s when he was a student and Pan a professor. Whatever the shortcomings of Pan's unexpectedly conventional pedagogy, his highly original paintings move the eye around the picture surface in ways that are also to be found in some of Zao's late paintings.
3. See his discussions of *Stèle* (1955), *Ville engloutie* (1956), *Peinture* (1958), and *Nous deux encore* (1973) in *Autoportrait*, pp. 115-116, 120, 156.
4. *Autoportrait*, p. 115.
5. "I confess without embarrassment that I have practised a romantic form of painting that has brought me great joys, the greatest being that of painting itself." *Autoportrait*, p. 121.