

**Mr Jean-Marc Bustamante speech  
on the occasion of his appointment to Zao Wou-Ki's chair  
at the Académie des beaux-arts  
Wednesday May 23rd 2018**

Dear Henri,

Thank you for your kind words, I am very touched.

We do not know each other very well but when I turned to you, I as much wanted to talk to the man than about his path, cultural heritage curator, director of the Musée d'Orsay, president of the Louvre Museum during many years before resuming your own way, that of a free man.

Attentive, curious, daring, your action within these prestigious institutions that you managed, has demonstrated your capacity to step over the epochs, measure them, compare them, appreciate them.

It would seem that you always do what pleases you even in the month of May, with this great come-back among us, academicians.

This freedom of expression, of choice, of attitude, I am here to share it with you all, happy to be among you, selected by my peers for the chair of the late Zao Wou-Ki.

This great artist had a real affection for the academy.

This recognition honored him and he was very proud of belonging to our company.

For the foreign artist he was, it was a landmark, a precious anchoring point that I also feel today among you.

My link with Zao Wou-Ki, it is above all our belonging to the world as a whole, a taste for adventure, a certain persistence, the one that enables us to live fully every minute of our life to fully exercise the freedom of our choices, the diversity of cultures.

A passion for art but also for artists.

Today, Zao Wou-Ki is known all over the world as a great artist, all over this world called global where artists are for the first time appraised more for who they are than for what they represent.

Today, artists free themselves from geographical and cultural boundaries. A deep revolution is taking place right before us, dispersion is a must, artists are considered as the advance scouts of a new world.

General Giap said: « When the enemy concentrates, he loses ground, when he disperses, he loses strength ». That is true at a given time on a battlefield.

On the contrary, dispersion and diversity in artistic production nowadays make certainties topple, now art and artists have their special place in the world.

In spite of those who thought they kept a higher truth, valuation criteria are to be reconsidered, history will catch up with them.

Today, it might be better to be an artist in Caracas than in Saint-Etienne, and Beijing is better than Madrid or Rome. We are facing reverse perspectives which impose to the art lover to suddenly spread his knowledge, his ability to judge and his critical mind far beyond the effects of fashion dictats.

International art is about to disappear, the same as so called 'international' artists.

Zao Wou-Ki has never been an 'international' artist, he went straight to the supreme category that replaces it, universality.

These new artists never disavow their roots.

Zao Wou-Ki always knew what he owed to the great ancestors, rejecting at the same time any form of domination, assimilation or protective influence.

He never belonged to any school, and if China claims him and celebrates him today, it is not only simply as a Franco-Chinese painter but also and mainly because for this country he represents a modern and universal vision of the world. That is why Zao Wou-Ki can be called a pioneer.

And recognition is always granted to the one who has been able to break free from models to create a new space while assessing unprecedented strength and freedom.

The price to pay for this freedom, solitude, but in his case, a solitude always turned towards the others, a solitude among the others.

More than individual solitudes, today artists are islands, they do not belong to anyone, they are like tectonic plates drifting and passing in front of our eyes, they collide, they even disappear, but they can also stabilize and endlessly emit in the mists of time.

'Will last the one who stands in his place', this is a Taoist saying which was very dear to Zao Wou-Ki and which I share.

During a meeting I had with Françoise Marquet, who is there and whom I salute, for her great dedication to the diffusion of her husband's work, and God knows that artists' widows have merit, Françoise told me that one day in 2007, he bluntly declared to her : « I stop painting, I have lost the way to the invisible world ».

This sentence evidences the difference between Zao Wou-Ki and the other painters of the time. Painting was not a job for him, it was a deep craving, a spiritual quest, the one of a man who goes his way from the inside, his work is not programmatic nor conceptual.

Zao Wou-Ki does not seem to have any preconceived plan. He is certainly one of the last great artists able to access innocence.

Zao Wou-Ki does not talk much, most of the time he remains silent, nice and welcoming, he does not like to talk about his work, painting is all he wants, his pictures lead him, bearing testimony of his search, impossible to dilute in a world that organizes itself not to miss anything.

His art comes from the world, his art goes back to it, it is a very long way, composed of many trips back and forth to approach it, grab it, taste it.

Zao Wou-Ki internalizes his work to such an extent that when he surrenders to us his truth it is the wonder of an attempt to make the painter disappear to reveal the world of inside forms and shapes.

Always turned towards the inside with a great discretion and this will, in spite of the chaos and violence, to recover some kind of harmony.

In the end, his work aimed to reveal the result of a fight and may be, a pacified ending.

Henri Michaux, his friend, will say that his works are positive.

A beautiful expression even if a bit obsolete but that has the merit to enhance one of painter's great ambitions.

The artist does not appear as some sort of *deus ex machina*, he can destroy his work at any time, Zao Wou-Ki's work is as much a laboratory as it is a conservatory.

Michaux also says : « It is through nature that Zao Wou-Ki moves, shows himself, is beaten, is revived, falls, rises again, is enthusiastic, is all for it or all against it, seething ... expressing what smothers him. »

The great modernity comes from the fact that the 'looker' is the only one responsible of what he looks at as Duchamp would say it, it is the 'looker' who makes the painting, and I would add makes it or un-makes it.

Zao Wou-Ki is not responsible, he does not try to convince us, his paintings accompany us, they never impose themselves on us. That is why they can be considered as positive.

In the last works of the artist, the world settles down, harmony seems possible when all along this search there have been hand-to-hand fights, the struggle of life against destruction.

The painter always represents the void.

Zao Wou-Ki's strength is to believe in art above all, he believes in the victory of art that heals, of art that saves.

His path is a long and lonely one, some might find his paintings too figurative or too abstract, too decorative not European enough, but what remains of Europe among other continents nowadays.

Zao Wou-Ki drinks from the plural sources that constitute him.

Therefore this saying about a little home that one likes best than a bigger house belonging to someone else, no longer makes sense, for Zao Wou-Ki nothing is vast enough, his paintings make our heads spin as Turner's paintings did in his time.

Truth through immoderation, Zao Wou-Ki can also be like an earthquake sometimes.

It is true that he can choose to show us at certain times elementary spaces, shaken by the violence of the world.

And it is with the utmost jubilation that only he can convey that he dared paint mythical, archetypal places, mountains, clouds, rivers, mist banks, we see them, we imagine them, we scrutinize them, they evaporate.

He proposes us big formats, diptychs, huge polyptychs or only smaller pieces, recollections of Chinese paintings, even if Zao Wou-Ki hated what he called 'Chinese knick-knacks'.

It will take him quite some time to find the right balance that will lift his painting to make it universal.

As far as I am concerned, I have always been interested in the early works and maturity works of the artists and with Zao Wou-Ki, it is the paintings I like best.

The freshness of his early years, the conquest followed by a trail of battles to assert his territory till the accomplishment of the gesture in a great serenity, in the very simplicity that synthesizes and defines everything.

To paraphrase Claude Roy when speaking of Zao Wou-Ki, great painters grow younger as they get older. That was true for him.

But let's take things in the right order and go back in time.

Wou-Ki whose family name was Zao is born in Peking on February 1st 1920, he is the eldest son of a family of seven.

It is an ancient family that goes back to the Song dynasty, a family of cultured intellectuals where painting is honoured, his father was a banker.

Zao Wou-Ki is gifted, he is passionate about literature, history be it Chinese or from the world. He starts drawing very young, he loves painting too, his dedication is a surprise but not thwarted by his family. He learns calligraphy with his grand-father.

And when the young man completes his secondary education, he decides not to go to university and asks his family permission to integrate the School of Fine Arts.

At that time, unprecedented tragic events fall upon China, the country surrenders in the hand of warlords. Insecurity is everywhere, violence is at its highest, people kill other people with the utmost cruelty, heads fall off.

Young Zao Wou-Ki is terrified, it is not unusual to see bodies hanging from the trees in the streets, to witness executions, to see heads rolling on the ground blood spattering around.

Robberies, scavanging, demonstrations against misery and against the presence of foreigners who colonize the country.

The Zao family, even if very rich is shocked by the corruption of Tchang Kai Chek's regime and believes in Mao Tse Toung's long walk, in the hope that China will at last know there is more than hunger, brutal colonisations, the Japanese ones or the equally arrogant one of the English army.

From their point of view, the French presence is more acceptable and this is why young Wou-Ki will choose our country when he decides to leave China.

At that time, the teaching of painting in China was very traditional be it for Western or Chinese painting, Zao Wou-Ki is bored by such an academicism and craves for the lightness, the freshness of French Impressionists of course but also discovers the works of Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso.

Endowed with a great working strength, Zao Wou-Ki spends long hours copying Western masters trying to understand this other way of painting, of drawing, of applying the colours.

Once the war is over, he asks his family the authorization to go to Paris to get to know better the models he admires and judge in situ the influence they might have on his own path.

Zao Wou-Ki decides to leave a sick China that aspires to something different and idealizes a new model where there is no room for art.

As an artist he wants to create his very own way, a way that only belongs to him, he wants to visit the world to make his passions and torments visible but in his own manner.

It is with a rare curiosity and great modesty that he arrives in Paris, settles there and immerses himself in this artistic world rich of a great variety of characters. He will be lucky or shrewd enough to recognize the best and form strong friendly links with them.

He will have the omniscience to celebrate life with talented creators who know that the world is beyond their reach.

When Zao Wou-Ki paints someone's portrait, it is not the person he represents but the relationship he has with said person.

It is natural for him to maintain relations of admirations with poets, painters, thinkers. He does not have in him this concentrate of vanity that might prevent him to have such relationships.

Zao Wou-Ki's art is intertwined with friendship, sharing and homages.

This great interior strength prevents him from fearing anything from the others and it is with the utmost elegance that he forges ahead and builds his bridges between different worlds.

To be able to paint, Zao Wou-Ki needs isolation and therefore it is necessary for him to have an enclosed space which becomes his universe.

His windowless studio with its zenithal light, illuminated by the sky, becomes a sensory tank in which the artist immerses himself every day, there he thinks during long hours before deciding to start action. His work is slow, as slow as the implementation of uncertain shapes, enriched by the exterior world like an imaginary symphonic orchestra composed of poets, painters, musicians from René Char to Henri Michaux, from Soulages to Riopelle or Hartung, from Varese to Pierre Boulez. Zao Wou-Ki is heartened by his painting, his world is ethereal, he loves life, his friends who are still alive will say it: he loved celebration.

Jean Lescure will write for him those magnificent words:

« Modest, smiling with utmost elegance, we are happy you exist.

With you, we love being there, we love what you do, we love what you love, what you are ».

Dominique de Villepin will tell me:

« One cannot love his painting without loving the man ».

It is a very special adequacy that reflects an earlier time.

My own generation can only admire those times when artists lived together, across all origins and disciplines, they were all present at each other's opening as we can see on the photographs showing joyful groups enjoying the simple fact of being together.

In those days, relationships between artists were more simple, more direct, without any hierarchy. The most important thing beyond any prejudice was the respect all those people had one for the other.

Zao Wou-Ki cooks, plays tennis a lot, shares his taste for sports cars with his friend Riopelle, Jean-Michel Meurice remembers quite well the blue of his Mercedes, he travels, goes for a long round trip in the United States with Pierre Soulages and Colette, his wife.

We know but we will not talk about the tragedies that a man has to confront during his love life, Zao Wou-Ki will have his share, moments of distress that combine with happinesses and passions culminating with the bewildering homage to his last wife, Françoise, magnificent painting bursting with joy of living.

He will paint many homages. Not less than 25 paintings will pay his tribute to those he admires.

His self-effacing manner will enable him to reach some sort of superior wisdom.

After copying the masters in his youth, he will make the transition to abstract painting during the 50's when he discovers a stylistic closeness with Paul Klee. He has to take the leap.

He does not fear the coexistence of cultures and chooses to ignore the differences or possible incompatibilities to invent his own language, a very personal vision of the world.

Paintings by Zao Wou-Ki tell no stories. As a matter of fact he does not like to talk about his work nor to explain it and it is true that finally they do very well without words.

Zao Wou-Ki knows that Chinese painting requests a real agility of the eye which is not very European. For him, a painting is to be looked at and walked through with the eyes. He said that books were boring to read when, for paintings, the looker goes where he wants and visually decides the path he wants to take to travel within the space of the painting.

At first glance, Zao Wou-Ki's paintings look like landscapes, but the artist does not like landscapes, his works are not landscapes, they might have been.

In Zao Wou-Ki's paintings, we are confronted to larger universes where multiple spaces slide and get tangled up.

With no landmarks, no visible architecture, his paintings are in constant expansion.

Nature is there, or it seems to be there, you perceive it, sometimes you recognize it and then it disappears, it is no longer there, but this should be it, but suddenly no more details, it vanishes and melts into a blinding light and a frozen color.

Zao Wou-Ki breathes life into colour, he makes colour turn into a real language. Colors are screeching, they often overflow and run freely past the shapes.

His refusal to paint from life is significant, even if he will commit a few watercolours, he prefers to stand aside from his model, he does not copy, he does not construe.

Nature is not his unique model either. I am, you are, he is, we all are his models, we are part of a whole.

The painting does not need to be recognized, it does not need a title, Zao Wou-Ki embraces the world and celebrates it.

And to achieve this, he uses all technical means to make each painting brilliant and resonant.

Zao Wou-Ki is both the conductor and the musician, he masters all the painter's tools with talent, endowed with a great dexterity, he also proves to be a virtuoso.

In his works, the light quivers and the wind blows.

Because of his training as a painter and as a calligraph, he multiplies the gestures and the strokes of his brushes leaving nearly invisible traces. Careful work, layer after layer, he reveals to us immense and vast rising liquid spaces.

Overlays, overlaps, coverage, transparency, free flow, all enabling the light to pass from a deep darkness to a blinding glow.

And to complete the master's training, I hope that those simple words will create for you an intense desire to discover the big format paintings that will be exhibited at the end of May at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris.

Now let me present you on the screen one of the most beautiful paintings that especially moves me, a successful synthesis of his long journey, a painting that I would call universal, and which is modestly entitled « Homage to Matisse ».

This beautiful painting refers to Matisse's usual theme: the window, four large colour stripes so very well painted enframe the vastness, the cosmogonic void, the great window opened on the abyss, the search for the unspeakable and the timeless.

I imagine that it is while walking through this great darkness that haunted the artist and that still haunts us today that the painter found his way and joined the unthinkable.

Thank you Wou-Ki.