

GAGOSIAN

SURFACE

A Friendship That Bridged Art and Architecture, On View In New York
A new exhibition at Gagosian displays I.M. Pei's influence on Zao Wou-Ki, one of the leading Abstract Expressionists of the post-war generation.

Barry Samaha



"Zao Wou-Ki" at Gagosian Gallery. Photo courtesy of Rob McKeever/Gagosian Gallery....

Friction in the creative realms provide the most thrilling narratives, prompting long, heated debates about who is better, or whose legacy is more prolific. From Yves Saint Laurent and Karl Lagerfeld to Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Eugène Delacroix to Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, the history of good-natured—though, more often, bitter—competition and how it has fueled the work of both parties has been well documented.

But there are many instances when camaraderie has created a kind of battery that charges artistic expression. Such is the case with Zao Wou-Ki and I. M. Pei, two contemporaries whose friendship is the subject of “Zao Wou-Ki,” a showcase at Gagosian on Madison Avenue that explores the output of one of the leading Abstract Expressionist painters of the post-war era, and the way he was influenced by the Pritzker Prize-winning architect.

“The exhibition we are presenting is a tribute to this fantastic story of artistic and cultural friendship,” says Jean-Olivier Després, director at Gagosian Paris. “Zao Wou-Ki was a painter living in France, while I.M. Pei was an architect based in the United States. Both of them had immense professional success.”



Zao Wou-Ki. Photo courtesy of ProLitteris/Gagosian Galle

The fact that Zao and Pei practiced different mediums could be a reason why they didn't fall into the roster of artist rivalries, but neither really had the kind of egocentric reputations that would stir unsolicited false reports. (Though, the similarities in their backgrounds and modernist ideologies that they brought to their work could have made for a juicy A&E tell-all.)

Like Pei, Zao was born in China to a privileged family, and had an intense fascination with Western concepts. But where Pei went to the U.S. and delved deep into the study of the International Style, Zao settled in Paris to immerse himself in the work of Expressionists and Surrealists. The result being that the visible differences in their oeuvres outweigh their comparisons.

“He visited museums in order to see the acclaimed works of Paul Cézanne, Modigliani, and many others whose artworks he had only seen in reproductions,” Després says of Zao's immersion in the French art scene. “At the same time, he met a generation of contemporary artists in Paris with whom he remained close for the rest of his life.”

This included Pei, who Zao met in 1951 after the architect saw an exhibition of his paintings at the Pierre Loeb gallery, and asked for an introduction. Quickly becoming friends and taken by how Zao blended Western and Eastern motifs, Pei enlisted him to create a series of monumental, ink-on-paper paintings that reflected their Chinese origins more prominently. Indeed, according to Després, this commission—which was housed in Pei's design of the Fragrant Hill Hotel in Beijing, China in 1982—would become the basis of Zao subsequent works. “This was the first of many professional collaborations,” he says.

These prototypes, along with seven paintings that Zao created in 2006 are just some of the highlights in the exhibition. They clearly demonstrate the staccato-style motion of his brushstrokes, forming a visual rhythm that is both steeped in the traditions of Chinese calligraphy and informed by modern ideas. The lack of distinguishable forms on Zao's paintings lends itself to a deeper appreciation of the way his gestures conjure emotion; the way his seemingly spontaneous drips and splatters not only fill the void on a canvas, but an internal one, too. And it was with the nudge from Pei that enabled Zao to fully embrace this type of execution. “Pei had asked Zao Wou-Ki to make large-scale ink works, so Pei could be seen as the instigator

of this series and similar works,” Després says. “Years later, he made this particular series on large Chinese paper.”

Now, six years after Zao’s death, these paintings have become a hot commodity in international markets, going for upwards of seven figures at auction. Adding to the general interest in the works is the fact that many were owned by Pei, whose personal collection went up for sale after his passing earlier this year. It goes to show that even in death, the friendship is mutually beneficial. “A very humorous photograph was taken of them years ago in front of what is now the gallery, where the exhibition will be presented,” Després says. “The show might be predestined.”