

The Sublime World of Fernando Zóbel

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By Marian Ang | Mar 29, 2023

Following Museo Nacional del Prado's recent landmark retrospective *Zóbel. The Future of the Past*, Sotheby's Hong Kong Spring Sales Modern Art auctions presents three rare paintings by the artist. We take a look at the exceptional life of the distinguished painter, scholar, collector and patron of the arts.

The indefatigable Enrique Francisco Fernando Zóbel de Ayala y Montojo Torrentegui Zambrano (1924-1984) was "born with a complicated mind". Trained in the Philippines, Europe and America, graduated from Harvard and finally settled in his beloved Spain in the 1960s, Zóbel developed a deep and dazzling knowledge of the artistic and literary traditions of the West and Asia. His artistic practice became defined by an intense, boundless curiosity and energy that instinctively sought an expression of the transcendental, rather than a preoccupation with channelling certain styles or techniques.

Created after the artist's life-changing move to Spain, *Naranja Y Ocre* (1966), *Bernard Childs pintando mi retrato en su estudio de Paris* (1967), and *Sevilla, Invierno a las cuatro de la tarde* (1968) exemplify the artist's newfound joy in the creative process, the return of colour to his work, and his experimentations with geometric forms inspired by the Spanish towns of Cuenca and Seville. The 1960s were a time of major international recognition for Zóbel, who was included in major institutional surveys of 20th century Spanish art, including *Before Picasso; After Miró* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York (1960), *Modern Spanish Painting* at the Tate Gallery in London (1962) and as part of the Spanish Pavilion at the 31st Venice Biennale (1962).

As well as the recent Museo Nacional del Prado retrospective, *Zóbel. The Future of the Past*, which explored Zóbel's long dialogues with paintings in the Prado and other museum collections around the world through 42 paintings, 51 sketchbooks and 85 drawings and graphic works loaned from collections in Spain, the Philippines and the US, Zóbel has been honoured with major institutional solo retrospectives at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid (2003), while The Ayala Museum mounted a survey of Zóbel's art titled *Contrapuntos* at the 2017 Venice Biennale, 55 years after his debut there in 1962.

The Path to Abstraction

The son of an industrialist father and an aristocratic mother, Zóbel grew up in Manila and then Madrid, until his parents retreated to the Philippines in 1936 following the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. As a painter Zóbel was self-taught, starting to paint after being bed bound for a year due to a spinal ailment in 1942. Admitted into Harvard in 1946 to read literature, Zóbel befriended a group of artists who were connected with the Boston Expressionists. Early works from Zóbel's oeuvre reflected their influence, a mixture of symbolic expressionism and romanticism, and his first ever group exhibition was as one of their number at Swetzoff Gallery in 1951.





Mark Rothko, *No. 1 (Royal Red and Blue)*. lot Sold for 75,122,500 USD

However, it was a 1954 exhibition by Mark Rothko in Rhode Island that committed Zóbel to abstraction. “Completely dazzled” by what he saw, after years of experimentation he unveiled his infamous *Saetas* series. Spanish for “darts”, as well as a dramatic and improvised type of flamenco song, Zóbel used a glass hypodermic syringe filled with oil paint to spatter thin lines of paint onto canvas. The lean, pared down compositions sought to capture the essence of a “movement observed and felt, never imitated, yet...clearly expressed”. These lines “vibrated” with energy upon the field of colour, paying homage to Rothko’s own study of colour. Zóbel’s *Serie Negra* (“Black Series”) followed in 1959 to 1962. Black gestural brushstrokes on massive white canvases blended Zóbel’s drawing and painting techniques, owing much to the Abstract Expressionists but also Chinese calligraphy, which he had studied in 1958. Their fresh and spontaneous appearance was in fact achieved by multiple drafts. Whilst his contemporaries brashly overwhelmed their canvas with paint, Zóbel wrestled with the problem of how to use light to suggest volume or depth, with order and simplicity taking precedence.

Life in Colour

In 1960, after years of an identity crisis and suffering from a deep depression, Zóbel resigned from the family business in the Philippines, and moved to Madrid in order to devote himself entirely to his art. Spain was, in many ways, the love of Zóbel's life. Returning to Spain also saw Zóbel's return to colour after years of ascetic abstraction. Naranja Y Ocre (1966) is marked by a sublime colour interplay that oscillates between warmth and coldness. The titular orange and ochre are separated by a swathe of black virtuoso strokes honed during Zóbel's *Saetas* and Black series. Light wraps itself around these forms, recalling the wings of a bird taking flight. The theme of memory took centre stage in Zóbel's work at this stage of his career, in particular the memory of a lived experience. Zóbel likened it to Marcel Proust's great work, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, where the reader completes his encounter with the work through his own subjective experiences and memories.



Fernando Zóbel, Naranja Y Ocre . Estimate: 1,500,000 - 2,200,000 HKD

“I decided to try a kind of painting based on memory; by this, I mean a climate painting, leaving the viewer to complete it with his memories. The realist focuses on that loaf of bread, that flower. I’d like to create a climate in which the bread, the flower, were born of the viewer’s imagination.”

Fernando Zóbel



Fernando Zóbel, *Bernard Childs pintando mi retrato en su estudio de Paris* . Estimate: 1,800,000 - 3,200,000 HKD

In Dialogue



Fernando Zóbel, *The Dream of the Damsel*. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Purchase through the generosity of Paul J. Haldeman. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College

With his return to colour, Zóbel began to produce a lifelong series of dialogues with paintings by other artists he saw in museums and studios – from Monet and Turner to Tintoretto, amongst many others. One of the most unusual of these was a humorous “dialogue” with his friend and mentor, Bernard Childs (1910-1985), an American painter and printmaker: *Bernard Childs pintando mi retrato en su estudio de Paris* (1967) which translates to “Bernard Childs painting my portrait in his studio in Paris”. Childs had pioneered the technique of engraving metal plates directly with power tools, a technique that Zóbel adopted in his own etching and printmaking practice. Both were interested in exploring the formal qualities of line, space, light and colour, and they developed a fond relationship over the years, exchanging ideas and meeting on multiple occasions. In 1967 Zóbel paid a visit to Bernard Childs and his family in Paris. Childs asked Zóbel to buy himself a yellow shirt for his portrait sitting. The present work captures sharp lines and shades of ochre and grey hinting at the outline of a canvas propped against an easel and the half-hidden head of Childs hard at work.



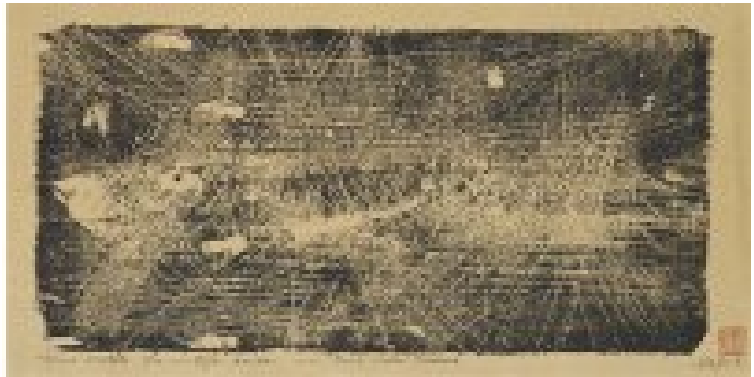
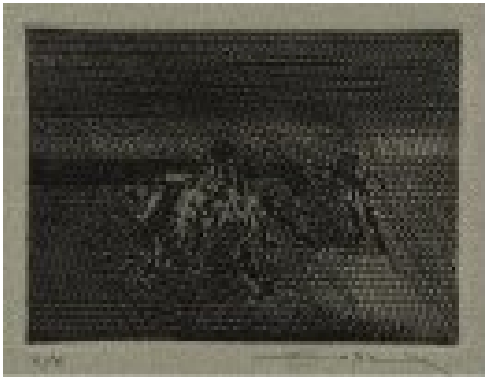
PHOTOGRAPH OF BERNARD CHILDS IN CUENCA AUGUST 1967 TAKEN BY Fernando Zóbel DE AYALA, IMAGE COURTESY OF JUDITH CHILDS.



FERNANDO ZÓBEL, SKETCHBOOK NO. 62, 1967. FERNANDO ZÓBEL ARCHIVE, LIBRARY AND RESEARCH SUPPORT CENTER, JUAN MARCH FOUNDATION, MADRID.

“There is nothing more pleasurable than watching somebody do something he knows how to do really well. [...] When we leave the studio, we’re in a daze, our heads bursting, and we go to Charbonnel to buy materials.”

Fernando Zóbel on Bernard Childs



left: Fernando Zobel, *Fútbol Estado VII (Football. State VII)*; right: Fernando Zobel, *Sin Título (Untitled)*. lot sold for 11,250 HKD.

Towards the Sublime

At the end of the 1960s, Zóbel’s work became more geometric, while his style became sparser and colder. *Sevilla, Invierno a las cuatro de la tarde* (1968), which translates to “Seville, Winter at four in the afternoon”, is typical of this era, with the arched architectural space articulated by pencil lines, and two delicate white-painted panels that simulate the effect of a weak shaft of light along a darkened corridor, illuminating a elegantly arched alcove at the farthest end. After Zóbel’s exhibition at Seville’s Galería La Pasarela in 1967, this city started to form part of his life. He set up a studio in Seville with close friend and painter Carmen Laffón, and José Soto.



Fernando Zóbel, *Sevilla, Invierno a las cuatro de la tarde* . Estimate: 600,000 - 1,000,000 HKD

These three works mark a vibrant period of experimentation at the height of Zóbel's love affair with Spain. Celebrating an important transition in his artistic growth, it would be remembered as a period where Zóbel sought out new modes of expression, bringing together memories of the past as well as setting out his vision of the transcendental and establishing a relationship between the observed world and our most intimate human sensibilities.

About the Author

Marian Ang is a Hong Kong-based art writer and researcher, and a regular Sotheby's contributor.