Abstract Defiance: Fernando Zóbel and the Rise of Spanish Abstract Art in Francoist Spain by Natalia C. Siy

Abstract

Spanish-Filipino painter and collector Fernando Zobel played a vital role in the propagation and preservation of abstract art in Francoist Spain and the Philippines, and the institutionalisation of the same. Zobel stood at the intersection of history and modern art by offering fresh perspectives not only through his own art but also through his advocacy, support, and endeavours in cultural preservation. This paper examines his life and legacy through a close reading of Zobel's art and its cultural context- most notably the founding of the Museo de Arte Abstracto Español in Cuenca and the Ateneo Art Gallery in Manila. Using a qualitative, interpretive approach, this study interprets how Zobel's art and legacy constituted a quiet yet potent form of aesthetic dissent against the rigid, state-sanctioned realism of Francoist Spain and its dominant influence on Spanish modern art at the time. Shaped by his transnational identity and informed by contemporary socio-political context, Zobel's abstraction offered an alternative vision of cultural preservation and artistic freedom by bridging continents, methods, and ideologies.

Fernando Zóbel and the Rebirth of Spanish Modern Art

On a limestone spur in central Spain, the small medieval city of Cuenca sits regally, high above the Huécar and Júcar rivers. Founded by the Moors in the 8th century, it has been witness to generations of history. In its current incarnation, Cuenca is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, promoting its cultural and historical significance. But beyond Cuenca's well-preserved medieval and colonial architecture, indeed, behind the walls of its famous *Casas Colgadas* or Hanging Houses, Cuenca holds another attraction to be proud of, the *Museo de Arte Abstracto Español.*

Founded by Fernando Zóbel, a Spanish-Filipino painter, scholar, and patron in 1966, this museum represents more than just a collection of paintings—it marks a turning point in the story of Spanish Modern Art. Before the Spanish Civil War brought Franco to power, modern art was gaining momentum in Spain. Surrealism, in particular, began to flourish with artists like Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró achieving international recognition. But after Franco took control, his regime used art to shape public opinion and promote its own ideologies. Franco enforced strict censorship and endorsed an "official" style of art that reflected the values of his dictatorship. Artists were expected to work in realistic styles on primarily Catholic subjects or those that glorified the military, if not glorifying the dictator himself. However, within this restrictive cannon, a new style emerged, one born in post-modern Europe and the West, which made its way to Spain through travel and exposure to contemporary art beyond Spain, and upended the preconceived notions of the enforced traditional art: abstraction. And one artist who both advocated for and practiced this new art style in Spain during the era of realism and restriction was the Manila-born Fernando Zobel. This paper delves into Fernando Zóbel's life. It

examines how his work bridged continents, ideologies, and artistic traditions through his deliberate turn to abstraction and his visionary establishment of modern art institutions. It explores how he enacted a form of aesthetic dissent that preserved cultural memory, fostered artistic freedom, and as a result, reimagined the role of modernism in shaping national identity in both Spain and the Philippines.

Fernando Zóbel, shaped both by his transnational identity and his experiences on the American East Coast; both by tradition and modernity; both by deep scholarship and a love for experimentation, had a different vision. His abstract works—delicate, thoughtful, precise—stood in quiet contrast to the dominant artistic style of Francoist Spain. While the regime demanded realism in art, Zóbel's deeply held beliefs about artistic responsibility and cultural preservation not only informed the reflective, calligraphic quality of his work but also motivated his efforts to support and institutionalize abstract art in Spain and in the Philippines. His founding of the *Museo de Arte Abstraco Español* in Cuenca and the Ateneo Art Gallery in Manila stand as key expressions of this dual commitment – to creating art and securing its future. In this way, subtly challenging the prevailing traditionalism in art through modern abstraction, thus positioning abstraction as a form of intellectual and cultural resistance— a soft "aesthetic dissent."

This paper has employed an extensive qualitative and interpretive approach outlined in the next section, followed by an introduction to the socio-political climate of post WW2 Spain, and then an exploration into the nature of the art and culture scene under the Franco regime to contextualise the detailed study of Fernando Zobel. Then comes a deep dive into the artist's early years and his emerging style through his various influences before the subsequent, more nuanced and detailed analysis of his artistic voice and body of work. The examination then continues to further explore Zobel's role, beyond that of the artist, in the context of Francoist Spain and how the work and experiences of his youth led to his lasting impact on the art scene, not just as an artist, but as a collector and advocate dedicated to cultural preservation. This study concludes with a final reflection on his legacy in both Abstract Modernism in Spain and the Philippines and his lasting impact on the development and preservation of cultural identity.

Methodologies

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach combining several approaches. First, this study utilizes art historical formal analyses of key works across the breadth of Zobel's artistic career at different points in his aesthetic development (Saetas, Serie Negra, etc) to study how his evolving style differed from the tradition and what this connotated. Second, historical examination and contextualisation of the socio-political climate of Francoist Spain was employed to illustrate the constraints and restrictions artists had to face under the regime, juxtaposed with new developing movements outside. Third, a biographical analysis of Zobel's transnational background from boyhood to higher education, personal connections, family, and roots was conducted to contextualise the evolution of both his artistic pursuit and style. Fourth, a cultural critique was used for examining his role in advocacy through the establishment and support of museums and art collections as acts of cultural preservation and resistance directly

resulting from his personal experience with erasure in a post WW2 era. Finally, comparative studies linking a multitude of influences such as American Abstraction, Japanese techniques, and Philippine traditions were employed to demonstrate the hybridity and innovation in Zobel's work.

This combination of stylistic, biographical, historical, and interpretive analysis supports the position that Zobel's contributions not only impacted the art world through the influence of his own art but also through his advocacy and support of emerging modernist movements and, as a result, were deeply intertwined with acts of cultural resilience and aesthetic dissent. These methods can be justified because they enact a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Zóbel's work and actions within their complex socio-historical context. Specifically, art historical analysis involves a detailed examination of Zobel's stylistic evolution and thematic interests. They reveal how formal choices in the visual medium can act as subtle forms of messaging and, in this case, resistance. Thus, this approach is essential to substantiate claims about aesthetic dissent embedded within his artworks. Next, a contextual historical inquiry positions Zobel's endeavours within the broader socio-political context of Francoist Spain. This provides the necessary background and contextual cues to accurately interpret his artistic development, the deeper meaning behind his work, and thus the intention and impact of the same. Understanding these cues clarifies the significance of his non-confrontational approach.

Further, biographical critique provides insight into how Zóbel's transnational identity and personal experiences informed his artistic philosophy and institutional decisions, which further support the personal, cultural, potentially political, and definitively socially conscious motivations behind and nature of his work. Next, the cultural critique through archival and institutional research establishes justification for the exploration of the impact of Zobel's patronage– such as the founding of independent museums which contributed to both the preservation and promotion of modernist art, functioning as tangible acts of cultural agency under repression. Finally, comparative analysis contextualises Zobel in the global modernist environment. This illustrates the multicultural and transnational influences on his work- that is, its hybrid-like quality– which in turn is a direct artistic opposition to the artistic tradition of Francoist Spain. Thus, its very existence is the definition of aesthetic dissent.

Collectively, these methods come together and provide a rigorous, interdisciplinary framework that substantiates the thesis that Zóbel's artistic practice and advocacy together constitute forms of aesthetic dissent amidst oppressive political conditions in Francoist Spain.

The Franco Regime and the Socio-Political Climate of Postwar Spain

To understand Zóbel and the trajectory of his artistic work in Spain, it is essential to first consider the sociopolitical climate of Francoist Spain – a context that profoundly shaped the country's cultural and artistic landscape.

General Francisco Franco was a rebel leader during the Spanish Civil War. The Nationalistas carried him to power at the end of the war in 1939, and he ruled, thereafter, as a dictator until his

death in 1975. However, the majority of the European and Spanish intelligentsia had allied with the defeated Republicans so the new regime was left with little intellectual respectability– moreover, Picasso's *Guernica (1937)* had exposed the ruthlessness of the Franco regime to the world Many artists had died or were living in exile as a result of the civil war and those that remained lived in a vacuum (Slomski; "Art and Diplomacy"). Thus, "The Franco regime became more concerned with control of possible alternative cultures through censorship than with the creation of an original culture" (Slomski). However, liberal elements survived and continued to assert their presence despite this repression. A quiet countercultural movement began to take shape–artists turned to abstraction, symbolism, and experimental forms as a means of subtle resistance. They formed collectives and began travelling to art metropolises around the world in order to keep up with the international art community and develop their work beyond the stifling, regulated traditions supported and enforced by the regime.

Under Franco for years, Spain was isolated, poor, and plagued by internal strife (Scott). In World War II, they had allied with the Axis powers and were spared from the worst of the war's destruction. But this was also the reason Spain was not included in the Marshall Plan after the war, which would rebuild much of Western Europe and bring in economic stability. Thus, Spain continued to lag behind its European counterparts in terms of economic, political, and cultural development. But the forces that would change Spain's course were on the horizon. The war had brought devastation on many countries and populations, and widespread discontent created fertile ground for the rise of communism, which led to the onset of the Cold War between the United States and the Communist bloc. Fortuitously, "Franco was a devout anti-Communist dating back to the Civil War; this made him attractive to the United States" (Scott), which helped keep the dialogue between the two nations, and thus the two cultures open.

Isolation to Internationalism: Modern Art and Francoist Cultural Diplomacy

In the meantime, a new art movement had been growing in New York City through the 1940s and 1950s. Abstract Expressionism emerged as the dominant movement in the international art world, where it came to symbolize post-war freedom, individuality, and artistic innovation – values in stark contrast to the cultural repression of Francoist Spain. Artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko were pioneers of this new movement that "served to unite the two dominant aspects of abstract expressionist art: a non-figurative commitment that reduced representational objects to basic geometric forms (abstraction) and the improvisational brushstrokes expressing emotion or conceptual states (expressionism)" (Toteva 364). It was at this time that Fernando Zóbel left Manila to pursue his studies at Harvard, and it was this very exposure to American Art during his education and early career that allowed him to engage with abstract expressionism not just through imitation, but through thoughtful adaptation. "It was upon seeing an exhibition of Mark Rothko, one of the American Abstract Expressionists, in 1955 that Zóbel realized abstraction's potential" (Paras-Perez 38).

In 1953, the US and Spain signed the Pacts of Madrid — three executive agreements that essentially brought Spain out from isolation. In the later decades of his rule, Franco began permitting some types of modern art, provided they weren't observed as critical of his regime. This became an opportunity: "Keen to brush off its image as a poor and backward dictatorship, Spain put modern art at the forefront of its efforts to present the country internationally as sophisticated and progressive" ("Art and Diplomacy"). "Seizing on cultural diplomacy as a key component of its nationalist agenda, the regime marketed Spain's abstract artists as members of an international avant-garde while at the same time emphasizing the "Spanishness" of their art." Soon after the signing of the pacts, two exhibitions of modern art assembled by the New York City MoMa were shown in Barcelona (1956) and Madrid (1958). In exchange, Spanish art was exhibited at the MoMA (New Spanish Painting and Sculpture, 1960), and at the Tate Gallery in London. Thus, the arts spearheaded Spain's efforts to break free from the long-standing isolation that had defined its postwar identity.

It was within this shifting cultural landscape that Fernando Zóbel would find his place—not just as an artist, but as an advocate for new ideas and modern aesthetics. His life, work, and conservation efforts would come to reflect the very internationalism that Spain, emerging from decades of isolation, sought to project– yet simultaneously restricted under Franco.

Making of a Modernist: Zóbel, The Early Years

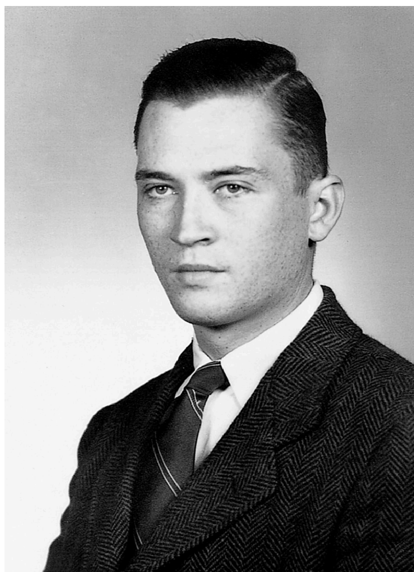

Fig. 1. Fernando Zóbel in the year of his graduation from Harvard University, 1949.

Fernando Zobel was a businessman, a painter, an art collector, and a general citizen of the world. He was born in the Philippines in 1924 to one of the country's wealthiest *insulares*[1] families, engaged in many businesses and industries. Even as a child, his family took him on many travels, and he was able to see the world (Paterno). Because of his father's businesses, the family was constantly on the move, and Zóbel spent his early years in the Philippines and Spain, as well as the rest of Europe (he spent a short time at school in Switzerland), returning to the Philippines as a young adult in 1936. He completed his primary education in the Philippines and was preparing to leave for university abroad when World War II broke out. This prevented him from leaving the country and so he enrolled at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila. However, at 18, he developed a spinal condition that necessitated him staying bedridden for a year. It was during this convalescence that he picked up a sketch book and rediscovered his love for drawing and art– in his own words;

[1] Insulares

"For a whole year, I was bedridden. I had all the time in the world to think, and it was then that I started to consider the idea of becoming an artist" (Zóbel, interview).

World War II was devastating for the Philippines, especially for Manila, where intense bombings left the city in ruins and resulted in the widespread destruction of its artistic and cultural heritage. Zóbel, the young man who was already beginning to explore his interest in art, bore witness to this tragedy. So when he was finally able to leave for Harvard University in 1946, he left "behind a city reduced to ashes as a result of the Japanese resistance and the American bombardments of World War II" (Pereda). This destruction of cultural heritage, including artworks and vital primary sources, created a profound gap in the ability to reconstruct and understand Philippine history. Something that the young Zóbel not only understood, but built his beliefs about cultural preservation around– the conservation and preservation of art, culture, and heritage. Zobel would return home to the Philippines and would establish the Ateneo Art Gallery, partly as a cultural reconstruction. "For Zóbel imagined the future having seen a beloved city brought to its knees by World War II" (Veric).

Zobel thrived in Boston. He was a successful student, engaged in learning about history and literature, but continued to be an active participant in the world he was in. He was introduced to and became enamored by the works of modern artists. He immersed himself in the Boston art community, and his exploration and appreciation of the avant-garde and modern blossomed. He admired the works of Boston Expressionist painters such as Hyman Bloom and Jim and Reed Pfeufer, he even developed a close friendship with Bloom and was mentored by Reed Pfeufer, which heavily influenced his art style. In his early years at Harvard, Zóbel's paintings reflected the Boston School's style of romanticism and symbolic expressionism. Many of his earliest works were landscapes in figuration. Zobel held his first ever exhibit in Boston in 1951 as part of the Boston Expressionists. He was active at the Harvard Alumni Bulletin, creating weekly caricatures for them. It was while there that he published an article for the Harvard Alumni Bulletin (1948-1952) which revealed his particular fascination with the avant-garde artist, architect, and the founder of the Bauhaus movement, Walter Gropius (Pereda). He remained increasingly drawn to abstraction. But his time in the US was coming to a close. He returned to Manila in 1952 ostensibly to work for his family business. By this time, painting was already central to Zóbel's intellectual and creative life.

Upon returning to Manila after his studies at Harvard, Zóbel immersed himself in the local art scene, befriending and supporting young, up-and-coming painters like himself. He exhibited with artists of the Philippine Art Gallery, which was the nucleus for the development and exhibition of modern art in the Philippines at that time. His paintings, while showing modernist tendencies, still portrayed the textures of daily existence in the Philippines.

Gesture, Line, and Space: The Artistic Evolution of Zóbel's Abstract Style

Like most Filipino painters of the day, Zobel took inspiration from the scenes that were in his reality — religious processions, local customs, and street life. However, unlike most Filipino painters then, he stepped away from painting them in figurative realism, breaking away from the

traditional art the likes of Fernando Amorsolo, who was widely recognized as the most gifted artist of that era. Amorsolo, “the pastoral painter whose light, in the opinion of Quijano de Manila, evoked the “rapture of a sensualist” in love with the Philippine earth” (Veric).

Zóbel was as much an intellectual as he was an artist, he engaged in a lifelong dialogue with both the past and the future. Though his work is unmistakably modern, he consistently honored the artistic traditions from which he drew inspiration. This reverence is perhaps most evident in his long-running series *Diálogos*, in which he entered into visual conversations with great artists of the past. Each canvas in the series reads as a discussion between Zóbel and the masterpieces that had shaped his own artistic vision. “Yet, he wasn’t just interpreting that work or paying homage to the original artist. Through his own paintings, he propelled the original work of art into a future that he thought they ought to have, a future he created by pulling on an emotion he retained from these inner conversations, paring them down to their essences” (Zóbel, *AAP Bulletin*).

(Processional Float), 1953. Polymer on wood, 119 × 59.5 cm. Ateneo Art Gallery.

Perhaps it was the intellectual in Zobel that attracted him to this alternative idea of a non-objective art, which would later be called abstract. Zobel began stepping away from figuration: “His *Carroza* (1953), which won the gold prize in the modern category of the 1953 semi-annual competition of the Art Association of the Philippines, was an abstracted form of the ornately decorated float used for religious processions in the Catholic country. Even then, he was less preoccupied with capturing the essence of a subject than its form” (Chikiamco). “The art critic Ricaredo Demetillo wrote on Zóbel’s art then: “The subject matter of Zóbel’s paintings generally is of a representational nature, even when he is at his most abstract. You somehow feel that he is concerned with purging the object of its surface features to reveal the form beneath, that he eschews the retinal impression to contemplate purely thingness and compositional relationship of objects” (Demetillo). Zobel taught an “Introduction to Contemporary Painting” class at the Ateneo de Manila University in the early 1950s and included in his lecture notes the following: a “painting need have no relation with the appearance of natural objects. It can deal with either emotions (organic school: abstract expressionism) or with constructions (geometric school)” (Zóbel, “Lecture Outline” 190). Clearly, he was moving away from the figurative school, shifting the focus from realistic external forms toward the expression of inner reality of emotion and concept.

Upon the invitation of Boston mentors Jim Pfeufer and Reed Champion, Zóbel returned to the United States in 1954 as an artist in residence at the Rhode Island School of Design. Zóbel

took advantage of the time to explore the art scenes and galleries in Providence, Boston, and New York. He attended an exhibit of a then relatively unknown Mark Rothko and was completely enraptured by Rothko's use of color not merely as form, but as expressive content. "He would later remark: "Rothko's demonstration convinced me completely…I felt obliged to paint, but I had abandoned the need to represent" (Magaz Sangro 119). He began exploring his own approach within this non-figurative, non-objective form of painting. It was upon returning to Manila that Zobel took a business trip to Japan. His experience of Japan reflected in both his artistic and intellectual perceptions. This had a profound effect on how he thought of his art. In Zóbel's *Saeta* series, the influence of Eastern techniques — particularly the use of negative space and gestural brushstrokes — begins to emerge. Zóbel's *Saetas* were thematic of "movement expressed metaphorically through the use of line. The movement of leaves, blades of grass, trees, birds, people; movement observed, sensed, never imitated, but, I hope, translated" (Pérez-Madero 19).

After Zobel's exposure to the American artist Mark Rothko, he ultimately solidified his move into abstraction permanently. He began to discover his own speed and style, and welcomed the oriental influence from his time in Japan; and it was the intersection of all of these experiences which solidified the creation of Zobel's *Saeta* series in 1957. Arguably, his most well-known series of works.

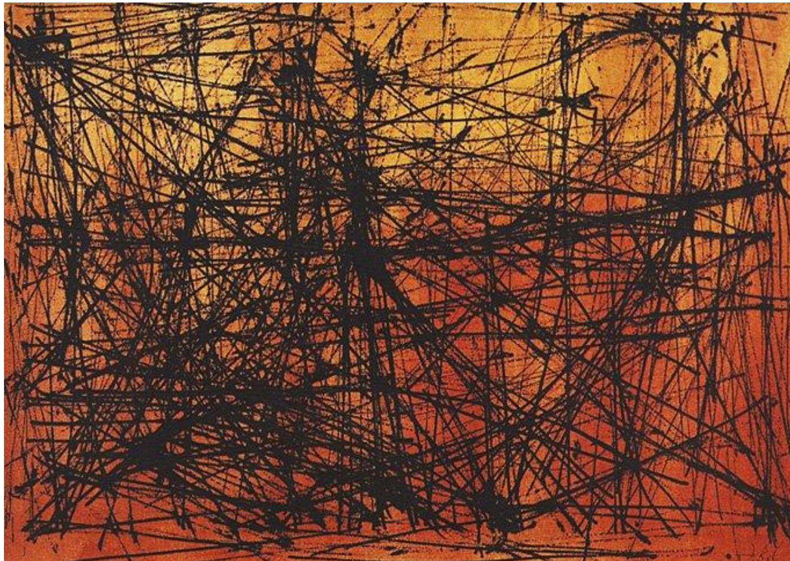

Fig. 3. Fernando Zóbel, **Saeta 22**, 1957, oil on canvas, 61 × 91 cm. Jose Joya collection.

Saetas 22 is a part of the Saetas series that can be selected to discuss the sum of the whole. Measuring 61 x 91 cm, the canvas has been washed in a mix of red and orange hues, with black lines densely populating the surface. With the lines so evenly dispersed, Zobel makes minimal use of negative space, unlike his later work *Icaro*. Regardless of their prevalence throughout the canvas, there is evidence that Zobel was intentional with the placement of these

lines. They converge to make focal points that form an implied grid across the canvas. It is these points that draw the gaze of the spectator initially. Despite the innate static nature of lines, they are responsible for the dynamic quality of this composition. This dynamism has been derived from the intentional congestion of the densely populated line work– creating a sense of movement that constantly draws the viewer's gaze frantically across the composition. The lines vary in width, with some being more precise and surgical and others heavier handed. The placement of each, while adhering to some type of grid, feels frenetic and rushed.

In Saetas 22, the tension is fostered by gesture and motion as opposed to the contrast seen in *Icaro.* It's a geometric entanglement, converging at angles and sharp edges. This is also a major point where we see the Japanese influence on Zóbel's art, that is, " Zóbel moves away from expressionist dramatism and bases his works on the nakedness of the line and the movement suggested through these strokes, which cross the space and intermingle in the painting. With this method, he achieves that vibrant and disturbing effect of Japanese gardens that at the same time makes us feel calm and tranquility."[2]

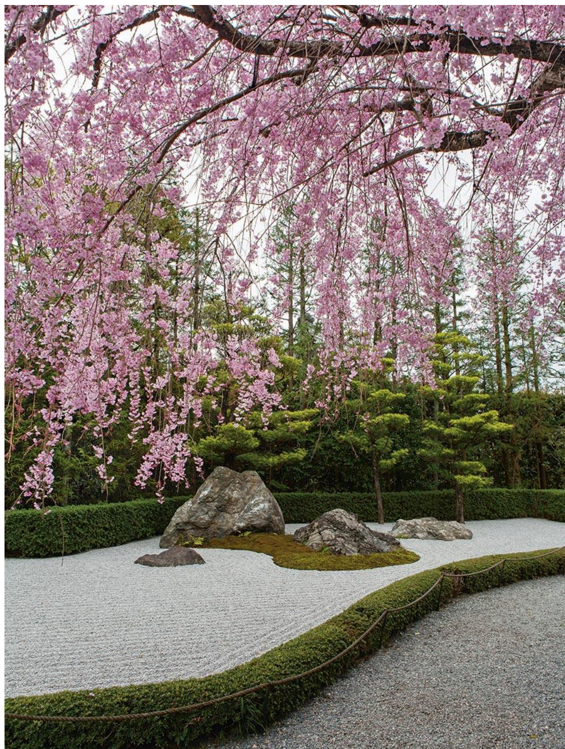

Fig. 4. Akira Nakata, Taizō-in, Myōshin-ji Complex, Rinzai Zen Buddhism, Kyoto, 1404, Muromachi Period; with later additions, Shōwa Period.

Interestingly, this sharpness is juxtaposed against the warm, softly-blended palette of the gradient-like background. Fiery yellow and vermillion make Saetas 22 reminiscent of a cloudless sky at sunset, with the same seamless blended quality of setting light, thus making the geometry of the linework over it all the more striking through the sheer contrast. The previously mentioned tension, the brilliance of the saturated palette, all suggest a certain liveliness, a notion further implied through the choice of colour as warm palettes suggest heat, a quality that usually signifies life and therefore movement.

Thus, the influence of American abstraction is undeniable- Pollock's overlapping dynamic lines, De Kooning's hurried brushstrokes, and Rothko's dual coloured warm palettes have been reimagined together in Zobel's art.

[2] Japanese gardens reframe Japan's natural landscapes, which embody both awe and terror.

Fig. 5. Jackson Pollock, **Autumn Rhythm**, 1950. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. 6. Willem de Kooning, **Gotham News**, 1955. Oil on canvas. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.

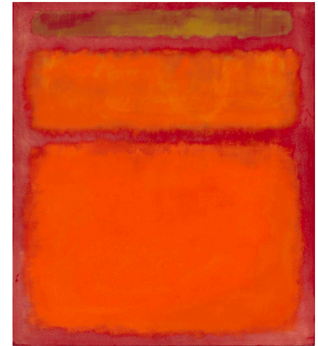

Fig. 7. Mark Rothko, **Orange, Red, Yellow**, 1961. Oil on canvas. Mark Rothko Foundation.

This subject, unlike Zobel's previous works, is pure abstraction, with no discernible suggestions of natural forms. This could be interpreted as referencing emotions, which are individually messy yet inherently structured in their humanity, but the general undertone of this composition is chaos– whose intense and restless feeling prevails throughout the whole work.

Following Saetas, a definitive turning point appeared in Zobel's work. Having explored his art through the lenses of his American Abstraction influences, the rest of his body of work found its own distinctive identity– one which grew and evolved with him for the rest of his career and became the hallmark of his artistic identity.

One of Zobel's most acclaimed and revered collections of works is the Serie Negra. The series can be traced back to 1959, when Zobel's artistic style took a turn after he became increasingly familiar with Spanish Abstractionism. In integrating the movements' key features, such as sharp geometric forms and contrasts, and calligraphic elements, Zobel no longer limited himself to expression via lines. Instead, he dry-brushed the canvas, mixing softer forms with harder ones, and used the negative space as a tool, and began to step away from vibrant, complex, and saturated colour palettes, elements previously freely featured in his work. Zobel himself said:

"After almost two years, I began to realize that my use of color was quite arbitrary (...). Any combination of two colors, as long as it had a certain vibration, could serve me. I think that for a work of art, what [proves] not to be necessary is superfluous, even distracting, weakening and hindering. Little by little, I eliminated color until I was left with black strokes on a white background."

Fig. 8. Fernando Zóbel, **Ícaro**, 1962. Oil on canvas, 137.5 × 200 cm. Ayala Museum.

Icaro (1962) is one of his more widely known works from this time. Employing dry brush techniques with oil on canvas, the form in this composition is more representational than the pure abstraction of Saetas 22.

While the majority of the canvas is occupied by negative space, most of the form is concentrated to the lower center of the canvas with wider, less intense brushwork tapering off upward. The juxtaposition between the untouched white of the canvas and the dark black of the paint gives the form more weight and tension through visual contrast, and this, combined with – negative space surrounding the form, gives it the illusion of being suspended mid-air. The composition contains an interesting blend of both gestural and intentional strokes, featuring thin and sharp linework that converges into smudges and swashes of dry paint– reminiscent of the effect of a motion blur. Moreover, the gestural strokes create a dynamic quality that serves to further suggest movement. They swoop outwards almost like extended wings.

Furthermore, the varying opacity of some strokes and areas gives the impression of translucence. These gaps and strokes, where the black fades away and tapers off, create the illusion that parts of the form appear to be catching light while others fade to black, suggesting a shape formed of denser mass. There is no distinct light source, but the white evokes feelings of light regardless– and it occupies a space in this composition almost as a material rather than a compositional feature.

While the Spanish influence can be observed, as mentioned previously in the compositional and technical elements, Icaro echoes another school that Zobel observed. His time in Japan exposed him to many of the traditional ink and watercolour drawings, and certain elements of Icaro illustrate the Japanese style as well. The contrast and duality of black and white, the gestural strokes where pigment and brushstroke seem to lift off the surface, and the use of negative space are all reminiscent of traditional Japanese ink painting.

All of these factors– line, stroke, negative space, movement– converge and a representational form emerges: a figure with a smaller body and larger wing span, made not of a single condensed form but suggestive rather of many smaller forms coming together. While the image first appears abstract, the implied movement suggests wings and flight, and through Gestalt principles[3], the spectator can observe a bird soaring across the canvas.

Fig. 9. Fernando Zóbel, **Ink Painting**, 1962. Ink on paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Though this may be a simple canvas with a singular element in its composition, the complexity of what it suggests can not be ignored. There's an undercurrent of tension in the work made through compositional elements that's offset by the thematic peace that birds represent. And this contradiction and duality can be observed across the artwork. There are motifs of light versus dark, motion versus stillness, and gestural versus intentional, figuration versus abstraction. Every element within the work is at odds with another, in what is perhaps an intentional dichotomy by the artist. Thus, Saetas 22 and Icaro showcase a convergence of influences and exploration at the intersection of which Zobel begins to discover his own unique artistic sensibility. Zobel found his own unique style.

Having discovered an artistic sensibility amalgamated from his various experiences, Zobel continued to refine it until it became an unmistakable part of his artistic identity. This can be observed in most of his works since Series Negra. The *Orsillas* series, which came later in Zobel's career, was a series of studies from his studio in Cuenca. They were analytical breakdowns of his most familiar view and demonstrated his firm commitment to the abstract movement. Of these, La Vista X (1974) is a prime example of Zobel connecting observational art to his particular style of abstraction– in many ways, it echoes Series Negra and is an evolution of his style.

La Vista X is an observational piece which is meant to showcase the view from Zobel's studios, in keeping with the theme of the series. The large expanse of negative space that dominates most of the canvas serves to act not just as a stylistic element in this case but also as a form: Zobel is showing the spectator a view from his window, and this view has been enclosed in a rectangular shape with the colors being contained to the same and situated higher up on the canvas. These compositional cues contextualize the piece and make up for the lack of details within the piece itself: "The composition of the paintings is directly related to that of the landscape itself. He [Zobel] leaves behind the river, the reflections, and the relations of color, to enter this time in the stony and arboreal masses of the nature of Cuenca; synthesizing everything to the maximum, eliminating all the distractions that the landscape carries with it. In the works of

[3]Gestalt principles explain why humans view visual items as wholes or unified patterns rather than as discrete components.

this stage, we can clearly see the mental process and the painter's capacity for synthesis, converting the materiality of the rocks, the trees, and the houses into a slight tremor on the canvas in which even the color disappears, only supported by the composition of the landscape reduced to its minimum expression."

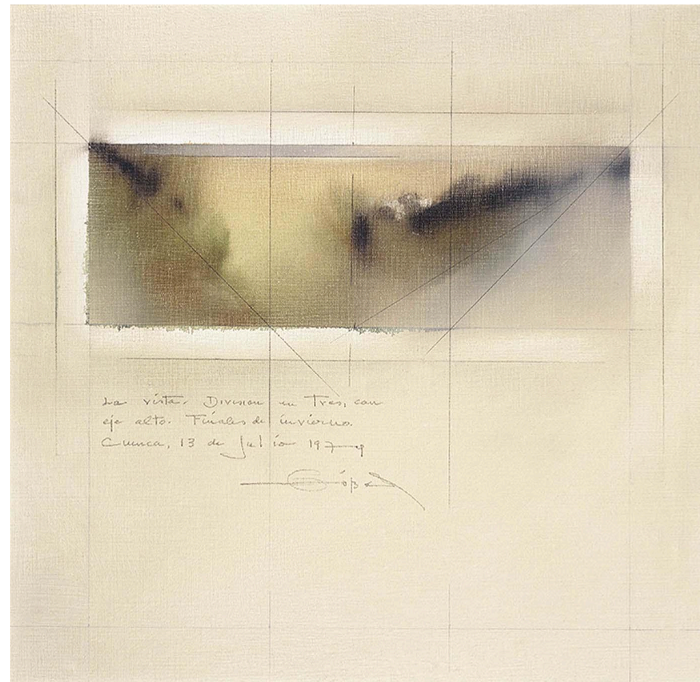

Fig. 10. Fernando Zóbel, **La Vista X**, 1974. Oil on canvas, 40 × 40 cm. Private Collection.

Moreover, the negative space can be interpreted as the wall of his studio. As a stylistic element, it makes the window the focal point of the composition, with everything else around it acting as a visual break. Much like Icaro, rather than detail and form, carefully considered context, layout, and brushwork give rise to a subject rather than a direct visual representation.

The canvas is largely a uniform eggshell hue, which complements the colour values in the "window." Muted earth tones, olive green, cream, white, brown, beige, white and black have all been softly blended together within the confines of the window shape. Similar tonal variations help the different hues blend together and create the effect of a soft light dispersed over a frosted pane, where one can make out colour and shape but not form. The diffused lighting makes it feel softer and calmer, and this haziness is suggestive of a semi-forgotten nostalgic memory– creating a sense of intimacy between the artist and the viewer with composition as a medium.

This is further supported by the thin, light pencil lines and annotations made over the painted artwork. While the central form is blurred and ambiguous, the hand-drawn lines are thin and precise in nature, and intersect to form what looks to be an architectural or grid-like surface division over the view. In this, it is reminiscent of a technical drawing, where different parts of a landscape have been divided up for an observational study. Unlike his previous works, in both

Saetas and Series Negra, these lines feel more dignified and forgiving, forming a structure that helps the viewer contextualise and make sense of the subject instead of an abstraction. The handwritten inscription below it feels more personal, like a note or a reminder, and bridges the disconnect between the abstraction of the natural world with the more controlled and detailed personal connection.

This overall sense of intimacy, borne from the nature of the subject– that is, the artist's literal perspective of a landscape, the diffused tones to suggest memory, the annotations and line work reminiscent of a diary entry that glimpse into his mind– makes the whole piece feel more personal, a result of which is a powerful sense of connection between viewer and artist that seems to transcend time, physical space, and even at time, context. The duality of soft formless composition and detailed notes and structural lines is yet another dichotomy, one of many that can be observed in Zobel's work– this one blending the line between emotion and analysis.

Collector, Curator, and Creator: Zóbel's Role and Contributions to Modern Art in the Philippines and Spain

Thus, Fernando Zóbel advanced his own artistic vision, evident both in his choice of subject matter and in his methods of execution. His conception of the future of art remained steadfast, regardless of the circumstances he faced. "The modern in Zobel may be construed, then, not simply as a formal style but, rather, as an aesthetic sensibility inseparable from the profound hope he felt" (Veric).

In 1959, Zóbel was invited to hold a solo exhibit at Madrid's Galería Biosca. The exhibition is Zóbel's first in Spain, featuring paintings from the *Saetas* series alongside his new *Serie Negra* works. He then participated in another exhibition, a collective this time, with the Spanish artists Chillida, Oteiza, Miro-Artigas, Tapies, and Palenzuela at Madrid's Sala Darro which became a significant turning point in Zobel's life: "At this exhibition, Zóbel identified with the Spanish painters of his generation and this became one of the reasons why he decided to leave the Philippines and the world of business to devote himself entirely to painting" (Veric).

But not before he bequeathed his private collection, consisting of post-war Philippine Modernist Art and some of the finest collections of prints and drawings of Western masters, to the Ateneo de Manila University, where Zóbel taught Contemporary Art in the 1950s. This collection would form the backbone of the Ateneo Art Gallery, which opened in 1960, the first museum dedicated to Modern Art in the Philippines. Whether by design or circumstance alone, his gift to the Ateneo de Manila University contributed significantly to the rebuilding of an artistic and cultural heritage in the Philippines. His collection was "more than a matter of taste, the choice was a philosophical vision that sought to rebuild the aesthetic artifact of the country. A reconstruction that began not with historical relics but, rather, with contemporary works that enabled robust imaginations of the future." In some respects, the loss of much of the Philippines' artistic heritage, which Zóbel had witnessed in WWII, would underscore the enduring nature of Zóbel's legacy, giving the modern a lasting and singular power.

When Zóbel initially moved to Spain, the political climate under Franco made it a difficult time to be an abstractionist and a modernist, as such movements ran counter to the regime's cultural agenda. Even when the political climate had relaxed, the Francoist government's stance toward the avant-garde was one of ambivalence — there was no open opposition, but neither was there an offer of support. So Zóbel had to pave his own way. Just as he had actively collected modern Filipino art, he had also begun to do the same with Spanish art. As abstraction was not the officially sanctioned art of the Franco regime, there was no support for abstract artists in Spain for many years. Thus, even as Spain slowly came out of isolation, and her artists were celebrated as avant-garde to lend an appearance of modernity and openness to the Franco regime, they remained largely under-appreciated within their own country. Spanish artists received acclaim in other countries, but then came home and had no venue to exhibit or show their work. So when the young Zóbel discovered Spanish modernist art on a trip to Spain in the 1950s, he was troubled to find that much of their best art was being acquired by collectors abroad. Thus, he became a supporter of modern Spanish artists like Chillida, Tàpies, Luis Feito, and Antonio Saura, Gustavo Torner, and Gerardo Rueda[4], the latter two whom he would form lifelong friendships with and would be key to the establishment of the *Museo de Arte Abstracto Espaňol*. Artist, patron, collector– Zobel's immersion in the art world was inextricably tied to every aspect of his very being.

While living in Spain, Fernando Zóbel's private collection of Spanish modernist art grew, and as it grew, so did its significance Soon, Zóbel became determined to share it with a domestic audience; "It was not too far-fetched for Zóbel (who had the ability, critical demand, an innate generosity, the drive and the intellectual and cultural capacity, as well as that small dose of pragmatism that must exist behind great ideas) to feel in the early sixties the moral duty to show those paintings that he had collected with so much faith and passion" (Villalba Salvador 205–236). Despite being regarded as a bold undertaking in light of Spain's political climate at the time, Zobel's initiative moved forward, and with these extended discussions with fellow artists, the idea of opening a museum gradually took shape. It was upon the suggestion of Zóbel's good friend and Cuenca native, Gustavo Torner[5], that Zóbel came upon the property in Cuenca that would eventually house the *Museo de Arte Abstracto Espaňol* in the historic *Casas Colgadas*, the Hanging Houses of Cuenca.

From Patron to Pioneer: Fernando Zóbel's Enduring Legacy in Abstract Modernism and Cultural Identity

On June 30, 1966, the Spanish Museum of Abstract Art formally opened: "At the center of the front row stands Zóbel himself, arms crossed and smiling modestly, surrounded by artists who had defined—and would continue to shape—the course of Spanish abstraction. From geometric experimentation to gestural informality, from kinetic art to textured matter painting, the group represents the rich diversity of the Spanish avant-garde in the 1950s and 60s. The photograph is

[4] These painters were influential in postwar Spanish abstract painting and are credited with promoting geometric abstraction, expressionism, and informalism in Spain.

[5] Gustavo Torner (1925–2021), Spanish painter and sculptor, noted for his role in postwar abstraction.

more than a record of an art event—it is a document of cultural resistance and creative solidarity. Amid the restrictive climate of Franco's Spain, these individuals gathered to inaugurate a museum built not by state decree, but by artists themselves, fueled by shared ideals of artistic freedom, experimentation, and mutual respect" (Veric).

The *Museo de Arte Abstracto Espaňol* was, in fact, more than a physical museum. For Fernando Zóbel envisioned bringing together a community of like-minded artists who ran the museum with Zóbel, thus also making it the first artist-run museum in Spain and the center of modern art in the 60's. He established a museum of Spanish abstract art, operating independently of the Franco regime's cultural framework. Beyond the museum itself, he actively invited artists to settle in Cuenca, transforming it into a thriving center for artistic creation. "I think we can almost say that the Cuenca museum was the first democratic museum in the country because it didn't ask anyone's permission to do anything," (Villalba Salvador 205–236).

Fig. 11.Fernando Nuño, Fernando Zóbel and Artists at the Inauguration of the Museum of Spanish Abstract Art, Cuenca, 1966.

Zóbel held a unique position in art history; he stood at the forefront of a new cultural dawn for both Spain and the Philippines, while being the instrument that quietly challenged the boundaries of the old order. Without direct confrontation or protest, Zóbel steadfastly upheld his modernist ideals, guiding his audience to appreciate the full breadth and depth of modernism through his own art and his collection. Stepping away from the "approved, enforced" tradition in his artworks, supporting fellow artists to explore beyond canon by providing means and opportunity, and finally, committing himself to the preservation and advocacy of emerging styles, was his three-pronged approach that quietly challenged restrictions and tradition in favour of innovation and creative evolution. His influence on both Spanish and Filipino abstract art was substantial; through his patronage and advocacy, he lent legitimacy — and even a degree of popularity — to abstract art at a time when figurative realism dominated the art scene. His confidence and bravado, perhaps rooted in the privilege into which he was born, imbued him with an air of assurance and authority.

Fernando Zóbel's contributions to art and art history are beyond measure. His paintings breathe with a quiet transcendence, like whispers of wind across water, carrying both the weight and the tenderness of his subjects.

In an age when figurative art and realism commanded the stage, Zóbel walked a different path. It was his peculiar cultural resistance to the prevailing traditionalism that set him apart —

an insistence on searching beyond convention, on finding forms that could speak to both the mind and the heart. This was his aesthetic dissent. In Zóbel's own words: "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" (Jones).

Zóbel combined the rare qualities of the passion of a painter, the zeal of a collector, and the imagination of a visionary to dream of creating a museum. Add to this his exquisite taste, rigorous academic training, insatiable intellectual curiosity, and economic means to cultivate those qualities, and it is clear that without Zóbel, the Spanish abstract movement would have suffered enormously (Veric).

For both Spain and the Philippines, Zóbel helped shape the future of artistic culture. As Filipino author, poet, scholar, and curator Charlie Samuya Veric wrote: "He was modern because his sense of debt was located in the future, seeing it as an unrealized place of redemption" (Veric). This vision was realized not only through his paintings but also through the museums founded through his generous patronage. In doing so, he helped define the path of modern and abstract art in both the Philippines and Spain by giving the public access and platforms to further understand and appreciate these movements. By building these world-class institutions, he created enduring repositories of visual culture, securing a legacy that would serve future generations. It is true that "without Zóbel's trailblazing vision – and without the artists and works and ideas he gathered inside the Hanging Houses almost 60 years ago – Spain would have taken far longer to establish itself as the cultural engine it became after the post-Franco return to democracy" (Zóbel, interview).

Art plays a major role in shaping national identity. It is inseparable from the creation of culture. In this sense, Fernando Zóbel cultivated a culture and shaped an identity that extended beyond what was officially recognized. Yet his divergence was always a quiet one — mirrored in the serenity of his works. Zóbel's art was, in the end, a quiet defiance — an insistence that beauty need not shout, that meaning could reside in restraint, and that the truest images are those that echo in both the eye and the heart.

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