

NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE



Fernando Zóbel

9 MAY -
30 NOV 2025

Order is Essential



WU GUANZHONG GALLERY AND LEVEL 4 GALLERY

nationalgallery.sg/OrderIsEssential

LET Art SURPRISE YOU

“Order is essential,” the transcontinental Fernando Zóbel once remarked.

This philosophy guided both his artistic practice and his methodical exploration of the world. Yet, within this order, his work reveals a tension between structure and spontaneity.

Born in the Philippines to a prominent Spanish family, Zóbel (1924–1984) was an avid traveller, a cosmopolitan thinker and writer, and a pioneering collector who formed two modern art museums in the Philippines and Spain. His lifelong, extensive interest in the world shaped his expressionist and abstract works in drawing, printmaking, painting and photography.

This survey of his art invites you to travel with Zóbel to North America, Asia and Europe, where he practised from the 1940s to the 1980s. You will see his fascination with art history and American Abstract Expressionism in Boston and Rhode Island; his experiments with the syringe as a device for painting in Manila; his deft compositions of black paint on white canvases in Madrid; and his homage to the landscapes of Cuenca. As we trace his travels across the world, we will discover how modernism took different forms in each place and time. He transcended the duality of centre and margin, past and future.

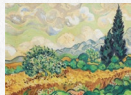
This exhibition follows *Zóbel: The Future of the Past*, a project that opened at Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid in 2022 and was later restaged at Ayala Museum in Manila in 2024.



CITY HALL WING, LEVEL 4

Wu Guanzhong Gallery

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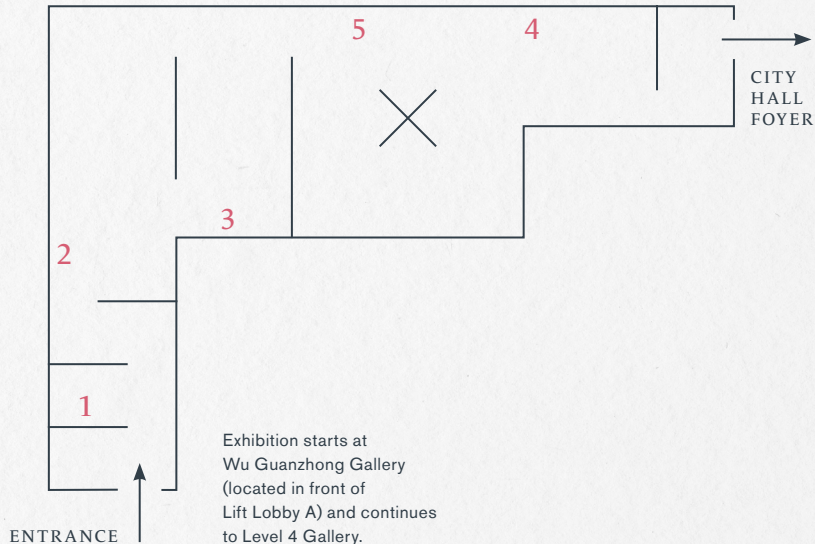
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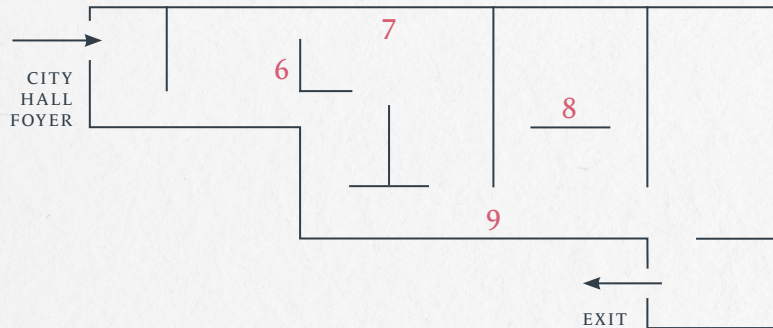
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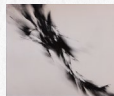
Exhibition starts at
Wu Guanzhong Gallery
(located in front of
Lift Lobby A) and continues
to Level 4 Gallery.

CITY HALL WING, LEVEL 4

Level 4 Gallery



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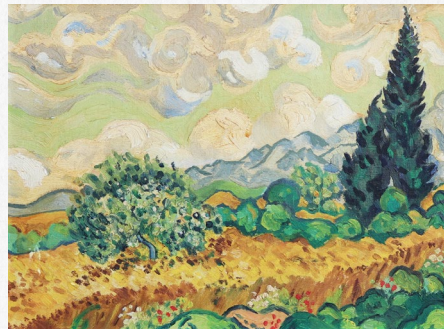


9



“Half of this haunted monk’s life”

Enchanted by art history, Zóbel recreated Vincent van Gogh's 1889 work *Wheat Field with Cypresses*. Drawn to its vivid colours, lively brushstrokes and vitality, his take on Van Gogh's work marked his incipient effort to respond to the expressionist style. This beginning converses with Zóbel's final work—found on an easel in his studio in Spain—which evokes the presence of a bridge over a river in the city where he lived. Though separated by time, these two works signify Zóbel's enduring dialogue with the past and the future.



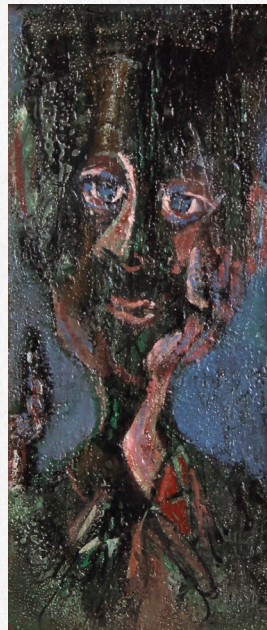
Copy of “A Wheatfield with Cypresses”
(1889) by Vincent van Gogh
1946
Oil on canvas
30 × 40.6 cm
Collection of Jaime Ponce de Leon

“With every
single
refinement”

Portrait of Jim Pfeufer with Clarinet
c. 1953
Oil on wood
36 × 17 cm
Collection of Mario and Mimi Que

In 1946, Zóbel attended Harvard University in the United States to study history and literature, focusing on the work of the Spanish playwright Federico García Lorca. During this period, he moved in the same circles as notable Boston artists like Jim Pfeufer, Reed Champion, Jack Levine, Hyman Bloom, as well as poets such as Delmore Schwartz and Stephen Spender. He also corresponded with his cousin, painter and assemblagist Alfonso Ossorio.

While studying at the Rhode Island School of Design, Zóbel saw an exhibition of Mark Rothko's work in 1955 that “completely dazzled” him. It was in the United States that Zóbel took his first steps towards becoming a professional artist, initially honing himself as a student of culture and art history before learning from fellow artists like Rothko and Franz Kline. Zóbel eventually fleshed out his own imagination amid a range of artistic tendencies, from satire to Bauhaus and photography.



“Thin lines against a field of colour”

From left:

Carroza
1953

Synthetic polymer paint on board,
with frame designed by the artist
127 × 67 cm

Gift of the artist
Collection of Ateneo Art Gallery,
Ateneo de Manila University

Self-Portrait with Chinese Seal
1952

Ink on paper
54 × 30 cm

Archivo Fernando Zóbel, Biblioteca y
Centro de Apoyo a la Investigación,
Fundación Juan March, Madrid

Saeta 44
1957

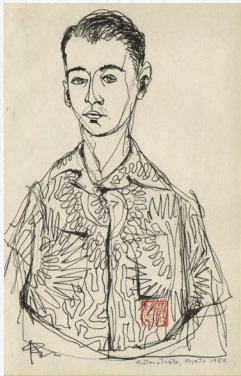
Oil on canvas
61.3 × 91.5 cm

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
This acquisition was made possible
through the generous support of
Lam Soon Cannery Pte Ltd

Zóbel was at the forefront of modernism in 1950s Manila as it shifted towards non-objective art, which disavowed references to literal reality. Motivated by Henri Matisse's practice, he experimented with Cubism and Informalism, yet remained connected to the cultural and material forms of the Philippines, insisting on preordained structure as opposed to pure intuition. From these traditions, Zóbel distilled key principles and motifs, such as the *carroza*, or the carriage in the religious procession, in which he saw the vigorous impulses of Philippine life.

Fellow modernists viewed Zóbel as a kindred spirit, a patron and an advocate. He helmed the Art Association of the Philippines twice, exhibited at the Philippine Art Gallery and worked with the leading lights of Philippine modernism. He collected art and generously donated works from his collection to the Ateneo de Manila University in 1960, creating the first museum of Philippine modern art, the Ateneo Art Gallery. True to his international outlook, he also taught classes in modern and “oriental” art, collected calligraphy and works by Asian artists such as Munakata Shiko and lived in a house of Japanese design.

While in Manila, Zóbel inventively repurposed the commonplace syringe—sans the needle—to control long, continuous lines of paint and disperse it across the surface of the canvas. He first used this technique and style in a series he called *saeta*, conjuring an arrow, a song, scaffolding, the icing on a cake or a sand garden. This was a signature achievement, and his distinct contribution to the repertoire of modernism.



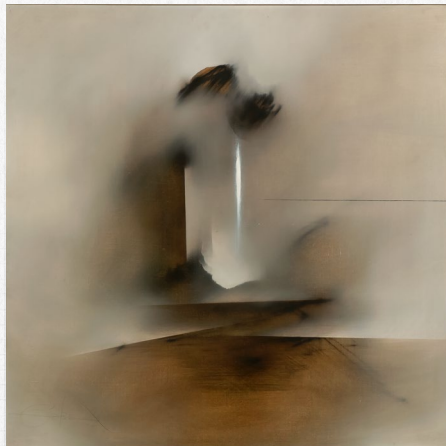
“Movement that includes its own contradiction”

From left:
La Visión
1961
Oil on canvas
162.9 × 198.5 cm
Collection of Lopez Museum and Library

El sueño de la doncella (II).
Conversación con Lorenzo Lotto
(The Maiden's Dream (II).
Conversation with Lorenzo Lotto)
1967
Oil on canvas
100 × 100 cm
Collection of Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao
Acquired in 1968

In 1961, Zóbel took up residence in Madrid. He further modified his abstraction through the modulation of tones and grids, as his practice continued to attract international attention. While in Madrid, he pursued *Serie Negra* (Black Series), a series characterised by the consummate tainting or smearing of white canvas with black paint rendered like calligraphy or in the vein of the Art Informel movement. What makes these works remarkable is the stark contrast between the overall black-and-white image and the subtle sublimations of tone. This is achieved through a dry brush technique that both blurs and signals the direction of the brushstroke.

Confident in his command of abstraction and its variations, Zóbel continued his cycle of conversations with artists in European and North American art history. He studied their works—from Lorenzo Lotto to John Singer Sargent—in museums and books and cited their formal qualities in his own paintings while introducing his unique visual rhetoric to reimagine both art history and abstraction.



“The light of the painting”

From left:
La Vista XXVI (The View XXVI)
1974
Oil and graphite on canvas
180.4 × 301 cm
Colección Fundación Juan March,
Museu Fundació Juan March, Palma, 0197P

Fútbol 14 (Football 14)
1973
Oil on canvas
60 × 60 cm
Private collection

Zóbel was already thinking of a museum for his collection as early as the 1950s. In 1963, he visited Cuenca, a city outside of Madrid, and was profoundly inspired by the natural landscape and medieval fortifications of the historic city. Three years later in 1966, he opened the Museo de Arte Abstracto Español (Museum of Spanish Abstract Art) in Cuenca, a project that he developed with artist Gustavo Torner. Perched on a cliff with other houses collectively known as Casas Colgadas (Hanging Houses), the museum was dedicated to postwar abstraction in Spain. Alfred Barr, the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, called it the “most beautiful small museum in the world.”

During his time in Cuenca, Zóbel created work sensitive to what he saw around him: the gorge that he called “La Vista,” the houses in the valley, the plateau, and the Júcar and Huécar rivers and their banks. From this suite of works emerged two series, *La Vista* (The View) and *Serie Blanca* (White Series), in which Zóbel considered the roles that drawing and colour inhabit in painting. With these significantly monochromatic investigations, he inevitably drifted towards conflating figure and ground; space and metaphor; ether and stain. He also documented young men playing football, translating the movement caught by the camera to the fuzziness of painting. Zóbel once mused: “I suppose that the distinction between action painting and the kind of painting that attempts to analyse movement is a subtle one, but it does exist.”



PROGRAMMES

In conjunction with *Fernando Zóbel: Order is Essential*, we are bringing together a variety of discussions, tours, screenings and learning activities for you to find out more about the exhibition.

For more information about the programmes, please visit nationalgallery.sg/OrderIsEssential.

Curatorial Floor Talk

Sat 10 May | 4.30pm | City Hall Wing, Level 2, Singapore Courtyard

Join curators Clarissa Chikiamco, Patrick Flores, Manuel Fontán del Junco and Felipe Pereda for a conversation on the Gallery's first solo exhibition dedicated to Fernando Zóbel. Look forward to a convivial discussion on curating and studying Zóbel across three continents!

Reading Groups

Sat 25 Oct or Sun 26 Oct | 2–4pm |
Wu Guanzhong Gallery and Level 4 Gallery

This reading group invites anyone interested in exploring Fernando Zóbel's work through close examination and engaging discussion. Participants will engage with selected artworks and archival materials from the exhibition, alongside writings by and about Zóbel, to explore and unpack the complexities of this unique and multifaceted artist.

Performances

Sat 22 Nov | 2.30pm, 4pm | Level B1, Padang Atrium

Fernando Zóbel's *Saeta* series, characterised by swift, linear strokes and a deep engagement with motion, finds a parallel in the expressiveness of flamenco. This flamenco weaves together movement, art and literature, much like Zóbel's artistic career. Experience the connections between dance and visual art, where the dramatic nature of flamenco echoes the depth of Zóbel's artistic expression.

More details will be shared on our website.

Learning Programmes

Lines tell stories. Wavy lines can feel fun and relaxed, while jagged lines might look tense or full of energy! Pick up a free activity booklet at the City Hall Foyer, Level 4, and find out how Zóbel created the lines in his works. What feelings and stories could his lines be revealing?

Watch out for our storytelling sessions, where you can learn to create visual stories using the expressive language of lines.

TOURS

Weekly Tours

Register for free at our Tours & Programmes Counter, located at City Hall Wing, Level 1

English | Thu–Sun | 11am (starts 23 May)

Mandarin | Sat–Sun | 2pm (starts 24 May)

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Fernando Zóbel: Order is Essential

164 pp | Paperback | \$55 (including GST)

Fernando Zóbel: Order is Essential covers the full scope of Fernando Zóbel's oeuvre. The catalogue features six essays offering new insights into Zóbel's transcontinental practice. The full-colour plates are broken into the exhibition's four sections which cover Zóbel's time in New England, Manila, Madrid and Cuenca, and trace the evolution of Zóbel's work and influences.

MERCHANDISE

Remember your visit to this special exhibition by bringing home some exclusive merchandise! Don't forget to drop by **The Gallery Store** located at City Hall Wing, Level 1 to browse the full range, created especially for this exhibition.

JOIN US

Unlock the world of art with National Gallery Singapore membership. Become an Insider and enjoy benefits such as free exhibition access, complimentary parking, dining and shopping discounts and more! Join a vibrant community of art enthusiasts and elevate your art experience.



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As a registered Charity and an Institute of Public Character, National Gallery Singapore relies on your support to build collections, engage in research, develop programmes and bring art to everyone.



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GALLERY PASSES

Purchase your Gallery Passes and register for programmes and tours at web.nationalgallery.sg.

GALLERY PASS TYPE	STANDARD	LOCAL*
General Admission + Free Guided Tours Admits one to these exhibitions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ <i>Singapore Stories</i>▪ <i>Between Declarations and Dreams</i>▪ Fernando Zóbel▪ <i>Diplomacy and Desire</i>	\$20	FREE
Special Exhibition Admits one to <i>City of Others</i>	\$25	\$15
All Access (General Admission + Special Exhibition)	\$30	REFER TO FOOTNOTE^

\$5 OFF CONCESSION for children aged 7–12 | Seniors aged 60 and above | Full-time National Servicemen (NSFs) excluding foreign personnel | Overseas students and teachers^

FREE ADMISSION for Gallery Insiders | Children aged 6 and below | Local/locally based students and teachers* | Persons with disabilities (PWD) and their caregivers

* Rates for locals apply to Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents.

^ For locals, purchasing a Special Exhibition pass automatically upgrades you to an All Access pass, granting entry to all galleries.

* From qualifying institutions only. Valid identification is required.

AN ACCESSIBLE EXPERIENCE FOR ALL

The Gallery is committed to creating an inclusive experience that can be enjoyed by visitors with access needs.



SCAN FOR ACCESS GUIDE

OPENING HOURS

Daily 10am–7pm
General ticket sales end
30 minutes before closing time



NationalGallerySingapore



NatGallerySG



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