ORGANISED AND presented by the Ayala Museum, Philippines, the exhibition, “Fernando Zóbel: Contrapuntos”, was among the twenty-two collateral events selected by the organisers of La Biennale di Venezia on exhibit in Venice, Italy, from May 13th to November 26th, 2017 (1). Fernando Zóbel (1924–1984), the Spanish-Filipino painter, had previously exhibited as part of the Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1962. The 2017 iteration was a more focused Zóbel exhibition, with works by the Spanish sculptor Pablo Serrano (1908–1983) as counterpoints, (re)presenting their artistic journeys to a 21st century audience. The co-curators, Ditas R. Samson, senior curator at the Ayala Museum, and Guillermo Paneque, the Spanish artist, envisioned the event as “an organic mise-en-scene—a contemplative, cerebral sphere rather than inanimate sce-
2 Panoramic view of the “Fernando Zóbel: Contrapuntos” exhibition, showing the interiors of Fondaco Marcello. Photograph by Jesus Ojeda, courtesy of Ayala Museum

3 Despliegue en Gerona
1956
Mixed media on canvas
60.5 x 91 cm
Ayala Museum Collection
Gift of Ayala Corporation

4 Saeta XXVII Báltica
1957
Oil on canvas
60.5 x 91 cm
Oszen and Karen Chan Collection
his sculptures in the larger, inner chamber. The epistolary excerpts are especially revealing, as exhibition co-curator Paneque notes:

Zóbel’s letters deserve to be read as bona fide literary pieces, if only because Zóbel subjected them to extensive revisions as he directed and fine-tuned his thoughts... The presence of Zóbel’s writing in this exhibit serves to keep experience, particularly lost experience, alive. At the core of that experience is the recurring theme of journey, of dislocation.1

Zóbel’s earliest painting in the exhibition, Despliegue en Girona (1956), beckons the viewer across the threshold to an intimate journey of (re)discovery (3). As one weaves to the left and right of the white display panels in the main chamber, Saetas paintings boast rich textures, densities, and muted hues. Illusions of depth and space reveal the surprising range of expression possible with lines applied with a hypodermic syringe (4–8). Zóbel describes his experimental works thus:

Rather scratchy paintings, mainly lines, with some quality of mirror about them. No subject. I call them “Saetas”. Spanish

7. Untitled (Brown Saeta)
1957
Oil on canvas
75 x 90 cm
Ayala Museum Collection
Gift of Jaime and Beatriz Zóbel de Ayala

8. Castille XXII
1957
Oil on canvas
61.1 x 92 cm
Cultural Center of the Philippines Collection
double-edged word, sometimes arrow, sometimes those short, improvised songs, high-pitched and abrupt, we make up in the South when we want to say something badly and the usual methods fail to measure up. (From a letter to Eric Pfeiffer, Manila, September 2nd, 1957)²

Upon reaching the White Syringe (1957) at the end of the chamber, the viewer is constrained to pivot and retrace one's steps back to the entrance/exit (9). On this return journey, the viewer encounters the Serie Negra paintings on the reverse side of the same display panels that hold the Saetas. Serrano's Bóvedas emerge and re-emerge at intervals in conversation with Zóbel's organic forms (10). Retracing one's steps reveals how Zóbel's forms evolve through time, from the textured linearscapes of the Saetas to the graceful gestures of the Serie Negra paintings. The engaged viewer will note how strategic placements of particular works lock them in conversation with each other, helping to illuminate the artist's formal progression through time. For example, Saeta no. 36 (1957) hangs within view of Number 344 (1960),
while *Saeta LXIV* (1958) is placed face to face with the iconic *Icaro* (1962), illustrating the artistic concerns he eloquently writes about (11–14).

...the same things that must be done, better...like these paintings, that are always the same painting, only more to the point, as time passes. (From a letter to James Pfeifer, Manila, October 18th, 1960)³

Qualities. Qualities of remembered experiences...take *my Icarus*, it is a recurring theme in many of these paintings, and it has to be done with a combination of a flight of birds, an effect of light, and the way I feel about the legend of Icarus...it is not important that the audience trace it back to my original source. What I am interested in is that they get some kind of equivalent emotion...⁴

The reunion of important works from the Ayala Museum—which has the largest institutional collection

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² Paneque, ed., *Zóbel Contrapuntos*, p. 46.
³ Paneque, ed., *Zóbel Contrapuntos*, p. 50.
⁴ Paneque, ed., *Zóbel Contrapuntos*, p. 42.
of Zóbel works in the Philippines—and the Museo de Arte Abstracto Español in Cuenca, Spain, along with works from other public and private collections, is significant (15–20). The successful realisation of this curatorial vision is affirmed by the critical praise the exhibition has garnered:

A collateral event in the city ("Zóbel Contrapuntos") showcasing a deceased Filipino artist Fernando Zóbel was infinitely more satisfying. Exquisitely curated, the exhibition captured the essence of this binational figure with his joint Spanish/Filipino roots as it explored his "controlled elaboration" of aesthetics.

Zóbel, an artist in the Diaspora

A transnational from birth, Fernando Zóbel spent much of his life searching for roots. Although Zóbel was preoccupied with the search for the essence of Filipino identity during the first decade of his artistic career while based in Manila, his later works transcend this notion, perhaps due in part to finding acceptance in his adopted home in Cuenca, Spain.

Fernando Zóbel de Ayala y Montojo was born in Manila on August 27th, 1924 into an affluent family of Spanish and German ancestry resident in the Philippines for several generations, from the early 19th century. In 1933, Zóbel travelled with his family to Europe, where he studied in Switzerland and Madrid. His studies were interrupted by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), and the family returned to the Philippines in 1936, when Zóbel was twelve years old. In Asia, his family was again overtaken by political upheaval, this time by the Japanese military invasion of Manila in 1941, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii.

While the exhibition presents his works to a 21st century audience, it is most illuminating to revisit historical events and contemporaneous accounts by colleagues, art critics, and others, who directly experienced Zóbel’s art at the time they were created and first exhibited in the 1950s–1960s. Of particular interest are the groundbreaking exhibitions of Spanish modern painting at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City in 1960 and the Tate Gallery in London in 1962, where Zóbel’s works were among those selected by curators to represent Spanish abstract painting shortly after he moved to Madrid. In sub-
sequent years, Zóbel embarked on a series of paintings restructuring notions of time and place, engaging past painters in visual dialogue. He sought to distill images, narratives, and realities to their quintessence, transcending temporal and geographic borders until his works ended up “looking like nobody else’s.” With a heritage of centuries of diasporic movement and global trade, many internationally celebrated artists with a Philippine background—like Zóbel—straddle East and West, partly inhabiting both realms, belonging completely to neither.

Zóbel and the American Abstract Movement

After the war, aged twenty-two, Zóbel went to the United States in 1946 to study Philosophy and Letters at Harvard University. He graduated with high honours (magna cum laude) in 1949, with a thesis on the poetry of Federico García Lorca. In Boston, Zóbel moved within an art circle that included the Latvian-born artist, Hyman Bloom. Hailed as “one of the most significant American artists of the Post-World War II era”, artists Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock identified Bloom as the first Abstract Expressionist in America.\(^9\) The Harvard student found a second home and intellectual stimulation in the circle of the Boston School painter, Reed Champion Pfeifer, and his husband, James Pfeifer. Zóbel also studied the works of artists, such as Max Beckmann, Georges Rouault, and Henri Matisse, to clarify his own use of expressive line and strong colours.\(^10\) Although later works would eschew colour, his representational paintings from the 1950s reflect the influence of these artists.

Of course I was open to influences. I still am. There is nothing I like better than ‘talking’ with other artists through their art. I sometimes think that my paintings are principally my way of talking back.\(^11\)

Zóbel briefly returned to Manila after graduating from Harvard, but soon missed the intellectual and artistic ferment brewing in the US. With the help of James Pfeifer—then the head of the Graphic Design Program at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD)—Zóbel returned to the US in 1954 to study engraving techniques, painting, drawing, and architecture. It is often pointed out that Zóbel’s artistic awakening occurred at this time, when he viewed a major exhibition of Mark Rothko’s paintings at RISD. Rothko’s masses of intense colour floating upon the canvas, with blurred edges that made the colours pulsate, convinced him to abandon the representational style and to develop a visual language analogous to Rothko’s use of colour. His search focused on line as a means to evoke movement and emotion:

CR—How did you get the idea of using hypodermic syringes to apply pigment?

FZ—I needed something that would give me a long, thin, controlled line in oil paint since I was doing mainly calligraphic paintings then, in the early and middle ‘50s... I saw a cook writing “Happy Birthday” in icing on a cake... I wondered why it took me so long to figure that out... I still draw with a syringe on practically every painting I do, though sometimes the lines end up vanishing.\(^12\)

Originally a figurative painter, Zóbel embarked on this new journey toward abstraction, inspired by Rothko’s pulsating colours, Pollock’s action paintings, and East Asian brush painting and calligraphy. It was not an easy transition. He describes his struggle in a letter, dated January 14th, 1954, from Manila to James and Reed Pfeifer:

I did some non-objective paintings for a show here. Not very good; I couldn’t get interested enough in just Canvas and paint and design... At any rate, when left to my own devices I continue to be revoltingly representational. People, mainly...I happen to like painting people doing odd things, among them being themselves. Such reactionary sentiments all the way down the line. But what fun. I get so tired of seeing emotional bits of paint when they are just that; though my own brief skirmish with complete abstraction has made me love De Kooning and Pollock.\(^13\)

Through a distant cousin and fellow artist—Alfonso Ossorio—Zóbel was able to meet Pollock, abstract expressionism’s most prominent practitioner.\(^14\) Like Zóbel, Ossorio came from an affluent Philippine background. He was a friend and patron of Pollock and the French artist Jean Dubuffet. Both artists were frequent guests at Ossorio’s East Hampton estate, The Greeks, well before they became household names. Among the abstract expressionist painters of the New York School, Zóbel was most drawn to the works of Rothko and Robert Motherwell, whose Elegies to the Spanish Republic, a series of more than 100 paintings created from 1948 to 1967, were inspired by the Spanish

\(^4\) Unlike the Zóbel collection at the Ateneo Art Gallery, which the artist donated in his lifetime, the Ayala Museum’s Zóbel collection was largely assembled posthumously through generous donations from family members and acquisitions from local and international dealers and auction houses. Between 2000 and 2006, the Ayala Museum’s acquisition policy focused on paintings from the 1970s to enhance the museum’s strengths in works from the 1950s to the 1960s.


\(^12\) Reyes, “Fernando Zóbel”, p. 50.

\(^13\) Faneque, ed., Zóbel Contemporaries, p. 47.

Civil War and the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca. The series developed into poetic meditations on life and death, metaphors for his understanding of the experience of living. Motherwell's canvases must have resonated with Zóbel on multiple registers—his childhood experience fleeing the Spanish Civil War, his research on Lorca as a Harvard student, his experimentation with the use of line to evoke emotion. Indeed, one discerns more refined iterations of Motherwell's brushwork and sensibilities in some of Zóbel's works from the 1960s and 1970s. Zóbel's conversion from representational to abstract art would make him a staunch supporter and advocate of Philippine modernism upon his conflicted return to manage the family business in the Philippines. Zóbel's passion was to be an artist, not an entrepreneur.

Zóbel: Champion of Philippine Modernism

Manila in the '50s was incredibly exciting for a painter. Beginnings are always exciting. I have been fortunate indeed to have lived through three different, equally fascinating moments in art: abstract expressionism in America, the birth of Philippine modern painting, and in Spain, the birth of the abstract school of the '50s. It's like winning first prize in a lottery!—Fernando Zóbel

The return to the Philippines of young artists from studies abroad shortly after the Second World War brought modern and non-objective art to the Philippines. When Victorio Edades, the painter, returned in 1928, he began to criticise Fernando Amorsolo, the pre-eminent artist at the time, arguing that the essence of a subject is revealed through avant-garde techniques, such as multiple perspectives, distortion, and collage, rather than by replicating reality. Edades and his circle came to be known as the Modernists. Their tastes and techniques were in direct contrast to painters who emulated the style of Amorsolo, known as the Conservatives. In 1955, the Modernists won all the top prizes in the Art Association of the Philippines Painting Competition, signalling the increasing ascendancy of modernism and the decline of the so-called Amorsolo School.

The newly converted Zóbel returned to Manila in the midst of this acrimonious struggle between the Modernists and the Conservatives. Although he was an advocate and a de facto spokesperson for the modernist movement, Zóbel, with characteristic humility, paid homage to Amorsolo as:

...the man who, with endless patience, kindness and good humor, taught me almost twenty-five years ago to mix my first colors and to use my first brushes. In fact, he has taught an entire generation of painters to paint and perhaps the moment has come to thank the teacher.

Shortly after his return to Manila, Philippine Art Gallery (PAG) owner Lyd Arguilla was quick to observe:

Among a group of enthusiastic experimenters with media and technique, Zóbel is probably the champion, having introduced every conceivable material with his painting and tried all shapes and sizes of brushes, palette knives, sticks and even hypodermic pump for applying the paint on.

His one-man show at the PAG in 1956 emphasised line as his primary means of expression. Literary and art critic Emmanuel Torres recalls that when Zóbel's abstract works were first exhibited in Manila, most viewers did not know what to make of them and were met with, in Zóbel's own words, “embarrassed silence”. But his artist colleagues recognised that here among them was someone ahead of his time. Torres goes so far as to suggest that, among his contemporaries, only Zóbel's works truly deserved to be called “avant-garde”. Zóbel played a key role in legitimising modern art in the Philippines, as Torres cogently notes:

The arrival of Fernando Zóbel...from studies abroad was a godsend to abstract art...a visual artist who was also a brilliant intellectual, writer, lecturer, and art critic, besides being a scion of one of the country's richest families. Intelligence, enthusiasm, and influence made him an ideal art patron, the best friend a struggling artist ever had. He bought the works of the best and brightest when they badly needed material and moral support. These works he later donated to the Ateneo de Manila University in 1959, forming the nucleus of a growing permanent collection at the Ateneo Art Gallery and making it the first museum of Philippine modern art...If abstract art today enjoys a cachet of status and no longer labors under the stigma it once did, the reason for this may partly be credited to Zóbel.

When it was proposed that the new university art gallery be named after him, Zóbel advised against it, pointing out that his name might discourage other patrons from similarly donating to the museum.

Zóbel: Champion of Spanish Modernism

Excerpts from Zóbel's recently available letters to the Pfeifer family are felicitously included in the exhibition and published in the accompanying catalogue, bearing witness to the lasting impact of their friendship.

I'm not trying to saddle you with an uncared for influence. I'm just trying, not very successfully, to express gratitude for your help in teaching me to see. Gratitude for your paintings which form part of my gratitude to every person who has ever been generous enough to paint well. (From a letter to Reed Pfeifer, Manila, May 20th, 1958)

On a more personal note, he shares his struggle with the elusive notion of “home” as he gradually transitions from Manila to Madrid—an existential conundrum most keenly felt by those constrained to straddle multiple geographies.

A very large show is set for the first two weeks of June in Madrid's finest gallery. I love the life and the people here; my episcopacy begins to wear off. I find it difficult to express just what I mean, but it is wonderful and fills a gap. I didn't realize how big a gap. I have been homesick for years and never knew it.

Oddly, this discovery takes away some of Manila's curse. I can't imagine why; I should have thought the opposite. But there you are. Perhaps it is that I don't have to think of Manila as "home"; whatever that means. There is a difference between being a self-imposed exile and being just plain lost. (From a letter to James and Reed Pfeifer, Madrid, February 13th, 1959)
In 1960, Zóbel retired from the family business in the Philippines and moved permanently to Madrid to fulfil his lifelong passion—to become, at thirty-six years of age, a full-time artist.

“My head is full of plans: what to do with the gorgeous gift of time that has suddenly materialized. This is a new thing, this feeling of freedom. I wonder if it is possible to convey to your American background what it means to be released, with blessings, by one’s family. The phrase “with blessings” holds the key; it permits me to release myself. (From a letter to James Pfeiffer, Manila, October 18th, 1960)”

Prior to this final move to Spain, he had kept in close contact with artists of the El Paso group, whom he had met during previous visits. The group’s goal was to encourage the development of art that was distinctly “Spanish” and, at the same time, “international”. The signatories of their 1957 manifesto include the painters, Antonio Saura, Rafael Canogar, Luis Feito, Manolo Millares, Juana Francés,

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17 Reyes, “Fernando Zóbel”, p. 54.
18 Emmanuel Torres, Philippine Abstract Painting, Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1994, pp. 2–12.
22 Torres, Philippine Abstract Painting, p. 14.
24 Paneque, ed., Zóbel Contemporáneos, p. 46.
26 Paneque, ed., Zóbel Contemporáneos, p. 50.
Manuel Rivera, and the lone sculptor, Pablo Serrano. El Paso’s search for a distinctly Spanish, but universal, artistic expression would be appropriated by the Franco regime, asserting that Spain is one of those geographic spaces where autochthonous and universal expressions converge.

While continuing to exhibit his works at the Luz Gallery in Manila and with Philippine group exhibitions at home and abroad, Zóbel found acceptance in his new circle of Spanish artists in Madrid. He was among the young artists whom curators selected to represent Spanish modernism at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1960, and the Tate Gallery, London, in 1962. Additionally, his large canvas, titled Colmenar, was selected as the mascot for the “Modern Spanish Painting” exhibition poster at the Tate.

More than a decade after the emergence of abstract expressionism in New York City, two group exhibitions of Spanish modern art, enriched by abstract expressionism, were simultaneously presented in the premier museums of contemporary art in New York—the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Just as the US government had appropriated the popularity of abstract expressionism to promote the country during the Cold War, the Spanish government, under General Francisco Franco, similarly aspired to international acceptance through cultural diplomacy. Spanish officials from the Foreign Affairs Ministry in Madrid co-operated with museum directors and curators in New York to bring the selected works to the US. The Guggenheim exhibit, “Before Picasso; After Miró”, ran from June 21st to October 16th. The MoMA exhibition, “New Spanish Painting and Sculpture”, ran from July 20th to September 25th. Zóbel’s works at the
Guggenheim were *Histionium* (July 26th, 1959, oil on canvas, 81.6 x 100 cm), *Ilüc* (July 26th, 1959, oil on canvas, 81.2 x 99.7 cm), and *Oscan* (July 29th, 1959, oil on canvas, 132.4 x 195 cm).²⁰

The Guggenheim and MoMA exhibitions negotiated a narrow path between the Spanish government’s interest in promoting abstract art for political purposes and the artists’ desire to resist colonisation. While the Franco regime

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promoted Spanish modern painting as an expression of “Hispanidad”, or “Spanishness”, the artists themselves argued that their works conveyed a political message against Franco’s dictatorship; that their work should be understood as political critique. Zóbel was part of a campaign for abstract art whose roots went back to the El Paso group, to which Serrano also belonged. The movement became known as “Informalism”, conceived as a form of resistance to power. But the existentialist rhetoric of Spanish informalism was easily appropriated and commodified. Abstraction prevented specific messages from being expressed explicitly. Its attitude of rebellion had no clear referents and did not point specifically to the Spanish political situation. This allowed the Franco dictatorship to disguise itself as a modern state supporting the freedom of expression conveyed in Spanish abstractionism. Like American abstract expressionism, Spanish informalism was easily appropriated for political ends.

The success of Spanish abstract artists abroad did not immediately translate into enthusiastic audiences at home. As with Manila and New York, it would take time for non-objective art to be universally accepted. For the second time, in a different geography, Zóbel provided a home for a misunderstood modernity. Establishing Spain’s first contemporary art museum—the Museo de Arte Abstracto Español at the Casas Colgadas in Cuenca—he engaged the ancient city and its 14th-century architecture in conversation with the present. This dialogue between past and present—between traditional environment and modern expressions—continued his artistic conversations with past artists on a larger scale. Besides financing the adaptive reuse of the Casas Colgadas into an art museum, Zóbel donated his fine collection of Spanish abstract art to the new museum, in the same way that he had donated his collection of Philippine modern art to the Ateneo de Manila University, creating the Philippines’ first contemporary art museum.

Two pioneering collections, two new museums, two geographies. While the Museo de Arte Abstracto Español transformed Cuenca into a cultural destination, the picturesque city was far enough from Madrid to allow the artists there relative freedom from the Franco government. Most significantly, the museum preceded by nine years the Spanish Museum of Contemporary Art in Madrid (later the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía). Scholars of Spanish modern art have suggested that Zóbel’s staunch support of abstract art and artists contributed to its acceptance in Spain. Zóbel died prematurely, aged fifty-nine, in Rome in 1984, a few months before his 60th birthday. He was buried with honours in Cuenca, and awarded the Gold Medal for Fine Arts by King Juan Carlos I of Spain.

CR—What do you think are the dangers to an artist, if any, of social and financial success?

FZ—Somerset Maugham had something useful to say on the subject. It went more or less like this: “It is commonly believed that success corrupts the individual, making him vain, selfish
and proud. On the contrary, I think that success almost always results in humility, tolerance and kindness. Cruelty and bitterness are usually the result of failure.\textsuperscript{34}

By all accounts a humble, kind, and most generous individual, Zóbel's wealth is perhaps the greatest obstacle to an unbiased assessment of his artistic achievements among a younger generation of critics, for his privileged background—the antithesis of the stereotypical struggling artist—so easily lends itself to the totalising language of Marxist art history. It is evident from epistolary sources that he considered his privileged family background and business responsibilities an albatross, a burden that he overcame through dedication, determination, and generous support of others. Despite—or perhaps because of—his material affluence, Zóbel seemed in constant search for authentic acceptance as an individual and artist.

Loneliness brings a built-in paradox: it is the point from which you communicate. The rest is silence, dust and splinters...The artist communicates from a point of loneliness, and his thought is received in loneliness. (From a letter to Eric Pfeifer, Manila, September 2nd, 1957)\textsuperscript{35}

The exhibition, “Fernando Zóbel: Contrapuntos”, represented the successful confluence of a vision by the Ayala Museum’s leadership, and effective collaboration among international co-curators, exhibition designers, and installation staff. A beautifully designed catalogue by Lacasta Design, edited by co-curator Guillermo Paneque with essays from divergent perspectives in counterpoint to each other, accompanied this jewel of an exhibition.

Zóbel's paintings offer us a way of seeing and relating to the world...through contemplative attention to the essence of physical realities. But relating to reality also involves recognizing the deeply enigmatic nature of what is real.\textsuperscript{36}

There is an ongoing catalogue raisonné of Fernando Zóbel's paintings, which began in 2016, made possible by Fundación Juan March, Fundación Azcona and Ayala Museum. Information may be submitted by email to research@ayalamuseum.org.

\textsuperscript{31}Jiménez-Blanco and Labarr, eds, Contemporary Transatlantic Dialogues, p. 143.

\textsuperscript{32}Nochles-Doerk, “Das Museum”, pp. 80–97.

\textsuperscript{33}Nochles-Doerk, “Das Museum”, pp. 80–97.

\textsuperscript{34}Reyes, “Fernando Zóbel”, p. 54.

\textsuperscript{35}Paneque, ed., Zóbel Contrapuntos, p. 32.

\textsuperscript{36}Paneque, “Contrapuntos: Notes for an Exhibition”, II.