



ART

PROTECT THE ARTIST

FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD

ANTHOLOGY

In opening Villepin in Hong Kong, Dominique and Arthur de Villepin are making a statement on the role and responsibility of the collector in today's art world.

BY CHRISTINA KO

When former French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and his son Arthur decided to open an eponymous gallery, Villepin, in Hong Kong's Central in March, they chose Zao Wou-Ki as the subject of the first exhibition, setting the tone for their space and exemplifying what it is they seek to do.

The show is titled *Friendship & Reconciliation*, a retrospective of the late Chinese-French painter's career as seen through their eyes, purposefully coloured by their relationship with the man and artist, both as a family friend and a collector of his work. The relationship between artist and collector is one they have pondered long and hard — and it's one that's well documented throughout art history but which has fallen in importance as the onus

of patronage changed through the decades.

"This is an interpretation, with humility, of what we think and how we look at the artist," suggests Arthur. "The idea was not to do the exhibition just for us, but to do it very personal, intimate and authentic, so [viewers] can reflect on these pieces and find their own way to look at Zao Wou-Ki."

As such, it includes assumptions and liberties that only those with a personal relationship would dare take, and is curated not simply to showcase works that represent career highs, but to also give a comprehensive understanding of the man as they knew him. Family photographs lining the stairwells make the Villepins' relationship with Zao part of the storyline, while a private room on the top floor displays works Zao gifted them as well as

the artist's only known self-portrait, which Dominique discovered stuck to another work during a reframing.

"Painting for him was a struggle with the canvas," says Dominique, "meaning that everything he had in mind in his heart, whatever happened in his personal life — pain, joy — he put it on the canvas. The canvas is not just something to play with, it's something that reflected his deep inner soul and that expressed what he was and what he looked for."

"And that's where knowing the man, having studied the life of the man and understanding the mindset of the man, [became useful] — because he was a very humble man in his personal life, but a very ambitious man in what he wanted to achieve."

It is this struggle and ambition, and his desire and ability to interpret the world that captivated Dominique through all his years of collecting art.

PORTRAIT SOPHIE PALMIER/VILLEPIN PAINTING DENNIS BOUCHARD/
ZAO WOU-KI/PROLITTERIS, ZURICH/VILLEPIN



Personal friend Zao Wou-Ki is the subject of the Villepins' first exhibition. Among the artwork is this oil on canvas, 22.11.2002-10.12.2003

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An installation view of *Friendship and Reconciliation* at Villepin. Shown here, from left, is Zao's *Hommage à René Char* and 10.05.62



(from left) Zao's *Sans titre (Funérailles)*; Arthur and Dominique believe that real collectors live with their collection



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“As a collector, I feel connected and dedicated to strange artists, people that are different. This is why it’s so interesting to meet an artist. Sometimes, you feel from the start you are in front of somebody who is not like the others,” he says.

Another personal friend, Anselm Kiefer, is an example. “Even if you are very stubborn, you will have great difficulty in making him change his mind. The guy knows what he wants to do. I admire this capacity to always be following the path they have decided. Many of my artist friends say, ‘Oh my god, I have this painting that went for this price. This is crazy. I don’t want to be selling at this price.’ They are anxious not to have their prices dictating what they should do. They want to be in control and when you have crazy prices, you might just be in the hands of the market.”

“It is hard for an artist to be independent and not to be played by the market. The forces of the market are so strong, very often they eat the artist. I have friends who, because they could not defend their independence, have lost control of their work, repeating the same thing without a lot of interest. Independence means solitude, strong capacity to know what he wants to do and what he is made for — and to be faithful to what he wanted to do when he was a young artist.”

The market has indeed changed the ways of artists and the art world, vaunting what Dominique calls “iconic artists” such as Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami and Damien Hirst into stratospheric pigeonholes, steering the direction of production according to collector hunger. But given that we are living in such unprecedented times, the former politician sees a return to art that deciphers the world — “universal artists”, he calls them.

“These people have been struggling all their lives and thinking about the world. And their answers are useful to us in times of crisis. The market is going to look for artists who are not just looking to use the market but are really delivering a message.”

From Arthur’s perspective, today’s market of collectors is driving a movement towards more vapid art that reflects society but doesn’t go very much deeper.

“It goes back to the intellectual depths of collectors today and their capacity to drive their choices through money. We sometimes call the most amazing artists crazy because we don’t understand them. Artists like Van Gogh were marginalised. No one understood the art. But they were absolutely certain of their vision. They were on a mission about the world. That was a freedom that they not only have from themselves from nature, but that they nurtured,” he says. “[The collector’s] role is

to protect the artist from the outside world. The gallerist is also here to help him be more himself than what he is not.”

Private collections such as those of Peggy Guggenheim, Eli Broad and the Rubells highlight the longevity of a strong and sustained art shopping spree, but the reason private collections are important is because so little of an artist’s oeuvre stays with himself. It is spread, usually piecemeal, among buyers, even though in today’s buying climate, it is limited as to exactly who gets what.

Arthur cites the relationship between Piet Mondrian and Sal Slijper, collector of his works: Mondrian basically curated

what Slijper received from him in terms of output, knowing that the man would become a singular and definitive source of information about his career.

“He knew at some point we would look at Mondrian through the eye of Slijper,” says Arthur. “And I think this is fantastic because this goes back to the responsibility of the collector.”

“I believe the collector should have a special relationship with the artist,” adds Dominique. “A special understanding of the artist, or a special understanding of the painting he might choose. In that regard, collecting is not just about looking for good

dates and best buys. It is about looking for the painting you will live with.”

“Real collectors live with their collection,” says the former French prime minister. “They think about it very often. I know collectors who are leaders or chairmen of companies, and the only person with access to them — day or night — is the guy who’s collecting for them.”

“Collecting is an obsession, but not one based on money. You might make a lot of money but collecting is trying to be yourself with art, and to develop yourself in a way that gives you so much pleasure while becoming who you want to be. That

is art. It’s like marriage — a real adventure. You are not going to get out of your journey the way you were in the beginning. This is something that will enrich or help you.”

“I went into politics... so many times when I went through difficulties, my best way to deal was think about a painting, or to have in front of me one to help me go forward. Art is part of a fantastic discovery of humanity. Why did prehistoric people decide to paint the caverns? Because there was a need, not because they enjoyed it; they needed to express fear or joy... Art collection is not a game; it’s a key part of life.” **A**