

Fernando Zóbel

Order is Essential

National Gallery
Singapore

Born in the Philippines to a prominent Spanish family and raised in Manila and Madrid, Fernando Zóbel (1924–1984) became an artist, a patron of the arts, and a global emissary for modernism. “Fernando Zóbel: Order is Essential” at the National Gallery Singapore (NGS), which featured over 200 paintings, sketches, photographs, and archival items, was Singapore’s first solo exhibition of the artist’s work. Curator Patrick Flores said that Zóbel’s creations are defined by their dynamism, abstraction, and rigor—an aesthetic reflected in the show’s subtitle, “Order is Essential”—a quote from Zóbel that underscores his exacting approach to craft.

Two key works hung just inside the entrance. Zóbel’s earliest known painting, *Copy of “A Wheatfield with Cypresses” (1889) by Vincent van Gogh* (1946), evinces the young painter’s early fascination with expressionism, conveyed through thick impasto that echoes the fluctuations of light and color in a landscape. Nearby was the starkly beautiful *El Puente (The Bridge)* (1984), Zóbel’s final painting, whose opalescent hues and hazy, shimmering effects transcend the artist’s early dalliance with representational art and mark the poignant conclusion of four decades of creative inquiry. Between these bookends sat a meticulously sketched plan for

an abstract work, a reminder of the artist’s defining formal shifts and highly deliberate process.

The second section explored Zóbel’s three years in New England, where in 1949 he earned a bachelor’s degree from Harvard. Influenced by the Boston Expressionists’ fraught figuration, the young self-taught artist also began to grapple with Abstract Expressionism, the avant-garde ideas of Bauhaus, and a distinctly American kind of modernism. Displayed alongside Zóbel’s early pieces were works by Mark Rothko and Franz Kline, among others, placing the painter in relation to the wider artistic experimentation of the era.

When Zóbel returned to Manila in the early 1950s, it was a time of dynamism and evolution for his birthplace. There, he established himself as a leading figure who helped redefine what art from the Philippines could be. Works demonstrating the artist’s move to abstraction included works from his *Saeta* series, created through one of his signature techniques of using a syringe to apply paint in delicate lines. Produced in a creative burst between 1957 and 1959, examples from this series of nearly 100 “dart” paintings were installed around a display of one of his syringes.

Upon moving to Madrid in 1961, Zóbel joined the Art

Informel movement and embarked on his revered *Serie Negra (Black Series)*. Color, he felt, had become a distraction. In works like the expansive *La Visión* (1961), he used only black and white paint, embracing subtle rhythmic variations in tone and pigment. Returning to color in the late 1960s, Zóbel resumed his lifelong dialogue with paintings by other artists. The exhibition juxtaposed Lorenzo Lotto’s 16th-century *Allegory of Chastity*, the first Renaissance work to appear in NGS, with Zóbel’s *El sueño de la Doncella (ii): Conversación con Lorenzo Lotto [The Dream of the Damsel (II): Conversation with Lorenzo Lotto]* (1967). The pairing of Lotto’s angelic light with Zóbel’s diffuse radiance was numinous.

An influential patron and scholar, Zóbel established the first museum of modern Philippine art, the Ateneo Art Gallery in Manila, followed by the Museo de Arte Abstracto Español in his beloved Cuenca. The exhibition’s concluding chapter explored Zóbel’s connection to the light, landscape, and ethos of Spain. The shapes and ochre tones of the rocky countryside seen from his museum window inform works such as *La Vista XXVI (The View XXVI)* (1974). Retaining a faint underlying grid, the picture belongs to an evocative series of hauntingly blurred, though geometrically constructed, studies.

Meanwhile, the energetic brushwork, warm colors, and abstract hints of running figures in *Fútbol 14 (Football 14)* (1973) evoke daily life in Spain.

“Order is Essential” demonstrated how factors both cultural and formal enriched Zóbel’s approach to art and to life. Coming after major retrospectives at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (2003) and the Museo del Prado (2022)—the latter traveled to the Ayala Museum in Makati City, Philippines, in 2024—the survey reconfirmed the artist’s status as an essential figure of 20th-century modernism.

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Installation view of **FERNANDO ZÓBEL**’s “Order is Essential” at the National Gallery Singapore, 2025. Courtesy National Gallery Singapore.

