

## Season Lao au musée départemental des arts asiatiques

Adrien Bossard, Director of the Asian Art Museum in Nice, France

Season Lao's exhibition at the Departmental Asian Art Museum in Nice was an opportunity to reveal his talent to the French public. This long-term project, slowed down by the pandemic, was achieved in 2023, with the installation by the artist himself of his works in the various spaces made available to him. During his two-week stay, the museum team had the pleasure of accompanying him in his creative process which is, in my opinion, a form of narration that Lao composes with poetry in a place in which he deeply immerses himself. Before coming to France, Lao met Paul Noritaka Tange (1958- ), son and successor of the architect of the Asian Art Museum, the world-famous Kenzō Tange (1913-2005). Their exchange allowed Lao to strengthen his link with the place and to comfort him in his artistic proposal which not only took place but was invested with a spirit. The architecture of the museum is indeed a clever blend of appearance and substance, whose modern forms contain both a synthesis of the world seen from Asia and a tribute to the ancient temples along the Mediterranean Sea coast. Entering and exploring it is like a spiritual experience, a feeling often expressed by its visitors.



KYOSHITSU SHOHAKU – An Empty Room Turns White For Enlightenment Season Lao exhibition – The Asian Art Museum in Nice

(Une pièce vide devient blanche pour l'illumination par Season Lao. Musée des Arts Asiatiques de Nice, France) 13.5 ~ 26.11.2023

At a time when the notion of well-being is increasingly associated with the museum institution, Kenzō Tange was innovative in his way of designing this marble setting, punctuated by passages from shadow to light and whose doorstep marks a frontier between the profane and the sacred. Over the past twenty-five years, the museum has welcomed many contemporary artists, giving them carte blanche. Few of them have understood the spaces and collections so deeply. Far from artificial superimposition, Season Lao has put himself at the service of the

discourse carried by the place and the works it contains to magnify them by putting his own artistic work in perspective.



Pins d'hiver dans un paysage en croissant de lune Winter 寒松三日月図 I SEASON LAO I Photographie sur papier Kozo 2200x290 cm

### Embodying the Literati Spirit in the 21st Century

The literati spirit constituted for more than a millennium one of the most important cultural foundations in the Far East. Today, many are those who claim to be part of it with force and conviction. Others embody it with subtlety, relevance, and elegance. Season Lao is one of the latter, I would even say that in addition to embodying it, he managed to update it because, while respecting this spirit, he takes it to other horizons.

Mountain and water, black and white, emptiness and fullness: the literati aesthetic is there, and its codes are respected. However, these are installations, filmed performances, and photographs. Season Lao plays with the traditional background and the contemporary form without however marking a strict distinction, as if his photographs on Kozo paper were a natural evolution of the ancient monochromatic landscape paintings. What if they were? Isn't it the very nature of the tradition to be maintained through the ages by adapting gradually? The great success of Season Lao's work is to manage to cross, in complete discretion, the milestone of the 21st century with a thousand-year-old tradition.



Mt. Kagami, Saga, Japan 2023 I SEASON LAO I 200x64 cm

Although his works have a humble appearance, the underlying reflections are of great complexity, nourished by a double inspiration drawing on classical Chinese sources and Western philosophical references. This intellectual density resembles that of the scholars of the past who, on the one hand, passed the imperial examination requiring a high level of erudition and, on the other, could empty their minds and concentrate to create paintings of an apparent simplicity sometimes disconcerting. Here we find a concept deeply rooted in Far Eastern thought: complexity must be erased to give the illusion of simplicity. This concept is Season Lao at the Asian Art Museum Adrien Bossard, Director of the Asian Art Museum in Nice reminiscent of Arte Povera, an Italian artistic movement, which according to Germano Celant (1940-2020) is "a voluntary barenness of the achievements of culture in order to achieve a form of authenticity of the body and of its perceptions<sup>1</sup>". The adjective "poor" is moreover borrowed from the vocabulary of the experimental theater of Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999), himself influenced by Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), psychoanalysis according to Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), and oriental philosophies. This barenness in reaction to the consumer society that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s is found in other movements such as Supports/Surfaces in France, Minimalism in the United States and Mono-ha in Japan.



Lotuses 氷蓮図 2023 | Photographie sur papier Kozo, pierre des Alpes-Maritimes | Dimension variable

It should be recalled here that Season Lao carries the literati spirit in the globalized context of the 21st century, made of a "pooling of ideas, concepts and principles<sup>2</sup>" and enriched by the experiments carried out by the movements previously mentioned. We thus find in his corpus of references The introduction to landscape painting by Zong Bing, a Chinese painting theoretician of the 5th century, the concept of Dasein by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), the complex thought of the French philosopher Augustin Berque (1942- ) or the plastic

and critical work of Lee Ufan (1936- ). Season Lao is, therefore, part of this fruitful back and forth between the Far East and the West which has allowed and still allows many artists to invent and reinvent such as John Cage (1912-1992), an American composer using the Book of Changes to produce random music; Herman de Vries (1931- ), a Dutch artist with creations influenced by Buddhism and Hinduism; Bosco Sodi (1970- ), a Mexican visual artist drawing on the Japanese aesthetic principle of *yūgen* to create installations; Rao Fu (1978- ), a Chinese painter producing expressionist works inscribed in a Germanic visual universe.

### Nature and the Garden Landscape

Following the Far Eastern tradition, Season Lao composes and constructs both tangible and mental landscapes. A connoisseur recognizes the breath- anima of painting in his photographs and the spirit of the garden in his installations. Nature has nourished his work like that of his Chinese and Japanese predecessors for centuries. This same nature also took on unprecedented importance in the West during the second half of the 20th century with the emergence of Land Art and Eco Art, among others. An emblematic work of this relationship between art and nature is undoubtedly 7000 Eichen – Stadtverwaldung statt Stadtverwaltung, created in 1982 by Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) for Documenta 7 in Kassel (Germany). Today, the issues of eco-responsibility have permanently established the environment as a major theme of the international art scene carried by a multitude of artists, such as Aviva Rahmani (1945- ), Fabrice Hyber (1961- ) and Yang Yongliang (1980- ), to name but a few.



KYOSHITSU SHOHAKU – Une pièce vide devient blanche pour l'illumination | An Empty Room Turns White For Enlightenment

虚室・生白 Dimension variable | rondins des Alpes-Maritimes, logs of Alpes-Maritimes, video 2023

Nature is Season Lao's favorite subject, as can be seen in his photographic series. It constitutes for him a physical and intellectual substrate: he explores it, experiences it, and observes it to capture emotions in order to restore them in his works. These are therefore memory capsules of natural phenomena. His aesthetic quest is marked by the seal of phenomenological experience and seeks to apprehend reality as it is given. Lao thus produces images and forms that reflect nature, through the prism of his Chinese cultural background, enriched by his Japanese experience and the references he has chosen. The mist he uses in his installation-performances entitled KYOSHITSU SHOHAKU – An Empty Room Turns White For Enlightenment is found in his photographs of mountainous landscapes. Whether the medium is fixed or not, Season Lao follows the principles of Chinese thought and transmits a living and moving nature, animated by yin and yang, inhabited by the concepts of Mountain-Water, Man-Heaven, and Emptiness-Fullness. François Cheng (1929- ) recalls "[...] the importance of cosmology, insofar as painting does not aim to be a simple aesthetic object; it tends to become a microcosm recreating like a macrocosm, an open space where real life is possible<sup>3</sup>". In Far Eastern thought, landscape paintings are worlds in their own right, it could not be otherwise for their contemporary extensions that Season Lao creates in the same spirit.

There is a fine line between landscape and garden in Far East. The garden is an artificial composition of natural elements, altered or not by man. This place plays on points of view and perspectives through the subtle use of partitions, openings, and pathways. It is a living space and a medium for contemplation that mobilizes the same concepts as a landscape painting. An exhibition being a "gathering of objects and documents in space [which] is significant and provokes emotion<sup>4</sup>", there is a parallel to be drawn between an exhibition designed by Season Lao and this Asian garden which is part of its visual universe. Throughout the process of creating the exhibition and installing the works in the spaces ultimately created by Kenzō Tange, the artist implemented a reflection on the interior and the exterior, the points of view, the wandering, and the complementarity. He thus, in a certain way, placed his garden-world within an architecture itself considered as a synthesis of the universe. It is all the poetry and the force of the artist's landscape-garden which then took place in the museum.

### The Spiritual Belonging

Asian observers of Season Lao's work all evoke a reminiscence of a "spiritual belonging". This feeling is difficult to explain and in my opinion is like the emotion that overwhelms us when we return for the first time in a long time to a place that is dear to us or when we observe a phenomenon that reminds us of familiar events. Lao captures fragments of his spiritual

belonging during his wanderings and presents them to others. By inscribing the names of the places photographed on the prints, the artist suggests the universality of this belongingness that everyone carries within them and invites the viewer to find it in his works. This approach is also an incentive to seek this feeling in one's own daily life.



Signlessness 無相 | SEASON LAO | Resin, plaster 25 ×30×45 cm 2023

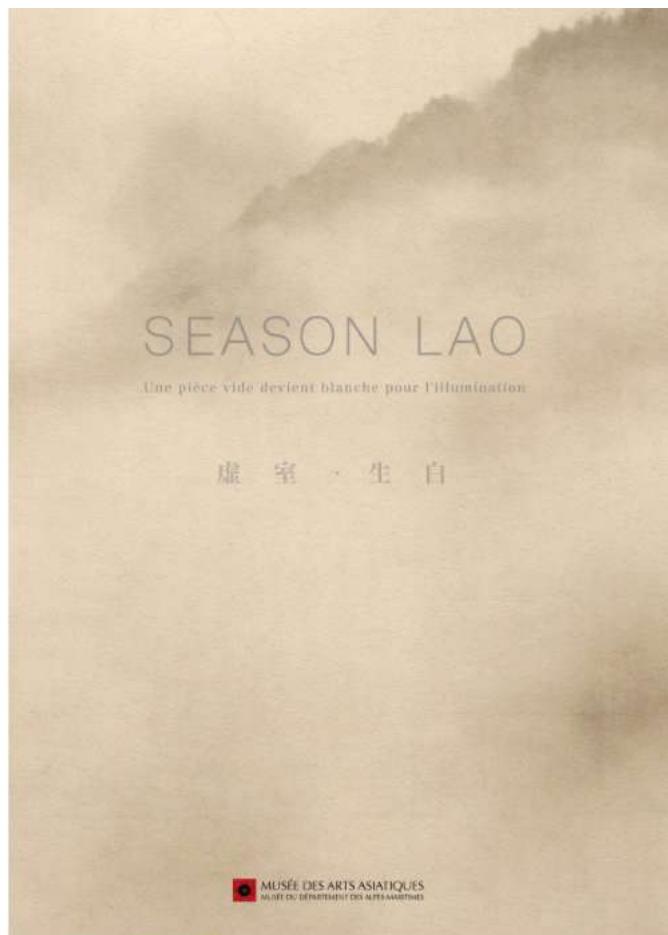
artwork collected by Asian Art Museum in Nice, France (Permanent exhibition) ニース国立東洋美術館コレクション (常設)

A great spirituality therefore emanates from the works of Season Lao, whose research explores the sacred dimension that certain images and forms can take on. An informed eye will be able to recognize the Taoist aura coming from many of his photographs. Other works have pronounced Buddhist orientations such as Signlessness, a formal and conceptual reference to the state of liberation from all attachment. There is, moreover, a real filiation between this work and the composite figurations (in plaster, tar, paper, wax, bronze, cement, wood, or wire mesh) of Buddhist deities by John Connell (1940-2009). Season Lao is however distinguished by the choice of glass giving its sculpture a mysterious look that pushes the spectator to deepen its observation. A Buddhist motif par excellence, omnipresent in Asian art, the lotus is the subject of a photograph presented suspended in a kakemono format. This symbol of purity is another reference to the Buddhist concepts used by the artist in his work. The installation since 2022 of a version of this work in an Itakura house in Fukuoka, a construction inspired by the portable hut

of Kamo no Chōmei (1155-1216), has allowed Season Lao's vision to flourish in a meaningful place.

In his series of filmed installation-performances entitled KYOSHITSU SHOHAKU – An Empty Room Turns White For Enlightenment, Season Lao stages an anonymous person seated on a log and having as a support for contemplation another log cut at an angle by the power of nature, sometimes next to a Buddhist figure and a landscape image as in Ōsaka, sometimes outdoors at the edge of the water and against a background of vegetation as in Nice (which seems equivalent in the mind of the artist), and always installed in the middle of a mist created for the shooting.

This staging is a metaphor for the relationship between man and nature often illustrated in landscape paintings by human representation or its evocation through an empty hut or studio. Here, it is Chan Buddhism, or Zen, that is reinterpreted in a contemporary version. The artist accompanies the spectator towards meditation. The seat and the support are presented physically and on video, the latter being a sort of instruction manual explaining the possibility of pensive contemplation. I was able to see the evocative effectiveness of Lao's creation on some museum visitors who sat in front of the installation to meditate. "When the human heart becomes the mirror of itself and of the world, only then begins the true possibility of living<sup>5</sup>." Thanks to Season Lao, the museum was thus able to share with its public this aesthetic charged with spirituality, which, starting from nature, is an invitation to explore one's own humanity.



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