

# The Spirit of Nature: A Conversation with Thierry Zarcone

*Fabienne Verdier*

‘Today in my hermitage I have a deep feeling of osmosis with nature . . . I love my “aquarium of serenity”, its permanent connection with the garden surrounding the house.’<sup>1</sup>

## From ‘osmosis with nature’ to the ‘aquarium of serenity’

**TZ** In China the art of gardens is often related to landscape painting (*shanshui* – mountains and water) and a particular genre of poetry (*tianyuan* – fields and garden) devoted to the life of withdrawal through detachment and the quest for serenity. Your autobiographical book *Passagère du silence* shows that these three arts, harmoniously combined, ran through your ‘ten years of initiation in China’. The balance that places your quest for the real at the centre of day-to-day life and in intimate connection with nature you have reconstructed at your home in France, when you evoke those three sites radiating energy in your life, the *house*, the *studio* and the *garden*, which you describe as ‘rich for the contemplation of the nature-universe, an essential source for my work as a painter’.<sup>2</sup> Can you tell us about *your* garden . . . your studio . . . your house . . . and your osmosis with nature?

**FV** The garden  
teaches us constantly  
‘the being-season’, the variations in weather  
the influence of the cosmos and its shifts  
on the earth body  
on the human body  
as well as on the picture body.  
The life cycles surrounding us  
the process powering them  
the morning drizzle trickling down a leaf stem

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the sap visibly rising as day dawns  
the multitudes of gestations beneath the humus mat  
a winter morning's purifying frost  
the movement of a cloud towards the substance rain. . .  
Thanks to a regular contemplative attitude  
the evidence of the sense of things brings us  
to the perception of an originating dynamic.  
Are these not life-giving values  
for the painter concerned with truth?

The house  
is experienced according to the idea of a 'hermitage'  
of withdrawal from social life.  
It is rare to receive a guest  
who might disturb  
the intensity of concentration sought.  
Like the monk  
the painter needs an enclosed space  
for an inner work.  
Starting an ascetic life  
a true art of living at home.  
A place tending towards a sublimation  
a ritualization of the day-to-day.  
There one cultivates an intimate purification  
polishing consciousness  
sweeping the terrace  
scouring the stone basin  
preparing meals in simple pots  
the fire, a wood-fired stove that generates the quietude of the home . . .  
Attitudes turned towards a furtive encounter  
between the true-being  
and the universe around us.  
The house is the space  
where we feed ourselves  
with many contemplations.  
While shelling peas  
my mind relishes the swaying-movement  
of the shadow of the magnolia branch on the kitchen wall.  
Or at siesta time  
my still body drowns  
and my imagination wanders free among the craziest daydreams.  
I need to go through  
this rosary of sober meditations  
that trickle by throughout the day.  
Praise for the ordinary life  
fasting body and mind

seeking what is basic  
simplicity  
a shifting serenity  
an accord  
with the flow of the living.  
We shape ourselves then  
construct ourselves  
out of the width of the instant's time.

The studio  
It is the temple for a sacred ritual  
the tatami of the act of painting.  
That sacred place where the apprentice  
handling the material of the ink  
seeks a physical and spiritual confrontation  
with the rhythm of the universe.  
A space of extreme rigour  
an intimate order  
a rule imposes itself around the emptiness.  
Down there, right down there  
light and silence proclaim their laws;  
darkness  
that veil of opaqueness caressing the ground  
is necessary for me to approach light in the work.  
Silence  
there is sonorous, deafening with riches being born . . .  
If the soul is receptive  
if the heart-mind is ready  
the studio allows us to experience an emergence  
a coincidence,  
an encounter with the inexpressible.  
The three entities 'Garden – House – Studio'  
a trinity necessary for the painter.  
The constant to-and-fro from one space to the other  
provides transition stages  
passages of initiation  
rites of purification.  
The interpenetration of experiences lived in the different spots  
bears it toward an active elevation  
an effective action  
in an apparent non-action

**TZ** The spiritual dimension of your development is emblematic of your work. But it is not the quest for a revealed God. You write: 'My quest? To grasp phenomena in their shifting wholeness and thus capture the spirit of life.' This quest clearly links with that of the Tao masters and certain Christian, Muslim or Buddhist mystics, and

even some Greek philosophers, such as Plotinus for instance, who wrote that at the moment of his death what is universal in him would mingle with what is universal in the universe. So you admit that you are 'searching for that tenuous thread that connects cultures and makes them part of the universal',<sup>3</sup> and that what you are trying to transmit in your paintings is the 'sense of union with the universe and its beauty', searching for 'the balance between the world of art and life'. And so your painting is also an art of living and being. . .

**FV** I do indeed feel close to Plotinus.  
Painting  
is a state of being in the world  
that manifests itself as the real.  
It gives itself up  
to the principle of transformation  
the very essence of the universal.  
Humility  
receptive readiness  
is needed to welcome  
that unnameable with the ten thousand beings.  
So the brush ceaselessly traces  
the infinitely lovely  
in an ordinary carpet of moss  
in the spirit of something obvious  
in the structure of a rock  
in catching the breath  
of a telluric landscape.  
Through simple metaphor  
through anonymous suggestion  
through the heart's way  
the painter makes possible  
transmission of an inner experience.  
The idea falls  
like the water droplet.  
Like the lightning it is about  
fulfilling one's task:  
grabbing the ink clouds  
and striking the form!  
Experiencing immediacy  
is the supreme excellence  
said Heraclitus.  
That piece of life materialized on the painting  
trace of an eternal rhythm  
is an attempt at an offering  
to the passing soul.

### The 'mystery of plants'

**TZ** The relationship with plants, as well as stone – as we shall see later – imbues your work and your search for the True: 'For many years now I had been feeling the secret temptation to deal with the mystery of plants in paint.' For you 'celebrating the living, uncovering the mystery of plants, the world's hidden substance' is akin to 'a visible translation of the invisible structure of things'. Indeed you quote a great Chinese master, Chuta, an expert in that art, who was said to be able 'to transpose into his pictures the inner dream that captures the soul of plants', letting 'a vital force that transcends us' manifest itself. You also recall that your old master Huang encouraged you to study plants and talk to them, as well as to your bird in fact. It is an invitation to mystic contemplation of those inspiring beings, plants, stones, mountains, water . . . And a shamanic adventure can even be discerned since you aspire to become 'brute wood', 'windblown grass' or 'spring breeze'; I am thinking too of one of your Chinese inks on paper, inspired by a poem entitled 'becoming one with the purity of a lotus'.<sup>4</sup> You also note that 'contemplating a blade of grass painted by various masters teaches me a lot' and is not your art in fact and among other things, as you say, 'painting in a single brushstroke', painting inspired by a style that Chinese scholars call 'wild grass'? What is this 'wild grass' style?

**FV** Wild grass  
is mastery of a calligraphic style  
beyond all reasonable thought.  
A cursive – fugitive – extravagant impression  
detached improvisation – efficient and sublime  
born of the secret impulses  
of our immanence.  
Free spontaneous expression  
returning to the original bone structure.  
The brushstroke  
in accordance with the process of natural creation  
displays a unique subjectivity.  
It suddenly harmonizes with  
the gust of a stormy sea  
the flow of the great rivers of Africa  
the virtuosity of an ephemeral butterfly's flight  
or the incantatory boom of whale song . . .  
Overwhelmed by this impulsive art – the refined  
limpid perception of the real – abstract  
I have for twenty years been practising  
interpreting beings  
with a single brushstroke.  
That stroke  
a living organism born of chaos  
is the total enigma  
of a manifestation between heaven and earth.

That first step  
is the key to infinite journeys  
constructs the non-finite nature of form.  
That alchemy is ineffable.

**TZ** But the link between your art and nature draws its strength from your work as a calligrapher too and from the very basis of that work whose mastery required of you long months of practice: the technique of the brushstroke. Of that stroke you say that it is 'a living entity in itself' and that it possesses 'a structure, a flesh, a living energy', that it is 'a creature of nature, like the rest'. But your master Huang taught you that in order to draw the stroke well, that is, to make it live, one had to know the 'life principle of the mystery of plants'. The demonstration of this given by your old master is astounding: 'He went into the garden to pluck a branch: "look, there is an outer structure, and sap inside; it is a fluid that feeds the stem. There is an inner movement and a stable outer envelope. I would like you to reproduce that with your heart."' In the year 2000 in France you assembled several of your pictures (the *branch*, the *buds in conversation*, the *blade of grass*, the *wild cherry wood*, the *stalks and buds*, the *tree branch*, the *onion bulb*) into a series which you called 'the mystery of plants'.<sup>5</sup> Could you tell us more about this 'mystery of plants' and your quest to penetrate it? What does it mean to 'contemplate a blade of grass'?

**FV** The mystery of plants  
a presence in the world  
that is all humility  
produced by a speck.  
To contemplate a blade of grass  
is to feed one's mind  
on the purity of its line  
its fragile movement  
its leisurely tension  
its perfect curve  
its sharp edge.  
Its supreme simplicity  
seems easy to interpret.  
But even before taking up the brush  
does the painter not need  
an infallible ethic  
a demanding inner nobility  
so that the heart may  
communicate that dignity of being?

**TZ** You hail the inspirational power of the plant and the stone at the Cistercian abbey of Silvacane where you showed a group of paintings-calligraphies dedicated to St Bernard of Clairvaux, with the title 'Résonances – installation picturale' (La Roque d'Anthéron, July 2004). The leaf motifs on the capitals – 'a veritable fusion of vegetable and mineral' – clearly delighted you and are part of the harmony of the

place, where you maybe found the quietude and silence of the Mount Hemei Taoist monasteries, which you describe in *Passagère du silence*. Do you in a way belong to that medieval alchemical tradition of humans as friends and respecters of plants, probably best represented by the mysterious doctor Paracelsus, who wrote in the 16th century that everything is alive, stones, planets, metals, air and fire, and that the universe as a whole is an eternal river of life?

**FV** Yes, I belong fully to that  
and I should like to reply  
with this thought from Hölderlin:

‘Just being one with the whole  
that is divine existence,  
that is man’s heaven.  
Just being one with everything living,  
overflowing with joy, no longer conscious of oneself  
returning to the great whole of nature:  
That is the sacred height, the place of eternal  
quietude where midday loses its overpowering heat  
and thunder its voice, where the sea dismantled  
becomes like waves of wheat.’

### The spirit of stone

**TZ** But life is not just humans, animals and plants, and stone can be very helpful in discovering oneself and the universe. That is what China teaches you since you are attracted ‘by the world of minerals that can be contemplated in paintings and dream stones’, that marble with brown and black veins against a grey or white background which evokes heavenly landscapes. After you met the painter Lu Yanshao in Hangzhou, near Shanghai, he gave you as a parting gift one of those dream stones, your first dream stone, and told you: ‘If you want to paint landscapes one day, believe me, study closely the profound similarity in fate between the work of nature and that of humanity. Meditate on this stone, I will be proud for you to do so. It will open for you the gates of the inner landscape.’ Then you started to collect them and made this dazzling discovery: ‘They continually teach me the mysteries of living things.’ Could you tell us about your collection of dream stones, your relationship with the stone of France and elsewhere?

**FV** Dream stones  
Meditation stones  
Standing stones  
Threshold stones  
Musical stones  
Ink grindstones. . .  
By living close to them

I am learning about their presence.  
Primal memory  
of wandering telluric powers.  
The material for perception  
of a genesis of reality  
essential to the painter.  
I tame their impenetrable lines  
source of boundless inspiration.  
Reminiscence of a heavenly breath  
their nourishing veins remind us  
of the principle of all destinies;  
evanescent path of a tormented sky  
calcareous stones inhabited by fossilized souls  
filament of merged presence  
metamorphic layers  
born of the slap of water  
silex with large grains  
mirroring a cosmic reverie  
Sediment of the soul, of matter,  
of space and time. . .  
Solid beings – rough  
holders of a knowledge refined – innate.  
Archetype of the well of being  
buried memory of the body and the mind.  
Embryos of origins  
landscape within the landscape  
life within life.  
Could stones be pregnant  
with the whole that is our infinite?

**TZ** Without a doubt stones occupy a special place in your painting. Then you devoted a number of pictures to rocks and mountains and you gave two of them the titles 'portrait of a stone' and 'meditation stone'.<sup>6</sup> In 1995 you did 35 drawings for the book *Rêves de pierre*<sup>7</sup> and in 1997 you made 22 paintings for François Cheng's texts in the book entitled *Quand les pierres font signe*.<sup>8</sup> Could it be that, more than the mystery of plants, stones are a prime route to knowledge of self and the universe, and your first and last object of meditation?

**FV** I do not think so.  
Every tiny thing is a prime route  
to knowledge of self and the universe.  
The encounter with all forms of life  
whether water, wind, mineral, plant  
or stardust  
opens fields for exploration  
of incalculable richness.



As if the brain  
instinctively made amazing connections  
between the pine-cone's spiral  
the shell of the passing snail  
the tornado sweeping across the landscape in a lightning moment  
the twining honeysuckle stalks before the terrace  
the spider's web above the basin  
or, on summer evenings observing the heavenly vault  
the cosmic spiral. . .

Is there not a profound conspiracy  
between the nature of the universe  
and the nature of humanity?  
Those cycles, rhythms and macrocosmic laws,  
do they not design the essences and life structures  
for everything in this world?  
No matter what the subject is.  
To grasp the nature of the sky  
in the depths of being  
is to understand that everything is manifested in everything.  
A kind of invisible ricochet  
of energizing resonance  
of moving wave  
that are being woven into the eternal chain of lives  
that constantly emerge and vanish.  
Human disciplines  
analyse and compartmentalize knowledge.  
Do they not lose that intuition – basic perception  
that melody of the unity of the great whole?

**TZ** You state that your 'masterpiece' at Silvacane is 'a meditation stone, in homage to the anonymous stonemasons who followed one another and built the abbey', adding that you 'felt the need to add a red square to represent alchemy, that inner fire that gives access to transcendence'.<sup>9</sup> I note that you relate your art to, and even identify it with, the art of the stonemason, alluding to 'that crazy idea of working on oneself that one does by withdrawing from the world'. And you did just that because often, in *La Passagère du silence*, you write that 'to assist concentration' you withdrew from the world. . . I want to come back to your vision of 'work'. You refer to it when you talk about the 'need for a rigorous asceticism', about those 'repetitive actions such as prayer, stone cutting and more generally manual work': necessary actions, according to St Benedict and St Bernard, whom you quote: 'if you want to rediscover the fundamental unity of body and mind, the path of inner purification'. . . You also stress that withdrawal from the world that enables one to explore the depths of humanity and become a 'true being', as the Taoists and the Cistercian masters teach, 'before being ready to pick up the brush or sculpt a stone'. That reminds us of the respect the cathedral builders and our present-day *compagnons du Tour de France* give

to the Profession, self-realization through work. . . Profession, asceticism, withdrawal from the world: is your art a 'mysticism' that puts you both *in* and *outside* the world?

**FV** Polishing  
polishing  
polishing  
polishing being  
till one is just  
the absolute of all things!

**TZ** Your philosophical, poetic and spiritual reading of the world can be found in your description of the magnificent gardens of Suzhou: they are the 're-creation of an ideal universe, an attempt to understand the great rule of the metamorphosis of the world and, who knows?, rediscover the primal unity that leads us to awareness'. There you find, in a harmonious setting, your inspirational beings and you report that the place exudes a 'serene harmony, a game of hide-and-seek between mineral, plant, earth, sky and water'. . . And there you have what you call a fundamental intuition: 'If landscape painters have managed to reproduce their visions with such power they seem quite real on paper, it is because they understood, with the utmost humility, that they were the little brothers of the stones and trees on this earth and that we were able, through our inner alchemy, to give life to the mineral as nature gives us life.' I will compare that sentence with one from an 8th-century painter quoted by your master Huang: 'Out of doors I took nature for my master and I found the nature of my heart.' Another observation that might surprise a westerner is the statement by that same master Huang, who suggests that: 'Painters do not work by setting up their easel before a landscape like Monet or Cézanne; they create it and those who look not only see but also understand the mountain or the old pine, for the artist has gone beyond the landscape, drawing only the structure needed for an imaginary journey.' So your painting is more than just an artistic path; it is an inner path, a wisdom that goes beyond the great western philosophies and the Judeo-Christian religions. I deduce from this that, by improving their art, painters improve themselves, like the Buddhist monk or Tao hermit, and grasp what their place in the universe is. Do you place your work as a painter in the most faithful respect for the Tao wisdom whose shamanic substrate we are aware of, or do you position yourself beyond?

**FV** Do you know it sometimes happens that I am living in another state  
in which I can no longer perceive any difference between myself  
the wild juniper  
the little pebble tossed back and forth by the tides  
the rhinoceros beetle  
or the cabbage leaf chewed by caterpillars. . .  
Why do we always want to name the unnameable?  
I am ephemeral  
incandescent by nature.

Where should we position ourselves except  
at the heart of the hurricane  
on the brink of a fault in the rock  
on the edge of the void and matter  
furtively seeing  
in the mirror of my ink grindstone  
many metamorphoses.  
I am nothing  
But the wandering of a destiny.

### Poem of the Earth

**TZ** You explain that your 'big calligraphic pieces are like poetic tables' and you write: 'I search for, I invent pictures able to accept gracefully the brushstrokes' poetic thought.' But you can also translate your calligraphy and your paintings into poetry and play with sounds, rhythms and images, as is demonstrated by several delicious passages from your *Passagère du silence*. I shall quote your sincere, simple, fresh picture of the plant that inspires you: 'Following the brush's breath I am today trying to explore the genius peculiar to each being: the rustling of the bamboo branches, the fervour of the young daffodil shoots turning towards the light, the skeleton of the tree bent over by the winter blasts, two buds in conversation, the destiny of a black-hearted flower, the stem of an ordinary bramble seeking water, plum-tree flowers opening into a milky way, the primrose's smile, the impetuous mood of a piece of dead wood. . .'. The intimate connection between painting and poetry is clearly expressed by Guo Xi (11th century), whose lines you reprise in *L'Unique Trait de pinceau*, as follows: 'The poem is an invisible painting/the painting is a visible poem.' A calligrapher, a painter of mountains and water, you are also discovered to be a poet of fields and gardens. Could you explain your relationship to writing and allow us to become better acquainted with Fabienne Verdier the poet?

**FV** Whoever claims to be a poet  
dies at that moment.  
Whoever forgets themselves in contemplation  
are they not more able to explore  
the 'world of elsewheres'  
without even realizing it?  
There where unknown symphonies  
spontaneous impromptus  
are revealed and sing.  
The great nobility  
the marvellous accomplishment of the seeker after the absolute  
is it not that total merging of human matter  
in osmosis with nature?  
And who knows whether humanity is not a natural process  
akin to the perfume wafting from a woodland flower?

**TZ** Your masters often used to defend ignorance, incomprehension, spontaneity. They praised self-effacement, simplicity, humility. And even older masters went so far as to give themselves absurd names that were nonetheless rich in lessons, such as 'the ass', and you yourself planned one day to adopt the nickname 'the stewed vegetable', 'the ferocious tigress' or 'the fool and the eternal'. That reminds me of some of our great spiritual Christian figures such as Nicolas de Cues and his 'learned ignorance', or, in Muslim territory, the *abdals* (idiots) or the Budala (imbeciles), mystical wanderers, half-shaman half-Sufi, and their 'learned stupidity'. Your exchange with Master Huang after months of training is a striking illustration of this:

'It's no good; I don't know where I am any more. In fact I don't understand anything at all.'

'Fine, fine.'

'I don't know where I'm heading.'

'Fine, fine.'

'I don't even know who I am any more.'

'Better still!'

'I no longer know the difference between "myself" and "nothing".'

'Well done!'

How should we understand 'learned ignorance' in landscape painting?

**FV** It is only by acknowledging  
our great ignorance  
before the eternal  
that it seems to be we can think  
of approaching knowledge  
true knowledge  
which is in harmony  
with the spontaneous course of life.

To conclude our conversation  
and to mitigate the mediocrity of my replies  
I recall that sentence from Fernando Pessoa  
Taken from his text *Sheherazade* (26–11–1916):  
'What I think I do not know  
But it is a joy to think it.'

\*

*Post Scriptum: Monsieur Zarcone*  
You who were daring enough to thrust me into the terrors of  
'the beyond' with your subtle questions. . .  
Can I in turn ask a favour of you?  
Since I am unable, for health reasons, to leave my hermitage,  
if you were one day to make the pilgrimage to Mount Hemei  
and came across the spirit of the old master Huang Yuan,

could you salute him for me?  
You could just tell him that  
you met his painter apprentice  
and that not a day passes  
when she does not think of his words  
trying always  
to recapture the innate joy of the swallow's flight  
on the tip of the brush.

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

### Notes

1. Fabienne Verdier (2003), *Passagère du silence. Dix ans d'initiation en Chine* (Paris, Albin Michel, 293 pages): in this book Fabienne Verdier tells of the early days of learning to paint in the 1980s in France, then in China, where that study was complemented by an initiation into Chinese mystical thought, its arts, its aesthetic, and even its way of life. Fabienne Verdier began to learn calligraphy, seal-making, preparation of materials and several painting techniques. She also writes about the difficulties encountered during her stay and speaks for several traditional Chinese painters and their dramatic story. The book is a spiritual and artistic quest, a sociological study and the story of two Chinas, the old and the new (Editor's note).  
Fabienne Verdier (2004), *L'Unique Trait de pinceau. Calligraphie, peinture et pensée chinoise* (Paris, Albin Michel, 188 pages): is Fabienne Verdier's 'silent book', which is complementary to *Passagère du silence*; just a few thoughts taken from Chinese philosophy and chosen by the author illustrate the 100 or so paintings presented here. The reader discovers her calligraphy, her way of pinning down the mystery of plants and the secrets of stone. Though monochrome painting predominates with a tendency towards red, which is so powerful in China, we are no less surprised by an indefinable blue, a beige ochre and a refreshing green bursting in. But the soul of the colour lies in the surface, which is very important for Fabienne Verdier; indeed we need to see the colour behind the colour, in the ribs, striations, cracking or piqué of the silk or linen/cotton canvases or the xuanzhi papers (Editor's note).
2. Most of the texts in quotation marks are taken from the autobiographical book by Fabienne Verdier *Passagère du silence, op. cit.* (when they are not, a note gives details of their source). The paintings by Fabienne Verdier mentioned in the text are reproduced in her book *L'Unique Trait de pinceau, op. cit.*
3. Words recorded by Jean-Pierre Frimbois (Art Actuel).
4. *L'Unique Trait de pinceau, op. cit.*, p. 159.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 165–75.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 73–7.
7. Éditions Paroles d'Aube, 1995.
8. Éditions Voix d'Encre, 1997.
9. Words recorded by Jean-Pierre Frimbois (Art Actuel).