

# ZEN GARDEN 1.0

Installation by Lucio Maria Morra and Astrid Fremin  
for Kazuko Hiraoka's exhibition LA MEMORIA DEI SEGNI  
at IL FONDACO in Bra (Italy), 01-09-2018 / 29-09-2018

## PRESENTATION OF THE WORK

This Zen garden is not a Zen garden... At least not a traditional classical Japanese Zen garden. It is rather a **work of western art**, an installation that takes inspiration from the tradition of the Japanese Zen gardens, and reinterprets it.

I realized this project together with **Astrid Fremin**, French sculptress, with whom I have been collaborating for some years now, producing works that lie outside of my painting and her sculpture, such as our action-painting performances, land art, or, as in this case, art installations. She also practises Zen meditation, which therefore constitutes an important shared presupposition.

Firstly, I would like to thank **Silvana for the farsighted creative opportunity she has offered us**, and **Kazuko for her generosity in granting us a space inside her exhibition**.

Silvana's intuition lies in spotting **the complementary aspect that unites Kazuko and I: we are two artists "contaminated"** by the east-west encounter. Kazuko, oriental, has found in the West **an open space filled with freer creative expression**, compared to certain consolidated canons of the Japanese culture. As for myself, a visual artist and western Zen monk, I have found in the East **a depth of content - I could say "spiritual"** - that has been teetering between conceptual art and commercial art for decades in the West.

Anyway, all of this came to be because Silvana thought a Zen monk couldn't avoid being an expert on Zen gardens... Not entirely true... Yet her intuition was right: **a Zen monk, even a western one, is familiar with the native spirit that imbues all the Japanese art of the last 7-8 centuries, influenced indeed by the Zen tradition**. I don't only refer to Zen gardens, but also to calligraphy (*shodo*), the martial arts, the tea ceremony, *ikebana* (flower arranging), *Noh* theatre, the music of the *shakuhachi* flute, *bonsai*, *haiku* poetry, *raku* ceramics, etc.

Although I'm not an expert of the ancient and refined art of Zen gardens, I felt sure that I would be able to guarantee the aesthetical principles synthesized in Japanese by the word **wabi-sabi**: beauty is sober, essential, introspective, melancholic, it celebrates the void, it suggests more than it narrates (as the finger that points out the moon), it avoids every explicit symmetry, etc.

But let's go back to this work, that we entitled **ZEN GARDEN 1.0**.

First of all then, we tried **to respect the principles of the traditional Zen garden**, the "dry garden", the *karesansui* (*kare* means modest, dry, and *sansui*, mountain-water, stands for nature):

- 1) **no water**, only sand or gravel and stones or rocks; moss is not just accepted – it is actually appreciated;
- 2) the flow of the **raking** evokes the absent water, its waves;
- 3) the only admitted accessories and furnishings must paradoxically recall the presence of the water, like the **bridge**;
- 4) **the disposition of the stones is rigorous**; we opted for that basic one with 3 stones; a tall and pointed one (called *taido*) in the background which represents a mountain or a tree and is associated with the element air; the second one (called *shigyo*) is arched, to one side, lower and more animated, and is associated with fire; the third one (called *shintai*) is flat and horizontal, and once again represents water.

Beside all this, **we took some liberties in our Western interpretation**:

- 1) first of all **the installation is indoors instead of being outdoors** to better suit the extemporaneous enjoyable style of the gallery;
- 2) consequently, **it is contained in a large wooden case rather than being integrated within a natural space**;
- 3) finally, compared to traditional standards, **the dimensions are rather reduced and the form much lengthened** (4m x 40cm) to fit the exhibition context.

As for the concept, being a Zen monk, I feathered my own nest. **The concept is shamelessly Buddhist. The 3 stones are the 3 Treasures**: the Buddha (a mountain), the Dharma (his teaching of fire) and the Sangha (the community of the apprentices, horizontal, as is water). **The sinusoidal raking is the Path. The 6 furrows are the 6 levels of the existence**, the 6 states of the conscience (demoniac, infernal, animal, human, superhuman and divine). In my opinion the Path dies away in front of the Three Treasures, whereas in Astrid's opinion it springs from them... **The flattened area behind the stones evokes the vacuity, ku**, beyond the Buddha himself. **The Zen garden is an "inner" garden. In its dry essentiality it opens a small aesthetical and contemplative window into the dimension of the vacuity, that eternally abides behind the visible forms. The bridge embodies the non-separation (*fu-ni*, not two) between the two banks, between the relative and the absolute, but also between East and West.**

I would like to conclude with a reflection by Roland Barthes from his text *The Empire of the Signs*, specifically about Japanese aesthetics, in which, referring to the Zen gardens, the *karesansui*, he says:

*No flower, no trace.  
Where is the man?  
In the transportation of the rocks,  
in the trace of the rake  
and in the work of writing.*