

Visionaries and Icon Painters: One Aspect of Hong Kong Contemporary Art

By Chang Tsong-zung

AFTER DECADES of neglect, the art world has slowly come to recognize the fact that some of Chinese modern art's best artists are to be found working in Hong Kong. Many different art movements and independent artists have, over the years, helped to provide Hong Kong art with its own identity. It is now possible to uncover patterns and characteristics that underlie seemingly diverse artistic expressions. My reflections revolve around several of Hong Kong's more senior modern painters whose gradual artistic evolution offers the best clues to the development of modern art in Hong Kong. I do not intend to be exhaustive and have selected only four painters to discuss in detail: Luis Chan (Chen Fushan) 陳福善, Hon Chi-fun (Han Zhixun) 韓志勳, Irene Chou (Zhou Lüyun) 周綠雲 and Gaylord Chan (Chen Yusheng) 陳餘生. Among them, Luis Chan is of singular importance, being an uncompromisingly original painter whose artistic career spans the history of Chinese modern art. The three remaining painters have come to art from very different persuasions than Luis Chan and are therefore instructive for purposes of comparison.

What particularly strikes me about the more senior modern painters in Hong Kong is the long years of relative neglect they have all had to endure early in their careers. Quite unlike American and European cultural centres, where modern art is accepted as part of the order of things, in Hong Kong it has not even been a matter of lack of sympathy but that—until recent years—modern art has been blithely ignored. However, working in a vacuum has its advantages; at the very least it allows space for reflection and slow gestation. For one thing, one does not work for an art market; one creates art to fulfill artistic and spiritual needs. When successful, it is also an art close to the heart of Hong Kong life. And I think this is what makes Hong Kong art important. A genuine spiritual pursuit—conscious or otherwise—underlies the works of the most intriguing Hong Kong contemporary painters. Their mature works share an aspiration to paint the world as it appears to the mind's eye, ultimately arriving at a visionary art. The fact that the four painters singled out for discussion are very different in terms of background and temperament, and have pursued diverse artistic careers, helps to define the special Hong Kong character of this spiritual pursuit.

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Luis Chan: Santa Claus Visiting my
Studio (1981)

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The World of Luis Chan

What Luis Chan set out to accomplish in 1928 when he was first enamoured of painting was to capture the real world. Fishing junks at Causeway Bay were a favourite subject, so were street scenes and other vignettes of local colour. Like all landscapists, he was fascinated with the magic of colours and the suggestive qualities of light that make the world change with every stroke of the brush. Between 1928 and 1960, on his countless expeditions to the seaside and the country, alone or with mates from his art clubs, he painted hundreds of charming watercolours. Luis Chan was not alone in this pursuit; there were scores of painters like him in those days. Watercolours and oil painting were new imports from Europe, and they were taken in this spirit—a marvelous game, fashionable and high-minded. There was a kind of charming naivety in the way painters scrutinized the physical world which to them was filled with beautiful framed scenes and sentimental sights. Like collectors of butterflies they canvassed the landscape of Hong Kong for their prey, studying it with love and carefully recording the trophies. Today there are still thousands of potential artists of this kind who roam the territory searching for memorable pictures, the main difference being their gear—not easels and canvases but Canons and Minoltas.

Until the 1950s, realism was a major force in Chinese, especially Hong Kong, “modern” art (both Western and Chinese ink-and-brush; take for example the Lingnan School). The early career of Luis Chan was typical of the art scene in general. What is less typical is his later development, as his art evolved into a magnificent odyssey of the soul. At their best his paintings are worthy of the most powerful religious art. A detailed discussion of Luis Chan’s iconographically complex art will throw light on the history of art in Hong Kong.

Although seemingly unenlightened, Luis Chan’s early career as a nature painter is in fact highly significant. In copying nature lies an implicit desire to make a complete record of the fleeting beauty of the world. The urge to record and document everyday life appears to be a modern phenomenon, as evidenced by the kind of impulse which moves every snapshot photographer; the more rapidly the world changes, the more anxious the desire to record. In retrospect the later achievements of Luis Chan may be said to be the fulfilment of the innocent ambitions of a young “documentary” landscapist starting out in 1928. Luis Chan had set out to paint the world—an endless task which promises frustration: every shift of the eye presents a new world to be recorded, and one can never paint enough or fast enough. It is interesting to note in this regard that the young Luis Chan was admired for the speed with which he could complete a landscape: once he reputedly finished seven pictures at a sitting by simply shifting the angle of his stool. As Luis Chan grew older he discovered it was *how* he perceived the world that mattered; in fact, it was his visual fantasies and hallucinations that constituted his world. He then embarked on an artistic journey of self-discovery which has continued to this day.

Luis Chan’s creative energy has always been expressed in his hungry desire to absorb the world. Instead of representing the world with hundreds of pictures, Luis Chan now endeavours to put the whole world into every painting. Instead of

painting scenes which are no more than truncated views of nature, each work now constitutes a complete perspective.

In his landscape paintings done in the seventies and the eighties, human beings and animals, ghosts and demons inhabit the same space, which is unmistakably based on the geography of Hong Kong. ("Island by the Sea" 1974). Many of these later landscape paintings are structured like cross-sectional views of the cosmos; they show levels of Dantean heavens populated with the creatures of Creation. ("Five Layers of Heaven" 1976). Vibrant colours glow in every corner of the landscape, as though seen with the absolute lucidity of the mind's eye. The world, in both its visible and invisible aspects, is painted in its entirety.

It is to Luis Chan's credit that he does not evade the confusion of Hong Kong's heterogenous culture, and manages to incorporate with ease the old and the new, foreign and local. Although he is influenced by other modern artists (albeit second-handedly through American art magazines) the closest blood-relation to his art is not modern but religious mystical art and cosmological diagrams. Although formal and stylized compared with Luis Chan's work, traditional paintings of mandalas and tantric drawings are similar to Chan's in their intention to symbolize the universe, and their colours are often equally shocking and hypnotic.

The ultimate development of such world diagrams are Luis Chan's brilliantly coloured abstract paintings created between 1984 and 1987, some of which ("Summer Ocean" 1986 and "Goldfish Pond" 1986) are uncannily close in feeling to Tibetan prayer banners and Indian tantric pictures.

A salient feature of Hong Kong life is its schizophrenic biculturalism. Of all Hong Kong artists Luis Chan is the only one who has faced this dilemma squarely, and who, without rationalizing, absorbs it at face value. We find bilingual titles, juxtaposed cultural references and tongue-in-cheek use of pop art in his pictures. His irreverence almost makes him contemporary with popular youth culture. It is amazing to think that Luis Chan has not travelled out of Hong Kong since his one major journey to Peking in 1936. His access to the world is, like every modern man's, through the media, especially television. (When asked in an interview if he still painted life studies, he laughed and said, "Life studies? Yes I still do life studies—I watch TV! Ha! Ha!") Not an inconsistency considering that after all, Luis Chan learnt to paint through a correspondence course, and has kept in touch through art magazines. He has a symbiotic relationship with the media—a modern man through and through.

One can draw an interesting comparison between Luis Chan's artistic evolution and Hong Kong's cultural history. Until the 1950s Hong Kong was a quiet port, economically active enough to be aware of what was fashionable overseas, but basically conservative and none too original. It was very much the kind of place portrayed in Luis Chan's early watercolours. With the population explosion in 1950 and the city's rapid change into a major cosmopolis, its cultural and psychological constitution went into shock. Luis Chan's sudden departure from the art scene in the late fifties and eventual return in the sixties with his intense and troubled paintings ran parallel to this period of rapid growth in Hong Kong. In less than a decade, Luis Chan had experimented with all the current international

Paintings by Luis Chan

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Summer Ocean (1986)

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Island by the Sea (1974)

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Five Layers of Heaven (1976)

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Goldfish Pond (1986)

avant-garde styles, and was by then nearing sixty years of age. He came back to landscape painting in the early seventies, this time to look at the world through the mind's eye; Luis Chan had fully matured as an artist. These paintings show his dreamland, perhaps an escape from the realities of the impinging urban landscape. They are playful and wild in imagination, madly free from the suffocation of the middle-class society Hong Kong was fast turning into. Toward the late 1970s, his landscapes became more insulated—although no less colourful and fanciful—as they evolved into pictures of underwater scenes. His strange fishes appear as symbols of amorphous forms hidden in the depths of his psyche. Then again he changed. In the late seventies Luis Chan began to concentrate on figure paintings.

Unlike his landscapes, Luis Chan's figure paintings display a strong narrative flavour. These are not so much stories as symbols of events which suggest a timeless significance. Certain paintings are obviously religious in spirit: "My Heart is Clean" (1980) echoes medieval art, "Rise of the Drowned Poet" (1980) takes for its theme purgation and rebirth. Many others without such overt iconography may be "historical" in inspiration; the stage-like landscape of "Silver Jubilee Offerings from Butterflies" (1977) for example, celebrates the Queen's Coronation Jubilee; and the playful "The Duel" (1974) which hints at the political situation of Hong Kong. In these paintings Luis Chan lifts events out of their historical context and gives them mythic status. His playful fantasies enrich these "events" and transform them into universal symbols.

The history of Hong Kong has certainly taken a turn in this one generation to become the stuff of myth. But this can only be realized through the genius of art. Without art, history pales into colourless chronological entries. Luis Chan is the myth-maker of Hong Kong, and all the more striking in that he has been totally unaware of it.

Luis Chan's recent figure paintings are less "historical" in inspiration but their aura is no less mysterious. "Good Neighbours" (1987) and "The Family Gathering" (1987) put people in simple environments with no apparent dramatic tension. But the figures seem to be caught in timeless situations; like fables they hint at narrative events. The use of colours and geometric patterns is reminiscent of Byzantine mosaics, and the pictures are bathed in a strange, joyful light.

The full corpus of Luis Chan's work over a period of sixty years is breathtaking in scope. Not only has he created an artistic world of his own, he has shaped a personal-mythology. Luis Chan has always been venerated as the doyen of Hong Kong art, but his importance stretches farther afield in that he is the only Chinese modern artist who, having embraced modernity in the 1920s, has travelled its full course. His career is not just a tale of continual stylistic development, but a journey of the soul. Such a journey takes more than genius; it requires fortitude, fearless honesty to oneself, and vigilance against the lure of complacency in success. In terms of originality, depth and output, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that Luis Chan is the greatest exponent of modern Chinese painting.

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Luis Chan

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Family Gathering (1987)

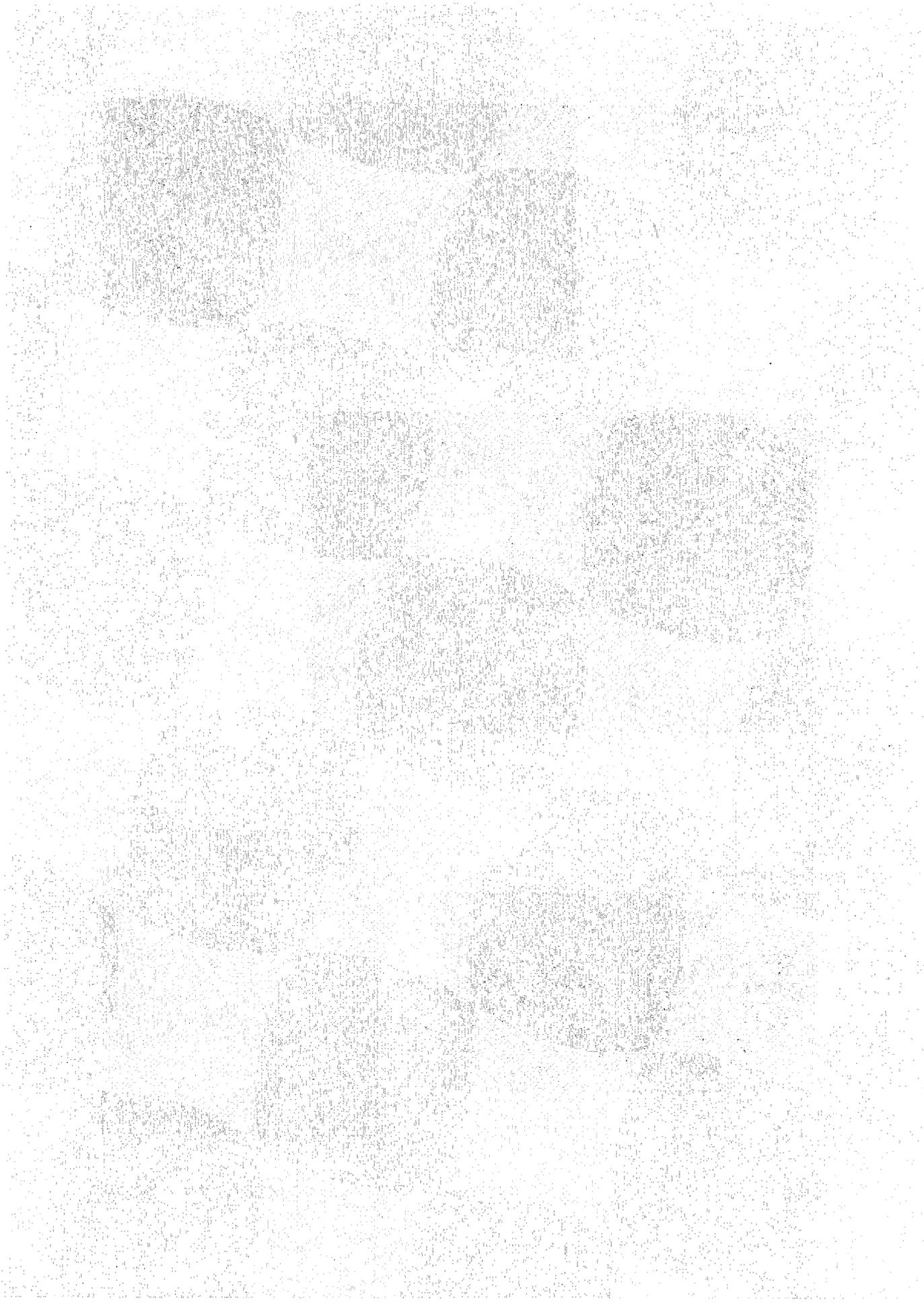
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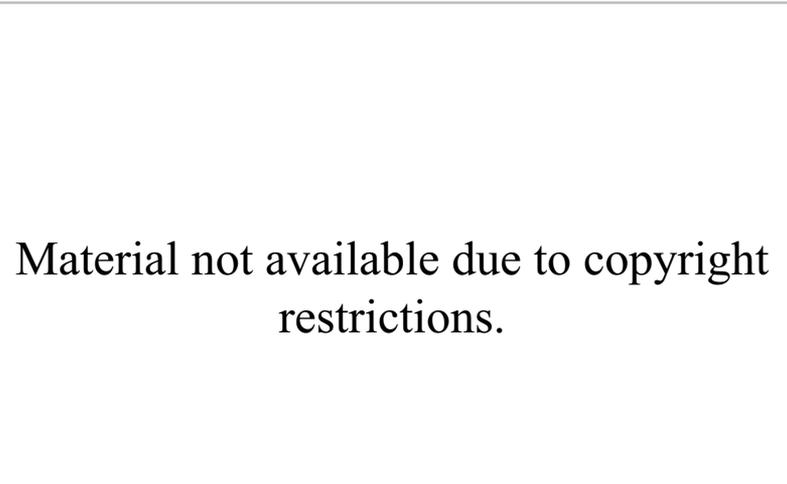
My Heart is Clean (1980)

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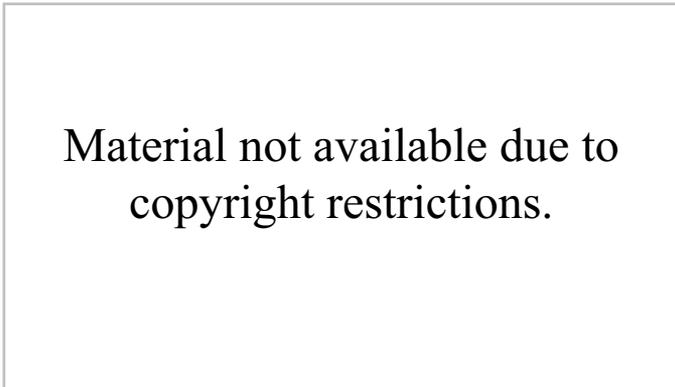
The Duel (1974)

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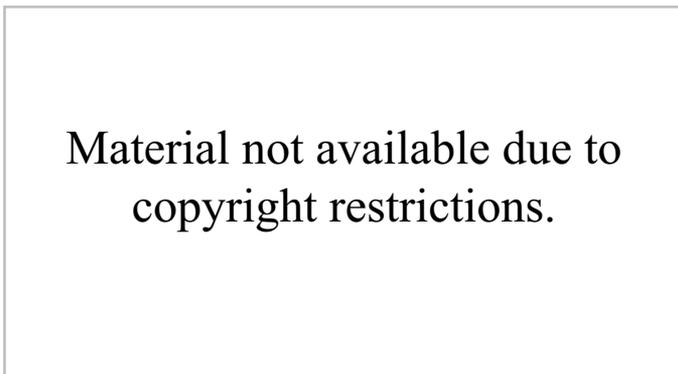




Rise of the Drowned Poet (1980)



Island of Strange Creatures (1973)



Good Neighbours (1987)



Dream in the Sky (1978)

Hon Chi-fun: The Star-gazer

Arriving on the art scene one generation after Luis Chan, also under the spell of contemporary art, Hon Chi-fun was first inspired by the spontaneity of the American Abstract Expressionists and Klein and Tobey's fascination with the Orient in the late fifties. From the start he was mesmerized by the intense introspection of their art. He started with landscapes, which were less pictorial representations than symbols of enlightenment: very dim scenes pierced by brilliant shafts of light, mostly in the form of white birch trees or the rising sun. A strong strain of the nineteenth-century romantic notion of Inspiration characterized these works. Although not great art, these early landscapes were portents of more profound works to come, and it is evident that very early on Hon Chi-fun was aware of the potential for spirituality in modern painting.

In contrast to the wisdom of Luis Chan, Hon Chi-fun's spiritual yearning seems to be motivated by a sense of desperation. Maturing into his own style in the late sixties, he was very much a child of that psychedelic decade. It was a time of wild idealism, carnal abandon, and omnipresent anxiety. In his heart Hon Chi-fun also felt the unsettling challenge of chaos, which eventually uprooted his marriage, and brought disorder into his life. The sixties was Hon Chi-fun's decade of upheaval, but he clung to his art. He tried his hand at various new techniques as his personal needs guided him, and poured his emotions into bold expressionistic paintings with massive brushstrokes. He strengthened abstract pictorial forms with junk assemblage as a metaphoric means of anchoring his disoriented emotions. He sought out ways to quiet his troubled heart.

In the course of Hon Chi-fun's artistic growth in the sixties one can see him grappling with powerful inner impulses which often took the form of sexual energy too powerful to be harnessed by reason. The fountainhead of creativity and destructive energy became one.

Hon Chi-fun's mature works also emerged during the sixties. They were mostly variations on the spherical form—a focused, all-absorbing form which threatens to swallow the observer. This form was a focal point of concentration as well as a compass with which to orient his heart. "To me it is the ideal form," Hon remarked, "the sphere is so perfectly balanced." Like stars, or unfathomable outer space, the geometric sphere represents the order of an ultra-human realm.

Unlike Luis Chan, Hon Chi-fun's art is uncoloured by human activity. His gaze is upon the stars, which he has developed into an iconography representing his spiritual yearning. This theme, which has accompanied Hon for over twenty years, also documents his personal growth as it evolves. The impeccable finish of his paintings presents views with a poker face, but they have an attraction in spite of this blandness, partly owing to the feeling of precarious balance between the calm exterior and the threatening potential for chaos struggling beneath the surface.

Hon Chi-fun's recent paintings are freer and happier. His colours are more exuberant and his tight technical control sometimes even relaxes toward the expressionistic. The absolute stillness of outer space has been ruffled, betraying human warmth and a longing for beauty which even the stars allow for in their changing seasons and charmed moments.

Paintings by Hon Chi-fun

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Now and Silver (1987)

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Dream Rest (1985)

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Gold and Unknown (1987)

Irene Chou and New Ink Painting

In their pursuit of spirituality Hong Kong artists often betray an escapist tendency. Many simply turn a blind eye to the real world. Luis Chan is an exception: he fixes his gaze upon the world, which he transforms into fantastic visions. Most other artists are inclined to look elsewhere. Hon Chi-fun's obsession with the stars betrays a fear of, or at least a distaste for, the complexity of earthly things. Among the New Ink painters, a movement which underwent sporadic developments since the fifties and which found its leader in Lui Shou-kwan (Lü Shou-kun) 呂壽昆, the conscious avoidance of reality is too obvious to go unnoticed. How an entire "school" of painters devoted to the idiom of landscape, working within the milieu of a teeming metropolis, can completely ignore the sights of the city in their paintings is difficult to understand. Perhaps it is the belief that spiritual exaltation is only possible in "nature", or perhaps they are unable to comprehend the spiritual dimensions of the mundane urban order. There is no single reason, one can only surmise. A favourite technique of the New Ink Painting landscapists is to dissect a mountainscape into unreal reflections of itself. Paintings of this genre, often shrouded by a looming tainted sky, are usually impersonal and always claustrophobic. Instead of the transcendence intended, one is overwhelmed by a sense of oppressive unreality. The art of Irene Chou should be seen against this background of New Ink Painting.

With the more successful New Ink painters after Lui Shou-kwan, for example Wucius Wong 王無邪 and Laurence Tam 譚志成, this technique has been used to advantage—unreal landscapes are turned into metaphors for the repressed soul. In Wucius Wong, the splitting and mirroring of the fragments of a mountain, and the use of the illusory voluminousness of lines and dots have become a reflection of the perhaps schizophrenic insecurity of the artistic imagination. The amorphous melting forms of Laurence Tam's grottoes suggest an encroaching claustrophobia. Generally speaking, clear skies are rare in a New Ink painter's landscape. Their vision of "nature" suffocates, looming large and dark over the human spirit. While we do not deny that there is genuine artistic insight in this sensibility, it is also true that very few of the New Ink painters have pushed its psychic implications much further. The originality of Irene Chou lies in her unabashed exploitation of schizophrenia and claustrophobia which are understood but left untouched by her peers. She emerges with a new personal idiom.

It should be noted that Irene Chou still champions the ideals of New Ink Painting: to create a spiritual painting without abandoning the spontaneity and versatility of ink and brush. But she has departed from the strictures of landscapes. Like the other New Ink painters, she also started with the world of mountains and valleys, but she has gradually freed her imagination and allowed it to fantasize with the seductive play of spontaneous lines.

Her typical approach is to make a few bold brush strokes on the paper, then develop the frayed edges and stains of the mark into abstract swirling forms, nerve ends and floating spheres. Although she often makes the results look like happy accidents, the work of elaboration is meticulous and painstaking, ("Paradise Lost

Paintings by Irene Chou

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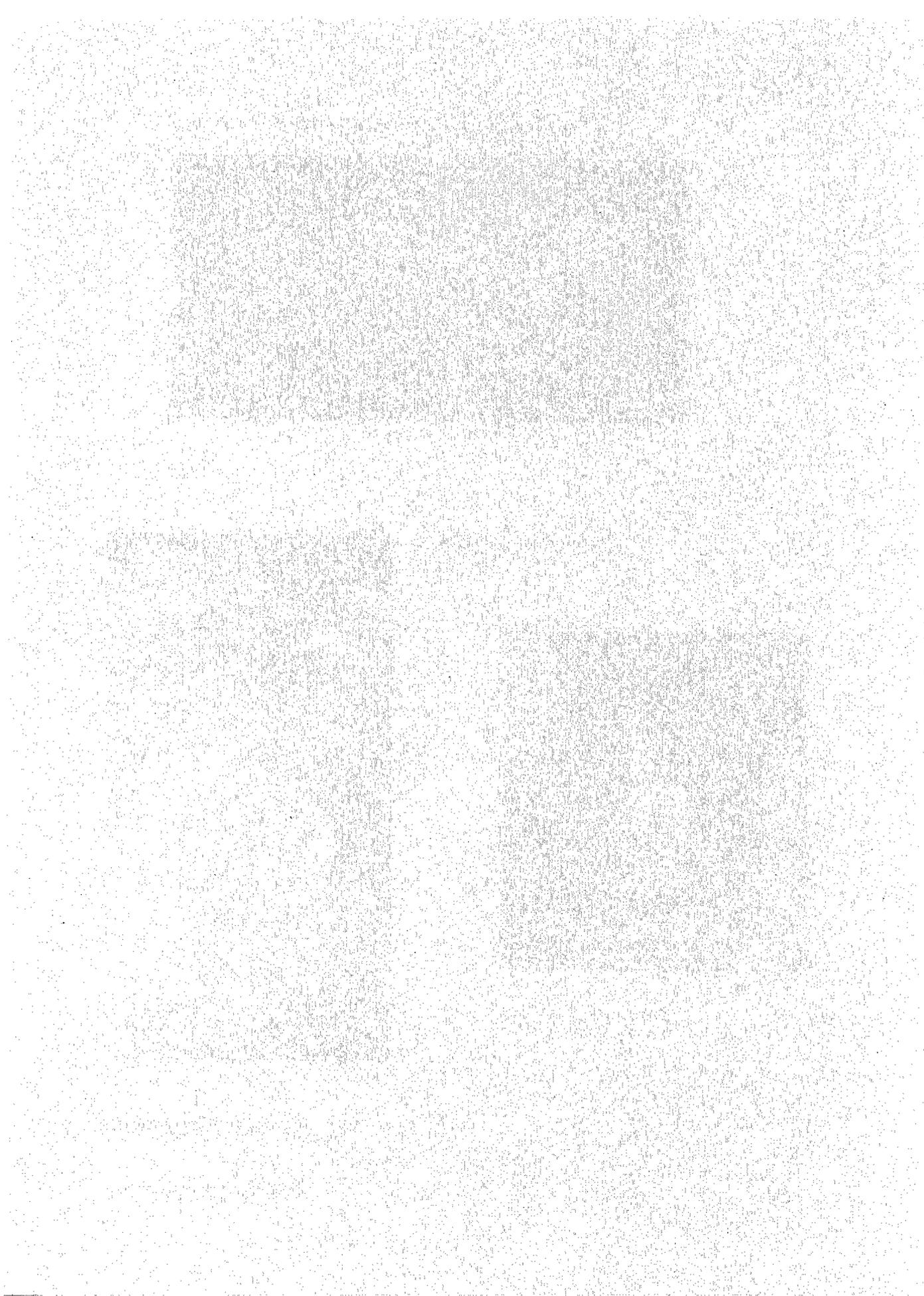
Irene Chou

Dreamland

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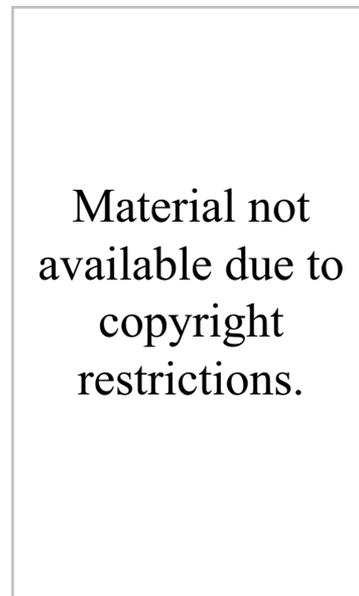
Genesis

Courtesy of Fung Ping Shan Museum, University of Hong Kong.





Infinity Landscape



Infinity Landscape (1988)

and Regained”). Irene Chou rarely submits to the freedom of spontaneous “brush-play” with total abandon. A dominant theme which she has worked on for years is the sphere overgrown with nerve-like filaments. She explains this as the result of an old fear of brain tumours. But this is partially an excuse. Her art in fact took an inward journey very early on, when she developed a special fascination with such natural forms as roots and veins. In contrast with Hon Chi-fun, whose imagination is swept away by the stars, Irene Chou is preoccupied with the internal universe, a microbiotic universe of the inner life of cells and nerves. Like Hon’s outer space, its dimensions are infinite—but moving in the opposite direction, collapsing into infinite regression.

An evident concern of Irene Chou is the ingenuity of reproductive power. Sexual symbols—the uterus, the ovaries and cell-like objects suggestive of sperm and nerves are found in every painting. The procreative force of complementary opposites is the theme she has explored extensively and adopted as a working method. One finds her attention absorbed by brush marks, which grow organically out of her dreamy explorations into a tangible universe. She revels in the dynamic interplay between chance and art, always leaving room for the viewer’s imagination.

In contrast to the comprehensive genius of Luis Chan and the pronounced spirituality of Hon Chi-fun, there is a sad introverted element to Irene Chou’s art. Maybe we should recall the trapped imagination that is the mark of New Ink Painting, and appreciate Irene Chou’s art as the poetic explication of the message others conceal behind the innocent facades of mountainous terrain. That masked, unhealthy element which makes most of the New Ink painters unconvincing is boldly brought to light by Irene Chou. Her paintings are her private tantric, giving shape to the darker, and possibly sinister, aspects of spiritual art. They are powerful and disturbing. At their best they are also cathartic.

Gaylord Chan

Modern life is besieged with pictorial signs: signs intent on convincing us of the desirability of a product, signs for identifying an institution, or simply to warn us of oncoming traffic. Signs are messages, however oblique their references. They function as pointers. A powerful commercial logo even assumes symbolic significance; that of Coca Cola for example has come to represent an age group and a particular way of life.

The paintings of Gaylord Chan are inspired by the mundane signs and symbols of the city: neon lights, billboards, traffic signs, product designs, etc. To him these images are suggestive of higher meanings and hidden messages, secrets unbeknown to the graphic artists who created them. He paints in the manner of public signs, often adopting the flat colour field typical of most commercial logos. His pictures confront viewers face on; there is no depth of field, no illusory movement of brush lines. They strike the eye with the static "givenness" of a flat statement of inalienable right.

Yet Gaylord Chan's paintings remain ambiguous even in formal construction. The wavy outlines of the forms never stand still but seem to grow into their destined shapes. The colours are not fast but are often translucent, like a thin membrane stretched over a solid body. They are symbols in the process of transformation, still attached to their mundane origins, slowly shedding old skin. The initial impression of stasis is deceptive.

It is tempting to read Chan's paintings as codes; they certainly have a kinship with heraldic flags and emblems. What do they "signify"? we want to ask. Perhaps it is in the nature of emblems that they are not abstract markers pointing to something absent. They do not "signify" as such; instead, they mark "presences". They evoke intangible powers which cannot otherwise be revealed. One thinks of national flags and corporate logos; their mere presence makes claims. It is this aspect of the emblem which Gaylord Chan's paintings bring to mind. There is a sense of mystery in his works; the hidden powers they conjure up are familiar and yet beyond the everyday.

The sense of familiarity in Chan's paintings demonstrates an adroit sleight-of-hand in bringing to our attention things we ordinarily overlook. Outside our windows, we see a city-scape strewn with billboards and signs. They gesture to our libido and impose upon our ego. Even churches, with their neon crucifixes, bargain with the promise of life after death. These signs in themselves offer no relief to the spirit. Perhaps in a land more disposed to spiritual pursuits—such as the romantically conceived Himalayan Buddhist kingdoms—public signs and banners speak more directly to the soul. Gaylord Chan's paintings will find happy company in such a skyline of signposts of mystery. But liberation only comes to us in the world we inhabit. If Gaylord Chan is deserving of our attention, it is because the message of his art spills out of the picture frames and invites us to re-read the modern man-made world as an open book of mystical poetry.

Paintings by Gaylord Chan

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The Edge (1988)

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White Fibre (1986)

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Renovation in Progress

Conclusion

What characterizes the modern painters under discussion is a dreamy hallucinatory aura. Compared to younger painters their works show a measured temperament. When young artists find their inspiration in the other-worldly, their art often exhibits a kind of violent abandon. Here, there is the considered sympathy of the mature artist, often tinged with humour. The best late-period Hon Chi-fun and Irene Chou paintings are richer than their earlier works even though they are less anxiously intense. In Luis Chan one sees the flowering of genius that only comes after a full experience of life in the mundane world. His spirituality shows the calmness and breadth of an epic story-teller. Perhaps this is because by the time success came to him, it no longer really mattered.

The four painters discussed here have undertaken very different artistic journeys. The epic dimension of Luis Chan's oeuvre and the narrowly defined pursuits of Hon Chi-fun and Irene Chou differ not just in scale, but also in their vision of the phenomenal world, while Gaylord Chan again follows a separate path. Their pictorial languages also vary greatly. However, what they have in common is a sense of mystery and an individual vision which gradually unfolded as the artists matured. This trait is not simply common to these four artists, but also characterizes an artistic sensibility which has grown up in Hong Kong.

In this decade the psychological make-up of Hong Kong has begun to change. The destiny of the territory has all of a sudden become an issue of public debate. The relationship of Hong Kong to Chinese culture as a whole has also shifted. Instead of a backwater colony, Hong Kong has become the symbol of Chinese success, representing "progress" and "modernization". It has also become an arbiter of cultural taste—witness the rage for "Hong Kong style" in China. With Hong Kong's new political role, even its religion—commerce—has been asked to help shape the destiny of China. This state of affairs is also reflected in the creative arts, and a new generation of artists, politically aware and intellectually critical, has begun to surface. Parallel to this, individualistic artists of the new cosmopolitan bourgeoisie are also producing good work, typified by the expression of personal and private sentiments. The topology of new Hong Kong artistic sensibilities, however, has yet to be charted.

On the whole, Hong Kong has continued to exist on the periphery of political events; it has not changed so drastically as to acquire a radically new character. The anxiety and sense of unreality are still here. The lure of the transcendent is still real enough. When the artist succeeds in rising above the particularity of this time and place, his work becomes a universal symbol for the modern condition. The icons created by the Hong Kong artists discussed in this essay are an offering to all of us.