

A Tribute to Chu Hing Wah: Introduction by Curator

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It is an honour and privilege to curate the seventh instalment of the Ink Society's "Tribute" series, which celebrates the art and creativity of Chu Hing Wah (b. 1935). Now in his 80s, Chu Hing Wah is one of Hong Kong's most original artists, recognised for his evocative ink paintings of human figures and observations of life in the city. His trajectory as an artist was unexpected, beginning with his discovering art in museums in London in the early 1960s while working as a psychiatric nurse, to ultimately devoting himself to his art after his retirement at the age of 56. The present exhibition shows an overview of the artist's achievements from his career spanning from the late 1980s to the 2000s.

Born in Guangdong Province, Chu moved to Hong Kong as a teenager in 1950. Leaving school early, he worked as an apprentice at a light-bulb factory, before finding a job as an usher at the Queen's Theatre in Central. Working at the cinema allowed Chu free access to many classic Hollywood films, and this had a profound effect. He became fascinated by European life, taking night classes to learn English. Chu dreamt about travelling abroad, and the opportunity arrived when he came across an advert looking for trainee nurses to travel to the UK. He applied, was accepted and in 1960, left for London, where he received training in psychiatric nursing at Maudsley Hospital. It was during this time in London that his love for art was sparked. In his free time he frequented museums, even bringing his paintbrushes to sketch masterworks in museums or landmarks across the city. "I did it because I was interested in doing it, so I simply followed my instinct. I was very engrossed,"¹ he recalls. After completing his degree in nursing, Chu returned to Hong Kong in 1965, where he served as a psychiatric nurse at Castle Peak Hospital. A few years later, through a colleague's introduction, he began an evening course in art and design at the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the University of Hong Kong, studying under faculty which included oil painter Martha Lesser and ink painters Laurence Tam and Wucius Wong. "This was the time that I came to terms with 'art', finally,"² he says.

Following the completion of his course in 1974, Chu continued to paint while working at his day job. Chu's observations of his patients—their behaviours and inner worlds—inspired the paintings he created during this period. *Where I Work* (1989) is an evocative depiction of two healthcare professionals and two patients—one of whom is captured with its back to the

viewer—set against a dark, sombre background. There is a feeling of both emotion and detachment in their expressions, resulting in a striking, even haunting image. Similarly, in *Young Boys in The Ward* (1992), Chu is unafraid to capture awkward figurative distortions. Of these works, he says: "...getting to know the inner world of patients is quite different from our own."³ However, "they are not abnormal, they just have a different brain structure."⁴ He further explains: "Their body gestures are so dramatic, the way they talk to themselves, their sensations, the way they see the world. I feel very fortunate to have worked with these patients. They are an inspiration to me."⁵ In a third piece conceived in the same period, *In Front of the Mirror* (1988), which is one of only two self-portraits by the artist, Chu portrayed himself without the mask-like appearance often applied to his human figures. Holding the viewer's gaze, his expression is intense, as if deep in thought. The boldly applied strokes of lemon-yellow on his visage, and the mottled background of deep purple with a web of turquoise lines, display Chu's masterful interpretation of post-impressionist-style paintings.

Chu's retirement from nursing in 1992 marked a new phase in his art. Departing from his dark, psychologically and emotionally charged works, he focused on creating visual diaries of his life in Hong Kong. Painted with the same honesty and sensitivity as his early oeuvre, Chu wove depictions of everyday folk with his reflections on the changes in environment brought about by the city's rapid urban development. In *Untitled* (2016), a small group of friends gather in front of roof-tiled village houses highlighted in red, blue and white in the foreground. The vignette contrasts with the high-rise buildings in the background, which are marked by formulaic dark windows against stark white façades that fill the entire composition. The vivid images in *Bad Wishes to Him* (2010), *See You at Nine* (2016) and *Lockhart Road on Stage* (2009) convey various and unique aspects of Hong Kong life, with the colourful, retro signs in the latter stirring a nostalgia for the past. In addition to quintessential Hong Kong scenes, Chu also created a series of pictures based on the memories of his travels across Europe and mainland China, such as *Exciting Sculpture, Paris* (1999).

Over the last two decades, Chu's work has taken on a strong sense of social consciousness. He has stated that in "an unstable, untranquil world, a universe beset with natural disasters, and the uncertain state of society have all weighed heavily on my mind; my feelings are often reflected in the moody quality of my paintings."⁶ *Twin Brothers* (2015) is an unorthodox combination of image, text and collage, comprising a commentary on human nature and its capabilities of both

good and evil. However, Chu's recent work is not limited to ruminations on the uncertainties of life. In other pieces he has embraced the purity and simplicity of primitivism. This is embodied in *Age Before the Swimming Trunks* (2018), which features a group of naked male figures swimming and frolicking together—unaffected and unencumbered—in an expanse of water under lush foliage. Similarly, while romantic love is an enduring theme in the artist's practice, as we can see in *Love + Love = Love* (1994) and *The Old Lady's Great Love* (2016), Chu returns to the pre-modern state of being in *Man and Wife* (2018). The latter is a portrait of a young couple in full-frontal nudity, standing together, unabashed, in a tender embrace.

Through his expert application and combination of colours and shading, Chu reveals emotion and character in each of his painted subjects—not only his human figures, but also his flowers, trees and landscapes. His floral arrangements rendered in vibrant hues and often juxtaposed against dark backgrounds, brim with life, as *Pink Vase* (1993) and *Happy Green Gold and Flowers* (2015) show. To him, each vase symbolises the inner beauty of his patients whom he met as a nurse.⁷ Their interrelatedness is explored in *White Companion* (1992), a portrayal of a woman sitting next to a table on which a vase of flowers is placed. The bright colours of the woman's floral top, the richly patterned table, and the spray of white blossoms gleam against the deep black background. Flowers reappear as a motif in *Dream No.3: Shadow of Fragrance* (2002), reflecting the artist's eponymous dreams and subconscious mind. In the aforementioned *Untitled* and *See You at Nine*, Chu softens the urban settings with flowering leafy trees, symbolic of the solace offered by the natural world. In *Grey House* (1992), a textured sky of lime-green, yellow and peach rises above the mountain range. By contrast, fluffy-edged elongated clouds float across an expansive sky in *Fatty and His Girl* (2017), recalling van Gogh in their expression and sentiment, an artist that Chu has long admired. Although Chu's artistic training focused on Western media, he favours the materiality of Chinese media—ink, brush and colours. His Eastern sensibility is also reflected in the way in which he captures the inner essence and spirit of his subjects.

What makes Chu's paintings so affecting is how they compel us to share in his deep humanity and empathy. There is a sense of beauty and joy in his painted world, from the quotidian to the moments of darkness and anguish. Chu reveals the universal feelings that connect us to each other.

¹ Phoebe Wong, "Interview with Chu Hing Wah", Ideas Journal, Asia Art Archive, 1 February 2012, accessed at <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas-journal/ideas-journal/interview-with-chu-hing-wah>

² Ibid.

³ Sarah Karacs, "The Tender Art of Chu Hing-wah", Zolima CityMag, 20 December 2017, accessed at <https://zolimacitymag.com/the-tender-art-of-chu-hing-wah/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Living in Compassion: The Art of Chu Hing Wah*, Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2018, p. 99.

⁷ Yiqinzhai Collection, collector's statement, p. 22.