

A Tribute to Irene Chou: Introduction by Curator Olivia Wang

It is an honour and privilege to curate *A Tribute to Irene Chou* for the Ink Society at Ink Asia this year. The exhibition is the third instalment in the "Tribute" Series, which aims to celebrate the remarkable legacies of master ink painters through their art, as well as the personal reflections of collectors of their work. Coincidentally, this year's exhibition takes place at a time when solo and group shows by female artists at galleries and museums here in Hong Kong and abroad have surged. These exhibitions have reexamined female artists through the lens of gender. Through their art, many female artists have spoken out and given their perspectives on what it means to be a woman. Irene Chou (1924-2011) was among the first female artists who broke away from the role and obligations of being a woman in traditional China. Her original and deeply compelling oeuvre, however, comes first and foremost. As one of the most important artists of the New Ink Painting movement of the late 1960s in Hong Kong, she was instrumental in bridging Chinese tradition with modernism, thus shaping a new language of ink art.

A Tribute to Irene Chou presents a cross-section of the artist's oeuvre from the early 1970s, when she began to develop her own unique style, to the year 2000. *Wife of Light* is reflective of her early experimental period when she broke away from traditional landscapes, flowers and birds, which was based on the formal training she received under the tutelage of Lingnan School artist Zhao Shao'ang. In 1966, Chou met the leading artist Lui Shou-kwan, who became her mentor and friend. His visionary ideas on how to modernize ink painting through assimilation of Western abstract expressionism inspired her to look beyond traditional ink and forge her own artistic language. Chou began to experiment with different techniques and various media including oil, acrylic and explosions of colour. Like Lui, she also sketched from nature, finding herself especially drawn to trees. The tree—from its trunk and branches to its gnarled roots and twigs—became a subject and motif that Chou would continue to develop and transform throughout her career. In *Wife of Light*, likely a reference to the artist's own identity, an enigmatic face with gleaming eyes emerges from long tresses of hair in the form of free-flowing tree-branches. Perhaps alluding to the Tree of Life, could this be the beginnings of Chou's lifelong exploration of the cycle of renewal?

In the early 1970s, influenced by her study and practice of Chinese calligraphy—in particular the Stone Drum script—Chou deployed the "piled ink" technique to create works composed of bold, expressive calligraphic lines, as demonstrated in *Seed*. Here, undulating, dense black lines gently envelop a floating embryonic sphere. Chou reveals a mysterious internal world, as observed by the piece's collector, Vincent Lo: "Or is it a depiction of the womb to celebrate life, as suggested by the title *Seed*?"

Just as these breakthroughs in style and technique were beginning to gain recognition in the art world with solo and group exhibitions both in Hong Kong and abroad, Chou was struck by personal tragedy with the deaths of Lui Shou-kwan in 1975 and her husband three years later. Painting became an outlet to process her grief and pain. During this period, she turned away from colour to a predominantly dark, monochromatic palette. There is a dystopian feeling in the landscape conveyed in *Abstract* (page 11). Set against a brooding, blackened background, *Untitled* depicts a large sphere enclosed by a web of fine lines evoking intertwining tendrils—or blood vessels—that break loose on the right, releasing explosive energy.

As if strengthened by her tragic circumstances, Chou bursted into her most productive period of the 1980s. Her subsequent style

became more expressive and intense. *4.30 am* communicates her indebtedness to Lui Shou-kwan and his iconic Zen paintings, but is more radical and daring than her mentor's in style and composition. She began the work with forceful yet controlled dark black calligraphic strokes, then completed the image with fine lines in contrasting, lighter ink. A small dotted sphere floats on the left, but the visual focus is the centre, where a piercing red stroke rises from the bottom and a moon-like sphere left unpainted looms behind it. Meanwhile, Chou developed her splashed-ink technique, where she liberally splattered tiny ink dots on wet paper, as we can see in *A Love Poem* (1990) and *Impact* (1992). Chou also delved deeper into examining her inner soul, where she found particular resonance in Daoism, as well as the words of Southern Song dynasty philosopher Lu Jiuyuan (1139-1192): "The universe is my mind; my mind is the universe", which she often quoted. The connections of her personal world with the greater universe were themes that she would more profoundly explore in her works to come.

In 1991, after suffering a life-threatening stroke, Chou moved to Brisbane to live with her son. Through physiotherapy, disciplined *qigong* practice and meditation, she gradually regained her health. Determined to live independently and paint again, Chou moved to her own townhouse only six months after the stroke to resume her art. This marked another turning point in her artistic career. Her compositions became more impassioned and complex, and she returned to the vibrant colours of her early years, adding gold to her palette. *Untitled* (1992), *Abstract, Heavenly Dance* (1993), *Intimate Letters* (1994) and *The Universe Lies Within II* (1997)—some of them larger in size than the artist's petite frame—are cathartic; the broad brushstrokes and whorls of colour are charged with renewed vigour and vitality. We can also see the artist's continued obsession with the concept of rebirth. Multiple spheres appear in *The Universe Lies Within II*, with the large purple dotted one enclosing three smaller orbs, while a small blue bulb sprouts at the bottom right. Chou remained resolute in painting these spheres. As the collector of Take the Step Back Collection recalls: "Once, she told me that some of her friends have told her that she has been painting small, colourful spheres for too long and it was time for her to do something else. 'But I really enjoy painting my spheres'; she continued, 'So should I stop doing them?'"

As she entered her twilight years, Chou experimented with different painting methods on silk and satin. Her late works have an air of simplicity and directness. In *Life, a Many Splendoured Thing I* (2000), rendered on silk with bright, solid colours and gold calligraphic lines, a sprout spreads over a large sphere across the breadth of the painting, as smaller, multi-coloured spheres float below. Conveying Chou's recurring theme of regeneration, the exuberant image is indeed a celebration of life.

Irene Chou undoubtedly was a major force in the artistic development of Hong Kong, as well as the New Ink Painting Movement. As a trailblazing ink artist, she created a distinct visual language, which evolved over the course of her entire career. She was resilient, courageous and had immense conviction. Undeterred by her setbacks, she remained positive and single-minded in her pursuit of art. It is perhaps because of these qualities that her paintings are so enthralling to behold. Chou's oeuvre expresses an intensely private—but ultimately universal—human experience of the fragility and joy of life, which is likely to resonate with viewers on many levels.

向周綠雲致敬：策展人言 汪鈺

十分榮幸能夠在今年的水墨藝博上為《向周綠雲致敬》策展。此次展覽是“致敬”系列的第三章，而這個系列目的在於頌揚水墨繪畫大師們的藝術與遺韻，以及收藏家們對於這些藏品的個人反思。十分湊巧的是，此次展覽也恰好碰上了香港與世界範圍內畫廊與博物館關於女性藝術家個展與合展逐漸增多的時代浪潮。這些展覽透過性別的視角，重新審視了女性藝術家。許多女性藝術家們通過她們的畫作來發聲，並以她們的觀點給出了作為一名女性的含義。周綠雲（1924-2011）曾是其中最早脫離中國傳統中女性的角色與職責的女藝術家之一，但她原創且引人深思的畢生之作才是最為重要的。作為上世紀六十年代晚期香港新水墨運動中最重要的藝術家之一，周在連結中國傳統與現代主義中發揮了不可或缺的作用，因此她也為水墨藝術塑造了一種新的語言。

《向周綠雲致敬》展示了周畢生作品的一個橫截面。從上世紀七十年代早期她開始發展自己獨特的風格，一直到千禧年的到來。《陽光的妻子》反應了她在基於嶺南派藝術家趙少昂的指導下，脫離傳統山水花鳥畫的實驗階段。在一九六六年，周認識了前治藝術家呂壽琨，而後者成為了她的導師與摯友。呂對於如何通過吸收西方抽象表現主義而使水墨現代化的充滿遠見的想法啟發了周看透傳統水墨畫的本質，並鍛造了她自己的藝術語言。周以不同的技法與多樣的媒介包括油畫與丙烯顏料，以及顏色的爆發開始了她的實驗。與呂相似的是，她同樣遵從師法自然，並發現了自己十分癡迷與於樹木。因此，樹，從樹幹到樹枝，從癟結之根到細支末葉，都成為了周的繪畫對象以及主題，這也使得她的藝術生涯得以延續發揮讚並不斷變化。在《陽光的妻子》中，正如周對於自己身份的一種隱喻，一張高深莫測的臉龐與閃閃發光的眼睛從以自由流動的樹枝為形的長發中浮現。或許，《陽光的妻子》便暗示著周綠雲一生對於四季輪迴探索的開始？

上世紀七十年代早期，在周綠雲的中國書法尤其是石鼓文練習的影響下，她借鑑了積墨的方法，並創造出了由厚重而充滿表現力的書法線條組成的畫作，《種子》便是一個例子。在這幅畫中，波狀的渾厚黑色線條輕柔地包裹著一個漂浮中的胚胎般地球體。周揭示了一個神秘的內在，而這一點也被《種子》的收藏者羅榮生所察覺：或如畫題「種子」所指，擬寫女性子宮，帶出生命的讚頌？

正當這些風格與技法的突破開始在藝術界獲得認可並在海內外為周舉辦個人展及合展時，呂壽琨於1975年的仙逝以及周的丈夫三年後的過身對周綠雲造成了嚴重的打擊，繪畫便成為了她釋放悲傷的方式。在這段時期，她由色彩畫轉向了由黑暗單色主導的色彩。在《抽象》（第11頁）的風景中便有這樣一種反烏托邦的情感。與幽暗背景所對立，《無題》描繪了一個被一張細網所圍繞的巨大球體從右側掙脫出來，使人想起纏繞的捲煙或血管，綻放著爆炸般的能量。悲劇的命運似乎令她更為強大，周的創作量在上世紀八十年代到達了巔峰。她之後的風格變得更加強烈而具有表現力。《清晨四點半》顯露出她受之於呂壽琨的恩惠以及他標誌性的禪畫，但同時又比他的導師的風格與構圖更為激進和大膽。她

開始使用強有力而又克制的深黑色書法筆觸作畫，並以與之形成強烈對比的淺色調細線完成。一個斑點狀的小球漂浮在左側，但是視覺焦點卻在正中，一條鋒利的紅色筆觸從底部升起，而一個月亮般的球體卻未上色並被落在一旁。同時，周發展了她的潑墨技法，她大方地讓小墨點潑灑在紙線上，這一點我們也能在《情詩》和《激蕩》中所看到。周還更深入地探索了對自己的內在靈魂的審視，並發現了自己與道教的強烈共鳴。正如南宋哲學家陸九淵道，“吾心便是宇宙，宇宙便是吾心。”而周也曾常常引用這句話。周綠雲的個人世界與更無垠的宇宙之間的關係本將是她在未來更為深入探索的主題。

在1991年，飽經了致命的中風折磨後，周綠雲搬去了布里斯班並與她的兒子一同生活。通過物理療法，受過訓練的氣功練習以及冥想，周逐漸恢復了健康。她決定重新獨立生活，並再次拿起畫筆，並搬到了她自己的住宅，在遭受中風後的僅僅六個月後便繼續開始她的藝術人生。這標誌著她的藝術生涯中有一個轉折點，她的構圖變得更加複雜與充滿激情，而她又回歸到了她年輕時常用的鮮豔顏色，在她的顏料中添加了金色。《無題》（1992），《抽象》，《舞姿》（1993），《Intimate Letters》（1994）以及《內心宇宙之二》（1997）——其中的一些畫比周嬌小的身形還要大的，是她情感的宣洩；粗壯的筆觸與顏色的漩渦因全新的生命與活力而充滿感情。我們還可以看到周對於重生這一概念長久的癡迷：在《內心宇宙之二》中，多個球體以一個較大的紫色斑點圍合住三個較小的圓球，其中一個小藍球便在底部右側萌芽。周依然十分堅決地在畫這些圓球，正如退一步齋的收藏家回憶：“有一次，她告訴我我的朋友認為她畫了太久那些小型而多彩的球體，是時候嘗試些別的東西了。她問：「但是我真的很喜歡畫這些球體，我應該停下來嗎？」”

在周綠雲進入暮年後，她在絲綢與綢緞上使用不同的繪畫方法進行了實驗。她的晚期作品有一種樸素與直接的感覺。在《璀璨生命之一》中，絲綢被明亮渾厚的色彩已盡金色的書法般的線條所渲染，一株嫩芽在一個巨大的、橫跨整幅畫的球體中散佈開來，而其餘多彩的小圓球則在底下漂浮。傳達了周綠雲反覆出現的重生主題，這幅熱情洋溢的畫的確是對生命的讚頌。

無庸置疑，周綠雲曾是香港藝術發展以及新水墨運動的中堅力量。作為一名開拓性的水墨藝術家，她創造了一門獨特的視覺語言，並在她的職業生涯中不斷進化。她是一個充滿回復力的、勇敢的人，並擁有着堅定的信仰。挫折不能使她後退，在她對藝術的追求中她始終保持著積極和單純。或許正是因為這些品質導致她的畫是如此普世的：人類在人生中脆弱與歡樂的經歷，這很有可能與不同層次的觀者產生共鳴。