

## Exhibition Review

### 'Liu Kuo-sung: Experimentation as Method'

National Gallery Singapore

Celebrated as the father of modern Chinese ink painting, Liu Kuo-sung (b. 1932) is regarded as one of the earliest advocates of modern Chinese art. With an artistic career spanning seven decades, the artist has exhibited extensively across Asia, Europe, and the United States. The National Gallery Singapore took on the ambitious task of presenting a retrospective for the nonagenarian Taipei-based painter, titled 'Liu Kuo-sung: Experimentation as Method'. The artist's first solo exhibition held outside mainland China and Taiwan in more than a decade, it brings together more than sixty paintings—of which a large number are donations to the museum by the artist—and 150 items from the artist's personal archive.

Arranged chronologically, the exhibition is divided into four sections, with each accompanied by substantial archival materials, giving visitors historical and cultural context for the art. As the curator Cai Heng states in the catalogue: 'The materials work together with the artworks to co-construct, expand, enrich as well as add complexity to the exhibition's narrative'. The first section traces the beginnings of the artist's career in the 1950s, as a leading member of the Taiwanese modernist art group Fifth Moon Society (1956–72), which sought to modernize Chinese art

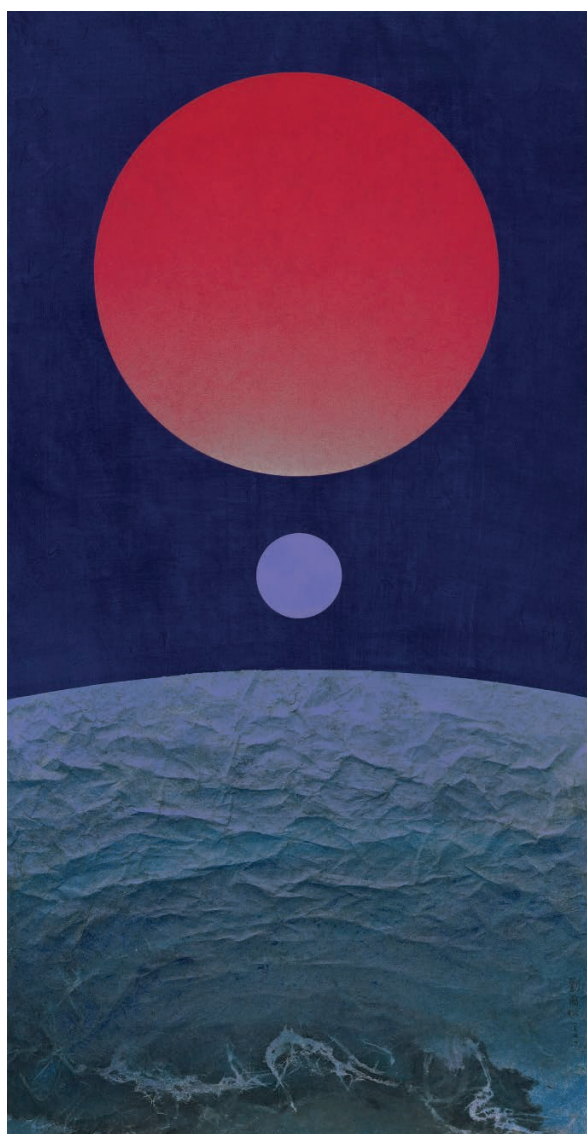
View of the exhibition 'Liu Kuo-sung: Experimentation as Method', National Gallery Singapore, 2023  
Photo courtesy of National Gallery Singapore



View of the exhibition 'Liu Kuo-sung: Experimentation as Method', National Gallery Singapore, 2023  
Photo courtesy of National Gallery Singapore

through employing Western abstraction. The section opens with a hanging scroll, *Dialogue between Clouds and Winds* (1965), before presenting a large diptych, *Winter Mountains* (1967), which measures nearly three metres in width. The latter can be read as a dramatic mountain range shrouded in mist and snow, with a waterfall at the far right. The white vein-like 'strokes' were achieved by the artist peeling off fibres by hand from coarse cotton paper after the application of ink—a radical technique that he developed to reinterpret the brushstrokes in traditional paintings. This technique led to his invention of the eponymous 'Liu Kuo-sung paper', of which a sample hangs nearby. Adjacent is *Dance of the Black Ink* (1963), which represents the artist's interpretation of *kuangcao*, the 'wild cursive' style of calligraphy; broad, powerful brushstrokes sweep across the composition against an unpainted background. Mature works such as these three paintings paved the way for more than four decades of experimentation. What might surprise visitors are the small reproductions of works created by the artist in the 1940s and 1950s, such as Western-style oil paintings on canvas and abstract landscapes painted with oil and plaster on canvas, which attest to Liu's early experimental spirit.

The second section delves into the artist's iconic 'Space' series, inspired by the Apollo 8 and 11 space missions. One of the earliest works in the series, the hanging scroll *Which is Earth? No. 2* (1969), depicts the full moon over the curved landscape of Earth, with both pictorial elements painted with bold abstract brushstrokes. Hanging nearby and painted in the same year is the idiosyncratic *Moon Walk* (1969), a reflection of how moved Liu was by the historic event. In this work, Liu pasted the photograph of Buzz Aldrin's momentous leap for mankind onto his ink painting, seamlessly merging two incongruous elements



*The Composition of Distance no. 15*  
By Liu Kuo-sung (b. 1932); 1971  
Ink and colour on paper; 111.5 x 57.5 cm  
Gift of The Liu Kuo-sung Foundation,  
Collection of National Gallery Singapore  
Photo courtesy of National Gallery Singapore

together. The astronaut's shadow on the rocky surface of the moon extends from Liu's textured brushstrokes, as Earth, in the form of a flat purple orb, floats above in the violet-blue sky. Three years before he created this work, Liu travelled around the world on a grant awarded by the John D. Rockefeller III Foundation. He gained exposure to European and American art as well as then-current trends such as Pop Art and hard-edge painting. He drew from these influences to take his experiments in abstraction further and refine his visual language, confidently melding collage, striking colours, and crisply defined geometric forms with ink painting. Many examples are exhibited here, such as *The Composition of Distance no. 15* (1971). Using an airbrush sprayer to apply the colours, Liu created the sun (a large, fiery, fuchsia-red circle) and the moon below (a small lavender circle), which floats over the curved surface of Earth. The creases and patterns with calligraphic strokes below suggest a moonlit oceanscape over mottled land.

It was during this period of the late 1960s that Liu began to garner international recognition for his innovations in contemporary Chinese art. The display tables in this section present booklets from the various solo and group exhibitions around the world that Liu participated in during the 1970s and articles about him, penned by noted scholars of Chinese art history including Li Chu-tsing and Michael Sullivan.

The cosmos clearly continued to hold Liu's fascination, as he revisited the subject more than three decades later. In *Rising Moon* (2008), a vertical composition nearly two metres in height, Liu layered white circles of increasing opacity against a deep-blue background, creating the effect of a luminescent moon rising over Earth, rendered in his characteristic textured brushstrokes. By contrast, the phases of the sun come to the fore in *BRICS* (2017), a monumental five-panel work spanning nearly five metres across. Five golden suns in a warm golden sky rise above Earth in a gentle arc, with the white veins and patterns imparting a radiance to the mountains and oceans of Earth.

The third section presents a new series of experiments that Liu developed in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1976 he boldly put forth: We must at once carry out a revolution that frightens the heaven and shakes the earth. A revolution against what? . . . Against the brush'. Eschewing the conventional use of the inked brush, he mined the materiality of ink and paper. *Verdant Pirouette* (1976), for instance, displays his 'water-rubbing' technique whereby a flat sheet



*In the Midst of a Beautiful Spring*  
By Liu Kuo-sung (b. 1932); 2008  
Ink and colour on paper;  
92 x 232.5 cm  
Gift of The Liu Kuo-sung  
Foundation, Collection of  
National Gallery Singapore  
Photo courtesy of  
National Gallery Singapore

of paper is placed into a basin of water filled with ink and pigment, allowing the spontaneous effects of water and ink to set out the initial composition. Here, the marbling of light-green and grey inks form the background, on top of which Liu layered expressionist calligraphic brushstrokes. Liu harnessed this technique in the hanging scroll *Red Cliff* (1981) to create an abstract landscape of towering cliffs, with a course of water rushing in between them and swirling waters in the foreground.

In 1971, Liu moved to Hong Kong to teach at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where he remained until 1992. He established the institution's first modern ink-painting curriculum. The exhibition display cabinets show Liu's handwritten notes, including manuscripts of lectures, articles discussing traditional Chinese landscape painting and techniques, and a reading list of books on Asian and Euro-American art histories. They speak not only of his systematic teaching methodology and dedication as an art educator, but also of his generous spirit in encouraging a younger generation of artists.

The final section of the exhibition presents two seminal series, 'Jiuzhaigou' and 'Tibet', that the artist conceived of in his late 60s, after his travels to the lakes of Jiuzhaigou and the snow-capped peaks of Mount Everest in the early 2000s. *In the Midst of a Beautiful Spring* (2008), a horizontal work measuring over two metres in width, is a stunning example of the former series: ripples of emerald and turquoise tones with touches of violet and yellow express the subtle interactions of water, light, and colour. Liu achieved the unique shimmering effect using his 'steeped-ink' technique, by placing ink and colour between sheets of architectural tracing papers and allowing natural patterns to form as the sheets are separated from one another. In *Five-Flower Lake in the Breeze* (2016),

Liu captured the sun-dappled lake in bright yellow and red flecks with swathes of grey denoting its lake bed, visible beneath the rippling turquoise waters. The latter series depicts some of Liu's most dramatic landscapes, such as the nearly four-metre-wide *Snowscapes Reaching Beyond the Clouds* (2020). Using his signature fibre-peeling techniques, as well as painting and creasing both sides of the paper, Liu created a stark, vast mountain range, with its topography delineated by white lines set against the rugged peaks.

Unexpectedly, one of the concluding works in the exhibition is a painting by Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010), which Wu gifted to Liu in the 1980s. The accompanying text explains that Liu met Wu—thirteen years his senior—in 1981 in Beijing. Sharing similar views on the modernization of Chinese ink painting, they subsequently kept in touch, writing letters to each other. The inclusion of the painting suggests the lineage and connection between the two masters and perhaps also a nod to the Gallery's substantial holdings of Wu Guanzhong's paintings.

Liu Kuo-sung's life was dedicated to his art, from his tireless conviction to innovate and experiment to his commitment to teaching and promoting the reinvigoration of Chinese ink painting. This exhibition is a comprehensive survey that confirms the remarkable legacy that Liu has created. It traces the development of the artist's career through some of his seminal works, and the thoughtfully curated archival materials provide valuable context to his innovations.

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#### *Selected bibliography*

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