

## A Tribute to Luis Chan: Introduction by Curator

Olivia Wang

It is an honour and privilege to curate the fourth instalment of the Ink Society's "Tribute" Series. This year's exhibition celebrates the art and legacy of Luis Chan (1905–1995). One of Hong Kong's most original mid-twentieth century artists, Chan's art reflects the city's distinct identity and environment of the time. Born in Panama, he immigrated to Hong Kong at the age of five with his family, and the city remained his home until the end of his life. A "homegrown" artist, Chan never travelled abroad, apart from a sketching tour to mainland China and a stint in Macau during the war.

*A Tribute to Luis Chan* presents an overview of the artist's achievements from his prolific career which spanned 60 years. The exhibition begins with a selection of his watercolour landscapes. Luis Chan gained recognition in the Hong Kong art scene for works painted in a realist manner, which by the late 1930s earned him the moniker "The Watercolour King". He travelled all over the city to sketch from life, rendering compositions with great sensitivity to detail and mastery of colour and tone. Painted with a subdued palette, these works each capture the spirit of the place without eschewing definition, as can be seen in *Street Scenes of Hong Kong* (1955), which portrays contemporary city life and draws our attention to Ho Chai Kung, the mainstay of local pharmaceuticals.

In the late 1950s, artistic activity in Hong Kong began to flourish. New art schools and programmes were established and art students wholeheartedly embraced contemporary art movements of the West. It was during this period that Chan's art dramatically changed direction. The fertile environment at the time gave him the impetus to set free his experimental spirit. He experimented with a diverse range of styles including ink painting, fauvism and abstraction, and techniques such as printmaking and collage. Though he never received any formal art training, Chan had an early interest in art and a voracious appetite to learn and read about it. In the mid-1960s, his realist landscapes started to morph into surreal, fantastical worlds. *Fantasy Landscape with Seaside Village* (1970) shows this remarkable metamorphosis—boats by the sea with houses rising in the cliffs are barely recognisable and bright colours blend into each other, conjuring a dream-like atmosphere. *Landscape with Tree* (1973) evokes themes of traditional Chinese landscape painting. But Chan playfully shifts the scale and perspective. The painting's "protagonist" takes the form of an improbably oversized cherry (or could

it be a peach, or apple?) hanging from a lone palm tree. Mountain peaks emerge in the distance and a small goblin appears at the bottom right corner. The resulting image is so fun and uncanny that it is almost irrelevant to question the type of fruit Chan had intended to depict.

These fantasy landscapes, the body of work for which he is best known, form the crux of the exhibition. Painted with flamboyant, ravishing colours, each piece seduces us into a unique and bizarre world. In *Big Steamer* (1977), human faces emerge from a mountain range punctuated by trees and flower pots, and outlines of ghoulish beasts appear out of thin air. Various types of tropical fish drift in psychedelic seas in *Fish* (1979). Figures of men and women—both clothed and unclothed—frolic and dance gleefully in *Legend of Goddesses of the Sea* (1968). Rich and multifarious, these images were Chan's response to the shifting postwar zeitgeist in Hong Kong. He was also unafraid to expose darker undertones of the generation's psyche, albeit tempered with great wit and enigma, as can be seen in *Untitled* (1979). Are the human faces peering out from the sides of the fish intended to express delight or futility?

Although Chan moved away from his fantasy landscapes to pure abstraction in the later years of his career, he never completely abandoned his connection to the human experience. For instance, the painted circles in *Afternoon Sun* (1972) suggest a pair of eyes drolly gazing out at the viewer. He continued his experimentations in his late seventies, which saw him employing the "action painting" method where he poured and splattered acrylic on the surface of the paper to produce abstract works full of colour and dynamic lines, as can be seen in *Untitled* (1982).

While Chan's art is a window into his acute observations of quotidian life, it is also a testament to his fierce imagination and joie de vivre. Devoid of pretension, his free and unrestrained spirit comes across in the black-and-white photographs by New York-based photographer Cheung Ching Ming. Cheung visited her native Hong Kong and spent time with Luis first in 1982, and again three years later. She captured a series of intimate portraits of the artist, the majority of which have not been exhibited before.

The exhibition concludes with another portrait of the artist—*Portrait of Luis Chan With Fish* (circa 1988) by Taiwan-born painter Chiu Ya-Tsai (1949-2013). Known for his oil-on-canvas portraits that often have an air of melancholy, Chiu by contrast conveys cheerfulness with a bright, saturated background rendered in red and green. Luis is portrayed as

poised and distinguished, but his playful streak dominates as a larger-than-life fish floats next to his loins.

Luis Chan created a highly original artistic language. He barely travelled beyond the Hong Kong shores, but his art wove together elements of East and West. He was a dreamer who devised his own universe that blurred the boundaries of reality and fantasy, but he keenly felt the pulse of the times. He pursued creativity, but never lost sight of living in the present moment. While the starting point of his exuberant paintings was postwar Hong Kong, they continue to resonate today. Chan's magical worlds invite us to lose ourselves within them, giving us the space to form our own interpretations, but also unleash our own imaginations of alternative realities.

## 向陳福善致敬：策展人言

汪鈴

我十分榮幸能夠為水墨會“致敬”系列的第四章節策展。今年的展覽頌揚陳福善(1905-1995)的藝術與遺贈。作為香港二十世紀中葉最具有原創性的藝術家之一，陳的藝術反映了這個城市獨特的身份以及那個時代的環境。他生於巴拿馬，在五歲時與家人一起移居到香港，並一生都生活在這裡。作為一位「本土」的藝術家，陳除了一次到中國大陸的寫生之旅，以及在戰時暫留澳門之外，從未出國旅行。

《向陳福善致敬》縱覽了藝術家橫跨六十餘年蓬勃的藝術生涯中所取得的成就，由一系列精選的水彩山水畫展開序幕。陳福善通過現實主義風格的作品獲得香港藝壇的認可，這也讓他於二十世紀三十年代末期被譽為“水彩王”。他周遊這座城市進行寫生，以對細節的高度敏銳以及對色彩和色調的精通來渲染作品。每一幅畫作都以柔和的顏料繪成，捕捉了這個城市的精神亦清晰地刻劃了它的面貌。正如我們在《何濟公》(1955年)中所看到的，這幅畫描繪了香港現代城市的生活並將我們的注意力吸引到了本地製藥業的中流砥柱——何濟公。

在上世紀五十年代末期，藝術活動在香港開始蓬勃發展。新興的藝術學校和課程逐一建立，而學生們也欣然接受及借鑑西方現代藝術運動。也正是在那段時期，陳福善的藝術發生了顯著的變化。當時欣欣向榮的環境為他帶來了釋放自己實驗精神的動力。他進行了多種風格的嘗試，包括水墨畫、野獸派、抽象派，以及版畫和拼貼畫等技術。雖然他從未接受過任何正式的藝術培訓，但陳很早就對藝術產生了興趣，並十分渴望能夠學習與理解它。在上世紀六十年代中期，他最早的山水畫開始演變為超現實、奇幻的世界。《Fantasy Landscape with Seaside Village》(1970年)展現了這非同尋常的質變——海邊的船隻以及懸崖上聳立的房屋幾乎無法辨認，明亮的色彩相互交融，營造出一個夢幻般的氛圍。《Landscape with Tree》(1973年)喚起了中國傳統山水畫的主題，但陳頑皮地改變了規模和視角。這幅畫的「主人公」是一顆大得令人難以置信的櫻桃(亦或是一顆桃子、蘋果?)，掛在一棵

孤零零的棕櫚樹上。山峰在遠處浮現，而小精靈則在畫幅右下角冒出來。由此產生的景象是如此有趣與不可思議，以致陳原意想要描繪的水果類型則似乎變得無關緊要。

這些奇幻的山水畫作為他最為人熟知的作品，構成是次展覽的關鍵。每一幅作品都以豔麗的、引人入勝的色彩繪成，將我們誘惑進一個獨一無二、光怪陸離的世界。在《Big Steamer》(1977年)中，人臉從穿插著樹木和花盆的山巒中浮現，而妖怪則在稀薄的空氣中若隱若現；在《Fish》(1979年)中，形形色色的熱帶魚在迷幻的海洋中漂游；在《女海神的傳奇》(1968年)中，穿著衣服和赤身裸體的男女歡欣地載歌載舞。這些圖像豐富而多樣，是陳對於香港不斷變化的戰後時代思潮的回應。他同樣毫無畏懼地以談諧玄妙的方式，展露了這一代人內心深處的黑暗色彩，正如《Untitled》(1979年)中所見。從魚的側面向外凝望的人臉，究竟表達的是喜悅還是徒勞？

儘管陳在職業生涯晚期從奇幻山水轉變為純粹的抽象主義，但他從未徹底摒棄刻畫人生經驗。《Afternoon Sun》(1972年)中彩繪的圓圈令人聯想到一雙眼睛，笑咪咪地凝視著觀者。陳在自己七十多歲時繼續進行著他的實驗，他採取了「動作繪畫」的方法，正如在《Untitled》(1982年)中所見，在紙面上潑灑塑膠彩，從而創造出充滿色彩和動態線條的抽象作品。

陳福善的藝術不僅是一扇通往他對世俗生活的尖銳觀察的窗戶，更是他天馬行空的想像力與生活樂趣的有力證明。他無拘無束的精神沒有任何的掩飾，被定居在紐約的攝影家張正名的黑白相片表露無遺。張在1982年回到了她的家鄉香港並與陳福善一起度過了一些時光，並在三年後再次造訪。她為這位藝術家拍攝了一系列親密的肖像，而其中大部分都從未展出過。

是次展覽以台灣畫家邱亞才(1949-2013)創作的另一幅藝術家肖像——《Portrait of Luis Chan With Fish》(1988年)作為結尾。與邱筆下通常帶有憂鬱气息的油畫肖像相反，這幅畫紅綠相間，明亮飽和的背景傳達了歡愉愉悅。陳福善被描繪得泰然自若而高貴卓越，但他的幽默幻化作一條巨大的魚，正在他的腰邊漂浮著。

陳福善創造了一種特立獨行的藝術語言。他幾乎沒有走出香港的海灣，但他的藝術融合了東西方元素。他是一個夢想家，他的宇宙模糊了現實與幻象的邊界，但他同時敏銳地感受到了時代的脈搏。他追尋創造力，但也從未忘記活在當下。儘管他的大量畫作起始於戰後香港，但它們直到今天仍引起共鳴。陳的奇幻世界邀請我們在其中留連忘返，自我詮釋，但同時釋放我們自己對另類現實的嚮往。