

A Master To All

The influence of the late master ink painter Lui Shou-kwan on Hong Kong's modern and traditional artists of past six decades has been profound. Lui's vision was one that eschewed the dogma of tradition. He encouraged artists to seek their own expression through a radical understanding of the potential of ink in the modern world.

By Paul Serfaty



Lui Shou-kwan, Zen Painting, 1964, Chinese ink and color on paper, 85 x 43.5 cm. All images: Courtesy of Alisan Fine Arts, Hong Kong.

Ink art has been a core part of China's cultural history for centuries. It has more recently transformed itself from an art form undertaken purely in ink on paper into one in which the underlying 'spirit of ink' is honoured, even if the form is more open than ever. Major museums have showcased ink art and works that are computer-based, photographic, drawn in biro, or even sculptural can now lay claim to the heritage of ink. One of the most remarkable modernizers of ink art was Hong Kong's Lui Shou-kwan (1919–1975). Though he himself used only ink on paper, his openness of spirit, passed down to his pupils, ensured that the aim of great ink art—to see into the heart of things portrayed and present their essence—was the true skill he passed on to his pupils, and on which they and their successors built the development of ink art not just for Hong Kong, but for lovers of this art form in its broadest sense.

In presenting this show on Lui Shou-kwan and his pupils, *A Legacy of Ink: Lui Shou-kwan 40 years On* Daphne King at Alisan Fine Arts has continued the support for Hong Kong-related ink painting for which her mother, Alice King, has been famous over the years. Twenty years ago Alisan presented works by Lui



Lui Shou-kwan, **Victoria Gap**, 1959, Chinese ink and color on paper, 94.5 x 45.5 cm.

and by his first generation pupils ("20 Years On"). That first generation—Wucius Wong, Leung Kui-ting, Pat Hui, Kan Tai-keung, Chui Tze-hung, Poon Chun-wah, Irene Chou, Lee Ching-man, Eddie Cheung Shu-sun, Cheung Shu-sang, Koo Mei, and Laurence Tam are shown in *40 Years On*—is well known, indeed many of them are very distinguished.

Now, another generation of artists inspired by Lui has chosen the route of art. Alisan includes works by this generation, never directly taught by Lui, and importantly includes their touching and illuminating comments on "Master Lui" in a generously produced book covering the show. Thus we find through their work and their essays that Ling Pui-sze, Cherie Cheuk, Kassia Ko, Lau Hok-shing, Stanley Wong, Wang Xu, Hung Keung, and Ho Kwun-ting are not only younger artists of distinction, but that—no matter how different their media or styles be from Lui's—they have fully absorbed his most important injunction, inspired by his deep interest in Zen: to be honest to yourself.

This show, the book, and its associated essays by distinguished scholars also helps us understand how a highly respected artist and teacher, with a special gift for transmuting traditional Chinese ink skills to express the eternal concerns of Chinese painting in a modern way, and very diverse artistic inheritance, can remain a relatively specialist taste.

Three major strands of art historical reality have left this special, almost unique Hong Kong artist under-appreciated. The first is an accident of history: art traditionalists in Hong Kong and Britain during Lui Shou-kwan's most transformative years were highly conservative. Second, Hong Kong is a commercial city lacking sufficient respect generally for the arts. Third, and perhaps most significant, was Lui Shou-kwan's view of the role of art and the master.

A Legacy of Ink demonstrates conclusively—and most dramatically in reading the essays by the "Third Generation"—that Lui believed most deeply an artist must find his own way; and while he taught respect for and encouraged the copying of the masters, for him this was a mechanism through which his pupils could understand the language of others that they might find their own.

As a result, he created no single visual school of followers. He imposed no single culture of art production and appreciation. And apart from an antagonism to the Lingnan School, which he saw as in decay through the 'art' of copying without a spirit of understanding, he was exceptionally open-minded as to which influences a young artist might look to find his own voice. His school, fittingly, is of



Lui Shou-kwan, **Zen**, 1970, Chinese ink and color on paper, 284 x 122 cm.

the mind, not of the pen or the ink, or the paper.

Take one important example, Irene Chou, a pupil of Lui's whose style is quite distinctive, but very different from his. Despite his exploration in certain of his 'Zen' paintings of the accidents by which ink and water and space interact on the paper to create a sense of universality hidden behind chaos, well exemplified by the work *Zen* (1970), his work in no way predicts what Irene Chou has done physically and visually with her own wet ink techniques, nor her *Impact* works of her middle years, nor can one anticipate the swirling starry mysteries of her late years after her 1991 stroke, such as *Untitled* (2003).

Indeed, Chou went so far as to state that the master, in his modesty and curiosity, was willing to find inspiration from the pupil, and that her inputs were a major contribution to an iconography that perhaps more than any other came to symbolize Lui's late work, the single, hovering lotus flower, in vermilion, suspended above the layers of black mud and water and sky that had given it life.

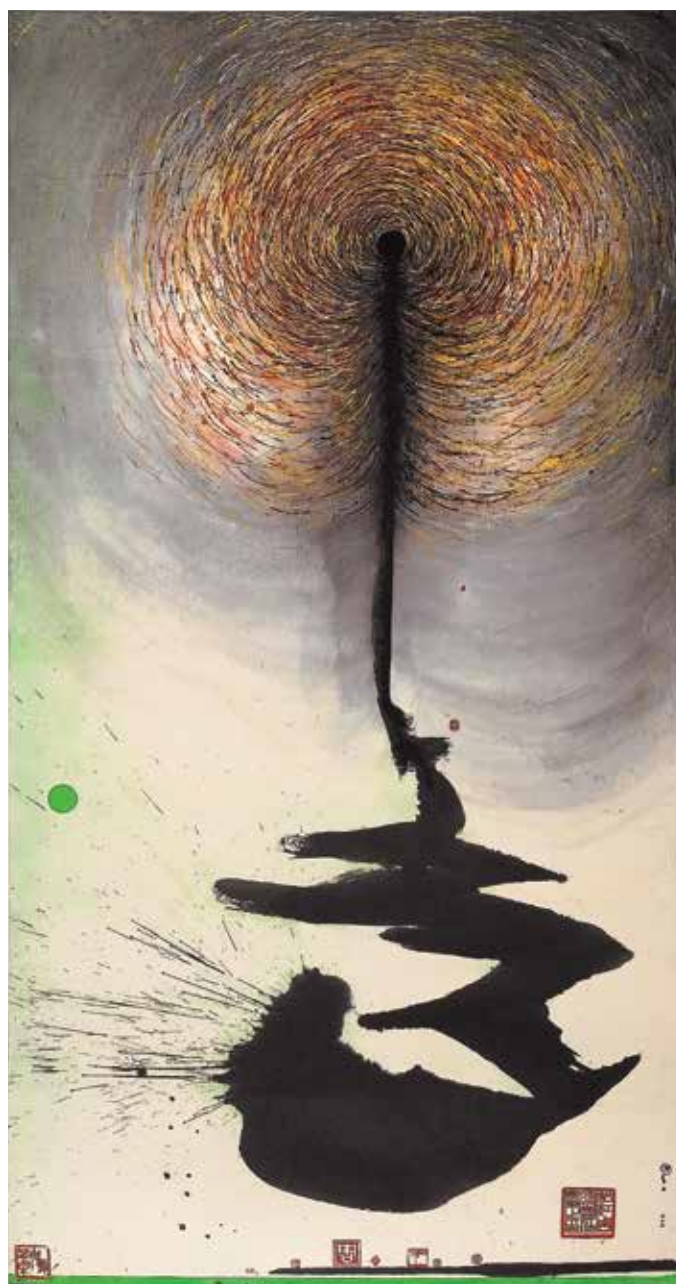
She also declared that it was she who demonstrated to Lui how to mix the vermilion, and that while she had not learned that much from him in technical terms, she had gained one precious thing: “Lui encouraged her to look to her own original self for inspiration in her work.”¹

We find the same in considering the memories and styles of Wucius Wong, another first generation link to Lui’s style and teaching influence. As we can see, Wong’s *The Highest Good Is Like Water* (2015) is far from Lui’s in form, content, and style.

Wong threw light on his experience as a pupil and on Lui’s thinking in a 2008 interview: “I was his earliest student ... I went to study with him one-on-one in the 1950s. At that time he had the idea of breaking away from the Chinese tradition, yet he also wanted to stick to tradition as he saw it was important for his development.”

And so for Wong, as Hung Sheng puts it: “Because of his thought of not having sufficient knowledge of Chinese painting, Wong had studied with Lui as a private student in 1958 for two years. He copied works of many masters such as Dong Yuan, Wu Daozi and Bada Shenren.”² But for Wong, who developed his own style, quite distinct from Lui’s, it was Lui who opened the psychological door wider.

Lui’s own development is well chronicled in this exhibition. As is made clear, Lui’s path was a steady one from tradition to what Wucius Wong describes



Irene Chou, *Untitled*, 2003, Chinese ink and color on rice paper and mixed media, 189 x 97.5 cm.

well in the book as a progression “from fullness to nothingness.”

Victoria Gap (1959) is traditional in form and substance. And yet, as Geoffrey Barker makes clear in his 1962

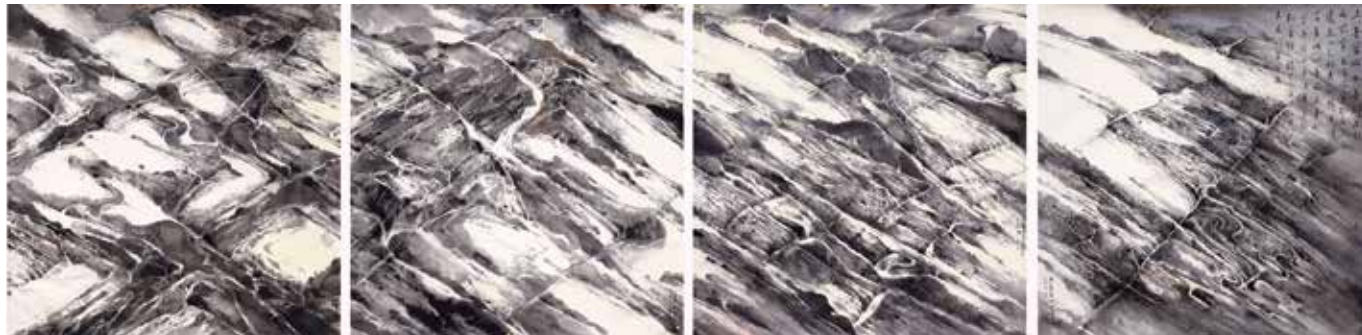
appreciation of Lui, Lui is not traditional, for he thinks in the following way: “As soon as the dots and lines appear on the paper..., some new idea or sentiment may come into play; then I may not dictate or force my brush to obey my original sentiments or idea.”³

So we see Lui progressively embrace abstraction, winnowing out the literal, and leaving the essence; not, as some critics have suggested, because he believed in the Western way of abstraction, but because he came to more and more deeply understand the Chinese way.

The turning point is found where his works can no longer easily be seen as landscape, but seem more thoughts about landscape, or even landscape thinking about itself, as in *Zen painting* (1964). In this work, the mountain has become a mass, the river a breath beside the mountain, the sea spray a splash of ink, the dwelling a red dash, a bar of light rises up the side, while fog and uncertainty hang over the center of the composition.

Lui Shou-Kwan’s Zen paintings evolved from this point in a progression “from fullness to nothingness.” His visible representation of the world slowly receded, and the spiritual took its place.

In his works, he often presents us layers of ink, relatively dry, and with firm thick strokes—of which Lui, in an interview with Geoffrey Barker, confirms: “The two dark masses ... are lotus leaf forms, and symbolize two worlds. The vertical red form has developed from a lotus flower, and the dot ... has become a straight line. It is a symbol, an idea: only through Zen



Wucius Wong, *The Highest Good Is Like Water* (detail), 2015, Chinese ink and color on paper, 6 panels each 100 x 100 cm.

can it explain and connect these two different worlds, which are perhaps two different regions of the mind.²⁴

Thus the leaves, accompanied by a newly born lotus, become a symbol for bodhicitta—"the mind striving toward enlightenment." And as lotuses grow in mud, so can the mind attain enlightenment by rising above intellectual-emotional defilement or excessive attachment to reality. Lui's dark ink can be seen as reflecting the existence in the world of thoughts and emotions associated with defilement, while his artistic advance, leaving behind the direct portrayal of physical reality, can be seen as the mirror of an inner development down a path toward Buddhist enlightenment.

In homage to that spirit, the works themselves need not be seen to be understood. Though Lui might not pursue Buddhist ideals as such in his paintings—"for apprehension of Zen does not depend on a person's worshipping the Buddha, or reading the sutras, or being a Buddhist monk,"²⁵ we sense they can offer universal truths, available to all. Certainly, his pupils found much to explore in the worlds of the mind and open thinking encouraged by his teaching.

It is perhaps one of the oldest artists showing, and one living furthest from Hong Kong who most demonstrates the value of Lui's teaching style in an otherwise normative environment like Hong Kong. Cheung Shu-sun, born in 1946, has lived many years in New York, but his works even in recent years show the fusion of the

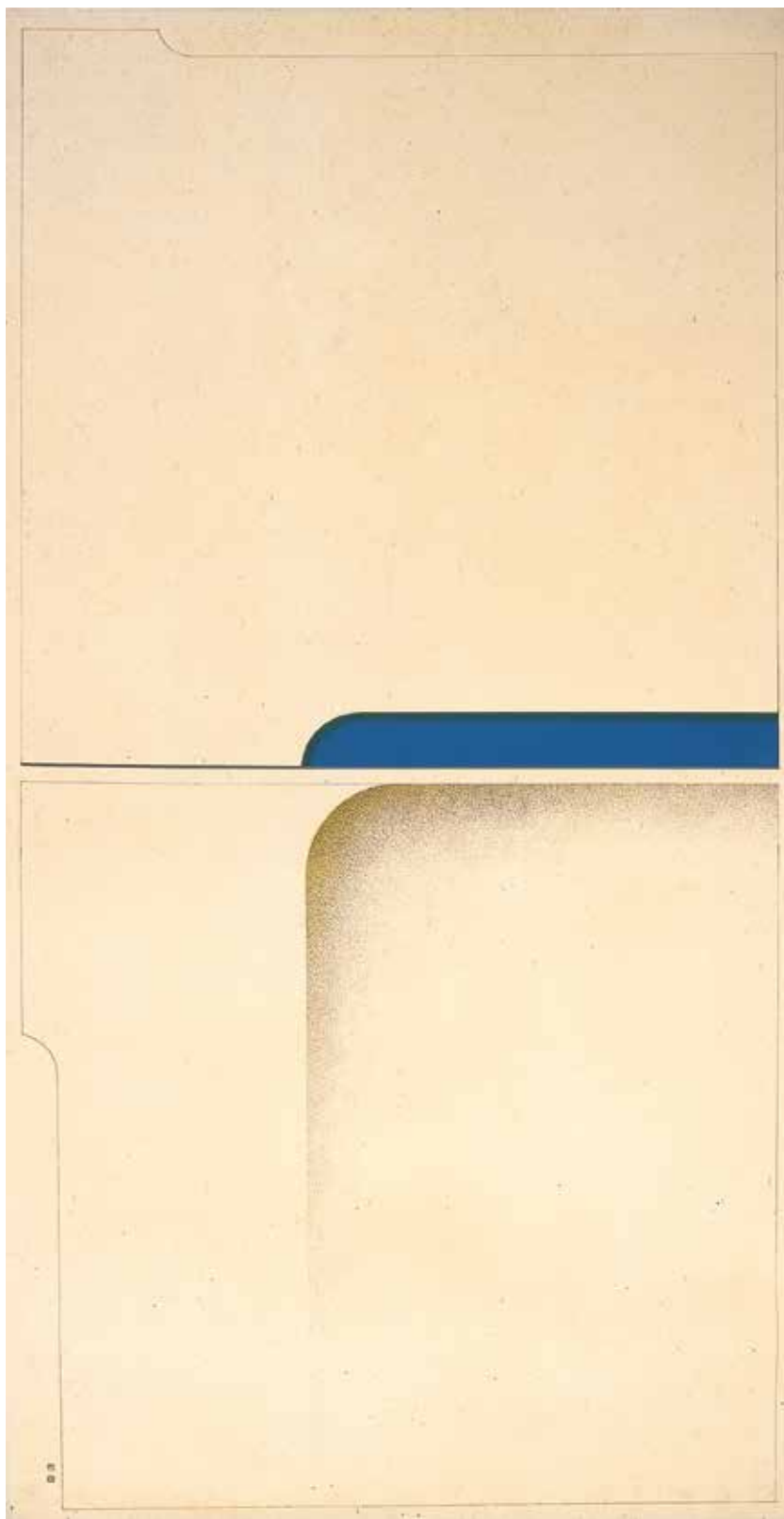
traditional and the modern that were enabled by Lui's assertion that Chinese painting should live in a modern and inspiring space, not an antiquated one. His *Homage to the Space* (2011) combines a Chinese toleration—even love—of space and the meaning carried by emptiness, with the feeling of landscape; the signifiers of land

and sea are reduced, as Lui reduced his, to the barest minimum (with brush in the case of Lui, with line, dot, and color in the case of Cheung.)

Yet Cheung does so in an idiom which is unmistakably Western as well, evoking Oskar Schlemmer in his use of spare and geometric line and Bauhaus in his treatment of borders, delicately incised, to reveal, perhaps, a distant promontory reflecting the blue light of sea and sun, a horizon line stretching out, while in the lower foreground, of indeterminate perspective is a pale green, mottled curve, right-angled, but still evoking the softness of landscape, as it shades away to nothingness, as if it were a Song expression of regret for the insubstantiality of the world. His seals modestly, almost invisibly, adorn the bottom left edge of the work, the antithesis of the brashness of Western modernity.

Moving on from Lui's immediate pupils, the diversity of styles that have emerged from Lui's highly permissive and open-ended teaching style is testified by the variety of works on show from those influenced by him at second hand—the new generation of (mostly) recent graduates.

These young Hong Kong artists have, like Lui, searched for and found inspiration in the world of nature. They adopt it not merely to represent it, but because it can serve as a vessel to inspire them, and convert their artistic aspiration into specific works. And Lui's spirit encourages them to make new links and find new interpretations, encircling the



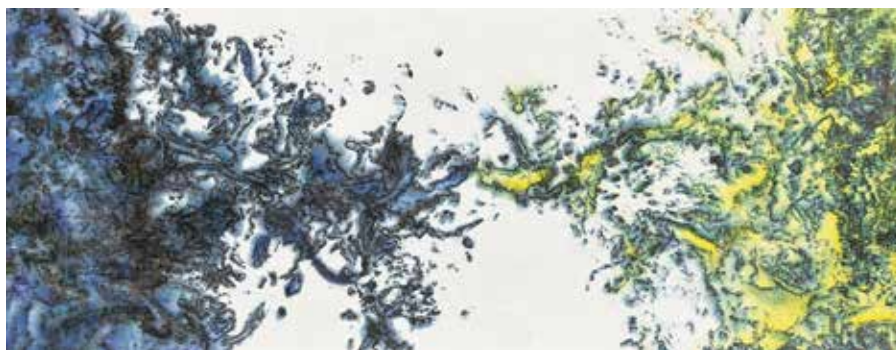
Cheung Shu-sun, *Homage to the Space*, 2011, Chinese ink and acrylic on paper, 180 x 90 cm.

delicate pivotal point of enlightenment. This helps us perceive with sharper vision the mysterious space in which all-understanding manifests itself, even though, as Paul Klee observed: “The power of creativity cannot be named. It remains mysterious to the end.”⁶

Hanison Lau’s installation *The Drawing Studio of Master Lui* (2015) mixes different media, and displaces our visual focus vertically, even reversing the placement of stars, moving them beneath mountains, to resolve multiple dimensions—stars, mountains, tables, nighttime, the idea of painter himself—in one space and yet integrating contradictory realities and ideas. We can imagine the ink experiencing an arduous yet poetic mountain-climbing and star-crossing journey, before it attains the paper it’s destined to adorn; or imagine that the mountains and stars compelled and guided this journey. This openness to nature and implicit Zen spirit is very much of Lui’s spirit too. The artist goes where he must: “... I may not dictate or force my brush to obey my original sentiments or idea.”

In Ling Pui-sze’s painting *Reproducibility 4* (2014) we could be witnessing a cosmic collision, which could also be an image much enlarged from a microscopic scale. In contrast to the tranquil lotus, Ling chose a moment before a new creation, when vibrant contraries meet. This point of collision/creation is not just evoked by the compositional memory of Adam seeking God’s outstretched finger, but by the artist’s use of blue and yellow—colors adopted by the political opposites that formed the *yin/yang* of Hong Kong’s political turmoil in late 2014.

Ho Kwun-ting’s *Cassette 6 – Find the Red* transforms his affection for a vulnerable cassette tape recording of fading childhood memories into a robust metallic sculpture. Its circular form, enclosing emptiness within the solid ring of tape, seems fittingly Zen in feeling. The repeating circles of the tape express not only the artist’s wish to preserve what is fading in his memory, but also his acceptance of loss. Slowly, what he loved is vanishing, circling into emptiness as the earth moves around the sun; and perhaps, like a disc of cosmic dust, it will create new stars. Either way, he has no choice but to let go, but he does so while respecting memory and looking forward as an artist. Respect for the past,



Ling Pui-sze, *Reproducibility 4*, 2014, mixed media on canvas, 47 x 122.5 cm.



Hanison Lau Hok-shing, *The Drawing Studio of Master Lui*, 2015, wood, iron and mixed media, 150 x 10 x 18 cm; iron stand: 150 x 150 x 50 cm.

while being open to the future, is another life lesson learned from Master Lui.

This new generation of young Hong Kong artists is not bound to one teacher’s central idea, rather they have taken Lui’s desire that they should express what is in their heart, and then set up their central ideas in unexplored spaces. Though there is no master plan for the development of what it means to paint in ink, we are, through their work, seeing a fuller picture of what ‘ink’ can mean to

us. Eventually the true legacy of ink will be revealed as more artists devote their talents to the medium. That is Lui Shou-kwan’s true legacy, expressed through the medium of this show. Δ

Notes:

1. Pun and Lu, *The biography of Irene Zhou*, 2001.
2. Hung Sheng, ‘The art of Irene Chou’ MA thesis, Lingnan University, 2013.
3. Per T.G. Barker in *Introducing Chinese Painting and the Work of Lui Shou Kwan*, November 1962, document at Chinese University of Hong Kong.
4. *Oriental Art*, Vol. XIX, No.3, Autumn, 1973, p.302.
5. Lui Shou-kwan in *Oriental Art*, Vol. XIX, No.3, Autumn, 1973, p.305.
6. Notebooks, 1921, Trans., Spiller (ed), Wittenborn (NY), Humphries (London).

* *A Legacy of Ink: Lui Shou-kwan 40 years on* was presented at the Hong Kong Art Center from September 23–30, and at Alisan Fine Arts, September 14 – October 28, 2015.



Ho Kwun-ting, *Cassette 6 – Find the Red*, 2015, stainless steel and mild steel, 50 x 50 x 15 cm.

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