

All the World's a Stage: The Art of Luis Chan
「歡樂今宵：陳福善的藝術」

Hong Kong Arts Centre
10 December 2022 – 18 January 2023

Widely regarded as Hong Kong's pioneer of modern art, Luis Chan (1905-1995) is known for his whimsical and peculiar paintings of landscape, figures, and animals that defy art historical and cultural categorisation. The artist took unsparing inspiration ranging from Western modernism to Chinese ink painting, television to pop music, fairy tales to mythology, but most of all, he was enticed and inspired by the theatre of life. His unique visual language gave expression to Hong Kong's drastic social transformation throughout the 20th century under the forces of colonialism and modernisation, and spoke to dynamic urban experiences both public and private, local and global, real and imagined. Chan's colourful works are matched by his equally vibrant personality, his love for dancing and costume parties, and his eclectic sense of humour that reflects the rich cultural fabric of Hong Kong. Referencing both Shakespeare's comedy and Hong Kong's classic television variety programme, this exhibition explores Chan's art and legacy in a thematic survey that highlights his perceptive portrayal of urban drama and identities, his love of narrative and storytelling, and the imaginative power of observation underlying his inventive pictures of modern life.

'The Artist and the Critic'

The exhibition opens by introducing Chan in both his roles as an artist and a critic. Chan was largely self-taught and throughout his century-long career, he was also a prolific writer on art history, practice, and theory, publishing books and articles such as *Treatise on Art* (1953), *How to Paint a Portrait* (1954), and *Evolution of Paintings in Twentieth-Century* (1962) in both English and Chinese. Chan's art and writing mutually influenced each other and he developed his personal aesthetic through studying and critiquing modern art from around the world. By presenting Chan as an active participant in modern art discourse, the introduction re-evaluates both the artist and the hub of Hong Kong within the context of modernism's global development.

Alongside archival materials related to Chan's writing on art, the works in this section also reflect his active contemplation about the nature of art, the act of exhibition, and the museum as an institution. Highlights include the works *Lee Byng at Work* (1949), *The Museum* (1978), *Coming on Stage* (1979), and *Watermelon Eater* (1984).

'Hong Kong Through the Looking Glass'

Chan began as a watercolour painter of naturalistic Hong Kong scenery in the 1930s and quickly gained acclaim in the local art circle in the following decades. In 1962, however, he was considered 'out of date' and was rejected for exhibition by the newly established Hong Kong Museum and Art Gallery. His desire to keep up with the times motivated him to further experiment with abstraction, and Chan eventually developed a new visual language inspired by modernist expression that responded to the speed and diversity of urban life,

social changes in Hong Kong, and the intersection of different peoples and cultures in the city's post-war refugee society.

The works in the second section include collages, portraits, and 'curviscapes' that reflect Chan's modernist sensitivity, with particular references to the location of Wanchai, home to both the artist and the Hong Kong Arts Centre. It also includes a selection of early watercolours and experimental works that show Chan's stylistic transformation towards abstraction. Highlights include *Man with Saw-teeth* (1969), *The Embrace* (1968), *Pink Nude* (1969), *Young Smoker* (1980), *The Refugee Boat* (1980), *Swan Lake in Red, Yellow and Blue* (1981), and *Woman Dancing* (1981).

'Luis in Artland'

In the mid-1970s, Luis Chan received a critical review from a local arts writer, who felt that his 'fantasy landscapes' have started to resemble a 'shoddy mantle of Disneyland'. Luis Chan made no apologies for his work and responded by saying that he was, in fact, an 'Alice in Artland' who desired to keep experimenting with different styles: 'I would feel bored if ever I came to a standstill.'

Focusing on the artist's fantastical pictures from the 1970s to 1980s, the third section explores the artist's 'personal mythology', filled with butterflies, birds, fish, and other eclectic creatures expressing the subconscious fears, desires, and hopes of living in a modern world. Highlights include *Vision of Devils* (1975), *Breakthrough* (1978), *Illusion (The King and the Queen)* (1979), *Rise of the Drowned Poet* (1980), *Impossible Dream* (1980), and *Aquarium & Viewers* (1980).

'Vision is a Many-Splendored Thing'

When Luis Chan started experimenting with abstraction in the 1960s, he attempted many Western abstract styles, such as Cubism, Surrealism, and Op Art. A set of abstract air spray paintings in the early 1970s reflect such influences, and they are also early indications of Chan's interest in manipulating the perceptual properties of colour. The artist later returned to pure abstraction from the 1980s onwards, and this time with paintings combining dripping and colour-field, which fully explore the potential of colour as its own expressive and structural means. A highlight in this section is the 10-metre *tour de force* painted by the artist at 81, *Aquarium* (1986), which invites us to walk with our eyes through the contrast and harmony of colours and imagine fantasies of our own.

After Luis Chan's passing in 1995, the HKAC was the first to hold a retrospective to commemorate the artist in the following year. Coinciding with the Centre's 45th anniversary, this exhibition enriches extant research on the artist with new archival materials and a long-overdue monograph from the city where the artist made home.

Joyce Hei-ting Wong, Guest Curator
22 November 2022