

F U L L

**HON CHI FUN**

BY CHLOE CHU

C I R C L E





Among the many changes brought about by 20th-century modernity was the expansion of human mobility, whether in search of refuge, opportunity or adventure. At various points in his life, the Hong Kong-born, self-taught artist Hon Chi Fun has packed his bags for all three. The flow of individuals, across borders and territories, initiated a coalescence of information, ideas and cultures; grounded in this context, Hon's works embody the trail-blazing, boundary-breaking spirit of modernism, representing a generation of artists who found renewal in postwar destruction, and who pioneered a culture of experimentation that inspired the generations of contemporary artists who followed.

Hon was born in 1922 to one of the first taxi drivers in Hong Kong and a stay-at-home mother. Although his parents received limited education themselves, both actively fostered Hon's interest in art and built a home environment rooted in intellectualism. Hon's father had a special eye for Han-dynasty antiques and porcelains, and filled the family's humble house with calligraphic Chinese couplets and paintings, while his mother encouraged him to take lessons in traditional Chinese calligraphy and *guohua* ("national painting"). From an early age, his proclivity toward experimentation and breaking the rules was clear: one of Hon's favorite games involved slinging a piece of white chalk at targets drawn on a black slate, which his mother set up for him to practice his Chinese writing. The dots and marks that resulted from the collision of chalk and slate piqued the artist's curiosity for drawing, and the lines, resembling loose, expressive calligraphy, led him to question methods prescribed by dogmatic manuals, and to envision transcending traditional techniques.

Although Hon's curiosity about the visual world around him persisted throughout his childhood, the Second World War made pursuing art and, indeed, a normal life, impossible. Hon and his family were forced to make several back-and-forth journeys

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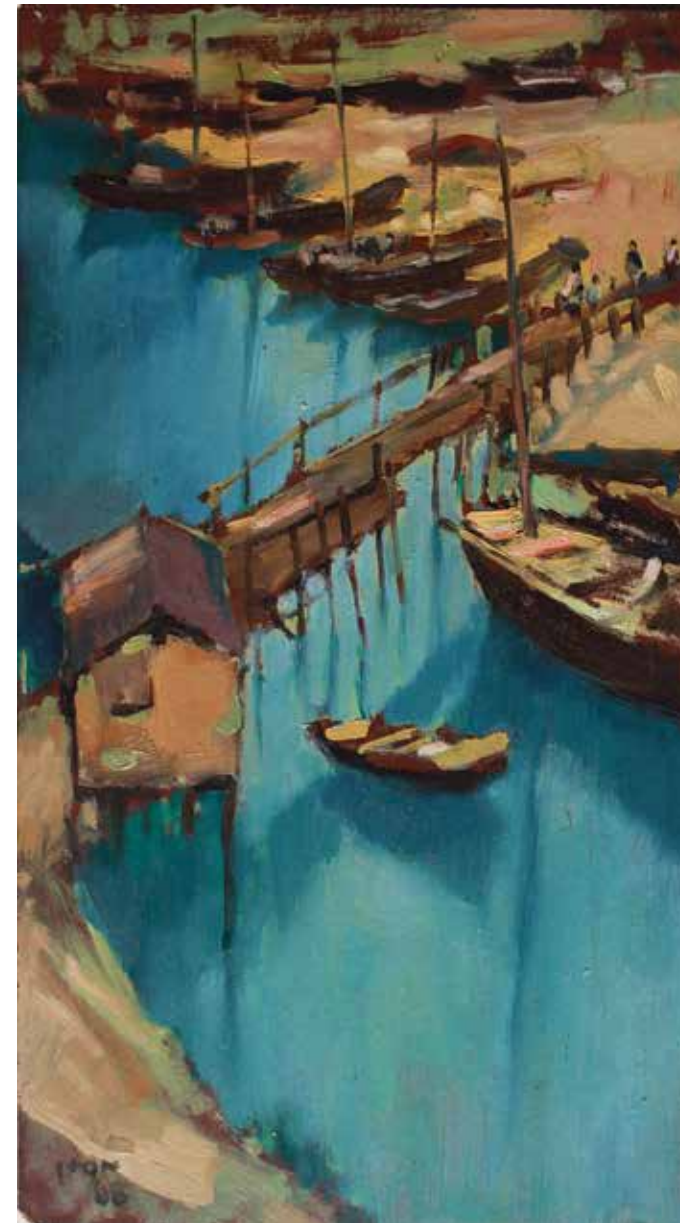
between China and Hong Kong to avoid conflict due to the Japanese invasion. As such, Hon's artistic career only really began over a decade after the war, at the age of 34, when he was working as a postal inspector in Hong Kong. He spent his weekends painting, zipping around Hong Kong on his motorbike or Volkswagen Beetle, in search of the city's best landscapes. On these excursions, he would take with him an easel and his painter's box, full of oil paint tubes, brushes and small pieces of cheap fiberboard, which he bought in bulk and cut up himself. After picking out a spot—typically, edges of remote beaches, lakes and villages in the New Territories—he would set up his materials and easel and, holding up his thumb and forefinger to frame his composition, would sit for a few hours recording the then-lush, tropical settings in flashes of blues, auburns and vibrant greens. Rendered quickly, the dense patches and thick streaks of pigment—such as in *Luk Keng* (1960)—recall landscapes by the Fauvist and fellow bohemian Paul Gauguin, as well as other Post-Impressionists such as Paul Cezanne, artists whose reproductions Hon had come across in the American Library in Hong Kong, and whose canvases revealed the possibilities of pushing boundaries in a world beyond ink and paper.

In the late 1950s, Hon also became acquainted with painter Luis Chan through mutual friends. Chan, already well-known at the time as one of the key figures of Hong Kong's "Western" art world, rejected academic realism, instead chose to paint surreal landscapes and vibrant, fantastical portraits. Like Hon, Chan was self-taught and had never been to Europe, but received indirect and fragmented pieces of information about American and European modern art via foreign art magazines and books. In a 2017 article in the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) newspaper, Hon recalled that Chan opened his eyes to looser, more radical approaches to painting, stating that "he was a bit older, more experienced, and he used to laugh at the rest of us as we tried to frame our landscapes very seriously. 'Just put a pile of crap here, and a pile of crap there,' he would say. He blew my mind."

The pair became part of a casual assembly of artists known as the Sunday Painters, who would venture out on weekend painting escapades. Hon's obsession with painting grew, and gradually the hobby took over his life outside of his job. He frequented coffeehouses and spent an increasing amount of time at bookstores practicing "*daa syu deng*" (literally, hitting the book staples, or, in other words, browsing without buying), absorbing all that he could find about the development of postwar art outside of Hong Kong with commitment and rigor, despite the relatively limited channels of information available at the time.

His technique varied widely in the early stages of his plein-air painting. While on some occasions he chose to depict foliage in generous daubs, as in *Amah Rock* (1958), in other works, such as *Village Houses in the New Territories* (1959), he suggests the texture of thickets via blankets of green paint. What ties Hon's experiments of this time together, however, is a focus on form and light—the latter becoming the basis of his most iconic works. In one of his earliest paintings, *Forest* (1958), the filtering of light through a forest of trees—casting a dramatic golden glow on one side of the tree trunks and hard shadows toward the back of the huddle—is the main subject of the painting. Similarly, in *New Territories* (1960) the artist harnesses light through the probing of color. The work's palette is brought together by yellow hues, which run throughout the composition, suggesting a shadowy, early morning scene. In *Mai Po* (1960), on the other hand, the artist experiments with vertical scratches of cyan blue, layered in a thin, textural coat atop the scene of a fishing village, to depict beams of light penetrating the clouds and illuminating the water.

It was around this time that Hon incorporated his childhood hobby of calligraphy into his work, using Chinese ink to compose his own poetry in running scripts. *Mountain Lake*, painted in 1963, was the first instance where he brought calligraphy and oil painting together. The powder-blue lagoon in the center of the composition,



(Previous spread)  
INWARD COURSE (detail), 1990, acrylic on canvas, 129 x 129 cm. Courtesy the artist and Ben Brown Fine Arts, Hong Kong/London.

(This page)  
YAU MA TEI, 1957, oil on board, 38 x 46 cm. Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page)  
TAI O, 1960, oil on board, 41 x 23 cm. Courtesy the artist.





(Opposite page)  
MOUNTAIN LAKE, 1963, oil, acrylic and paper  
on board, 41 x 54 cm. Courtesy the artist.

(This page, top)  
FROZEN STANZA, 1970, paper collage  
with ink and serigraph on board,  
71 x 71 cm. Courtesy the artist and Ben  
Brown Fine Arts, Hong Kong/London.



(This page, bottom)  
A NOTHING, 1964, oil on canvas,  
60 x 104 cm. Courtesy the artist.



which was made for his mother, is surrounded by monochromatic, jagged cliffs, made of torn pieces of ink-washed paper. Over the top cluster of slopes, Hon added a veil of dilute white paint, highlighting the vein-like folds of the material. Although recognizably a landscape painting, the focus of the work is on the collage of textures, which served as the artist's means of departing from realistic images and moving into the realm of the abstract. In *Script Remote* (1960), Hon takes this one step further. Although executed in similar dimensions and on the same fiberboard as his landscapes, the painting is a murky mix of gray and blue with pools of white surfacing from underneath—the only tropes that tie the piece back to Hon's previous works are the minimal lines etched in the painting's surface that resemble primitive symbols for trees.

His foray into the new visual language bloomed in the 1960s, especially in the later years of the decade, where he became increasingly dissatisfied with simply recording what was in front of him. With the Cultural Revolution raging in China, anti-colonial riots brewing in Hong Kong and changes erupting in his own personal life, Hon also felt that the times, charged with fragmentation and divisiveness between and within people, called for inward inspection rather than outward examination. Further catalyzing this break in his practice was another fated encounter. Through his ties with Hong Kong's Modern Literature and Art Association, which he co-founded in 1958, Hon had found a kindred spirit in the artist Lui Shou Kwan, founder of the New Ink Painting Movement. Lui criticized the lack of creativity in traditional Chinese ink painting, stating that artists were constrained by techniques of the past, and were merely regurgitating masterworks. He too believed that introspection or the return to one's own roots would enable the transcendence of temporal, spatial and cultural differences. Lui's own formal innovations were based on a reinterpretation of the use of form, color and space in works by JMW Turner and by integrating the explorations of Abstract Expressionists such as Franz Kline

and Robert Motherwell, who were themselves looking to Asia to understand the emotive power of the calligraphic stroke. The making of images based on the perception of the mind's eye, an essential element of Chinese landscape painting, had captured the attention of modern artists across the globe. This sparked Hon's and Lui's shared ambition to merge the two styles. "We all wanted to try and find a way to bridge Chinese realist tradition with Western modernism, and the American painters gave us a model," Hon said to *SCMP*. While revolutionary China was closing itself off from the world and destroying expressions of avant-garde culture in favor of art for the masses, Hong Kong was uniquely placed for such an exchange and investigation, and this intercultural dialogue defined the city's art history.

*Black Crack* (1964) marked the beginning of Hon's abstract, black-and-white period, and embodied the artist's early endeavors at reinvigorating his practice by connecting Western modernist principles with those of Chinese ink and calligraphy. Using plaster, Hon created a rough-textured surface, which he cloaked with black oil paint. Splicing through the dark field is a vertical sliver of white, as if fragmenting the picture plane itself. The striking effect evokes a sense of rupture; like a crumbling wall, it represents Hon's journey toward pure abstraction as he tackled feelings of constraint imposed by traditional methods of understanding and depicting reality. The work dissolves the greenery, sky and waters of Hon's previous canvases into the stark contrast between solid and void. "There is nothing to see, but you can *feel* the painting," Hon commented in an interview with film critic Shum Long Tin, conducted as part of Asia Art Archive and Hong Kong Museum of Art's Hong Kong Art History Research – Pilot Project in 2013.

When *Black Crack* was unveiled, it scooped first prize in a contest for paintings organized by the Modern Literature and Art Association in 1964. It stunned fellow painters, including Lui, with the way it shifted the focus from the visual to the immaterial—breaking through with the window of light in a new form of expression. Similarly, in *A Nothing* (1964) and *Colloquy* (1964),



the artist delved into a more personal visual language, rendering broad ink strokes bent in a circle that never meets at the ends, recalling, in Hon's words, "the twists and turns of the mind, the ups and downs of the heart, the excitement of discovering light through darkness."

In the same year that he received the prize, Hon co-founded Hong Kong's Circle Art Group, whose members shared a common interest in experimentations with material and avant-garde approaches to depicting life in the 20th century. Between its active years from 1964 until the early 1970s, the group comprised nine to 11 artists, including some of the city's most recognizable practitioners of the time, such as ink artist Wucius Wong and bronze sculptor Cheung Yee. The Circle Art Group also organized exchange exhibitions at sites associated with like-minded figures, as a way to initiate dialogues with modern artists around the world—for example, they regularly showed at Luz Gallery in Manila, helmed by Filipino Modernist Arturo Luz. (Perhaps facilitated by his exposure to these Hong Kong artists, Luz's abstract collages also feature calligraphic marks, and his ordered, geometric abstractions of urban landmarks parallel the assertion of order over chaos seen in Hon's later circle works.) Members were also represented in shows such as the São Paulo Biennial, the Saigon Exposition and the India Triennale, gaining increasing international attention.

In Hon's own practice, after his studies in black and white in the early 1960s, he sought to break through the two-dimensional plane completely. *Blue Swirl* (1966) was one of the first Robert Rauschenberg-esque instances where he incorporated a found object—a rusted iron wheel—into his composition. Radiating outward from the circle are rings of subtly differentiated hues of blue, and, on the left, an abstracted Chinese character denoting "swirl." Resembling a dharma wheel, the work also reveals the influence of Buddhist ideas. In Buddhism, the movement of the dharma wheel symbolizes rapid spiritual change—in Hon's image, it represents another phase of transformation in his practice, which parallels his personal growth. "I realized painting could break a lot of boundaries—I placed rocks, carvings, sculptures, Chinese words and pottery in my paintings. Cultural studies, time, body movements—everything could be read from my canvases," he said. Whereas the circles in Hon's black-and-white works are fragmented, it is important to note that the wheel in *Blue Swirl*, which forms the epicenter of the work, was his first complete

rendition of the shape. The symbol became iconic in Hon's prolific practice, particularly from the late 1960s until his stroke in 2000.

The circle introduces to Hon's work what the artist calls a "more spacious fourth dimension"—it invites metaphysical explorations in reference to Taoism and references the notion of the wholeness of the self, allowing Hon to extract some semblance of order from the chaotic tangle of self-perception. In early examples, such as *My Profiles* (1969), this is literally explored with the Chinese word for "I," incorporated as a collaged element and pasted against the backdrop of the round disc in the center. In terms of technique and material, the initial body of circle works also marks Hon's venture into screen-printing, as inspired by Pop Art. Using large canvases that reach over a meter in width and height, the artist worked quickly and with multiple projects at the same time, spreading puddles of bright, kitschy, colored acrylics with wide calligraphy brushes, finishing these compositions with serigraphs of texts, often drawn from Buddhist mantras. Although the mantras invite spiritual readings of these works, Hong Kong critic and gallerist Johnson Chang noted: "Hon's sanctity is not always peaceful. As he admits, he is out to capture 'the sudden moment of clarity that appears after wanton abandon of body and soul.'" For Hon, this inward journey—suggested in the swirls of *Inward Course* (1987), which lead to a black void—is key to his definition of Modernism and its values. Given the context of Hon's time, which was strongly focused on the rebuilding of society following the Second World War, this was a radical statement in itself. The sanctity in his works can also be found in the act of offering oneself wholly through one's art. In the context of post-colonial discourse, this parallels a wider cultural search for self-identity. Reflecting on his use of the circle in his autobiography, published as part of his monograph *Space and Passion: The Art of Hon Chi Fun* in 2000, Hon added: "The circle might be you, or me or be the him or her other than us"—suggesting that the motif contains multiple voices, constantly in flux.

In 1969, Hon was the first Hong Kong artist to receive the John D. Rockefeller III Award, which allowed him to participate in a one-year residency at the Pratt Graphic Center in New York. In addition to being exposed to different printing processes there, Hon was struck by the graffiti and spray paint found throughout the city, and incorporated these urban techniques in his practice when he returned to Hong Kong. On his way home, Hon stopped in South America, Europe and South Asia. In his autobiography, he describes a scene he encountered on the grounds of Buddhist



(Opposite page, top)  
OURS EVER, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 132 x 132 cm. Courtesy the artist and Ben Brown Fine Arts, Hong Kong/London.

(Opposite page, bottom)  
CHASM FOREVER, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 188 x 188 cm. Courtesy the artist.

(This page, top)  
YELLOW MOUNTAIN, circa 1970s, photograph, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

(This page, bottom)  
UNTITLED 01, 1983, mixed media, 11 x 9 cm. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.

temple ruins in India: "With the purple beams tenderly caressing my face and long hair, I drained my eyesight into the horizon, discovering that the universe was already in my heart," he wrote in his characteristically poetic prose. The works that emerged following his journey across the globe all seem to carry these musings on light and one's connection with the world. In *Ours Ever* (1974) the use of a spray gun to thinly distribute pigment lends the work its ethereal quality and creates its barely perceptible changes in gradient, adding to the glowing effect of the white orb in the center, which suggests a divine light, while *The Way of the Lotus* (1974), with its gently melding forms resembling the Taoist yin-yang symbol, recalls the notion of oneness. In *Eternal Profile* (1976), the Chinese character for "I" that featured in Hon's previous profiles disappears altogether, leaving two sets of arcs, which emanate from a dark mass in the center and fade into the edges of the canvas, once again invoking the connection between self and other. The slits that run down *Naked Shrine* (1971) and *Chasm Forever* (1971), on the other hand, seem to reference the origins of life, adding an element of eroticism.

One of the first truly multimedia artists in Hong Kong, Hon was also an avid photographer throughout his travels. Looking back on his shots of pristine Norwegian fjords from 1969 in his discussion with Shum Long Tin, he remembered that he had cried at the thought that such "tranquility was out of the question in China," which was undergoing the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. In the late 1970s, Hon would reenter a China undergoing yet another period of reform, this time under Deng Xiaoping, zealously pointing his lens at mountains and lakes that appeared, at least on the surface, untainted by the bloodshed. Hon's unwavering love of Chinese culture is most palpable in the photo *Yellow Mountain* (circa 1970s), which he captured on one of his visits. With rocky cliffs dropping off into a pool of mist, the composition evokes a classic scroll, exemplifying the verticality that is common in Hon's works—a trait inspired by the ink medium. The same verticality can be seen in Hon's photos of waterfalls, which he became fascinated with after seeing the Iguazu Falls on the border between Argentina and Brazil. The story of his slipping off a boulder and falling into the water at the foot of the crashing stream has been recounted on numerous occasions as a life-changing moment for the artist. In his contribution to *Space and Passion: The Art of Hon Chi Fun*, Ted Goossen, a friend of the artist, and a writer and translator, wrote: "He had joined with [the water] for a few moments, felt its power in his bones, and it would stay with him forever."

From documentary-style images, Hon then moved onto scrutinizing the materiality of photography—an extension of his abstractions on canvas. Here, he focused on the manipulation of light and form through shutter speeds and photochemicals, particularly that of Polaroids. The 1980s saw him producing an "Untitled" Polaroid series (1983–84) wherein he creates ghostly doubles of various objects, including glass balls and window frames. In some of the images, Hon adds layers of paint while scratching off sections of the photo. For others, he adds collaged elements such as the cardboard packaging for the film. The series brings together all of Hon's most frequently revisited tropes—the circle, light and nature—and are, perhaps, the most avant-garde of all his works, embodying the artist's insatiable curiosity. It is as if Hon's works are, in his own words, "somehow hidden with a tomorrow in motion."

The last few works created before Hon suffered a stroke in 2000 are culminations not just of the artist's decades of experimentation and introspection, but also of the rapid changes in Hong Kong's history. In 1997, Hon returned to Iguazu with his wife Choi Yan Chi, prompting reflections on the years that had passed, which saw the death of Hon's mother, the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the fracturing of Hong Kong's society in the lead-up to the handover of the city to China. These reflections and the force of the waterfall are sublimated in Hon's works that depart from the motif of the circle—such as in *Plunge and Live* (1999) and *A String of Pearls* (1999)—the powerful, brusque brushstrokes resembling the artist's early abstract canvases. The raw, unordered mode of expression suggests the artist's full embrace of life's dynamics. Although his practice has now slowed given his health, his enduring legacy—that of his pioneering spirit—is recognized as one that helped build Hong Kong's art scene. While the city came to flourish as an international art hub in the 2000s, its art history preceding that is vibrant and rich—and it's one that, thanks to Hon and his contemporaries, can be characterized as continuously explorative. 🌐