

Fang Mei-ching

Chu Wei-bor rose to prominence in the art world of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Experimenting broadly in his use of materials, he became a pioneer of modern art in post-war Taiwan, and continues to create to this day. He has always insisted on self-expression and the trailblazing of new artistic modes. Through the comprehension of his living environment and the application of Western forms, he explores art with a deeply Oriental inner spirit. In a conservative, restrictive society, he broke free from traditional methods of painting, enlarging the depth and breadth of his works with innovative concepts and thoughts. He has employed a host of materials, from commonly used oil paint and Chinese ink to wall paint, industrial foam, plastic plates, cloth, and cotton swabs. He endeavors to present the special qualities of different substances, responding to the challenges of each material, and the corresponding alterations of various media.

Since embarking on his career in 1958, he has closely associated with members of the Ton-Fan painting group, once described as "highwaymen," boldly flying the banner of modern art. Whether using an abstract vocabulary or representational objects, he consistently expresses the ineffable within the world of emotions, or ideas and feelings that cannot be immediately sensed. Consequently, his works are not direct reflections of historical events, but internal ruminations, personal soliloquies. Although he did not directly study under Li Chung-sheng, mentor of the "eight highwaymen" (the core members of the Ton-Fan painting group), Chu was greatly inspired by his exchanges with the Ton-Fan school. Li Chung-sheng called on his students to discover their own unique language, to consider the path they wished to take, and to pay particular attention to the inner meaning and spirituality of their works, finding a means to join the essential parts of the Chinese artistic tradition with the concepts of modern art, and thus endow Chinese art with a new appearance.<sup>1</sup> This too became the ideal for which Chu Wei-bor strives in his creations.

He has constantly impelled himself to innovate

and break through the barriers of convention, and is conscious of the necessity of infusing his perspectives with new ideas, expressing them in the materials he uses. Recalling the influence of Li Chung-sheng, he has affirmed, "The tentacles of modern art must come into greater contact with both the primitive and the modern, the East and the West. We must not forget to use our hands and our brains to carve out a path of our own. We cannot be self-satisfied standing in someone else's shadow... In pursuing and understanding the ideas and the evolution of art, we must seek, we must push. Creative breakthroughs are of ultimate importance."<sup>2</sup> In addition to horizontal explorations, studying Western concepts and techniques, he also looks back on the traditional philosophical thought of China, consistently incorporating conceptual reflections into his aesthetic system.

He arranges the structure of his artworks with a rational attitude, engaging in conceptual inquiry, pursuing in his images a pure inner space of the spirit. His interpretation and transformation of philosophical concepts, presented through alterations in material, have allowed his colors, lines and shapes to convey a pursuit of beauty. And because his demand for originality in aesthetic forms takes precedence over technique, his works frequently express a desire for purity, simplicity and sincerity. New ideas often touch off new developments in the use of materials, and ingenious applications of new materials also expand the avenues of his artistic sojourn.

### **From battle to exile**

Chu Wei-bor was originally named Chu Wu-shun. He was born in Nanjing in 1929.<sup>3</sup> In his early years, he served in the Ministry of National Defense. Following World War II, he traveled broadly throughout China in the spartan life of military service. Later, fate would lead him to Taiwan. These experiences have lent his works an aura that is detached from the vicissitudes of the mundane world and projects a yearning for tranquility, balance and quietude.

Originally, Chu merely sought a way to cultivate his character and ameliorate the tedium of military life, joining Liao Chi-chun's Yunhe Studio, where he studied sketching, watercolor and oil painting. During that period, Liao's painting style was gradually moving away from the conceptual depictions of his early years, with their emphasis on structure and treatment of space, and was turning to embrace impressionism and the vibrant colors of Fauvism. At the time, Chu Wei-bor maintained an analytical, scholarly attitude, scrutinizing the fluid manner in which Liao's paintings transformed musical variations into colors, and through this he received Liao's encouragement and praise. Afterwards, he devoted all his free time to painting in the studio.<sup>4</sup> The books and magazines in the studio became the focal point of his studies. Chu's morale benefited greatly from the study of Western painting.

Transferred from the front lines, Chu was stationed at Chingmei Elementary School in Taipei. At the time, Ho Kan and Hsiao Chin, both graduates of the National Taiwan Normal University art department, were serving as art teachers at the school, and frequently gathered there with other artist friends on holidays. From the end of 1945 to the beginning of 1955, they met at the school the first Sunday of every month, bringing three recent works for the others to view and critique, and inviting outsider observers to give their opinions.<sup>5</sup> Chu, who lived at the school along with his unit, often carried a small paint box, making paintings on campus. For this reason, Ho Kan invited him to join their group. Chu subsequently began to discuss modern art with the students of Li Chung-sheng's studio, thus increasing his understanding of modern painting concepts.

In 1958, Chu Wei-bor formally joined the Ton-Fan painting group, and beginning with their second exhibition, started to publicly display his works. He chose to use the name Wei-bor, which in Chinese means white, pure, empty, limitlessness – a name of bountiful conceptual implications. In this way, Chu encouraged himself and urged himself onward, hoping to devote himself completely

to the life and living experience of artistic creation. In addition to "making some marks on a blank and limited life,"<sup>6</sup> he hoped to transcend the disorderly complications of the world and gradually attain a purer self. And just as his name suggests, he constantly honed his skills in pursuit of his art, purifying and heightening the clarity of his works.

During that era, few exhibition spaces existed. Taking part in a painting association not only gave one mutual dialogue and encouragement from fellow artists; it could also increase the opportunities one had to exhibit one's works. And the clear public stance of an art association gave greater cohesion to a new generation of artists with common ideas. The Ton-Fan painting group advocated embarking from the spirit of Chinese culture and exploring various possibilities of Chinese art and thought, in the hope of creating modern art with Chinese characteristics.<sup>7</sup> In order to integrate the development of Eastern and Western modern painting, the Ton-Fan school placed little emphasis on realism, but found resonance with the artistic tradition of profound imagery. When it was founded in 1957, the group especially stressed that the perspectives of traditional Chinese painting differed from those of Western modern art only in forms of expression.<sup>8</sup> "Choosing the name Ton-Fan (literally, 'The East') Exhibition indicates that these new paintings are produced in the Orient. They are not blindly modern, but hope to possess the spirit of the East."<sup>9</sup> They emphasized that modern art forms should originate from intrinsic ethnic qualities. Chu Wei-bor also adopted Western techniques, amalgamating them with Eastern perspectives, and embarked on the road of modern painting.

When Chu first appeared in the art world, Taiwan was still under martial law. Communications were restricted, and news of European and North American art was sporadic and limited. Newspapers often included articles on art and entertainment in the same section. Artists absorbed new knowledge from such magazines as *Wenxing*, *Bihui* and *Life*. They gained an

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understanding of the new trends in world art largely by word of mouth. In the context of the Cold War, the United States Information Service disseminated information on new trends in modern art, through exhibitions, periodicals and catalogues. These were also a focal point of study for Chu Wei-bor and other young artists. The language of abstract painting, with its emphasis on the subjective and purely cerebral, struck a chord with the new generation. The mainstream art forms of the day, however, were Western-style realistic painting of the Japanese tradition, as well as traditional Chinese ink painting. The eight founding members of the Ton-Fan painting group were all students in Li Chung-sheng's studio. Li had been a student in Japan prior to World War II, studying under the *école de paris* painter Fujita Hideharu. Fujita's various teaching methods and creative perspectives had a far-reaching impact on Li.<sup>10</sup> Having in his early years gained exposure to the new artistic developments of continental Europe while in Japan, he unobtrusively passed these ideas on to the Ton-Fan school. In 1956 Ton-Fan member Hsiao Chin took studies abroad in Spain. Over a period of time he introduced the intellectual current of Western art to Taiwan, and introduced works by the Ton-Fan painting group to Europe (in such cities as Barcelona, Madrid, Bilbao and Venice). By broadly perusing art periodicals, attending exhibitions and holding discussions with fellow artists, Chu Wei-bor came into contact with the general trends of world art. While his initial motivation for studying painting was to temporarily escape the loneliness and dreariness of military life, Chu tacitly understood the strongly subjective consciousness of abstract painting and the Ton-Fan group's advocacy of creating works original to the era, and resolutely committed himself to the spiritual realm of abstract creation.

### **Reflections and metamorphoses in forms of expression**

Spatial explorations have consistently been the pursuit of Chu Wei-bor. In his early period when working primarily in oil, his methods of partition-

ing colors or overlapping pigments created a feeling of spatial layering. Using knives and scissors as tools, he even more concretely deepened spaces by digging or etching, occasionally mounting materials as reliefs, exploring the intriguing possibilities of non-two-dimensional imagery. And through the alternating emptiness or fullness of spaces and through changes in color and form, he achieved highly rhythmic pictures imbued with rich tonality.

His new works of 2004, "Book Page Series," join several pieces of paper with sketchings on them together in a line, complemented by carving, entering deep into the process of change through repetition. Modern architecture's emphasis on grid structures and exteriors of horizontal and vertical planes, and even the rising and falling of stairways, have all influenced the form and structure of his works. He has adopted a method of slashing knives with subjective emotional expression, striving for a musical flow and cadence in his lines amidst abstract, geometrical shapes.

The three years between 1999 and 2003 were a period in Chu's artistic career dominated by the use of cotton swabs, objects composed of both spheroids and straight lines, with which he created spaces that crested and fell in waves and opened upward in expectation. Through the structural sensation of depth formed by three-dimensional objects and various patterns of arrangement oriented up and down or left and right, his paintings perform a silent rhythm. Chu believes, "Unusual creative thought often comes from unusual living spaces; original artistic expression arises from unusual artistic concepts." He has moved away from the utility of objects, reflecting a greater imaginative space in his pictures.

His "Lattice Series" rendered in the medium of cloth, which he began in 1980, can be viewed as a major milestone in his exploration of materials. Ingeniously applying the handicraft concepts of Chinese tradition, he formed latticeworks of coarse cloth or linen by overlapping, curling,

mounting and wrinkling woven fabric, thus opening up a purer space on his canvasses with an increasingly minimalist, rarified artistic vocabulary. He often used knives as substitutes for brushes, cutting open cloth, shattering the boundaries between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional and, further, adopting the fibers and threads that this produces as principal elements of his pictures. The cloth that he interlaced or overlapped through different techniques such as cutting or pasting produced an exotic aesthetic formed of shapes and lines.

The techniques Chu used during this period could be broadly divided into three categories: The first was an extension of the spatial explorations of his "Dug Out and Mounted Series" which he developed during the 1960s: first slicing open the picture, then interlacing cloths of various colors on the background. Cutting the cloth open revealed its fibers. Chu Wei-bor ingeniously employed fibers of varying lengths, presenting on his canvasses an effect imitating brushstrokes. The second category of technique was the use of wrinkled cloth, creating the effect of protruding and indented textures in his pictures. Thirdly, he used cloth as a substitute for paper fibers, cutting out cloth strips and curling them up to create the effect of the fibers in paper lanterns. This technique can be traced back to 1966, but his later applications were more simplified and spare. This period was characterized by abundant colors and great vitality. Soft, fine fabrics with vibrant hues created an intriguing feeling of folk art, and echoed Chu's pursuit of an Eastern poetic sensibility.

The use of knife blades as tools of art was in fact an invention of Lucio Fontana (born in 1899 in Argentina to Italian parents). In 1947 Fontana founded the "spatialist" school, slicing and piercing tightly stretched two-dimensional surfaces, creating a marvelous tension between lax and taut states. Torn and punctured canvasses created different alterations in light and shadow, opening up limitless room for the imagination within pictures rendered in a single color.

Yet while Chu Wei-bor comprehended Fontana's earthshaking concept of rending the canvas asunder, he ultimately required a certain amount of time to digest it, and to develop the wisdom to open new terrain of his own. Since Chu began to exhibit his artworks, he actively attempted to work with unconventional tools and materials. Starting in 1963 the spatial inspirations of Fontana began to ferment. When he took part in the 1958 Ton-Fan Exhibition, he shook wall paint onto the canvas, creating dry cracks in flowing motions. In 1959 he expanded upon the previous year's abstract style of expression, adding linseed oil to increase the effect of expansive absorption. His representative work of this era, *Faraway Hometown*, was an expression of his feelings of homesickness. The old-fashioned, rough-hewn tone extracted the essence of old-style calligraphy and painting, creating abstract imagery evocative of a dreamy, distant Chinese landscape. He used his purely calligraphic works of 1960 and 1961 to express his emotions, expanding the poetic and appealing application of brush and ink as a major element of his paintings.

When Chu took part in the seventh Ton-Fan Exhibition in 1963, he centered on the themes of "length and shortness" and "motion and stasis." Blending calligraphy and decorative window paper cutting, he adopted backgrounds of red paper and formed the structure of his pictures with lines of calligraphic ink. The sense of space formed by contrasting empty and filled areas also symbolized a cosmology in which heaven, earth and humanity were unified.<sup>11</sup> Thereafter, this became Chu's principal theme. In 1964 and 1965 he continued to use paper and ink as his primary media and blades as his primary tools. Chu diligently focused on the contrasting effect produced by brushing ink laterally across a white surface. Working mainly in black-and-white compositions and occasionally using a foundation of red, symbolizing life, he cut paper with knives or scissors, causing these cut-paper motifs to stand out from their backgrounds. As if practicing meditation with each stroke of the blade, the long lines he etched

out, either deliberately or randomly, curved up or down, the holes and folds producing a shifting, magical effect under the illumination of lamps. This "dug-out and mounted art," which became his predominant form, seemed to spring to life on paper.

Chu selected his images with inner discipline and rational consideration, paying close attention to the details of his pictures, and composing them carefully and cautiously. This diverged from Fontana's animated style of cleanly and swiftly disrupting surfaces. Analyzing the disparities between Chu Wei-bor and Lucio Fontana, the artist Chu Ko averred, "Chu's way of digging out holes differs from Fontana's way of punching holes. The former works from an orientation of stillness, the latter from one of motion. Because Chu carves out a small section of paper (and joins it to the picture in a different place), he creates a sense of repetition, forming a protruding section and an indented hole. This avoids the feeling of 'space' and the sense of wounding created by Fontana. Thus, it arises from stillness, while still intimating a sense of 'decorative space.'"<sup>12</sup> Chu's "lattice" works are clearly an extension of his spatial explorations, yet the contrast between emptiness and substance produced from multiple layers of cloth also naturally and purely expresses the spiritual level that the artist wishes to articulate (though one is still able to visually perceive its sense of rational progression).

Starting in 1968, the form of Chu's thinking regarding abstract creation took a turn. Chu shifted from concrete objects to abstract concepts. Influenced by children's paintings, he wanted to create visual forms that could be directly seen and felt. Yet invention and exploration of new materials remained his pursuit. He spent lengthy periods contemplating how to best manifest the spirit and inner meaning of different artistic modes. Thus, he extended the use of blades to the medium of wood. He chose to project subjective ideas onto concrete objects, endowing them with an idealistic purpose.

In 1965, Chu Wei-bor joined the Modern Printmaking Association, exhibiting works from his "Dug Out and Mounted Series." In this exhibition, his pieces received the support of his fellow artists purely because they dovetailed with the spirit of innovative modern art, though none were works of print.<sup>13</sup> Because the study of print art and the number of print artists were rapidly growing, such artists as Fang Hsiang, Yuyu Yang, Chou Ying and Chu Hsiao-chiu founded the ROC Printmaking Association in 1970, with Chu Wei-bor, Chou Ying, Lee Shi-chi, Liao Shiou Ping and Chen Ting-shih serving as co-signers.<sup>14</sup> Chu, naturally, was a member.

### **The interaction of medium, concept and technique**

Chu Wei-bor's art is actually a process of interaction among his media, concepts and techniques. In addition to using knives and scissors as art tools, he also has adopted everyday items like foam, cloth and cotton swabs as art media, using their color, shape and appearance to emphasize the images in his pictures. Flat-surface paintings are no longer limited to closed-off two-dimensional space. And new visual metaphors have bestowed his pictures with poetic complexity, and at the same time broken free from the issue of substance vs. emptiness in form.

During the 1950s and 1960s, material conditions were not favorable. Oil paints were extremely expensive, and this was a major factor spurring artists to explore the possibilities of alternative media. Since childhood, Chu had been interested in industrial handicrafts and the manufacture of toys, and in 1965 his experience teaching vocational art at Hua Hsing Orphanage allowed him to observe the pure and straightforward expressions of children. This became one of his sources of artistic inspiration. During the mid-to late-1960s, new art trends from Europe and North America such as Dada, Pop Art and Op Art, introduced through newspaper and magazine articles, also nudged the artistic motifs of the era in the direction of "everyday life," and this was a princi-

pal reason for using commonplace household articles as art media. Collages of objects and the use of mixed media liberated utilitarian materials from their original functions. While exoticizing objects, this also gave viewers greater room for imagination and expanded the sense of space within paintings. By the 1980s, Chu's sophisticated, lyrical brushwork had even been replaced in his art by the colored surfaces of cloth and sketching paper.

Chu has also frequently reflected the thought of such Taoist philosophers as Laozi and Zhuangzi. In order to express the spirituality of his works, Chu often uses pure black, pure white and minimalist shapes to interpret transcendental ideas. The visual limitlessness created by single colors or contrasts, as well as the sense of space created between emptiness and substance, have also expanded the spiritual dimensions of his works. The Tao is nature. It is the animating principle of all things. It is fundamentally shapeless and formless. Consequently, by making his visual expressions abstract, he has created greater room for the imagination. The basic nature of the Tao is emptiness, nothingness; it has a corresponding reality to the existential, incessantly animating the universe. Chu's canvasses appear to be empty, yet in reality, "within nothingness lies the way." With simple forms he has aroused a wealth of imagination. And in terms of the use of colors, he has chosen three dominant hues – black, white and red – applied in their pure forms, avoiding the visual paralysis of "the five colors that blind the eyes." And when utilizing materials, Chu insists on "the way of nature," rising up step by step from physical phenomena to comprehend the natural laws of the Tao. This is the simple, honest Tao that he indefatigably pursues in his works, be they abstract or concrete. He keeps his eyes on the genesis and extinguishment of the cosmos, hoping through art to shed all the vexations of reality.

## Conclusion

With incomparable determination, Chu Wei-bor persists in seeking change, genuineness and goodness through his art. He believes that if "artists didn't work in order to make others happy, there would be nothing but enduring the loneliness of life and the impoverishment of living. Only if artists accept loneliness and poverty can they truly discover the meaningfulness of what they pursue." Indeed, this is a portrait of his own mental terrain, having lived through an era of hardship when no art market existed, as well as an era of unbridled prosperity. He has consistently spurned vulgar taste. From his sketches and works in oil, wood and print to his creations with cloth and fiber, Chu Wei-bor has insisted on shattering convention and creating new things. And because of this, he has never abandoned his love for making art.

The continuance and transformation of life amidst the flood of history is the focal point that consistently concerns Chu Wei-bor. Facing the rise and fall, the sorrows and joys of life and nature, he seriously contemplates the meaning of life. With the philosophy of "gaining joy by viewing the myriad forms with serenity" he beholds all the phenomena of the world, and with his abstract, minimalist images, he touches a vision of the vast and unbounded universe. Nature is the source of the space and conditions on which all creatures rely for their existence. Human beings cannot exist independent of nature. The goodness of co-existing and flourishing together is the sincere sentiment that Chu seeks to express. For him, a life of peace and contentment is the foundation of happiness.

He has chosen the simplest materials from nature, expressing the pure beauty for which he hopes. Though knives and scissors have frequently become his creative tools, in terms of imagery, what he creates is in fact the inner tension of the picture. Without feelings of conflict or anger, but rather with introspection and originality transformed by contemplation, he expresses an

idealistic spirit of optimism and brightness. His single-color backgrounds often induce exquisite reverie. His pure blacks or pure whites flush out chaos, purifying all the images of the mundane world. The working of his visual imagery seems, within a harmonious balance between being and nothingness, emptiness and substance, to enter into an incessantly dynamic yet stably coordinated state of poise.

On his artistic journey, Chu Wei-bor's commitment and contemplations have transcended the limited expressive capacities of traditional painting and sculpture, opening up greater possibilities in terms of form. Along with the shifting of time and sedimentation of the spirit, the special qualities of his materials and tools have, under his conceptual guidance, produced a unique artistic appearance. As his imagery penetrates the cognitive surface of the viewer's mind, awakening an intuitive response, his sense of beauty and the vocabulary of his works have introduced us to a new aesthetic vision, rich in poetic sense and philosophical import.

#### Notes

1. See Hsiao Chung-ji, *Fifth Moon and Ton-Fan – Developments in the Chinese Art Modernization Movement in Post-War Taiwan* (Taipei: Soochow University Press, Nov. 1991) p. 102.
2. Chu Wei-bor, "Pioneer of Modern Painting – Li Chung-sheng," *Ageless Reminiscences – Beloved Teacher Li Chung-sheng* (Taipei: China Times, Sept. 1984).
3. Chu Wei-bor's identity card carries the date 1926, and gives the name Chu Bo.
4. "An Art Veteran's Reminiscences – A Witness to Forty Years: 'The Experimental Sixties: Avant-Garde Art in Taiwan' Symposium Record," *Modern Art* 110, ed. Chen Shu-ling (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Oct. 2003).
5. See Ho Kan, "Looking Back on Ton-Fan Painting Group," *Lion Art* 63, (Taipei: May 1976), p. 104.
6. Chu Wei-bor's self-description. See Lai Ying Ying, "A Perfect Sense of Beauty – An Interview with Chu Wei-bor on His Early Works," *Modern Art* 67 (Taipei: Aug. 1996), p. 72.
7. See Hsiao Chin, "The Influence of Ton-Fan and Fifth Moon on Chinese Modern Art," *Ton-Fan & Fifth Moon 25th Anniversary Joint Exhibition Catalogue* (Taipei Provincial Museum, June 1981).
8. Ibid.
9. "Concerning the Ton-Fan Painting Group," *Lion Art* 91 (Taipei: 1978).
10. Hsiao.
11. *Modern Art* 67, p. 73.
12. Chu Ko, "Recollections of the Ton-Fan Exhibitions," *Independence Evening Post* (Taipei: Jan. 9, 1966), p. 245. Chu's "Visual Life" column was included in the "Entertainment and Life" section.
13. *Modern Art* 67, p. 74.
14. See Chen Chi-mao, *Research in Printmaking: Research Report/Exhibition Catalogue*, (Taichung: Taiwan Provincial Museum, 1994), pp. 35, 46.