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Irene Chou's

UNIVERSE OF INK

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E-Published specially for a
Solo Exhibition of Irene Chou's Universe of Ink
at Hong Kong Art Basel 2017 Booth 3D29
organised by iPRECIATION

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Front Cover Image: *Universe is My Mind*, 2002, 93.5 x 111.5 cm, Ink and color on rice paper

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IRENE CHOU

(b.1924, Shanghai, China)



FOREWORD

Helina Chan

Born in the modern city of Shanghai, China in 1924, Irene Chou received a Western education from St. John's University in 1945. She left Shanghai to settle down with her family in Hong Kong in 1949. Leaving her former life as a journalist to become a mother and full-time homemaker led Chou to yearn for an outlet where she could fully express her personal thoughts and emotions that stemmed from the stress of managing her family and marriage. In 1950, she became acquainted with Zhao Shao' Ang, master ink painter from the renowned Lingnan School of Painting, and began to study traditional Chinese ink painting under his tutelage. She often honed her skills by imitating Zhao's signature "Flower and Bird" paintings.

Her creative journey transformed from one of mere imitation to that of free artistic expression when she met Lu Shou Kun in the 1960s, an artist who was regarded as the main driving force behind the establishment of the New Ink Painting movement in Hong Kong. Lu encouraged her to move away from traditional Chinese ink painting and create a style of her own. At the same time, Chou was also increasingly inspired by many books on Western painting that she found in the local library collections. Filled with a fervent desire to propel her artistic visions to new heights, Chou started producing works that explored the inner workings of the mind and the mysteries of the universe.

She studied several profound philosophies revolving around these subject matters, and was particularly taken by the quote “The universe is my mind; my mind is the universe”, by the Chinese philosopher, Lu Jiuyuan from the Southern Song dynasty. Her inquiry into such complex notions evoked a sense of insignificance of the self in the vast universe, and she was compelled to further contemplate the meaning of life through her work. Her paintings offered her an opportunity to delve into the depths of her mind, at the same time allowing her to freely explore new and unconventional techniques with the Chinese brush, ink, paper and various kinds of media. Chou's visual language flourished and developed

into a unique fusion of aesthetics; guided by the fundamentals of Chinese ink painting, the philosophies of Zen Buddhism and Taoism and the modern abstract sentiments of Western Art. Her works embodied a global sensitivity that was able to extend beyond cultural barriers and the boundaries of time. Chou came to be known as one of Hong Kong's most innovative artists at the forefront of the New Ink Painting movement during the 1960s-70s, and was recognized for her prominent breakthrough as she embarked on a relentless pursuit to modernize traditional Chinese ink painting.

Beneath the animated brushstrokes and unbridled energy and emotion of

her paintings lies the tenacity of an artist who even in her final years, did not succumb to her age, illness and pain. Despite suffering through the debilitating effects of a stroke at the age of 67, Chou remained dedicated to her art. We are deeply honoured to be able to present this solo exhibition for her at the 2017 edition of Art Basel Hong Kong. This exhibition entails a selection of works by Chou after her stroke in 1991 and before she passed on in 2011. Part of two major series, “Universe is My Mind” and “Life is a Many Splendored Thing”, these works are especially poignant and meaningful - they were created during a period of significant development in Chou's artistic expression after she moved from Hong Kong to

Brisbane, Australia, in 1992 to recover from her stroke.

The paintings we have chosen from the “Universe...” series marks a period of time when she struggled to adapt to a greatly weakened body and her new living environment in Brisbane. Left with little choice but to rebuild her life from scratch, Chou resolved to keep her mind stronger and more focused than ever before, despite her poor physical condition. She was determined to resume her artistic career and to push newer and bigger boundaries in Chinese ink painting. Drawing on her reserves as a dedicated and long-time practitioner of Qi Gong and meditation since the 1960s, she

slowly and painfully rebuilt her art and thus her weakened spirit in the process. With great difficulty in movement, she often crouched with her hands and knees on the floor to work on her paintings. One of the larger pieces, titled “Universe Is My Mind 3002” (1994) testifies of such an arduous creative process. Chou was adamant that she should continue to produce works of such a scale, just like she usually did before her stroke had occurred. This particular painting, characterized by its deep, dark and enigmatic portrayal of the universe, is notably different from the other paintings in this series, that were created at a much later stage of Chou’s recovery (from the year 2002 onwards). In these paintings, the

signature linear and cyclic motifs that had been a familiar sight in her previous works had now evolved into livelier forms. The visible and increased use of colours and newer techniques signified a stage where she had successfully regained her steps in her creative journey and moved on to realize more ambitious and innovative ideas.

In the paintings from the “Life is a Many Splendoured Thing” series, we are able to see familiar components from the “Universe...” series, which been further distilled down to the purest and most abstract form of expression in Chou’s entire artistic practice. Completed in the year 2007, these paintings are some of Chou’s

final set of works before she passed on in 2011. At the age of 83, she had not only reached a ripe old age, but had also survived her stroke for more than a decade. The development in her visual language during this period is remarkable. Before late 2007, Chou was still creating large scale works like she did during the 90s. Subsequently, she moved into a nursing home as her eyesight and dexterity had deteriorated to the point where she was no longer able to move without the help of a walking aid. The scale of her creations was greatly reduced, as it was difficult for her to work on bigger pieces. However, these smaller paintings were no less powerful in terms of content. Colour, which had been used

sparingly in her early works, was now used unabashedly to form vibrant compositions. The thick splashes and solid blocks of colour and ink emitted a sense of rhythmic and unconstrained delight. Chou's signature use of the cyclic motifs and forms emerged with a new meaning – one that represented rebirth and the continuously evolving cycle of life and death. At this point of time in her life, Chou was finally able to fully express her subconscious thoughts through her art, and had attained an almost spiritual state of mind that she had always strived to reach from her early beginnings as an artist. No longer bounded by the troubles of a material life, she had not only broken free from the conventions of traditional Chinese

ink painting, she had also successfully created her own language of abstraction that was truly extraordinary in its own right. Her art served as a cathartic medium for almost half of her life, offering viewers a genuine documentation of her inner self during her most difficult and happiest times. These unique works are indeed a testament to her unwavering passion for art in spite of the many challenges she faced throughout her creative journey, and they are truly a wonderful reflection of her liberated spirit in her final years both as an artist and an individual.

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Universe is My Mind 3002

2002

93.5 x 111.5 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



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Universe is My Mind

2002

93.5 x 111.5 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



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Universe is My Mind

2002

93.5 x 111.5 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



宇宙便是吾心

Universe is My Mind

2003 (set of 4)

38 x 30 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper





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Universe is My Mind

2002

93.5 x 111.5 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



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Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

14 .5 x 12 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



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Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

14 .5 x 12 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



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Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

12.5 x 14.5 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



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Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

14.5 x 12.5 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



錦
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Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

29 x 29 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



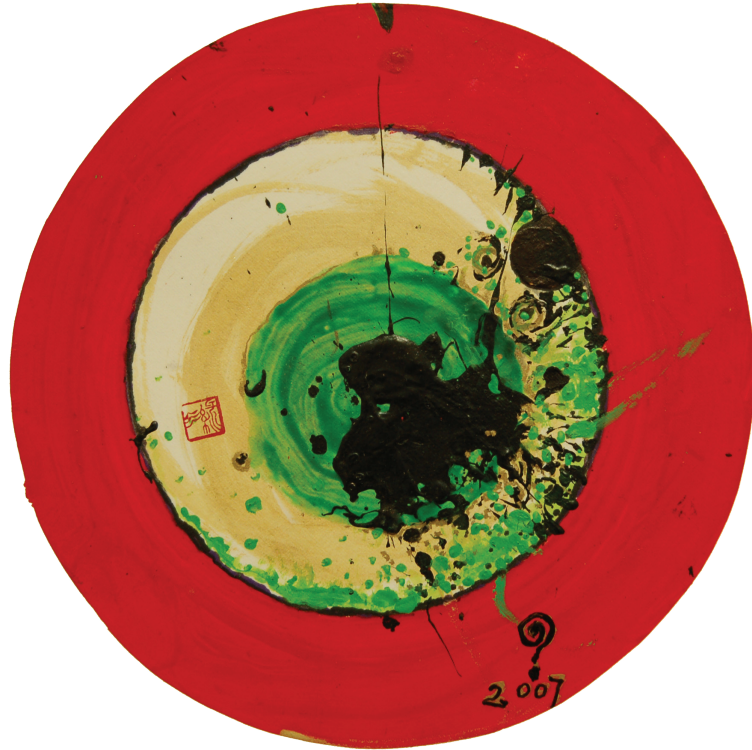
錦
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Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

29 x 29 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



錦
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Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

29.5 x 29.5 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



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Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

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Ink and colour on rice paper



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2007

29.5 x 29.5 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



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Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

38 x 30 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



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Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

38 x 30 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



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Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

38 x 30.5 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



錦
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Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

38 x 29.5 cm

Ink and colour on rice paper



錦
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生

Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

30.5 x 38 cm

Ink and colour on paper



錦
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生

Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

30.5 x 38 cm

Ink and colour on paper



錦
繡
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Life is a Many Splendoured Thing

2007

30.5 x 38 cm

Ink and colour on paper



Irene Chou

(b. 1924, Shanghai, China)

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|------|---|------|---|
| 1924 | Born in Shanghai, China | 1972 | Exhibition of the International Society of Plastic & Audio-Visual Art (SPAA).
Group-exhibition: Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting in Tao, Hong Kong.
Art Now Hong Kong, Evansville Museum, Hong Kong.
Won the Pacificulture Asia Museum Fine Art Award. |
| 1945 | Graduated from St. John's University, Shanghai with Bachelor degree in Economics | 1975 | Cleveland International Drawing Biennial, London.
Contemporary Hong Kong Art, Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong.
Five Artists Exhibition, National Fine Arts Museum, Taiwan.
Hong Kong Artists 1975, St. John's Hall, Hong Kong.
Hong Kong Painters, Luz Gallery, Manila, Philippines. |
| 1946 | Reporter for Peace Daily Shanghai | 1976 | 1976 Critics' Choice, St. John's Hall, Hong Kong.
Art '76, Fung Ping Shan Museum, The University of Hong Kong.
Solo-exhibition, Quorum Gallery, Hong Kong. |
| 1947 | Married to Peace Daily Chief Editor, Evan Yang Yanqi | 1977 | Fine Choice, Hong Kong Exhibition, Hong Kong.
Hong Kong Arts Centre Inaugural exhibition, Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong.
Solo-exhibition, Raya Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.
Women Artists, City Hall, Hong Kong.
Art - The Visual Experience, Hong Kong. |
| 1949 | Moved to Taipei, Taiwan and later moved to Hong Kong and worked as freelance writer | 1978 | Chou's husband passed away and the '70s marked a sombre period for her which reflected in her paintings.
Fine Choice, Hong Kong Exhibition, Hong Kong.
One Art Group, Hong Kong.
Art '78, Fung Ping Shan Museum,
The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong. |
| 1954 | Studied Chinese ink painting under the tutelage of Lingnan master Zhao Shao'ang | | |
| 1960 | Experimented with various types of paints, including oil, acrylic and water-colour on Chinese paper(xuan zhi) | | |
| 1964 | Started qigong meditation | | |
| 1968 | Involved in the study of "New Ink Painting Movement" under the guidance of Lu Shoukun.
Solo-exhibition, City Hall, Hong Kong.
21st Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts, London.
Contemporary Hong Kong Art, Museum of Art, Hong Kong | | |
| 1970 | 22nd Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts, London | | |
| 1971 | Art Now Hong Kong, tour to London, Edinburgh, Bristol and Manchester, UK.
Solo-exhibition, US Cultural Centre, Hong Kong. | | |

- 1979 Fine Choice, Hong Kong Exhibition, Hong Kong.
One Art Group, National Museum, Singapore.
Hong Kong Contemporary Art, Raya Gallery,
Melbourne, Australia.
- 1980 Fine Choice, Hong Kong Exhibition, Hong Kong.
One Art Group, National Museum of History,
Taipei, Taiwan.V
Recollections & Visions of Contemporary Chinese Artists,
Yoland Gallery, Chicago, U.S.A.
- 1981 Fine Choice, Hong Kong Exhibition, Hong Kong.
Solo-exhibition, Raya Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.
Art '81, Fung Ping Shan Museum,
The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.
Contemporary Art of Chinese Intellectuals,
City Hall, Hong Kong.
Inaugural Exhibition, Japan International Artists Society.
Hong Kong Art 1970-1980, Hong Kong Museum of Art.
- 1982 Fine Choice, Hong Kong Exhibition, Hong Kong.
Contemporary Art from Hong Kong,
Metropolitan Museum of Manila, Philippines.
International Association of Ink Painters, Taiwan,
Singapore, Malaysia & Seoul.
Contemporary Vision of Landscape,
Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong.
Contemporary Hong Kong Artist,
University of Cincinnati, U.S.A.
- 1983 Fine Choice, Hong Kong Exhibition, Hong Kong.
Solo-exhibition, City Gallery, Manila, Philippines.
Art '83, Fung Ping Shan Museum,
The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.
- 1983 The Experience of Art, Hugh Moss Collection, Hong Kong.
Contemporary Art of the Eighties, Hong Kong Arts Centre,
Hong Kong.
Women Artists' Show, Hong Kong Women's Arts Council,
Hong Kong.
Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial,
Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong.
Won Urban Council Fine Arts Award for Painting
- 1984 Fine Choice, Hong Kong Exhibition, Hong Kong.
Academy Award Winner's Exhibition, Hong Kong
Museum of Art, Hong Kong.
- 1985 Fine Choice, Hong Kong Exhibition, Hong Kong.
Foundation Prince Pierre De Monaco Exhibition,
Monte-Carlo National Museum, Monaco.
Solo-exhibition, Charlotte Horstmann & Gerald Godfrey,
Hong Kong.
Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial, Hong Kong
Museum of Art, Hong Kong.
- 1986 Fine Choice, Hong Kong Exhibition, Hong Kong.
University Art Collection Show, Fung Ping Shan Museum,
The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.
Hong Kong Art 1986, Hong Kong Museum of Art,
Hong Kong.
International Contemporary Ink Paintings,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.
Solo-exhibition, Fung Ping Shan Museum,
The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.
- 1987 Solo-exhibition, A Libertacao da Tinta,
Museum Luis de Camoes, Macau, Hong Kong.

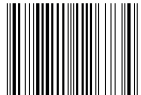
- 1988 The XXII International Prix of Contemporary Art, Monte Carlo, Monaco.
Hong Kong Modern Art, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China.
Ink Painting by Hong Kong Artists, Barbican Centre, London, U.K.
Solo-exhibition, Hanart Gallery, New York, U.S.A.
Won Hong Kong Artists' Guild Painter of the Year Award.
- 1989 The Fourth Asian International Art Exhibition, Seoul Metropolitan Museum of Art, Korea.
Thirteen Well-Known Hong Kong Painters, Nagoya, Japan.
Hong Kong Modern Art, The Institute for the Promotion of Chinese Culture, Hong Kong.
- 1990 Art Works of Hong Kong Women Artists, The Institute for the Promotion of Chinese Culture, Hong Kong.
- 1991 Six Contemporary Chinese Women Artists, San Francisco, U.S.A.
Solo-exhibition, Godfrey Far East Art, London, U.K.
Recent Painting of Irene Chou & Hon Chi-Fun, The Rotunda, Exchange Square, Hong Kong.
- 1992 Chinese Art 1992, Godfrey Far East art, London, U.K.
Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial, Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong
- 1992 Chinese Art 1992, Godfrey Far East art, London, U.K.
Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial, Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong
- 1993 Inaugural Exhibition of the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia.
Art Asia 1993, Hong Kong International Fine Art Expositions, Hong Kong
- 1994 Solo-exhibition, The Kenneth & Yasuko Myer Collection of Contemporary Asian Art, Myer Centre, Brisbane, Australia
Art Asia 1994, Hong Kong International Fine Art Expositions, Hong Kong
Solo-exhibition, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, Taiwan.
- 1995 Solo-exhibition, Cat Street Galleries, Hong Kong
Lingo- Getting the Picture, Brisbane City Hall Gallery, Brisbane, Australia.
- 1996 Solo-exhibition, Ancient Traditions, New Images, Philip Bacon Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
Annandale Art Galleries, Sydney, Australia
Solo-exhibition, Works by Irene Chou, Lyric Lounge, Queensland Performing Art Complex, Brisbane, Australia
- 1997 Irene Chou Painting Exhibition, Hong Kong Bank Building, Brisbane, Australia
- 1998 Rotunda Exchange Square, Hong Kong.
- 1999 Philip Bacon Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
- 2000 Hanart Tz Gallery, Hong Kong

- | | | | |
|------|---|------|---|
| 2001 | Multicultural Women's Business Exhibition, Australia
In Celebration of Art – Hong Kong Arts Centre 25th Anniversary Exhibition, Hong Kong
First Choice Exhibition 2002, Hong Kong | 2010 | De la Chine, entre Tradition et Modernite, Galerie F.Hesler, Luxembourg |
| 2002 | Chinese Paintings from the Khoan & Muchael Sullivan Collection, The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, U.K.
Artists in the Neighbourhood Scheme II, Launching Exhibition, Central Library, Hong Kong
Hong Kong Cityscapes – Ink Painting in Transition, Hong Kong Festival, London, U.K. | 2011 | Irene Chou passed away at the age of 87 in Brisbane, Australia. |
| 2003 | Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong | | |
| 2004 | Hanart Tz Gallery, Hong Kong
Grotto Fine Art, Hong Kong | | |
| 2005 | Museum of Brisbane, Brisbane, Australia | | |
| 2006 | Universe of the Mind – Zhou Luyun (Irene Chou):
A Retrospective exhibition,
University Museum & Art Gallery, Hong Kong | | |
| 2007 | <i>Irene Chou: Life is a many splendoured thing</i>
solo-exhibition, The Rotunda, Exchange Square,
Hong Kong | | |
| 2008 | <i>Irene Chou: Life is a many splendoured thing</i>
solo-exhibition, iPreciation, Singapore. | | |

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