

Vision splendid

Always looks on the bright side of life, octogenarian artist Irene Chou tells Yenni Kwok



Irene Chou's latest exhibition, *Life Is a Many Splendoured Thing*, not only offers a long-awaited glimpse of her most recent works, it also reflects the 83-year-old artist's wisdom and insight into life.

”Being this old now, I've experienced many things: sadness, happiness, love, hatred and so much more – all of which we can't avoid,” says the ink painter who's also known as Zhou Luyun.

Her life in recent years has been tough. Chou, an innovator in Chinese ink painting, is widowed, uses a wheelchair and lives alone in Brisbane, a city she has called home for the past 15 years.

Yet she remains positive. “I've seen enough of life to make me realise that, with all I've gone through - good and bad, delightful and depressing - life is a truly splendoured thing.”

The exhibition features 53 of Chou's latest ink paintings, created during the past 18 months. She's known for her cosmic themes, articulated with expressive brush strokes. However, her latest works are different.

”They're about life and joy,” Chou says of the paintings, which are characterised by dynamic brushwork and bright, contrasting colours. “They're about the portrayals of life's many beautiful and splendid elements and moments - thus, they're more colourful compared with my previous artworks.

“Sometimes, my old works look gloomy and not so open. My new works have a lighter and carefree feel. They show that life is happier now.”

Shanghai-born Chou, who spent most of her life in Hong Kong, suffered a stroke in late 1991. After intensive physiotherapy, she plunged right back into her painting.

The daughter of a feminist calligrapher, Chou was exposed to Chinese art from an early age, but she didn't start painting seriously until later in life. She first studied economics at St John's University in Shanghai, receiving an unusually modern education for a woman of her time. After her graduation in 1945, she worked as a journalist for a few years. She later married her editor-in-chief and they moved to Hong Kong in 1949.

Shortly after their arrival, Chou took up painting. Then in her 30s, she studied Chinese ink painting under Zhao Shao'ang, a master of the influential Lingnan school, which gave her a solid foundation in traditional Chinese painting.

Her subsequent studies under Lu Shoukun changed the direction of her painting. Lu is the founder of the New Ink Painting movement, which blends modern western aesthetics and traditional Chinese elements, with the Chinese philosophy of Zen Buddhism and Taoism as the guiding principle.

”Art is not copying,” Chou once said. “Art is creation.” After her involvement with Lu, she began to move away from the conventional Chinese style and created her own expression. She has continued to experiment with media and techniques, creating art that transcends cultural boundaries.

However, the Zen and Taoist spirit of the New Ink Painting movement still feature prominently for Chou, who is a Christian. Her paintings typically include circles, a traditional symbol of nature and rebirth. They appear as strong calligraphic strokes, perfect white circles and light illumination. Some

paintings are even done in a circle-shaped paper medium.

”They're somewhat related to Zen and the Tao,” Chou says. “Squares have angles, but circles are smooth and basically perfect. To me, drawing circles is very easy and the best way to express perfection.”

Chou, whose works have been collected by institutions such as the Hong Kong Museum of Art, the National Museum of History in Taipei, the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, lives modestly in a small townhouse in Brisbane. “The space is rather small,” she says. “However, I still dedicate a part of my place to painting.”

When the weather is bright and sunny, she sometimes sets to work. Or she might join painting parties thrown by friends. When it's rainy and windy, she simply stays in. “I just face reality,” she says. “I just go with the flow.”

Chou says she's not concerned about the future. “Even when I was younger, I didn't plan. I don't plan now either.

”I've learnt that life is as it is - very simple and complex. Life is a present from God. So it's a gift that I must take care of. Life is wonderful. It is so precious.”

Irene Chou: Life Is a Many Splendoured Thing, the Rotunda, Exchange Square, Central. Sept 11-17

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