A realm that ordinary people never reach

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The knife carves away silently at the sugar cane board. The board is thick, and the carving must be done slowly and carefully less the knife cut too deeply. When the forms sketched onto the board are clear, raised slightly above the now cutaway surface, the board will be smashed against a table or chair, leaving random cracks that give added texture to the surface.
Chen Ting-shih, a significant, innovative, creative artist in the Republic of China, then begins a new stage in his work. Patiently, printer's oil-based ink is rubbed onto the raised surfaces of the board. Then a piece of paper is carefully laid over the board, and a glass weight is rubbed over those areas to which the ink has been applied. Some areas are left gray with only one application of ink, but to others ink is repeatedly applied. Finally, after several hours and repeated applications of ink, the desired deep and solid blackness is obtained. Some prints may then be taken from the board and hung from the ceiling like wet clothes for several days until dry.

It is silent, solitary work, but the creative process has always been so. For Chen Ting-shih, however, the process is doubly silent and solitary, for his is a totally silent and solitary world. When he was eight, he fell from a high place and injured his head. His hearing was lost and his speech was almost completely impaired. He later wrote of the effect upon his life: " ... on the good side, it makes me calm at heart...this loneliness and melancholy have brought me into a realm that ordinary people never reach. This is perhaps a philosophy. Nobody can understand it unless he experiences it."

It is this calm "realm that ordinary people never reach" that much of his work reveals. But like all true revelation, it was preceded by a long ordeal during which the requisite skills had to be acquired and his personal worthiness had to be tested and proved.

The maturing process was slow, but being slow it was also rich and deliberate, allowing Chen Ting-shih a long, creative development that is forever giving fresh, penetrating visions and insights.

This slim, finely featured man of 61 was born in Foochow, Fukien Province, to a family distinguished by numerous scholars and military men. He began his education in the Chinese classics under the watchful eyes of a tutor when he was only four. He seemed destined to join the ranks of the educated elite that had ruled over China for centuries. But fate had other plans.

He began his study of traditional Chinese painting when he was thirteen, building upon the foundation of Chinese calligraphy. Calligraphy itself not only demands a mastery of the Chinese brush, but allows both for artistic and personal self-expression. Indeed, writing was the only channel by which he could overcome his handicap—he was forever a deaf-mute-and communicate with those around him. Even now his calligraphy is among the most subtly beautiful in Taiwan. Soon he mastered Western techniques, developing a special facility in the production of woodblock prints.

Chen's first woodcut was published in Fukien in 1938 when he was only 22. The years of the Sino-Japanese War forced dislocation, and Chen, signing his woodblocks "Mr. Ear," soon found himself moving about from town to town, contributing anti-Japanese prints to a variety of journals. In 1947, after the war, he came to Taiwan, continued working with woodblock prints, joined the newly reorganized Chinese National Woodcut Association, and participated in a number of exhibitions at which he drew growing attention.

If an accidental fall when he was eight set the silent pattern for his life in society, the forming of the Chinese Modern Graphic Arts Association in 1958 set the pattern for his artistic life. He found the courage to leave his job in a library and to devote full time to art. His previous work had all been representational, descriptive of the real world he saw around him. But he always found his imagination demanding more than he could represent or describe. The new association helped free his imagination by introducing him to abstract art from New York and other art centers in the West, now beginning to influence art circles in Taiwan. Once freed from the needs of representation, he could

turn his artistic skills to more deeply felt, abstract—yet nevertheless real—values. But still it was not easy, and he wrote that although "my works are created from my imagination, it is very hard to catch my imagination."

While the liberating abstraction movement came from the West, the forms Chen's imagination sought were grounded in Chinese tradition, particularly in the rubbings of bronzes. Linear patterns of both decoration and early characters enlivened the semi-abstract mass of bronze art. In two early prints from 1965-67, we see both the decorative and character-like linear patterns. Of this freeing process he once wrote:

"Realism is not welcomed by people, and it wastes too much time. Abstract painting allows more freedom of expression. It gave me a chance for fuller development. When I started to paint abstracts, Western painting gave me a hint. But I should confess I received a much stronger influence from the Chinese arts of stone carving and calligraphy. Some people have criticized my work for resembling Klee's. But at that time I did not know who Klee was, and I had never seen his works before."

But just as the sugar cane board was slowly pared away to allow the imagination's forms to emerge, so too were the images themselves pared away and simplified. For a time, the consciously designed linear patterns were replaced by the accidental, ragged patterns of the cracked board. Color too was simplified, until only the black of traditional Chinese calligraphy and rubbings remained. The images themselves multiplied, at times filling the paper to the point where they seemed to send it sinking through the heavily reinforced concrete floor. At other times a light effect was obtained; the heavy rock-like forms seemed weightlessly suspended on the surface of the paper. In *Instantaneous Time*, completed in March, 1971, for example, these deep-black, monumental forms acquire an elemental urgency and power that unites them in a tense equilibrium. In the best prints, as here, it is never static equilibrium; the balancing of forces among the varied forms is only temporary. Additional energy is left loose in the print, soon to seek a new, differently arranged equilibrium. Thus the print itself comes to embody the unending cosmic processes of the *yin* and the *yang*.

Once mastery was established, Chen started to add colors-peacock blues and golds—that were at first too light and pretty, but which soon evolved, as in *Day and Night*, *No. 25,* into deeper tones that do not dissipate the strength found in the forms

themselves.

At the time he was working to resolve the problem of color, he also began a series of more playful prints that display much of the sort of spirit evident in English toy soldiers. The series has now evolved into a group of more flashy but less substantial prints, whose designs are partially inspired by Chinese calligraphy. In *Day and Night, No. 26*, the calligraphic forms prance across the surface and even, occasionally, enter into a kind of confrontation with the elemental forms of Chen's earlier prints.

In the late 1960's, Chen Ting-shih began to experiment with painting done in Chinese inks—in Taiwan they are often called "water inks." At first the paintings were largely calligraphic markings, often on a partially colored ground. But the renditions were weak, and Chen was soon seeking stronger visual impact. The ground became stronger and extended over the sullen surface of the paper; inks of various colors were then added, sometimes being brushed and other times being splashed—similar to Jackson Pollack, but without the linear energy of his dips and dribbles. The surface became far richer, and the various colors became increasingly integrated into a layered but unified texture.

This beginning maturity revealed itself in his December, 1974, exhibition. His most successful paintings were cool and reflective, their colors restrained; they were abstract transformations of the real world Chen had seen while on an earlier journey around Taiwan,

In the small painting *Misty Mountains*, one of the most perfect to come from his brush, memories of the mountains of Fukien underline images of the mountains of eastern Taiwan as seen from the narrow gauge railroad. The mountains are darkly silhouetted against a deepening blue sky with only touches of sunset's color remaining here and there. Below, cars are beginning to drive with their headlights on, creating a dynamic movement of light through the thickening darkness. In the painting, the mountains become dark solids; the evening sky gives rise to a floating, airy emptiness of the blues; and the headlights' energy provokes a white forcefully thrown across the painting. And yet in this meeting of mountain, sky, and light—this fusion of being, nonbeing, and energy—there is still the reflective, meditative peace found in the Chinese landscape tradition.

The water-carved chasm of Taroko Gorge, visited on this same journey, directly inspired more than one painting. His favorite work at the time of the exhibition tried to catch on paper the constant flow of the stream through and over the smooth, rounded rocks that pave the river's bed. Again, the black becomes solid form; the blue-both fading into quietly brushed areas towards the sides and full of vital, flickering presence towards the center-becomes the formless water. The strong, black calligraphic stroke to the right solidifies and energizes the whole. Unlike *Misty Mountains*, however, it is a difficult painting, at times revealing its magic and at other times withdrawing into a silent uncommunicativeness.

In October, 1975, Chen Ting-shih left Taiwan for a year-long visit to the United States. It was another time of growth and artistic transformation. Fascinated by the brightly colored work he saw, and pushed by a more demanding audience, he infused more colors in greater intensities, new potency, into his painting. And he began to paint on larger sheets of paper.

In an untitled work of early 1977 we can still identify the landscape components on which the painting is based: mountains rising from the rocky waters below into the wispy clouds, sunset above. But it is done with a force and immediacy unknown in his earlier paintings. In another work of 1977, *Scenery*, additional steps are taken into the abstract. The earthy, brown fragments of the center are set in an ever shifting sea of blacks, blues, and reds. Like energy-charged celestial clouds, the white pigments swirl around and around, uniting all in their vivifying movement, distributing their energy throughout the small cosmos that is the painting.

It is the same vision that we saw in *Instantaneous Time*, wherein both print and painting embody the unceasing cosmic processes of *yin* and yang. But where the energy of *Instantaneous Time* was kept in a precariously balanced but potentially active equilibrium, here the energy is allowed to run free, to course unimpeded through the painting. It is almost as though Confucian reticence had been superceded by an unrestrained Taoist or Ch'an vision into the very heart of an ever-acting, creative, energetic universe.

Several years ago, Chen wrote that "my canvases are not large enough. The large canvas makes it easy for me to express the ideas of expanse and sublimity, which I am pursuing. Maybe this is because I was born on the Chinese mainland. My mind will always be filled with the shadows of huge mountains and vast rivers."

It is these "shadows of huge mountains and vast rivers" that Chen Ting-shih has succeeded in capturing in his art, first in the monolithic black and white prints, and then in his increasingly spontaneous and colorful paintings. But unlike much of the geometric and rational abstract art of the West, it arises from nature itself and might best be called an "organic abstract art." In the end, how ever, it is not the name that we give to it that is important; import is found, instead, in the cumulative impact of all that he has done, a significant and revealing body of art that, like the best paintings of traditional China, restores man to the deepest kind of unity with the essence of nature, of which he is part.