

An exhibit fit for a master

Chu Teh-chun's retrospective spans the painter's entire career, from representational canvases to his later abstract expressionist works — with a healthy dose of Chinese calligraphy for context. The result is one of the year's best museum shows

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: Chu Teh-chun 88 Retrospective (朱德群88回顧展)
WHERE: National Museum of History (國立歷史博物館), 49 Nanhai Rd, Taipei City (台北市南海路49號)
WHEN: Until Nov. 23. The museum is open Tuesdays through Fridays, from 10am to 6pm; closed on Mondays
TICKETS: NT\$30
ON THE NET: www.nmh.gov.tw

Few masters in the history of modern Taiwanese art underwent the kind of dramatic aesthetic transformation experienced by Chu Teh-chun (朱德群). The stages of this transformation provide the framework for a retrospective that features more than 100 of his canvases, calligraphy and ink paintings and is currently on view at Taipei's National Museum of History (國立歷史博物館).

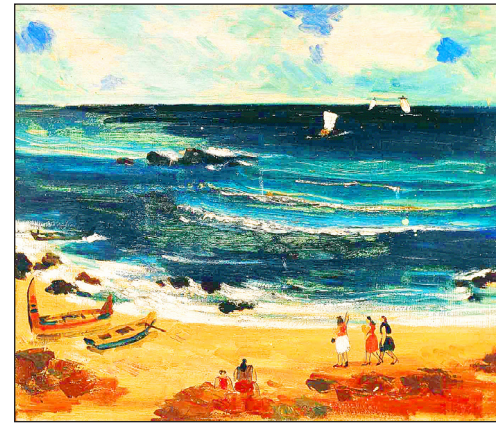
The museum and the exhibit's curators should be commended for producing one of the year's most outstanding shows. From the arrangement of the paintings — mainly chronological but, somewhat mischievously, here and there disrupting the timeline so as to show contrast with his different artistic periods — to the explanation of the works themselves, the exhibit admirably reveals why Chu, 88, is regarded as one of Taiwan's preeminent masters of abstract expressionism.

Chu's early representational paintings of Taiwan's rugged mountains and the expansive horizontal lines of its coasts greet viewers as they enter the exhibit. These seven formative canvases, which use broad brushstrokes and a liberal application of paint to capture the stark beauty and vibrant color of Taiwan's natural scenery, are placed here as much as a testament to his early work as to show the remarkable contrast between these realistic landscapes and what was to come later.

Had Chu remained in Taiwan, he would probably be known as a proficient chronicler of Taiwan's natural scenery, as these relatively



Seascape, below, painted before Chu Teh-chun moved to France. Composition No. 53, left, was painted after Chu settled in the country and was influenced by abstract expressionism.



The works of Chu's early French period, therefore, are not so much landscapes as they are experiments with the abstract-expressionist style popular in the West during this period, which served as a background to Chinese calligraphy brushstrokes that make up the foreground of these canvases.

The early 1960s saw Chu gradually moving away from De Stael's geometric influences and finding a style all his own. In another sound decision by the curators, the exhibits' explanations of the works spend little space analyzing Chu's growing popularity. At the time Chu was receiving invitations to show his work at a number of international exhibitions, a situation that continues to the present day but one the curators chose not to belabor.

Having gained proficiency in abstract landscape painting, Chu began traveling the globe and applying his unique technique, which one might call "abstract expressionism with Chinese characteristics," to paint some of the world's most well-known natural sites. These landscapes comprise most of the rest of the exhibition, with each providing a clue to Chu's feelings about the place. During this time Chu was studying Song Dynasty and Tang Dynasty poetry, which was beginning to influence on his aesthetic sensibility.

Of particular note are his series of paintings of the French Alps. On a trip across France in the mid 1980s, Chu saw the Alps in the distance and was immediately struck by their timeless beauty.

The result: a series of large tempestuous canvases of fine white specks with furries of brushstrokes imitating the flow of snow in winter. Black continues to be Chu's color of choice to represent form, with twigs and trees practically jumping off the canvas.

Chu's latter abstract period still employs the somber colors of his earlier abstract palette, but with the addition of pastel flourishes.

To help museumgoers gain a better understanding of Chu's influences, the curators also display some of his cursive calligraphy and Chinese ink paintings, completing a splendid explication of the oeuvre of an abstract expressionist who combines a modern Western style with the aesthetic traditions of the East.

small canvases show a painter in love with the graphic depiction of landscapes and seascapes, in works that are reminiscent of the style popularized by Canada's Group of Seven.

The popularity of his first Taiwan solo exhibition in the early 1950s, however, convinced Chu to leave the island and further his studies in France. He never looked back, both in terms of where he chose to reside and his style of painting. The traditions of Chinese calligraphy and a love of landscapes that informed these earlier works, however, have remained constants throughout his long career.

As with many artists, a date can be assigned for when Chu had an epiphany that would change his style. In 1956 he visited a retrospective for abstract artist Nicolas de Stael at a museum in Paris and promptly abandoned representational painting. The geometric slabs of impasto color, which are hallmarks of De Stael's abstract paintings, soon began to influence Chu's work.

In one of the exhibit's more ingenious flourishes, *Fantasia* (幻想曲), a post-Taiwan work done in 1958, and *Seascape* (海景),

completed in 1954 just before Chu moved to France, are placed side-by-side. Rather than separating the two pictures or offering commentary, the museum allows the viewer to contemplate the differences between the layered color and horizontal brushstrokes of the latter and the sparse pigment and conservative use of oil with black vertical lines in the former.

Although De Stael remained a formative influence, it is clear during this early French period that Chu was also experimenting with a tradition outside the Western canon. The addition of stark black lines is evidence that Chinese calligraphy was becoming an important part of his visual vocabulary.

Another noticeable difference between these two works — differences that become more apparent with time — is the size of the canvas. Small canvases using copious amounts of paint mark Chu's Taiwan period, which one museum official attributed to Chu's poverty. Perhaps, but it also seems that the increasingly larger canvases are a hint that Chu was becoming more confident as an artist.



Celebrity Interview

Brolin

CONTINUED FROM P14

W filmed for two months in Shreveport, Louisiana, a conservative bulwark that did not take kindly to an influx of wealthy, liberal movie stars. On the last day of filming, Brolin and fellow actor Jeffrey Wright (aka Colin Powell) were arrested following an altercation at the local Stray Cat Bar. Wright was reportedly Tasered in the street, while Brolin found himself doused with pepper spray.

The actor explains that all this was the result of a verbal altercation, not a physical one. "But when you're in a place like that, it's about them wanting to teach a lesson to the Hollywood 'poof squad,' and it snowballed like nothing I've ever seen. There was incredible violence in reaction to zero violence. When I was in jail I could only think about what the average person has to go through — the person who has no power to go to the press or no money to hire a lawyer."

Was he scared? "Well, it's a scary prospect. When it started escalating I thought, 'Is this the night when I get Tasered and have a heart attack?' But I was more confused than scared. Confused and befuddled. I was looking around in total shock. Or I was trying to — I had Mace in my eyes at the time."

When the story was reported, it initially seemed to support the perception of Brolin as a hell-raising Hollywood brat. And while I have no idea whether this impression has ever had any basis, it's hard not to return to those fictional parallels. Stone's film implies that Bush squandered his youth on wild living and then fell ass-backwards into politics because it provided the easiest option. Did Brolin — the son of the man who starred in *Westworld* and *The Amityville Horror* — do the same thing with acting?

He shoots me a withering look. "How to you fall into acting? It doesn't happen. I was pursuing it in a major way." He shrugs. "People assume it's some nepotistic thing. If my father owned a studio then maybe he could get me work. But my father's just like me, looking for the next job. The difference is that he got it right off the bat."

"He got very famous, very young, but I was knocking around for 25 years before anyone gave two shits about me."

So what changed? Brolin freely admits he has made some bad movies in his time. But he was happy to wait. He rustled up rewarding roles in theater and eased his incipient financial pressures by trading on the stock market. These days he even runs a Web site called *marketprobability.com* that offers five to 10-day "stock baskets" based on historical trends and the current state of the market.

He's not trading at the moment, he says. Times are tough. Even so, he estimates that he still makes more money from stocks than he does from acting.

"I like to do it," he explains. "It enables me to offset movies that I might otherwise have had to do for the money. Plus it stopped me gambling. I used to go to Vegas and play the horses, and then I realized how ridiculous that was. There is no winning in gambling, but there is on the stock market. Maybe it's not trillions of dollars. Maybe it's just five bucks for lunch. Who cares, it's all good."

In the wake of the 2000 election fiasco, Bush hurried to claim victory, taking to the stage to boast that they (the great, anonymous They) had always "misunderestimated" him. They might have underestimated Josh Brolin, too. Certainly he has always been a better actor than he was given credit for — yet only now is he getting the chance to prove it.

"You know, that's the funny thing about Josh," says British actor Toby Jones, who plays Karl Rove in the film. "It was such a difficult and demanding role, playing Bush, and yet I was impressed by how lightly it sat on him. When you get to a certain age you are able to get a sense of perspective on the whole business of making a film. I think this came at the right time for him."

Brolin would go along with that. If success had struck any earlier, he says, he wouldn't have been able to handle it. Now it's different. His three kids are almost grown up, and he is happily settled with the actor Diane Lane. He has known triumph and flirted with disaster and he has learned to treat them just the same. "I hope I can respect the moment," he says. "I've been given an amazing opportunity and I could not be more grateful. But I also know that all this will eventually die off. It's not real. It will go away and then you'll go away and then, I don't know, I'll be left sitting in some English hotel room."

In the meantime, here we are. "Yeah, I know why you're here, man," he says, laughing. "This is a fun story for you guys in the media, because it's like a discovery. The old man." He rolls his eyes. "All of a sudden they care about the old man."

Despite gloom, modern art booms

Sagging prices at last month's London auctions seemed to indicate that the global financial downturn had finally burst the art market bubble. Not so fast: Sotheby's just broke a few records at its annual art sale in New York this week

BY ULA ILNYTZKY
AP, NEW YORK

The Sotheby's auction house kicked off its annual art sale in New York this week against the backdrop of a gloomy economy that had some observers wondering whether there were any deep-pocketed buyers left to snap up paintings for tens of millions of US dollars.

Well, there are. And they're breaking records. Some of the most famous artworks of the past century were up for sale, including Edgar Degas' *Dancer in Repose* and Kazimir Malevich's *Suprematist Composition* (from 1916).

The Degas sold on Monday night for just over US\$37 million, an all-time high for the artist, whose previous best was US\$28 million for the same piece in 1999, a Sotheby's spokeswoman said. The work's presale estimate was US\$40 million.

The Malevich work sold on Monday for just over US\$60 million, in line with its presale estimate. The sale price set a record for the artist and for any Russian artwork sold at auction, Sotheby's said.

The previous record for Malevich was US\$17 million for another *Suprematist Composition* (from 1919 to 1920) in 2000; the previous Russian record was US\$20.9 million for Wassily Kandinsky's *Fugue* in 1990.

And Edvard Munch's *Vampire*, a brooding painting of a woman with cascading auburn hair, set a new record for the Norwegian artist, US\$38.2 million, Sotheby's said. The previous record was US\$30.8 million for *Girls on a Bridge*, set last year.

The buyers' identities weren't immediately disclosed.

Among those who reportedly are selling pieces from their art collections are Kathy Fuld, the wife of Richard Fuld Jr, the former chief executive officer of Lehman Brothers who has been vilified for his company's role in the global financial meltdown.

The high-end art market had stumbled in recent months as the hedge fund traders, financiers and Russian, European and Middle Eastern buyers who helped prop up the art market in recent years fell victims to the financial crisis.

Sagging prices at last month's London auctions suggested that the financial meltdown had finally ended the art market boom, which has seen a series of price records shattered over the last few years.

Christie's and Sotheby's contemporary art sales generated at least a third less money than predicted, and many items were unsold.

The auction houses' New York sales are considered an important test of how price levels have changed since the summer and of how buyers will respond to the top-selling works, said Ian Peck, CEO of the art finance firm Art Capital Group.

The last such sales, in May, generated more than US\$500 million between the two houses. Last week, Sotheby's withdrew Pablo Picasso's *Arlequin*, one of the star lots at its Monday sale, for private reasons.

The move was "a sign that auction houses and buyers fear the risk of a downturn in prices is too great to ignore," Peck said.

That fear also was evident in an online auction last week when a 1717 Stradivari cello reached a record bid of US\$1.35 million but failed to reach its estimated value of US\$1.48 million to US\$1.97



Kazimir Malevich's *Suprematist Composition* sold for just over US\$60 million at Sotheby's, in line with its presale estimate, in New York on Monday.

PHOTO: AP

million or its reserve, according to Tarisio, an auctioneer of fine stringed instruments and bows. The reserve is the lowest undisclosed price the consignor agrees to sell a work.

Sotheby's and Christie's said on Monday they were cautiously optimistic about the outcome of the Impressionist and modern art sales this week and postwar and contemporary art sales next week.

"The result will speak to market expectations," said Guy Bennett, international co-head of Impressionist and modern art at Christie's. "It won't just be about one sale. The market is far deeper and broader than that. I think we found the right balance in terms of price points and also the quality of the things we're offering."

The Fulds reportedly are selling a group of abstract and minimalist drawings at Christie's on Wednesday of next week. The highlight of the 16 Master Drawings of American Post War Art from a Private Collection is a 1951 Willem de Kooning drawing of a nude called *Woman*, estimated at US\$4 million.

Another important indicator in the art auction market is the number of guarantees by the auction houses. A guarantee is the undisclosed sum sellers are promised regardless of whether the work sells or not.