

An abstract painting featuring bold, expressive brushstrokes in shades of blue, orange, black, and white. The composition is dynamic, with swirling forms and a sense of movement. The background is a light, neutral tone, allowing the darker and more vibrant colors to stand out.

# **Hung Hsien**

**A SINGULAR BRUSH**

**M. Sutherland Fine Arts**

NEW YORK, NY

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This catalogue accompanies the exhibition

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M. Sutherland Fine Arts  
55 East 80th Street, Second Floor  
New York, NY 10075

***NEW LOCATION FROM APRIL 2016 ONWARD***

M. Sutherland Fine Arts  
7 East 74th Street, Third Floor  
New York, NY 10021

Tel (212) 249-0428 Mobile (301) 529-2531  
[www.msutherland.com](http://www.msutherland.com)  
[info@msutherland.com](mailto:info@msutherland.com)

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# HUNG HSIEN: A SINGULAR BRUSH

Martha Sutherland

Hung Hsien (aka Margaret Chang) is the most intriguing artist I've shown in the fifteen years of M. Sutherland Fine Arts. With Hung's exhibition during Asia Week 2016, it is my hope that the art world will take notice and recognize her singular position in the pantheon of modern Chinese painting.

I first met Hung Hsien when I was a graduate student in Lawrence, Kansas, in the late Seventies. I was astonished by the fantastic forms in her pictures, her striking pastel palette, and the abstract tension of the compositions. The paintings left an indelible impression. In all my years of looking at contemporary Chinese painting while living in Taiwan, Beijing and Hong Kong, I have never seen anything else like this.

The pictures in this exhibition are clearly modernist, but delivered with the brush skills of a classical ink painter. They are "landscapes" but have more affinity to "mod" designs of the Swinging Sixties (think Lava Lamps and Pucci scarves) than the *gong bi* (fine line style) bird and flower paintings of Hung's famed teacher, Prince Pu Hsinyu (1896-1963).

As a teenager in Taipei during the early 1950s, Hung took private painting lessons from Prince Pu Hsinyu, a survivor of the Qing Imperial household, who, to this day, is regarded as one of the great 20th Century Chinese painters. Hung recently explained, "Pu Hsinyu was very old fashioned in his teaching style. I would be given one of his compositions to copy over and over again, stroke by stroke to perfect the techniques. Each week, I would bring my homework to him for a formal critique. I studied with him in this manner for years."

Hung Hsien ultimately took a completely different path, separate from Pu's other students. As an art student and teacher in the Chicago area during the late 1950s through the 1970s, Hung was exposed to Abstract Expressionism, which profoundly changed her painting style. She became unafraid to experiment with abstraction and allowed the traditional rock and water forms to become

**Ocean Rocks**, 1970 – DETAIL

simply a point of departure for her expressive brush. Mary Lawson, a University of Chicago-trained art historian, wrote that Hung Hsien's mature works embodied "the implication of the eternal flow of nature rather than the reality of identifiable forms and texture."

In "Ocean Rocks" (1970), the only hint of the subject is revealed in the title. The painting's strength emerges from the rich coloration and rhythmic brush-stroke along with the "inner light" emanating from the compositional push/pull between form and void. There is a connection to the abstracted landscapes of Shi Tao of 17th Century Yangzhou (Hung's hometown) but also to modern 20th Century American painters such as Arshile Gorky and Mark Tobey.

Yet, without the years of discipline under Prince Pu Hsinyu's tutelage, Hung would never have had the technical skill—and confidence—to break free of the limits of traditional ink painting. What other student of Prince Pu can boast of belonging to these subsets of influence? And similarly, what other Abstract Expressionist can claim the technical rigor of training by Prince Pu? It is an understatement to say that Hung's creative vision is unique.

Hung Hsien was born in 1933 in Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province. Her family came from a long line of intellectuals from Yangzhou, one of the cultural and commercial centers of China since the late Ming Dynasty. At the outset of the Sino-Japanese War, when she was just three years old, the family moved to the Chongqing. There, she spent a happy childhood, sheltered from the ravages of war. Her family had a house in the country, surrounded by the lush, verdant Sichuan countryside. After the war, her family moved back to Nanjing for three years. Hung remembers attending the Chinese opera theatre with her older sister every week in Nanjing. To this day, Hung can recall the bright colors of the *nien pu* (face paint), the swirling robes and stylized movement of the actors on stage. But as Mao Tse-tung's forces came to power, in 1948 her family resettled in Taiwan, where Hung continued her education through high school and college.

In Taiwan, Hung Hsien became one of the last private students to study with Prince Pu, continuing to take tutorials with him after she entered Taiwan Normal University. “He was very disappointed when I went to the university,” she told me recently. “He wanted me to continue tutorials with him only.”

While studying for her art degree at Taiwan Normal, Hung also took classes in ink painting with Huang Junbi and in oil painting with Zhu Dechun. Huang stayed in Taiwan and is considered one of the great post-war classical Chinese painters. Zhu Dequn emigrated to Paris in 1955, and became one of the most famous and prolific Abstract Expressionist painters of France before dying there in 2014.

One of Hung Hsien’s classmates at Taiwan Normal in the Oil Painting Department was Liu Guosong, the founder of the Fifth Moon Group. Liu, and other classmates formed the Fifth Moon Movement in the late 1950’s as a new approach to art. Michael Sullivan, the acclaimed Asian art scholar, wrote: “The Fifth Moon Movement was the happy marriage of monumental landscape painting style of the Northern Song period (960–1126) and the *Xieyi* style of the Southern Song period (1129–1279) with modern Western styles and techniques, such as Abstract Expressionism.”

Upon graduating from university, Hung travelled to the United States in 1957 and visited numerous major museums throughout the country. Recently, Hung admitted the trip had a dual purpose: she really wanted to reacquaint herself with her childhood friend, T.C. Chang, who was working in Chicago as an architect.

The trip must have been successful as Hung Hsien married T.C. the next year and settled in the Chicago area, where she would live for over 20 years. Her marriage to T.C. exposed her to modern and classical architecture in America and Europe. Known to her American friends as Margaret Chang, she watched as Chicago expanded exponentially in size and as a cultural center. While T.C.





was part of the architectural team to design O'Hare Airport, Hung took classes at Northwestern and then at the Art Institute of Chicago. She was influenced greatly by two painting teachers, George Cohen and Theodore Halkin, both graduates of the Art Institute of Chicago and part of the "Monster Roster" movement of painters. Hung Hsien's greatest influence, however, came from studying the works of Arshile Gorky, the Russian émigré "Father of Abstract Expressionism." She explained to me recently that it was Gorky's rhythmic line and sense of color, along with his theoretical bases for painting, that impressed her deeply.

After years of concentrating on western oil painting, in 1965 Hung returned to the traditional Chinese media of ink and color wash on paper. By the late 1960s she was exhibiting her work around Chicago to wider and wider acclaim. In 1969, Liu Guosong, her former classmate from Taiwan Normal University, invited Hung to join the annual exhibitions of the Fifth Moon Group, which had been founded in the late 1950s.

After several decades, by the late 1960s, the Fifth Moon Group had attracted worldwide acclaim as well as a devout following among young painters in Hong Kong and Taiwan. During a Fifth Moon exhibition at Taiwan's National Museum of History, critic Jennifer S. Byrd writing in the *Japan Times* (July 22, 1970), said, "Miss Hung's work like Liu Kuo-sung's (sic) is among the most exciting I have seen anywhere. She uses a traditional *literati* brush, in strokes learned from traditionalist teachers, and yet her paintings are uniquely her own and contemporary."

While Hung's works gained greater exposure in Asia through Fifth Moon Group shows, her paintings also caught the eye of Professor Chutsing Li, a renowned art historian who taught at the University of Kansas. (Dr. Li was also my grad school professor, a scholarly figure who mentored a whole generation of Asian art historians). Li organized a travelling solo show of Hung's paintings in the late 1970's which went to six different museums throughout the States.

Professor Li wrote in his catalogue essay for the show that by 1970, Hung Hsien had achieved a “personal liberation”:

*No longer limited by traditional Chinese practices and requirements, and going beyond her early fascination with modern western art, she discovered her own vision of merging east and west. These paintings are her “landscapes of the mind,” to use a traditional Chinese phrase which suggests the artist’s synthesis of a perception of nature and of inner feeling for it. We feel that we are almost at one with the universal spirit, the age-old theme of the great Chinese landscape tradition – but Hung Hsien’s means are completely her own.*

In the mid-1970s illness and surgery slowed Hung’s production. However, a trip with her husband for an architectural project on Hornby Island, near Vancouver, rekindled her creative passions. During her solitary visits to the island’s deserted beaches she filled her sketchbooks with brush drawings. She was so moved by the experience that she returned to Hornby Island three times in the 1970s.

In 1978 Hung Hsien left Chicago to teach painting at Chinese University in Hong Kong for three years. In Hong Kong and during her numerous trips back to Taiwan, Hung began a serious study of *tai ji* with two different masters. In 1984, Hung and her husband retired to Houston, Texas, where they live today. While Hung—Margaret to her friends—has painted sporadically throughout the past few decades, she dedicated more and more time to other pursuits, teaching calligraphy, exploring Jungian psychology and the practice of *tai ji*. She has taught tai ji for over fifteen years in the Houston area. At eighty-three years old, Margaret recently explained, “The exhilaration from the slow, controlled practice of *tai ji* is the same feeling as when in the midst of painting. I feel energized, yet calm and serene at the same time.”

Since the 1980s, Hung's importance as a pivotal figure in modern painting has been known to only a handful of Asian art history scholars in the West, due to her disinterest in self-promotion. The unique character of her painting also defies easy categorization. Ironically, one of her last group shows was entitled "Ten Texas Women Artists" (1991-92). How many Chinese-born artists can claim that label?

For this exhibition we chose works from the 1970s, a decade when Hung Hsien reached the peak of her creative powers. The fluidity of the brushline is impressive in a work such as "Valley After the Rain"; the outline is like a fine, tensile wire, flowing without inhibition across the surface of the paper. The coloration is subtle, with luscious purples and blues. The word "voluptuous" comes to mind. This painting could hold its own next to one of Georgia O'Keeffe's iconic flower paintings. In "Floating without End," the composition is a swirling, vibrating abstraction, spread across two huge scrolls. The impact is arresting, as if one were looking into a spiraling funnel cloud or the turbulent waves of a tidal pool. The large scale (approximately 6 x 6 feet) of this powerful diptych arguably makes it one of the most important pieces of Hung's entire career.

When I viewed Margaret's paintings again in November 2015, I felt as if I had stumbled across a hidden treasure. The impact was just as profound as when I first saw her work as a graduate student. These paintings have not been on public view for nearly forty years and because of this, Hung Hsien's link between Chinese and Western painting was at risk of being forgotten. This exhibition celebrates Hung's importance as a pivotal figure in both Chinese and American painting.

***Ocean Rocks***, 1970  
ink and color wash on paper, 86 x 43 inches













***Floating without End***, 1970  
ink and color wash on paper, 70<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 35<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches each, diptych







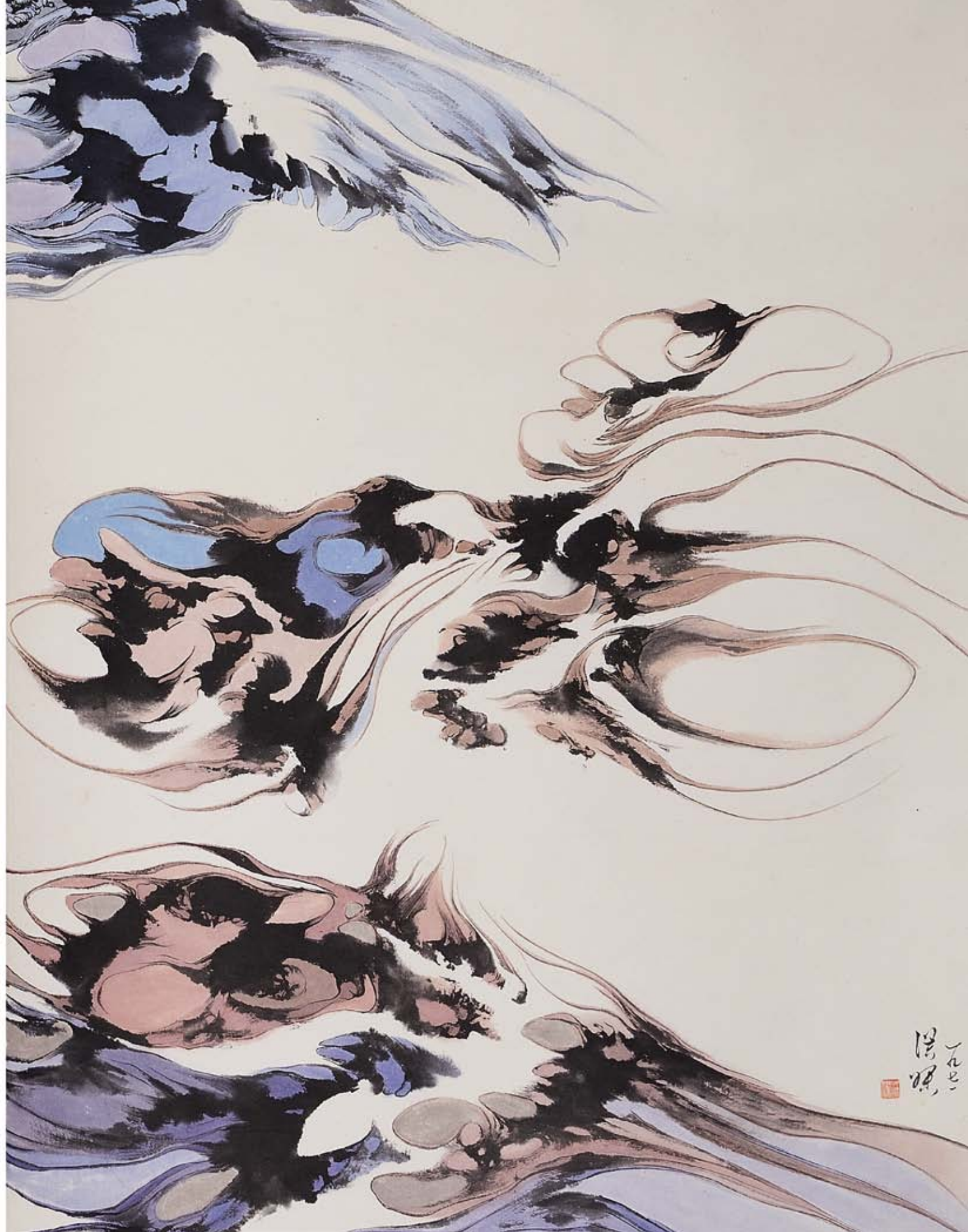
***Bewitched Clouds***, 1971  
ink and color wash on paper, 56 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches











***Mist and Rocks***, 1971  
ink and color wash on paper, 33 x 27 inches each, diptych





***Valley After the Rain***, 1971  
ink and color wash on paper, 56 x 28 inches each, diptych



***Pond of Heaven***, 1972  
ink and color wash on paper, 68 1/2 x 33 1/2 inches







***Winter Rocks***, 1973  
ink and color wash on paper, 47 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 23 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches



***Waterfall***, 1973

ink and color wash on paper, 56 1/2 x 30 1/2 inches











***Streams in the Valley***, 1977  
ink and color wash on paper, 27 1/2 x 39 inches







## Chronography

**HUNG HSIEN** (aka MARGARET CHANG)

### Selected Biography

- 1933 Born in Yangzhou, Jiangsu, China
- 1948 Settled in Taiwan
- 1952-55 Studied painting with Prince Pu Hsinyu
- 1957 B.A. in Fine Arts, National Taiwan Normal University
- 1958 Married T.C. Chang, architect and moved to the Chicago area, USA.
- 1958-60 Studied painting at Northwestern University and the Art Institute of Chicago
- 1968-78 Taught at: Evanston, IL Art Center; Northwestern University and the Art Institute of Chicago
- 1978-81 Taught at the Chinese University of Hong Kong
- 1984 Moved to Houston, Texas

### Solo Exhibitions

- 1965 Mori Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
- 1968 Forsythe Gallery, Ann Arbor, Michigan
- 1971 Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio
- 1973 Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, San Diego, California
- 1978-80 *Rocks, Trees, Clouds and Water: The Art of Hung Hsien*: Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York; Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana; El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, Texas; Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts
- 1985 Loyola University Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
- 1987 Portland Art Museum, Oregon Art Institute, Portland, Oregon
- 1990 Jung Institute, Houston, Texas
- 2016 M. Sutherland Fine Art, New York, New York

### Selected Collections

Smithsonian Museum, Sackler Gallery, Washington, D.C.  
Cleveland Art Museum  
Chicago Art Institute  
Spencer Art Museum - University of Kansas  
Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon  
Smart Art Museum - University of Chicago  
Harvard University Museum  
Stanford University Museum  
Phoenix Art Museum  
Hong Kong Art Center Museum