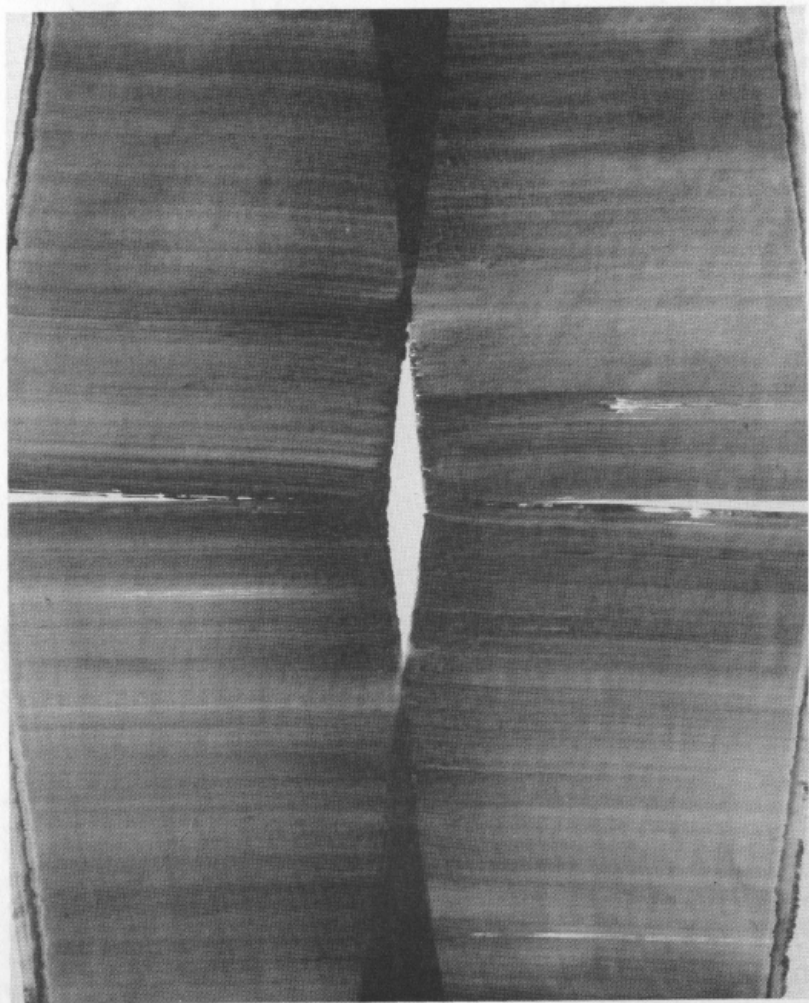


Tchai
MATRIX/BERKELEY 171

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Healing series II, no. 9, 1996



Scroll No. 11, Tchai's vast length of brush-and-ink painting on paper, stretches almost the entire 85 feet of the gallery wall. Five feet in height, it is a two-tier, frieze-like sequence of repeating vertical forms that tilt, tentatively touch, and slide transparently across one another at edges and corners. Each form, both gestural and architectonic in character, comes from a single dramatically large-scale brushstroke. The resulting forms—each coincident with the brushstroke that created it—are the delicately nuanced yet monumental constructive module of an artist trained in both Chinese calligraphy and architecture.

Tchai (Yeh Mei-Song) is a Chinese artist who was born in Thailand and sent at the age of ten to Malaysia to receive a classical Chinese education, which featured ongoing study of Chinese calligraphy. He moved to the United States in 1973 to pursue advanced studies in architecture at the University of Michigan, and subsequently practiced in New York City for several years. Painting the whole time he was a student and then an architect, Tchai has all along devoted himself to developing a distinctive artistic style that draws on his varied cultural background.

Tchai's MATRIX exhibition features recent work from two series, *Scroll* and *Healing*. Notably, it also includes two paintings that he has selected from the museum's holdings by artists who have been important touchstones for him in his attempt to create a contemporary idiom grounded in traditional Chinese artistic methods: the seventeenth-century Chinese master Hung-jen, and the twentieth-century abstract painter Hans Hofmann.

Tchai creates his distinctive brushstroke-forms with "row brushes"—composite brushes used in Asia for lacquering furniture that are made of many individual Chinese brushes bound side-by-side. He came

across these broad brushes in the mid-1980s, and started using them to create compositions of large, single-stroke colored planes. By the time he moved to the Bay Area a few years later, he had begun combining these composite brushes into even wider implements comprised of dozens of smaller brushes—48 in all for the *Scroll* series.

Like other works in the series, *Scroll no. 11* refers to the traditional Asian handscroll that one views section by section. A drastically amplified version of that horizontal format, it possesses a boldly environmental dimension that induces the viewer to experience it bodily, walking alongside it and identifying with the human scale and associations of each two-part vertical form.

This somatic reference can equally be described as an architectural one. The series of verticals, each consisting of a shorter upper and taller lower segment, reads simultaneously, if subliminally, as an abstract figural procession and as a colonnade-like sweep of columns—a figural-architectural analogy in effect since antiquity when Vitruvius first made the comparison between columns and bodies. Since each "column," however, appears fractured and jogged discontinuously off axis (the upper part often seeming to hover, and to read a bit ahead and in front of the lower), any suggestion of physical support is vitiated. Instead, everything looks weightless, held together not by gravity but by an ongoing delicate equilibration among the forms. Even the way both the upper and lower forms seem to extend beyond the paper's edge creates a sense of spatial freedom and flow.

The procession of large two-part repeated verticals is accompanied by two smaller sequences of shapes that the interaction of these verticals generates. As forms overlap at their edges, a series of dark wedges results.

Where the upper tier of forms lifts off from the lower, a broken chain of angular shapes of white space surfaces. Part of the pleasure one takes in visually and physically following the length of the painting comes from these simultaneous sequences of rhythmically repeating shapes.

The overlapping planes in *Scroll no. 11* create passages of great spatial suggestiveness, like the depth evoked by shallow planes of a bas-relief sculpture. In his preoccupation with planes as the source of pictorial space, Tchai cites the theories of Hans Hofmann, to whom he turned in the late 1980s when his increasingly large-scale forms seemed on the verge of becoming too flat. Hofmann's theories suggested ways of juxtaposing these brushstroke-forms so that their planarity could evoke rather than flatten space. In *Scroll no. 11*, Hofmann's relevance is most apparent where the two tiers meet. There, planes cluster and overlap variously, often ambiguously, creating an effect of ever-shifting movement in and out of depth that Hofmann famously described as "push-pull." In homage to his relationship to Hofmann, Tchai has included Hofmann's *Imperium in Imperio* in the exhibition.

However much influenced, especially in scale, by his architectural studies and by Western abstract art such as Hofmann's, Tchai's style is rooted in Chinese methods and materials. Effects in his art of puddling, frayed edges, and skips in the surface, among others, all come from Chinese brush-and-ink practice, as does his extraordinary textural and tonal subtlety. By painstakingly inking the bristles variously along their span before beginning to paint, Tchai textures each monolithic stroke with almost imperceptibly fine striations of light and dark, each small brush leaving its individual trace. The resulting phenomenal tonal range and depth, both within and among the

forms, lends his painting its elusive emotional resonance. The ink medium itself, of course, is Chinese, and is responsible for the distinctive and beautiful transparency of his painting. There is a sheerness to all the tones, a sense of light coming through even the darkest. The profundity of Tchai's art is due in part to this exacting manipulation of dark ink as light.

Tchai's painting since the 1980s interestingly contrasts with the work of many modern Chinese artists whose style, grounded in Eastern brush techniques, exhibits affinities with Abstract Expressionism's actively gestural and spontaneous qualities. Tchai amplifies and slows gesture until the path of his giant brush comes to describe a tonal field more than an action—a field nonetheless enlivened everywhere by the bristles' texture.

Acknowledging his debt to traditional Chinese art, Tchai has included in the exhibition a hanging scroll titled *Landscape in the Style of Lu Kuang* by Hung-jen. In Hung-jen's spare, geometrizing style of landscape painting, Tchai discerns a use of overlapping planes to create mass and pictorial depth that he relates to Hofmann's, and to his own, handling of planes to create space. Despite the many differences between the Asian and Western artists, this perceived commonality makes the two of them a kind of talisman for Tchai's bicultural identity and style.

Countless watercolor sketches from nature, mostly of plants and flowers, run alongside Tchai's abstract output. In fact, he claims that both the *Scroll* and *Healing* series relate to traditional Chinese plant and flower painting. He compares the two-part vertical forms of his *Scroll* series to paintings of bamboo—for Tchai, a pre-eminent Chinese cultural symbol: the break in each refers to the characteristic segmentation of

bamboo. The broader forms in the *Healing* paintings, with their delicate horizontal striations and mid-section fraying, relate, he says, to the traditional motif of the banana leaf. Tchai explains that he is consciously alluding to this traditional Chinese repertoire in his attempt to deal artistically with contemporary issues—in the series titled *Healing*, with what he calls the need for “cultural healing.”

The way Tchai talks about the imagery in the *Healing* paintings, in fact, seems to express his desire to see disparate cultures brought together in himself and in his art, and on a larger, societal scale as well. Two great vertical forms close in on an empty space that he insists is a rent or a wound—a narrow but central rupture that the vertical forms shape as they compress, powerfully visualizing an urge to re-connect across a divide. The towering yet diaphanous forms bend, but, unlike the forms in the *Scroll* paintings, they do not fracture. The tearing of their surface and the “scarring” evoked by small blotchy passages of puddling near the center result, according to the artist, from the healing process itself.

Contrasting with the relentless lateral flow of *Scroll no. 11*, each of the images in the three *Healing* paintings on view is centralized, even symmetrical. The direction of the brushwork itself contributes to the interiority of the image: each vertical form is created by two huge horizontal strokes, each a composite of well over a hundred smaller brushes. This horizontal texturing of the vertical forms gives them a lateral direction and calm that reinforce their impulse inward.

As for the expressive impact of the *Scroll* series, the architect in Tchai who wants to influence human experience through spatial construction is here similarly at work in two dimensions. With a scale that compels us bodily, the life-size

brushstroke-forms temporarily impart to the viewer their own rhythmic measure, their lightness as well as sense of depth, and, thanks to their planar interplay, an effect of ample space created by their very proximity to one another.

Tchai was born in 1954 in Yala, Thailand. He currently lives and works in the Bay Area.

Sherry Goodman

Works in MATRIX

Scroll no. 11, 1996, brush and ink on paper, 60 in x 75 ft.
Lent by the artist.

Healing series II, no. 6, 1996, brush and ink on paper, 72 x 60 in.
Lent by the artist.

Healing series II, no. 9, 1996, brush and ink on paper, 72 x 60 in.
Lent by the artist.

Healing series II, no. 16, 1996, brush and ink on paper, 72 x 60 in.
Lent by the artist.

Hans Hofmann, *Imperium in Imperio*, 1964, oil on canvas, 84 1/8 x 52 in. Gift of the artist. BAM 1966.43

Hung-jen, *Landscape in the Manner of Lu Kuang*, 1658, hanging scroll: ink on paper, 34 x 13 7/8 in. Collection of Sarah Cahill.

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