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香港大學美術博物館
University Museum and Art Gallery
The University of Hong Kong

**Landscapes and Other
Natural Occurrences**



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Natural Occurrences**

Chak

UMAG

THE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY, THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG,
HONG KONG

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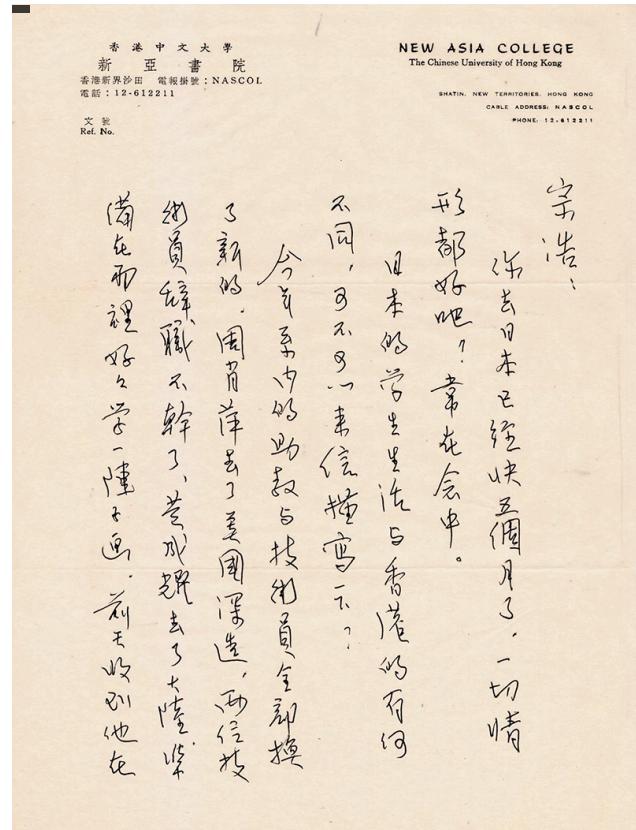
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Introduction



Chak's Hong Kong studio

Chak graduated from the Department of Fine Arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1981. At CUHK, Chak studied with the modernist master Liu Kuo-song, who stressed the importance of considering multiple artistic traditions and unconventional modes of brushwork as a way to transform Chinese painting.



Letter to Chak from Liu Kuo-song

During his undergraduate years, Chak began to incorporate an impressive range of contemporary theories and materials into his work for which he received several prestigious awards, including honours from the

Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial (Hong Kong Museum of Art, 1979) and Youth Art Now: Asia (Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1980).



Hong Kong sculptor Antonio Mak with Chak at his graduation from CUHK

After graduation, Chak was awarded a Monbusho Scholarship to continue his studies at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts. He then went on to programs in the United States, completing an MA from Ball State University in 1986, an MFA from Queens College in New York, and residencies at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, and the National Artists Program at the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York City. Throughout the 1980s and early '90s, Chak's work was shown widely in Hong Kong, New York, Tokyo and Taipei.

Having living abroad for nearly 30 years, he returned to Hong Kong in 2009.



Chak and the Frog King at the soft opening of the renovated Hong Kong Museum of Art

In Dialogue

Text in this chapter is taken from an ongoing conversation between Chak and curator Christopher Mattison. Some material was published, in slightly different format, in the UMAG catalogue *Landscapes and Other Natural Occurrences*. The excerpts here focus primarily on Chak's experimentation with various mediums and types of brushwork, which together form the basis for his concept of 'Chinese Painting'.

Completed between 2018-2019, all of the paintings are oil and acrylic on canvas and the drawings are watercolour, gouache and ink on paper.

Chak: The individual brushstrokes are just physical markings that serve as 'proof' that I am alive. Sometimes when applying a dab of ultramarine to the canvas, it feels like I'm creating actual air, which might end with me creating a sky over a horizon. The magic of this moment occurs right in front of my eyes, and through a form of actualisation—in this case a single brushstroke—a specific instance is rendered into a frozen sign. It's hard for me to say whether the individual brushstrokes, or the broader concepts behind the visual elements, are more or less important to me as an artist. What I do 'know' is that I need to paint.



Brotherhood of Streams 小溪與河流的滙流 125.7 x 180.3 cm | 2018

Christopher Mattison: *Does your choice of materials relate to your understanding of what it means to be an artist?*



Sketch for Brotherhood of Streams 小溪與河流的滙流 (草稿) 42 x 29.8 cm | 2018



Sketch for Co-existence of the Clam and the Waving Sea 海的兩面—風平浪靜與波濤洶湧 (草稿) 32 x 41 cm | 2018-19



Co-existence of the Clam and the Waving Sea 海的兩面—風平浪靜與波濤洶湧 50.1 x 59.7 cm | 2019

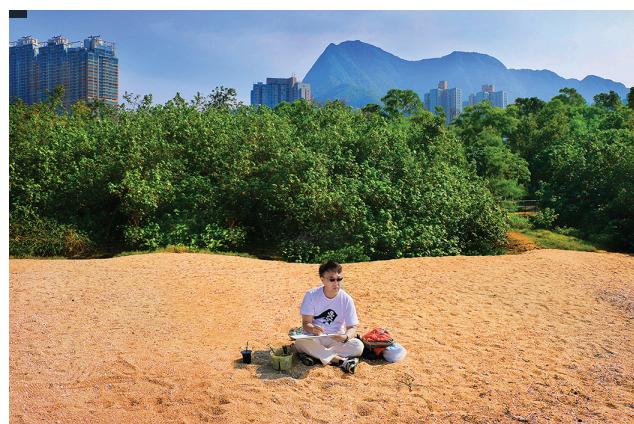
One consistent element in your work is a particular form of contemplation; is this something you aspire to create for an audience?

To be honest, I never really consider the audience. Painting for me has never involved an attempt to appease any third party, but instead to target a subject's essence, to recreate its 'being'. This is what seems most natural. In terms of the actual brushstrokes, within some schools of contemporary art, skill and technique have become subordinate to conceptual gimmicks. Based on his revolutionary feat of manipulating the 'readymade' into a form of self-expression, we often forget Duchamp's foundational years

as a highly accomplished Cubist painter. Numerous aspiring artists, influenced by his later innovations, have blindly stepped into the world under the false notion that they can create meaningful work without an appropriate level of craftsmanship.

Could you speak a bit about your daily process and materials?

Chak: I usually get up early, eat breakfast, spend a couple hours reading, go for a walk and then take care of chores. Some days I will spend several hours sketching in the countryside, or else drawing what I see out my studio window. If I'm out somewhere, I'll take a picture of the scene before I leave, and then head back to my studio. I'm not looking for any inspiration, or thinking about anything in particular when I sketch. If one of the drawings eventually becomes the basis for a painting, it's then that I'll consider additional layers of meaning—aesthetic or social. I then work on my paintings in the afternoon light, and in the evening I concentrate on unfinished sketches and setting out a plan for the next day.



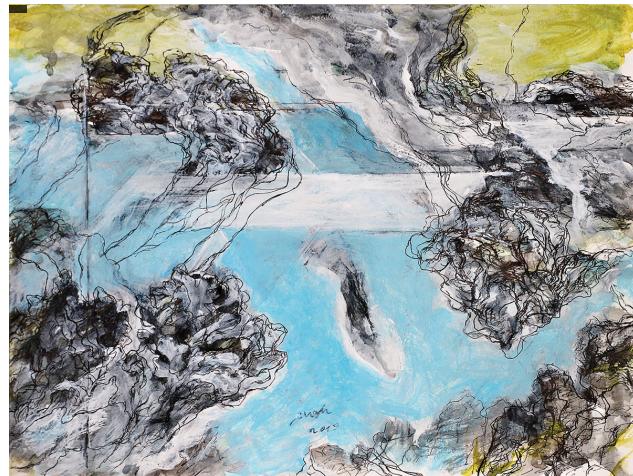
Chak drawing on a beach in Ma On Shan

As for materials, over the past year I have been using acrylics to create a type of Chinese ink wash as a hazy background layer. There is an inherent fluidity to acrylics that proves useful when creating this effect. As an art student in the late 1970s, I was intrigued by the wave of Photorealism in the American art scene. In response to this, I spent several years trying to incorporate airbrush work and acrylics into my more traditional oil paints. I gave up on these experiments relatively quickly as I found the acrylics and airbrushed paints expressively lacking, and my heavier brushstrokes often collapsed as they dried.

During one of the pre-exhibition tours, you brought up the relationship between Cubism and your painting 'Flower-eating Fox'.



Flower-eating Fox 愛吃花朵的狐狸 121.9 x 182.88 cm | 2018-19



Lonesome Islet 寂寞的小島 30 x 40 cm | 2019

My list of heroes, in terms of modern artists, sets Duchamp and Picasso firmly at the top. In particular, 'Guernica' and 'The Charnel House', have had a particularly strong influence. I mentioned Cubism in terms of the 'Flower-eating Fox' primarily because many abstract paintings—including Piet Mondrian's urban scenery paintings—grew out of the uninterrupted innovation of Picasso and Braque in the 1950s.

A series of angles are redrawn onto a quadratic plane, like a geographer had flattened a globe in order to concoct a new distribution of visual information. It's not difficult to find the aftermath of this tradition resurrected in Formalism, or its shadow in the New York School of Abstract Expressionism. For example, in de Kooning's 1945 work 'Pink Angels', the geometry of coloured blocks echoes the groundwork set by Cubism, while creating a space that is allowed to encompass more abstract forms.

'Flower-eating Fox' explores the same metaphysical issues; that is, how to merge two incompatible elements—geometric and organic—onto a single canvas. Of course, my work bears no relation to de Kooning in terms of subject matter, motivation or creative output. Our impulses and ideologies diverge; I am focused on the turbulence found in the natural world—though our respective visual languages do contain certain similarities.

Apart from the movement inherent in your paintings, I'm also struck by the use of grid lines—rough latitudes that divide some canvases into horizontal planes. This can be seen in works like Peninsular and Early Spring.



Peninsular 半島地區 182.8 x 243.8 cm | 2019

Promoting the coexistence of 'organic' and 'geometric' elements reflects the progressive view of modern civilization, which also takes into account the rapid advancement of technology and the continuous attack on our own humanity. This concept of progress is undoubtedly a product of Western thought. It began in the Enlightenment, with individuals advocating for progress via the scientific spirit. It is an extension of a brand of optimism. Unfortunately, after the arrival of this positive energy, much of modern society was transformed into a series of precise calculations. This state derives from dueling inner conflicts—sincerity and fear; dreams and

ideology; dynamic and static; straight and distorted lines; and finally, nature versus a geometrically constructed wind.

Returning to the discussion of grids and visual analysis, there is a specific dynamic that intrigues me about horizontal lines—the underlying nature of atmospheric science. I am fascinated by meteorology's representation of the twisting arcs of landscapes and the observable patterns of wind and waves. Based on our innate desire for stability, the lines offer a visual and psychological frame for viewers to enter the painting and re-examine nature. In this way the lines define and hold certain psychological components, but ultimately these structures are simply meant to accentuate the beauty of the natural world, the coolness of Liu Chengyin's heartless willow.

What is the actual intention of the layer you refer to as a 'hazy background', and does this relate to how you sometimes start a painting by building up areas of white?

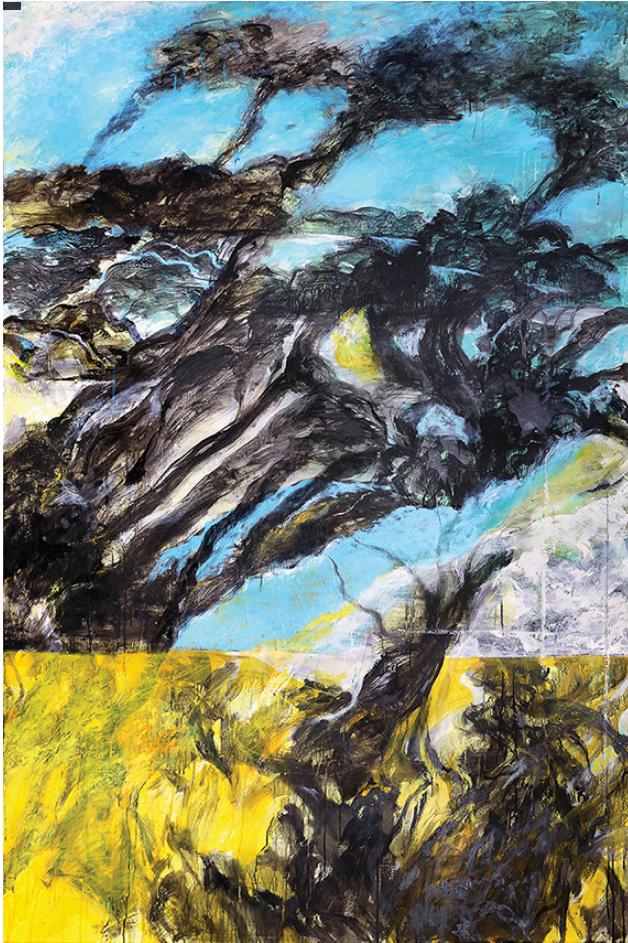
As far as the layers of white, or the blue used for the ocean and sky, one literal interpretation could certainly be related to the natural world surging through Hong Kong, though these swatches of colour are also closely related to the prescribed compositions emphasised in Western formalism, as well as the traditional blankness sometimes found in Chinese painting. The whiteness is used to represent another key opposition in my works—'scattering/gathering'—which is highlighted by the condensed movement of the strokes.



Mocking Bird Screaming from Amah Rock 牠站在望夫石上高聲吶喊 182.8 x 121.9 cm | 2019

In one of our early conversations you mentioned struggling with getting the acrylic paint to 'pop'—that it doesn't shimmer like oil.

Early Spring is a good example of this challenge. Traditional Chinese painting uses a limited set of inks that are naturally more agile than oils. De Kooning, the master of Abstract Expressionism, used safflower rather than linseed oil because it dries more slowly, allowing him a longer amount of time to work on each canvas. I use water-soluble acrylics in a similar manner to create a splashed-ink effect. I could also add turpentine and linseed to my oils, but I believe the results of those combinations are a bit thin and not nearly as striking.

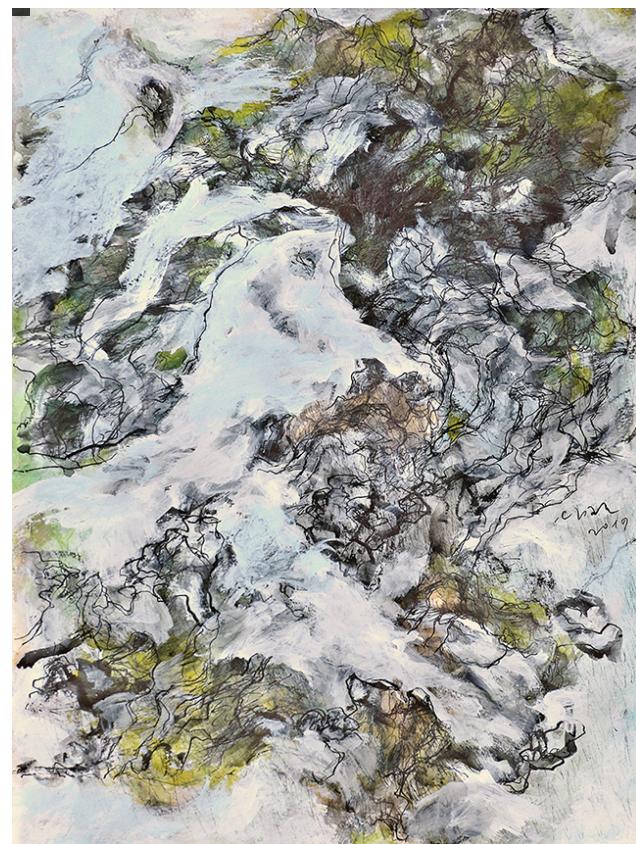


Early Spring 早春 182.8 x 121.9 cm | 2019

freedom to explore sensation and human experience through purely visual and 'natural' elements—an endless palette of forms, lines, shapes, compositions and hues.



Mountain Chorus 山嶺之謳歌 182.8 x 243.8 cm | 2019



The Green Hill We Climbed 我們攀爬的青山 40 x 30 cm | 2019



Exhibition



Chak outside his Fotan studio preparing to load art work with (from left to right) Kaye Takahashi, Wing Keung and Kazuko Takahashi



A recurring exhibition challenge is knowing when to edit the final object list. Apart from the artworks and captions, each gallery wall also needs space to breathe. We first tried double-hanging the works on paper, and then a 3 x 3 grid, but the end result felt congested, so we ultimately opted for a cleaner line. This particular configuration affords equal emphasis to the individual drawings and maintains the overall balance.



Chak being interviewed by HK Cable TV

Access the full HK Cable TV interview with Chak [here](#)

About

Landscapes and Other Natural Occurrences is the second volume in UMAG's Digital Chapbook series. The publication was designed using Quire, the Getty's open-source publishing environment that creates traditional and digitally enhanced books from a single set of plain-text files.

UMAG gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. Please follow this link to explore more of UMAG's online content, including Jen Bervin's *Silk Poems*.

Contributors



Chak

Chak graduated from the Department of Fine Arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1981. While at CUHK he began to incorporate a broad range of contemporary theories and materials. After graduation, Chak was awarded a Monbusho Scholarship to continue his education at the Tokyo National

University of Fine Arts. He went on to study in the United States, completing an MA from Ball State University in 1986, an MFA from Queens College in New York, and residencies at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine and the National Artists Program at the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York City. Having living abroad for nearly 30 years, Chak returned to Hong Kong in 2009.

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Haven Lo

Haven Lo XXX

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