

Talk of the Town

For decades, Chu Hing Wah has captured scenes of everyday life in Hong Kong in his striking paintings. He's now 87—and has no plans to stop working *By Denise Tsui*

Chu Hing Wah's eyes sparkle when he talks about art. The 87-year-old is now one of the most celebrated artists in Hong Kong, where he is admired for his tender, delicate paintings that capture the small details of life in the city, such as shoppers in a wet market, the neon signs hanging on Portland Street in Mong Kok, or simply a row of shops closed for the day, their roller shutters down. These touching works are sought-after by both collectors and institutions—M+, Hong Kong's museum of visual culture, has 11 of his works in its permanent collection. But it has been a long and winding road to this point—he didn't start painting professionally until he was nearly 60, after a successful career as a psychiatric nurse.

Born in 1935 in Guangdong province, Chu moved to Hong Kong with his family when he was a teenager and lived on Temple Street in Yau Ma Tei. Growing up, he had an interest in art, but his first love was film. In the late 1950s, he landed a job working as an usher at Hong Kong's iconic, now defunct, Queen's Theatre, which sparked a lifelong passion for the work of director Alfred Hitchcock and actor James Dean. "He is my idol," Chu says of the latter.

Glimpsing other worlds on screen inspired him to travel abroad, so he took up evening classes to learn English and, in 1960, was granted a scholarship to study



Clockwise, from left: *Double Deck Flyover* (2018); *The Cage* (1986), a painting inspired by Chu's work as a psychiatric nurse; Chu at his latest exhibition at Hanart TZ Gallery

nursing in the UK. This decision ultimately changed the course of his life, as the UK provided him with both his professional qualifications and a deeper love of art. In his time off from studying, he frequented the famous museums of the British capital, including the National Gallery, the Tate galleries, the Victoria and Albert Museum and more, soaking up everything they had to offer. Taking sketchbooks along with him, he began to draw, attentively studying the works of the world's great artists.

Upon returning to Hong Kong in 1968, he took up a job at Castle Peak Hospital, the city's oldest and best-known psychiatric facility. For the next two decades, he dedicated his time to caring for patients day and night—an experience that underpins many of his later pieces, such as *The Cage* (1986), which features seven people behind bars; *Where I Work* (1989), a depiction of a doctor and nurse attending to a patient; *Sleep It Off* (1993), a painting of a sleeping woman; and *So near yet so far away* (2011), a painting of a shadowy figure looking at another person across an expanse of darkness. The latter two are now in the collection of M+. During his



Above: *Sleep It Off* (1993), one of 11 paintings by Chu that have been collected by M+. Opposite page: *Portland Street Mongkok* (2018)

time as a psychiatric nurse, Chu saw people at their most vulnerable. "I saw what society normally doesn't get to see," he says.

In 1972, while still working full-time, he began formal art training at the University of Hong Kong under the tutelage of legendary Hong Kong artists such as Hon Chi-fun and Irene Chou. In 1989, his worlds collided: his first solo exhibition was at Castle Peak Hospital. Three years later, in 1992, he retired from nursing and began working on his art full-time. That year he staged his first exhibition at Hanart TZ Gallery, which has represented him ever since.

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Chu's visual language is distinctive for its delicate rendering of shapes and figures, and for his distortion of perspective. He describes himself as a visual thinker and selects colours through feeling rather than learned notions of colour theory. Similarly, his intuition led him to experiment with ink and eventually to develop his own method of expression, marrying western artistic concepts with techniques traditional to Chinese painting.

His observations of everyday, ordinary life in Hong Kong convey a sense of humility and a belief in our shared humanity, perhaps inspired by his years as a nurse. His work is also imbued with a love for Hong Kong. "I really like that Hong Kong is a duality of east and west, whether it's in the language, the food or just daily activities," says Chu. "I try to express that in my paintings too." Imagination and reality converge in his work, making his paintings intimately familiar to anyone who knows Hong Kong, yet slightly strange. In works such as *Tin Hau Temple* (2018) and *Portland Street Mongkok* (2018), his love for Yau Ma Tei shines through, while *A Log Bridge* (2018) and *Double Deck Flyover* (2018) draw on his passion for Cantonese opera.

In person, Chu is cheerful, although he admits the pandemic has made finding inspiration more challenging. Among the works exhibited in his recent show, *Bare Life*, at Hanart TZ Gallery until November 5, are paintings that he has created over the past two years, when public health measures have caused Hong Kong to be largely cut off from the world. *Virus* (2020) features his vision of a virus cell, while *Calamity* (2020), with its deep black ground, conveys the sense of isolation and sadness clouding society. Art became an outlet for Chu but, he says, it could only motivate him for so long. "Like anybody else," he says, "if there's nothing to paint, I don't paint. I hold the brush and I have no inspiration." He laments the joyous days when he travelled widely, taking sketchbooks on his journeys to Italy, Austria, Canada and mainland China.

Nevertheless, he remains upbeat, and says he is content with the many adventures and experiences life has given him. And it shows. He glows with happiness as he takes me on a tour of *Bare Life*. "Painting makes me happy," he says. "I feel fulfilled and I can express my thoughts. I hope always to continue painting."

