

in Contemporary Chinese Painting

by Julia M White

Spiritual Mountains The Art of Wesley Tongson debuts a recent gift to University of California Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) of 11 paintings by the under-recognised Hong Kong artist Wesley Tongson (1957-2012). His work draws heavily on traditional Chinese painting techniques and processes, including painting with brush and ink, as well as the more experimental approach of utilising his fingers and hands, culminating in a highly individualistic style of painting. BAMPFA is uniquely situated to present his work alongside historic Chinese paintings from its collection, permanent demonstrating the link between the past and the contemporary world. Included in the exhibition are paintings by artists who were influential in Tongson's development as an artist, such a Zhang Daqian and Liu Guosong, who helped to shape his life's work, as well as other Chinese artists who experimented with abstraction and tradition.

The exhibition title reflects the importance of tradition in Tongson's journey as an artist, his admiration and acknowledgement of the past even as he pursued a new direction in his own work. It is in Tongson's highly lyrical brushwork and his exuberant style of painting, which included large-scale landscapes and intricately patterned, dense examinations of the natural world that we comprehend his range and genius. His experimentation in painting with his hands and fingernails finds precedence in the works of 18th and 19th-century masters, such as Gao Qipei, while his dramatic use of splash colour treatment seems in harmony with Zhang Daqian's work of the midtwentieth century. The exhibition includes works by these artists as well as other historical painters that may have provided inspiration such as Shitao, Li Shan, and Li Fangying as well as modern masters that served as more direct involvement in his development including Zhang Daqian, Liu Guosong, and his mentor Huang Zongfang (Harold Wong).

Tongson started painting at the age of seventeen although as a youngster growing up in Hong Kong he had already studied calligraphy and so had some experience with traditional brush and ink drawing. In the late 1970s, he moved to Toronto where he studied at the Ontario College of Art and was introduced to Western painting styles including Cubism and Abstraction which are reflected in a group of sketches in the exhibition where he experiments with line and colour in a dramatic fashion (fig 1). It was in Canada that

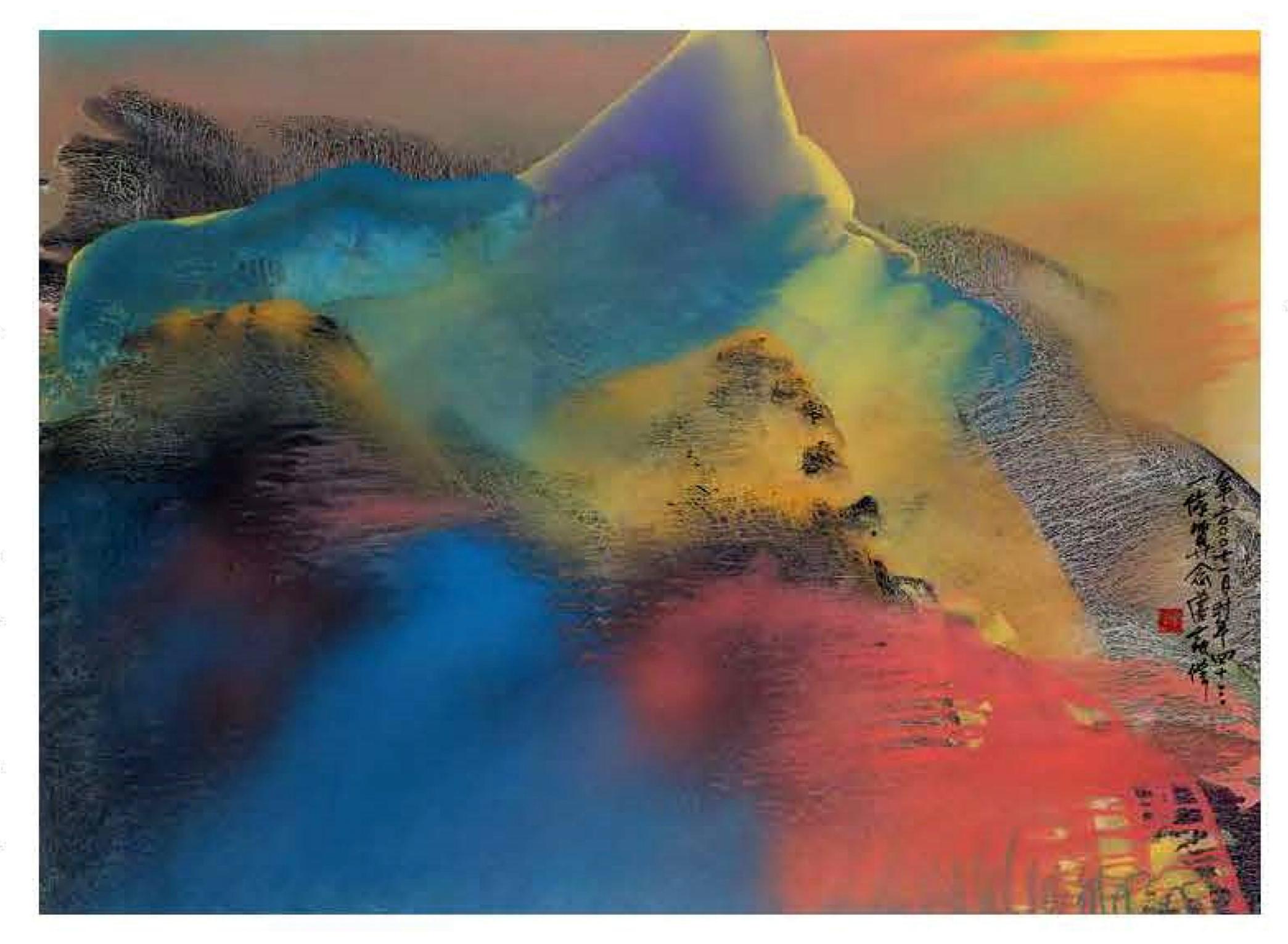


Fig 2 Untitled from the Mountain of Heaven series, 2000. ink and colour on board 28^{3/8} x 38^{3/8}in, gift of Lilia and Kenneth Tongson

Fig 1 Untitled (Toronto painting 5), 1980, ink and colour on paper, 30 x 22 in, J Chan Collection

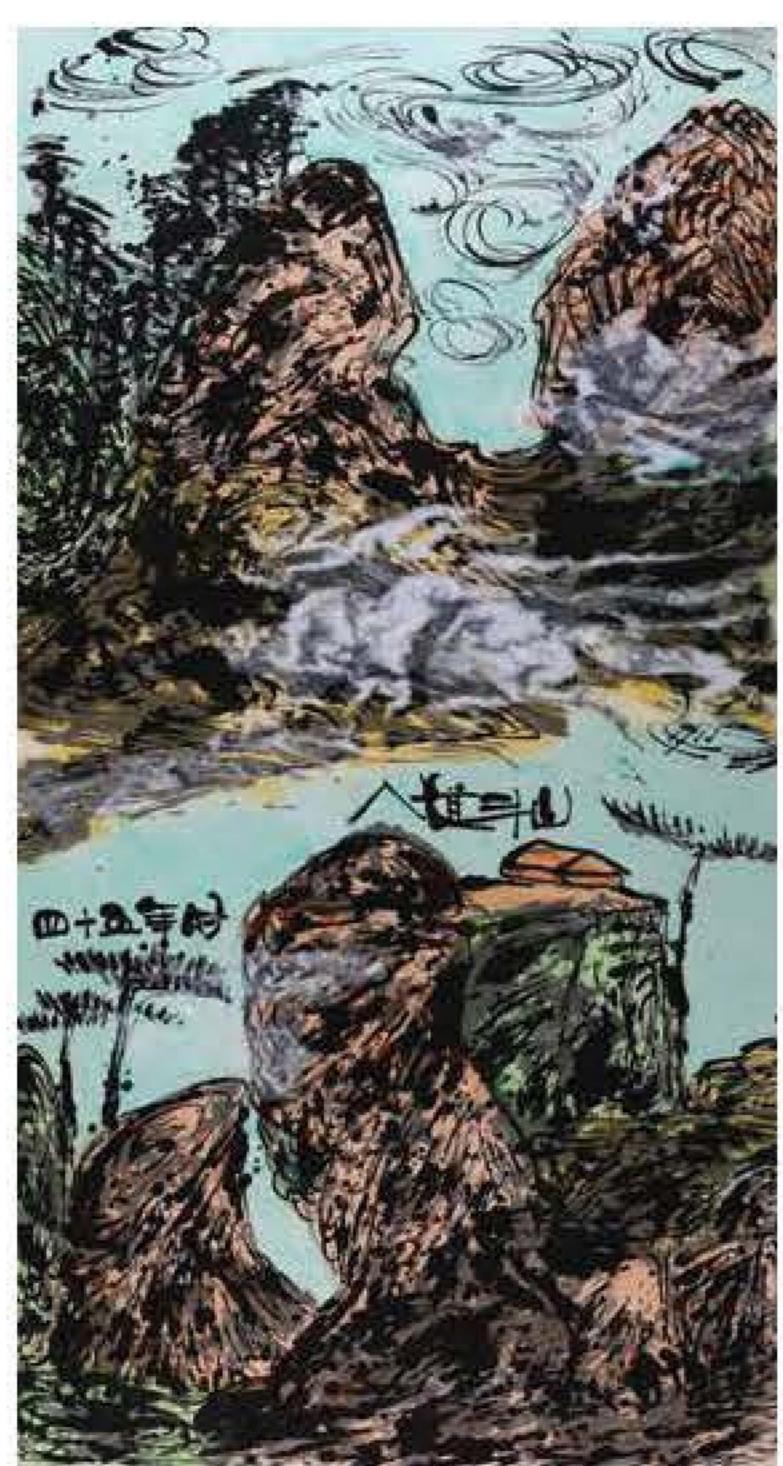


Fig 4 Untitled, Spiritual Mountains series, 2012, ink and colour on paper, mounted on silk, image: 70 x 38 in, Wesley Tongson Charitable Trust

he began a lifelong interest in Picasso's work and found inspiration by studying and exploring abstraction in his own work. The techniques that he learned at this time were influential in his later exploration of colour and splash ink techniques of the late 1980s and mid 1990s (fig 2). During this time, he also studied traditional ink painting with the renowned Shanghai painter Madame Gu Qingyao who, coincidentally had also taught the Hong Kong painter Huang Zhongfang (Harold Wong) who would become one of Tongson's other mentors once the young artist returned to Hong Kong in the early 1980s. One cannot overstate the spirituality importance





Fig 3 Untitled from the Spiritual Mountains series, 2012, ink on paper, 49 x 96 in, gift of Lilia and Kenneth Tongson

in Tongson's journey as an artist; he was a student of many forms of devotion, from the teachings of Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity to references to the natural world. Tongson's landscape paintings, which he considered to be the most difficult form of Chinese art, are frequently inscribed with his self-designated sobriquet (assumed name) 'Mountain Daoist' paintings from the Mountains series (fig 3 Mountains of Heaven Spiritual emphasise his connections to the spiritual.

In Tongson's own words: 'My Zen landscape paintings are neither worldly Zen nor otherworldly Zen, but otherworldly Zen of this world. This is a kind of personal practice of well-being. Someday I will go to another world in the West after death, the Western Heaven of ultimate bliss where all saints live. Since I have not abandoned my worldly troubles, I have to rely on my power of determination to enter the Western Heaven'.

Wesley Tongson was diagnosed with schizophrenia at age fifteen, and he wrestled with the demons of that disease for his whole life. His secretive work style, his compulsive need to paint, and finally his push to give up the intermediary of the brush and physically engage with ink and paper allowed him to merge himself with the painted image. 'Eccentrics' (this is the term used to translate *guai*, literally meaning 'strange' in Chinese) have been celebrated over a millennium in Chinese culture because, in their willingness to flout social conventions and expectations, they are thought to be able to create more freely. Thus, eccentricity is celebrated in Chinese art historical traditions. While some artists, such as Shitao, can be classified today as recluses or misanthropes, others like Xu Wei can now be seen to have been suffering from serious mental illness for which there was no treatment during their time. Mental illness and excessively heightened sensitivities have impacted artists across ages and cultures, as is and are vividly evident in the eccentric paintings of Shitao, who was regarded by his contemporaries as 'strange' and Xu Wei, who had a serious mental disorder. Both artists are represented in the exhibition by masterful works from the BAMPFA permanent collection.

In Tongson's final works in the Spiritual Mountains series he continues to vigorously paint large scale bold landscapes in black ink with his fingers and hands but remarkably returns to splashing bold and vibrant colours across the surface of the paintings (fig 4). This return to colour may mark another new direction for an artist who over his entire career continuously experimented with composition and techniques always pushing the limits of his mind and always interested in exploring new avenues of expression.

It is unusual for an artist of Wesley Tongson's talent to go largely unnoticed during his lifetime and it will likely be a revelation to many that this little-known artist produced such evocative and beautiful paintings.

 Spiritual Mountains, curated by Julia M White, Senior Curator for Asian Art, at BAMPFA, Berkeley, until 12 June, bampfa.org