

“Rebel as Creator: The Artistic Innovations of Liu Kuo-sung”  
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As the artist delicately pulls the fibers out of his paper, one by one, the crisp snows of the Himalayas arise vividly from a haze of black and gray ink. From this exposure of what lies underneath the painted surface ground, this removal of ink, emerge with miraculous clarity monumental mountain forms. Liu Kuo-sung’s work both evokes and denies the accomplishments of early masters of landscape painting, who created grand landscapes by painstakingly building up their texture strokes in ink. In the most literal sense, Liu Kuo-sung has mutilated his paper in a radical rejection of traditional painting techniques. This destructive gesture, however, has brought forth a series of new techniques, and a new landscape imagery that possesses a power and immediacy that may equal that of the great Chinese painters of the past. Liu Kuo-sung’s mountains, created by a modern man in an epoch of burgeoning science, share their universality with landscapes painted by Northern Song (960-1127) artists, who painted to capture the cosmic truths known from the philosophy of their own era in the form of mountains and streams that emulated the process of natural creation itself.

The young Liu Kuo-sung emerged in Taipei in the late 1950s as a rebel and a Westernizer, an artist who abandoned the traditional Chinese painting of his early artistic education in favor of modernist canvases. Within a few years of graduating from National Taiwan Normal University, he had helped establish the Fifth Moon Society, a group of iconoclastic painters in Taipei. In this role he fearlessly confronted critics who made dangerous claims that the Fifth Moon aesthetic rebellion was instead political subversion. In his own right, Liu Kuo-sung began to enjoy some international success as an oil painter, invited to join the Sao Paulo Biennial and to exhibit in Paris, among many other places.

This recognition opened the door to a career as a modernist painter in the Western definition of the term. Another painter might have taken an easier path, but Liu Kuo-sung’s ever-inventive spirit led him into another challenge. Dazzled by the power of the eleventh century landscape paintings newly exhibited in the temporary galleries of the National Palace Museum in Taichung, he was inspired to hold modernism up against China’s own artistic tradition. After two years of intense aesthetic struggle, in 1963 he emerged with newly invented techniques of making art and new purposes for creating it. The battle between modernism and Chinese painting had been fought, and what had survived was simultaneously art of both those worlds. Abstraction, a primary focus of his art and his theoretical writing, began to give way to the landscape, and canvas gave way to custom-made Chinese paper and ink. Over the subsequent decade, he exhibited and taught internationally and domestically, living for long periods in the U.S. and Europe. His work of the 1960s was bold, gestural, and self-expressive, in keeping with international trends of the time, but his use of Asian materials and formats and his return to the landscape as primary subject, marked his work as something different. Indeed, the seal that he adopted as the logo for his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday exhibition, reading “Dong xi nan bei ren (A man of East and West, South and North)” well sums up the trajectory of his life and art took beginning in this period. This seal both denies the limited claims of national borders on Liu Kuo-sung’s art and affirms his place in the post-war generation of artistic pioneers.

The cosmic aspirations of pre-modern Chinese landscape painting and philosophy and the scientific goals of contemporary society came vividly into focus for Liu Kuo-sung with the appearance of manned space travel. His landscape was transformed into moonscape, and hand in hand with new expressive concerns came new ways of applying ink, color, and imagery, painting with crumpled paper and anything but the brush. Indeed, in the decade of the 1970s, when he led the new Chinese landscape painting program at Chinese University of Hong Kong, he advocated eradicating the brush, or more precisely, eliminating use of the literati brush (*ge zhongfeng de ming*; literally: decapitating the centered brush). He had rejected the practice of copying, whether it be copying the ancient Chinese masters or parroting contemporary Western artistic fashions, and now sought to make ink paintings without conventional brushwork. From this fruitful skepticism were born a series of new ways of creating images. His inventiveness has continued into the new millennium, when the seventy-year-old artist created mesmerizing images of the rippling blue-green water of Jiuzhaigou on architect's drafting paper with a modified monoprint technique. The subtle coloristic effects seem more true to the actual experience of seeing this breathtaking site, both visual and psychological, than photography. Known as one of China's most important ink artists, in this body of late work he turns completely away from ink.

Liu Kuo-sung remains a rebel. He has challenged the art of the past, found fault with the art of the present, and even turned away from his own past work. He never lets go until he has discovered something new—not novelty for its own sake, but a solution to the expressive problem before him. For him, critique is a positive creative act, the first step in the birth of new techniques and new concepts. His genius for invention keeps his art always young. Equally important, it serves as a platform from which his students, well-represented in the current exhibition, may take their own leaps into realms as yet undiscovered.