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-Paul Pei Jen Hau

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Wooden sign with Mr. Hou Beiren's studio name.
Translation: *Old Apricot Hall*

For Paul Pei Jen Hau (also known as Hou Beiren), painting and having a pulse are equivalent. It's even more impressive considering he's living it out at the respectable age of 103.

His upcoming exhibit at the Silicon Valley Asian Art Center—*A Refined Pair: Lotus and Plum Blossom Painting*—will feature both Hau and his student of 10 years, Susan Chan. Both artists will show abstract expressionist oil paintings of two heavily symbolic flowers to Chinese culture. “Lotus grows from mud,” Hau says of the plants that float on the surface of ponds like an armada of delicate white boats. He pauses as he internally translates his native tongue into English. “After it grows up...very, very beautiful, very clear—like people. Doesn't matter what background they come from. When we grow up, everything clear with our spirit.”

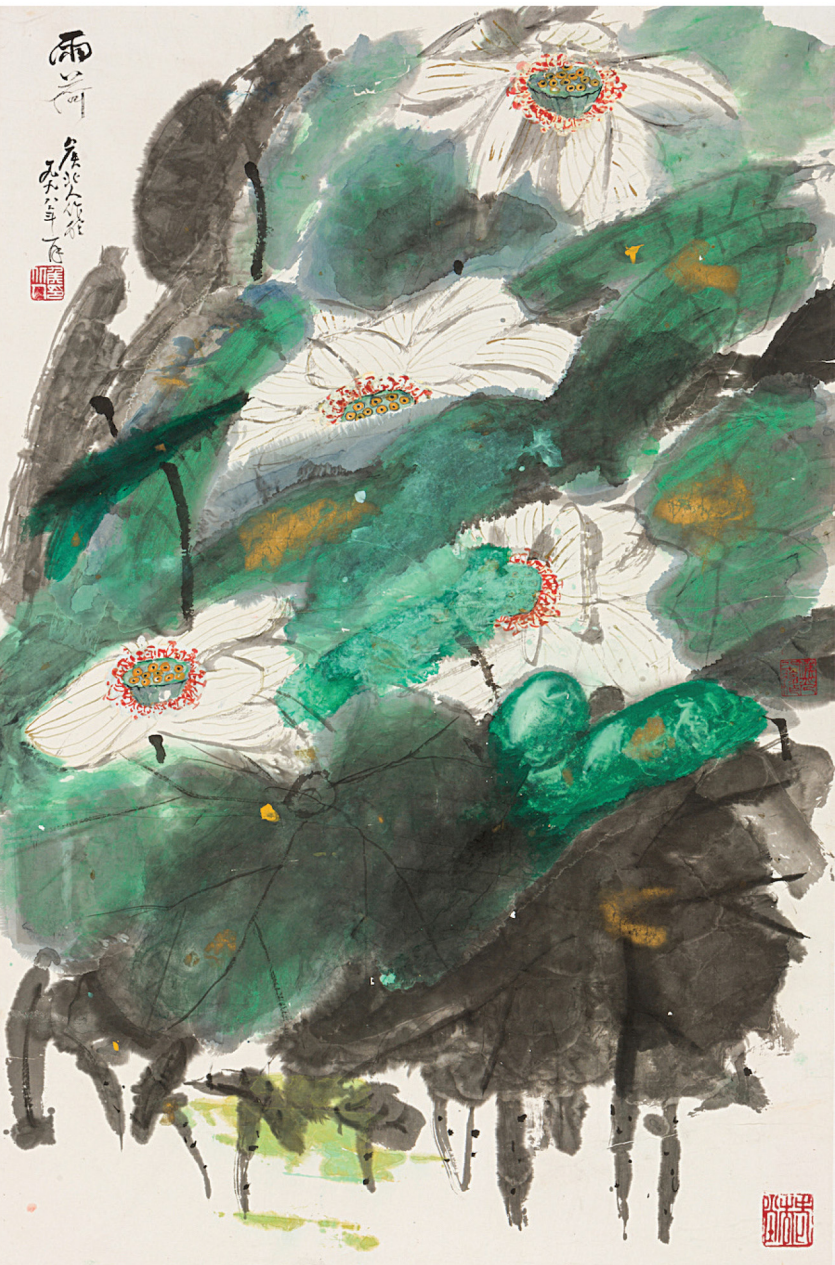
Following her teacher's explanation, Chan motions at the trees peeking through the back window. “Méihuā,” she calls them, explaining that plum trees flourish in the February chill, their tiny pink and white buds stippling across black branches like goosebumps. “All the [other] flowers are still sleeping, but [Méihuā] start to blossom,” she describes. It's nature's way of reminding us we can achieve grace and growth even through bleakest adversity. In fact, Hau identifies with these trees on such a level that he christened his Los Altos home and studio “The Thatched Adobe of 100 Plum Trees.”

An embodiment of both flowers, Hau minimizes his struggles throughout the conversation. When asked what it was like studying sociology and literature abroad in Japan during WWII, he smiles softly and summarizes, “Wartime was hard time. People's lives, very difficult. It was...chaotic. But after the war over, everyone go to peace.” Then he sits back and folds his hands.

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Exhibition:

A Refined Pair: Lotus and Plum Blossom Painting
December 15th to January 5th
Silicon Valley Asian Art Center
3777 Stevens Creek Blvd
Santa Clara, CA 95051
artshu.com





He's equally discreet about his experience during the communist takeover of most of mainland China (the result of an intense civil war) as well as his strategic choice to move to the British-colonized territory of Hong Kong. And he dedicates all of two sentences to the transition of moving to the United States in the '50s after our country lifted the Chinese Exclusion Act—an almost certainly jarring transition, considering the culture shock. “Little bit of tough time,” Hau states simply. “I could not speak English.”

He's quiet about his accomplishments, too, though he's achieved many. Over his lifetime, Hau's art has found its way into the National Art Museum of China, the Nanjing Museum, the Liaoning Provincial Museum, and—a little closer to home—the de Young Museum. He founded the American Society for the Advancement of Chinese Arts (ASACA) to promote Chinese art in the States and explore the integration of Eastern and Western art styles. There's an art museum in Kunshan, China, that bears his name. And he's made considerable contributions to contemporary Chinese painting.

Hau continues the Chinese tradition of applying a poem directly to the painting's canvas in beautiful, swooping calligraphy—a way of expressing his perspective and feelings about the piece. However, he transfigures the minimalistic colors of traditional art by exchanging black-ink-heavy designs with rich mineral-based paint. “He started a color revolution,” Chan affirms.

She is one of hundreds upon hundreds of art students who have trained under Hau—some seeking his guidance for decades. A time-honored tradition in China, the student-master relationship extends far beyond the wizened kung fu practitioner and young trainee you've seen in movies. The legacy of passing one's knowledge on to the next generation spans many spheres, including art. Hau himself studied under Chinese masters Huang Binhong and Zheng Shiqiao. A teacher must cultivate the potential of his students—a little like the master sculptor must transform raw rocks into intricate new shapes.

For this reason, Chan's style continues to mirror Hau's own—even though her work is featured at well-known art museums and she resides as the current ASACA president. “My teacher is here, so I have to listen,” she affirms. “So when you look at [our paintings], it might seem like they're pretty much the same. But inside, they are not the same.”

And although the vivid colors of both artists bloom across canvas, each favors different hues. Chan herself gravitates toward reds and greens, green for the grassy highlands of Malaysia where she grew up, red for its association with good luck. Hau motions at a painting with white over reds and yellows—swaths of color that signify the clouds and the mountain overlooking his own hometown in the Liaoning Province.

“Each person moves the brush...different spirit, different style, different way,” Hau adds. The two of them are like the lotus and the plum blossom: as different as if one floated serenely on the surface of the water and the other embraced the sky from tree branches, yet intrinsically similar in their desire to display beauty. 