

Luis Chan
Fantasy Landscape

8 Bury Street London SW1Y
19 March – 27 April 2024
Private view: Tuesday 19 March, 6-8pm

Sadie Coles HQ presents a solo exhibition of works on paper by the late artist Luis Chan (1905-1995). Chan began painting in the late 1920s in Hong Kong and emerged as a pivotal figure of 20th-century Chinese art. Born in Panama in 1905 to Cantonese parents, Chan settled in Hong Kong with his family in 1910 and developed his practice as a landscape painter and watercolourist. By the 1950s however, he had begun experimenting with other styles and mediums, influenced by a wide range of international avant-gardes, leading to his abandonment of orthodox styles completely by the 1960s in favour of more introspective and psychological landscapes. This shift was born in the ferment of the political, social and economic changes taking place at the time in Hong Kong, and while we are never able to see an explicit commentary on such events, Chan's work exposes the subconscious of a city undergoing huge transformations. Chan's canvases, having metamorphosed into surreal dreamscapes, used a psychedelic vocabulary to effectively map the collective mind of his hometown during a period of great upheaval. This mapping continued in the 1970s and 80s, typified by the works presented here at Bury Street, all produced from between 1972 and 1986.



Such a remarkable transformation delineates a clear contrast between his early and later works. These two decades sit firmly in the second half of the artist's career and speak to a period characterised by rapid urbanisation, cultural experimentation and the convergence of Eastern and Western influences. It was against this backdrop that Chan transitioned from a landscape artist to what might be described as psycho-geographic mapper. He certainly had contemporaries who were influential in articulating this moment in history, too, but Chan was a singular figure who stood out as exemplary in this historical moment. The work resonated with the zeitgeist and cultural feeling of his own time, and while the political context engendered important questions surrounding cultural identity, tradition and modernisation, Chan somehow transcended his peers' tendencies toward ideological allegiance – liberating himself into a world of fantasy and social allegory.

While mainland China saw a resurgence of traditional folk-art movements aimed at reviving cultural heritage under socialism, some artists in Hong Kong found themselves alternatively embracing Western artistic conventions. However, Chan stood apart, and his works from this time reveal multiple layers of existence; from celestial realms to subterranean depths, they are populated by humans, animals, Buddhas, demons, ghosts and fairies. A fantastical universe as a mirror to reality, reflecting Chan's profound psychological insight. In these works, from the 1970s and 1980s, the diverse geography of Hong Kong is unmistakably present. Often structured like exaggerated cross-sections that vertically reveal the heavens, the earth, and the sea, their attendant populations reflect the multifaceted complexity of urban life, blending elements of East and West, old and new, into a mythological tapestry that defies categorisation.

With titles such as *Untitled (Fantasy Landscape with White Rhinoceros)* (1972), *Untitled (Life Under a Tri-coloured Flag)* (1986), *Untitled (Fantasy Landscape with Seabirds, Animals and Rose)* (1972) and *Untitled (Figures with Golden Waves)* (1984), the works construct a mythical universe that infuses the mundane with meaning in sometimes unnerving ways. This is done with a sense of playfulness and humour that belies the significance of its observation and critique, aided, not least of all, by Chan's innovative approach to colour. His introduction of such a vibrant spectrum in his 1970s and 80s works revolutionised traditional artistic conventions. Understanding the profound link between colour and emotion, Chan's hues invoke reaction, not only to elicit feelings of intrigue and fun, but also an uneasiness that points to the possibility that parallel readings can be unearthed. And it is precisely in this visual dissonance between the fantastical and the mundane, between the content and its uncanny, colourful form, between the painting's subjects and the worlds they inhabit, that truths can be found in the seemingly trivial. In showing us a world, slightly untethered from its own reality, Chan shows us the reality of the world contending with its post-war moment and possible futures.

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