Spiritual Mountains
The Art of Wesley Tongson
January 12 to June 12, 2022

University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA)

Organized by Julia M. White, BAMPFA's former Senior Curator of Asian Art, with the support of Associate Curator Stephanie Cannizzo and independent curator Rosaline Kyo.

The exhibition is supported in part by the Asian Art Endowment Fund and the Wesley Tongson Charitable Trust.

Spiritual Mountains
The Art of Wesley Tongson
The Art of Wesley Tongson beautifully represents the type of exhibition uniquely suited to BAMPFA. Our strength in historical Chinese landscape paintings from the renowned James Cahill Collection is displayed with the generous gift of eleven contemporary paintings by Wesley Tongson from the Wesley Tongson Charitable Trust. *Spiritual Mountains* introduces our audiences to a groundbreaking view of Tongson’s innovative ink paintings, alongside historical examples of great Chinese landscape paintings from the Qing and Ming dynasties, which he closely studied and emulated before charting his own path as an artist from the 1980s to 2000s. The past always informs the present, yet few museums are able to present such a dynamic intergenerational dialogue within their galleries. Beautifully curated by former Senior Curator of Asian Art Julia White as her BAMPFA swan song, this exhibition is an insightful, thoughtful look at Tongson’s work, which certainly merits further study and greater awareness by curators and scholars across the United States.

In addition, *Spiritual Mountains* reflects BAMPFA’s commitment to showing more of the museum’s collections — which total more than 25,000 artworks and 18,000 films and videos — and our ongoing research into historical and contemporary art from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. I am most thankful to Julia White, Rosaline Kyo, and BAMPFA Trustee Cynthia Tongson for their dedication to this exhibition and for seamlessly interweaving the past and the present, in so many ways in this project, with a spirit of possibility.

Julie Rodrigues Widholm
Executive Director, BAMPFA
When Julia White first brought up her idea of an exhibition combining Wesley’s works with the historical works from BAMPFA’s esteemed Chinese painting collection, I thought it was a perfect idea because Wesley’s works are so tied to tradition. Although he took his work in a contemporary direction, he never left tradition behind.

Introduction by Cynthia Tongson

Wesley started painting when he was seventeen, ten years after he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. He took to it well and it became his life; it was his one true love. He dedicated the rest of his life to working relentlessly at his art — he would set goal after goal, pushing boundaries that resulted in many breakthroughs. His passion for ink led him to explore various ways he could work with the medium, creating many different styles and techniques.
When Wesley first took up Chinese painting in 1974, it was in a manner inspired by the Chinese literati style (wenren hua). Highly influenced by Zhang Daqian, whom he greatly admired, Wesley started to experiment with colors and splashed ink while living in Canada (1977–81) and attending Ontario College of Art. At the same time, he studied Chinese brush painting with Madame Gu Qingyao (1896–1978).

Upon his return to Hong Kong in 1981, Wesley studied with Huang Zhongfang (Harold Wong) (1943–2022), who was taught by Madame Gu. From these two teachers, Wesley received solid traditional training. However, his deep desire to form his own style prompted him to increasingly experiment with creating a bridge between East and West.

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1. **Scholars with a Qin-Zither in a Misty Landscape**
   - **1965**
   - **Ink and color on gold paper**
   - **Zhang Daqian**
   - **China, 1889–1983**
   - **Rustic Studio Collection**

2. **Sound of the Waterfall**
   - **1993**
   - **Ink and color on paper**
   - **Huang Zhongfang**
   - **China, 1943–2022**
   - **lived in Hong Kong**
   - **BAMPFA collection, anonymous gift in honor of Lila and Kenneth Tongson**

3. **Toronto Painting 6**
   - **1980**
   - **Ink and color on paper**
   - **Wesley Tongson**
   - **Hong Kong, 1957–2012**
   - **J. Chan Collection**
During his active years, from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, Wesley was best known for his splashed ink works, a technique he perfected from years of practice, well into the mid-2000s. In 1982 Wesley took a course with Liu Guosong (born 1932), who not only taught him the basics of non-brush techniques, but also opened his mind to explore the many ways he could create without a brush.

After 1995 Wesley rarely showed his works in public. He later became more withdrawn. Few people knew how he progressed as an artist. Hints of finger painting appeared as early as 2001, while he was still making splashed ink works. Around the mid-2000s, feeling stagnant, Wesley decided to take on a new direction. He returned to the brush, making black-and-white paintings, in stark contrast, with the subjects peeking through black backgrounds. For the next few years, Wesley continued to explore in this direction, abandoning colors, though the black became less dominant. This new direction was the transition and prelude to abandoning the brush all together.

From 2009 until his death in 2012, at age fifty-four, Wesley virtually ceased using the brush. He always said he could not express well on a small scale; his works from this period are either six or eight feet tall. Wesley worked with his hands, fingers, and fingernails, placing nothing between himself and the paper. These works are powerful and spiritual, full of energy and movement. With his finger paintings, Wesley had found his own voice, his unique expression. At the end of his mature period, Wesley brought colors back to his finger paintings. He was on the cusp of something new.
In one of Wesley’s personal notes, he talked about three points that made his work unique: “the Qing brushstroke,” “pulling distance,” and “Tongson’s colors.” Some of his brushstrokes can be traced to those of the Qing master painters. I remember Wesley talking about the Qing masters he revered: Bada Sharen and the Four Monks of the late Ming to early Qing dynasties. Of the Four Monks, Wesley respected Shitao the most. Wesley looked to these Qing master painters as teachers and was highly influenced by them. Calligraphy was also important to Wesley; it was a spiritual and physical practice for him.

“Pulling distance,” or adding volume and depth to his paintings, was important to Wesley from his early days as an artist. He was highly influenced by the Cubism of Pablo Picasso, the Western artist Wesley admired the most. Wesley wrote that he wanted to find a way to take the idea of Cubism in an Eastern direction, showing another facet of the style. Through texturing, he managed to “pull distance,” giving his subjects a three-dimensional feel. The textured patterns of the ridges, rock folds, and valley clefts in his paintings draw the viewer in. Wesley achieved these strokes by using non-brush techniques or his fingers for rocks and mountains. He also used colors to “pull distance.”

Wesley preferred to use bold and bright colors instead of the more muted, traditional colors of Chinese landscapes. Sometimes the colors reflected his mood. When Wesley lived in Toronto, he started to experiment with a range of bold colors. He might have been influenced by Western painting. With his splashed ink landscapes, the colors he used for the sky were often intense. He used colors to add layers and dimensions to his landscapes, and they became more alive.

Early on, Wesley understood that to elevate his art to a higher level, he had to transcend himself from within. This was what painting from the heart meant to him. From the 1990s onward, his spiritual journey toward Zen-based enlightenment became inseparable from his artistic expression. He referred to his landscape paintings as “mountain and water Zen” (shanshui chan). By 2009 “Mountain Daoist” (Shandou Daoren) became his sobriquet. He wrote in an undated note, referring to himself as middle-aged, that “flowing from a world beyond” best described the origin of my landscape and Zen paintings.” Wesley recognized that art and religion shared a deep connection. For his spiritual quest, he explored different religious practices, including Christianity, Buddhism, and Daoism.

Wesley considered landscape painting to be the highest accomplishment of Chinese art — and the most difficult to master. He devoted most of his energies to mastering the form, particularly
Spiritual Mountains debuts remarkable paintings and calligraphy by the under-recognized 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 utilizing 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 permanent collection, demonstrating the link between the past and the contemporary world. Included here are paintings by artists who were influential in Tongson’s development as an artist, such as 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.

Tongson started painting at the age of seventeen, first exploring the art of calligraphy and then branching out into painting in the traditional ink and brush style of the literati tradition in China. His boldly executed landscape paintings follow the basic principles of the great tradition, exploring the natural world through multiple perspectives, layering ink to create solid natural environs, and adhering to a purity of painterly form that expresses an essential, nearly spiritual force. Tongson and those who influenced him, from teachers to past masters, helped to define a new, internationally aware direction in Chinese art of the twenty-first century. In addition to landscape painting, Tongson created dramatic and expressive works of calligraphy and flower paintings that employ traditional techniques that link his work to traditions long admired in Chinese painting.

Julia M. White
Former Senior Curator of Asian Art, BAMPFA

I truly admire my brother’s dedication to his art. He never conformed, never settled. He did not care about trends or marketability. This allowed his mind to be completely free, so he could always follow his instincts and paint from his heart. Wesley had many struggles in life. I believe his art was the good that came out of his affliction. It gave him purpose and became his greatest achievement.

Cynthia Tongson
Sister of Wesley Tongson

mountainscapes. He often said the colors of the sky in his paintings were not from this world; he was depicting the heavenly domain. His alluring landscapes manifest the traditional Chinese philosophy of the “unity between heaven and man” (tianren heyi).

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Julia M. White
Former Senior Curator of Asian Art, BAMPFA
Inspiration

One cannot overstate the importance of spirituality in Tongson’s journey as an artist; he was a student of many forms of devotion, from the teachings of Buddhism, Daoism, and 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” (Shandou Daoren), while his paintings from the Spiritual Mountains and Mountains of Heaven series emphasize his connections to the spiritual.

“My Zen landscape paintings are neither about 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
The words ethereal and otherworldly best describe Tongson’s brilliant Mountains of Heaven series. The floating color planes juxtaposed with touches of ink mysteriously combine to form a meaningful landscape of the mind. Tongson was famously secretive about his process, so little is known about the techniques he employed to create this fantasyland of color and form.

Wesley Tongson
Hong Kong, 1957–2012
BAMPFA collection, gift of Lilia and Kenneth Tongson

The great modern master Zhang Daqian’s work inspired Tongson with its splashed ink and color landscapes, providing the younger artist with a new direction in his technical development. In this landscape, Zhang dissolved the distinction between brush and ink painting and allowed for a spontaneity in approach, application, and composition unlike anything seen before in traditional Chinese ink painting. Both Zhang and Tongson looked to the early Qing master Shitao for inspiration.

Although Tongson never studied directly with Zhang, the master’s presence would have loomed large over Tongson, who clearly wished to explore new forms of expression through splashed ink compositions. Zhang’s mastery of the form in the 1960s resulted in a distinctive approach that multiplied his success on an international scale previously unheard of for a modern Chinese artist. However successful this approach was for Zhang’s career, the technique was actually largely the result of his diminishing eyesight.

Zhang Daqian
China, 1889–1983
Rustic Studio Collection

Scholars with a Qin-Zither in a Misty Landscape
1965
Ink and color on gold paper

Zhang Daqian
China, 1889–1983
Rustic Studio Collection

Verdure of Spring Mountains
1973
Ink and color on gold paper

Zhang Daqian
China, 1889–1983
Rustic Studio Collection
A mountain range, carefully constructed through the use of ink resists, emerges between two bands of freely splashed blue, violet, and jewel green color, creating an otherworldly yet photographic landscape. As Tongson once told his sister, he wished to splash ink to the point that his paintings looked like photographs, and he continually experimented with different techniques to achieve the illusion of dark contrasts and shadows usually found in the optical focus and clarity of photographic images.

The monumentality of the painting Slope, an early experiment with resists to create mountain ranges that are contrasted with colorful splashed ink skies, overwhelms the viewer, as Tongson searched for the balance of textures and abstraction of forms that he would achieve in his later Scudding Clouds, Misty Peaks (1996) and Untitled (2001).
Spiritual Mountains was the last series Tongson embarked upon before his passing. After using only ink monochrome since the early 2000s, the artist returned to the use of colored ink and the splash technique, which he combined with his monochrome experimentation with finger and hand painting. In these monumental works, fantastical peaks and mountain landscapes, dynamic and writhing, evoke the changeable essence of the environment while on the precipice of disintegrating abstraction. Tongson’s arrangement of compositional elements reflects his close study of earlier Chinese paintings and their mastery of compositional balance. As seen in Untitled (2012) and Spiritual Mountains 6 (2012), Tongson sandwiched splashed ink between layers of ink monochrome paintings to create a unique depth and texture that built upon the techniques of the twentieth-century master Zhang Daqian. Spiritual Mountains is the culmination of Tongson’s varied experimental phases, including splashed ink, studies in tonality, finger/hand painting, and the use of resists to manifest unpredictable textures.

Mountain Range
Wesley Tongson
Hong Kong, 1957–2012
Wesley Tongson Charitable Trust

Completed just three years after Slope (1990), this painting’s layering of controlled wet washes, splashed ink, and resist applications creates a nuanced scene, with silhouettes of distant, fading forests at the upper left and miniature valleys and ravines manifest between mountain peaks.

Landscape

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Teachers and Mentors

Traditional Chinese painting emphasizes the importance of learning from the past through studying, copying, and imitation, and in turn, finding one’s own voice or style. Tongson had several important influences in his development as an artist: the Shanghai-born artist Madame Gu Qingyao, the Taiwanese painter Liu Guosong, and the Hong Kong artist and connoisseur Harold Wong (Huang Zhongfang). Works by Liu and Wong are included in this gallery.

In his writings, Tongson said he was fascinated with the work of the early Qing artist Shitao, and some of his expressive, almost naive natural forms appear to spring from his understanding of and association with that artist’s works. Through his days of study in Ontario and his own explorations of Western art, Tongson also felt a strong connection with Pablo Picasso and strove to understand through his own paintings the principles of abstraction.

“I believe that artistic creation requires purity, passion, and integrity; without which no good work of art can ever be produced.”

Wesley Tongson
The marbled ink play in this painting creates textures like those seen in Tongson’s Slope (1990) and Mountain Range (1993), from the same period, yet there is a clearer parallel between this work and Zhang Daqian’s Scholars with a Qin-Zither in a Misty Landscape (1965) in this gallery: In both works, ink is manipulated to suggest a primordial, swirling substance from which the main subjects emerge.

A central tenet of Liu Guosong’s work is his marked experimentation with materials and techniques. In this tall landscape, the artist painted with ink and color on a very long-fibered paper, which he then pulled threads out of and manipulated to create negative spaces within the composition. Tongson attended a workshop that Liu taught in Hong Kong and may have been inspired by his bold experiments.

“Fifth Moon artists have borrowed the fire from abstractionism to light the lamp of modern Chinese Painting . . . to further pioneer the spirit of nonrealism and to revive the spirit of non-reality and fantasy, which was the basis of much traditional Chinese art.”

— Fong Chung-Ray

The artist Fong Chung-Ray, a member of the influential Taiwanese Fifth Moon Group along with Liu Guosong, also experimented with abstraction and color-field painting. Adopting Western Abstract Expressionism, combined with rigorous traditional training, Fong creates art that is characterized by its innovative expression.
The Taiwanese artist Ho Kan, a lifelong friend of Liu Guosong, was trained in Chinese ink and Western painting techniques and has led the movement toward abstraction among modern Taiwanese artists. He was a founding member of the Taiwanese Ton-Fan group, whose members became known as “outlaws” for their insistence on pushing the limits of painting. Ho lived and worked in Milan, Italy, for many years and developed a unique style that combined abstraction and symbolism, demonstrating a transnational approach. While Tongson turned to splashed ink and experimented with painting with his hands and fingers, Ho’s ink experimentations deploy an understanding of the wetness and dryness of the ink brush in their swiftly applied feibai (flying white) strokes, which echo Shitao’s gestural strokes in Lotus (1704) (in the adjacent gallery).

This boldly abstract work confirms Tongson’s admiration for the Western modern art movements Surrealism and Cubism, as well as his fascination with emulating past Chinese masters like Shitao. His exploration into this process of abstraction was short-lived, and he produced only a few works like this extreme and daring composition. This careful tonal study of fluid, amorphous shapes that fold into one another evokes Shitao’s own play with ink tonality, as seen in his painting of lotus leaves and blossoms included in the next gallery.
Harold Wong was best known as a connoisseur of traditional Chinese painting, but throughout the 1990s, he actively pursued the craft of painting in the style of old masters. Wong was Tongson’s mentor beginning in the 1980s and had a profound influence on Tongson’s use of brush and ink, as in this dense rendition of a natural landscape. The overlapping brushstrokes of both ink and color give Wong’s work a depth of field that Tongson also attempted in Untitled (2001).

Tongson’s affinity for the early Qing painter Shitao stemmed largely from his appreciation for the master’s ability to capture the very essence of the natural world. Unfettered by conventions, Shitao struck a note of simplicity and authenticity in his depiction of the surroundings of China’s former capital, Nanking, which was also his home before he fled into the mountains to escape the political and social unrest of the disintegrating Ming dynasty. As a member of the family of the fallen Ming dynasty, Shitao had little choice but to retreat from the life of a scholar. He became a Buddhist monk and later an ardent Daoist, traits that Tongson found very appealing.
Creativity

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. Eccentricity is highly valued in Chinese art historical traditions. Indeed, “eccentrics” (the term used to translate guai, literally meaning “strange” in Chinese) have been celebrated for more than 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. While some artists like 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 life.

“I have to be clear with myself that I was born in a male body with a woman’s heart inside. It is extremely difficult to resolve this in life. If I keep on pursuing, I will only reach a dead end. I should let go of this problem and give up (the pursuit). This is my only way out. I have to observe Buddha’s teaching and the way of ink.”

Weedley Tongson
Though Tongson was highly influenced by his teacher Harold Wong, who in turn took inspiration from Huang Binhong’s staccato clusters of ink dots, Tongson chose to push beyond both Huang’s and Wong’s approaches. Splashed colors layered between lighter strokes of ink and darker sinews applied with Tongson’s fingers and other tools bring a dimensionality to his landscape painting that creates volume in a different way than Binhong’s layered, short dots of ink. He applied his own version of “long hemp-fiber strokes” (chang pima cun), which has been a common way of forming landmasses in landscape painting since the Yuan dynasty (fourteenth century). Rather than creating light, dry brush marks, however, Tongson splashed linear, dramatic strokes (as in the upper-right peak) and vertical, drizzled waves of ink (as in the upper-left peak) to push beyond received traditions in one of his last major works.

As a Ming loyalist during the Ming-Qing transition (1644), Gong Xian became an exiled painter. Many of his landscapes are ominous: though seeming to portray tranquil scenes, the varying tonalities of his brushstrokes also intimate billowing smoke that could dissipate at any moment. The influence of Gong’s short brushstrokes can be found in both Huang Binhong’s and Harold Wong’s landscapes. Tongson’s paintings from the Spiritual Mountains series emulate Gong’s suggestion of tumultuous, threatening skies, albeit through a layering of colorful splashed ink.
Eccentricity among artists is not a modern invention but was a part of Chinese tradition. The close association between creativity and a heightened mental state is exemplified by the Ming painter Xu Wei. His biography reveals a man consumed by eccentricities that landed him in prison and nearly destroyed his life. His great talent and recognition of his genius by officials of the regime saved him and allowed him to continue painting in what today would be considered the genre of performance art.

“In life, I would not grow melons outside the Qing gate [to lead the life of a recluse], I wish I could carry the lingering sweetness [of the melon] to far away Lingnan.”

In Chinese mythology, Zhong Kui is known as the demon queller who vanquishes ghosts and evil spirits. This remarkably expressive work of the early Qing period by Gao Qipei projects the power and dynamism of the legendary figure. The inscription on the painting explains that the artist used his fingers and hands to paint the over-life-size image. Chinese painters who, like Tongson, wished for more direct expression in their work were celebrated as “eccentrics” and admired as innovators.
Tongson deeply revered the work of Shitao, the monk painter who went into reclusion and retreat upon the fall of the Ming dynasty. Shitao’s willingness to experiment with traditional materials is on full display in this rendition of a lotus flower. He expressionistically tackled the inherent energy of the plant by flinging ink onto the paper and allowing the image to flow into the inscription in a radically different manner than the traditional method of carefully rendered characters separate from the floral composition.

“A common subject of paintings by scholar/amateur artists, the pine tree is one of the “Three Friends of Winter,” along with bamboo and plum blossoms, all plants that thrive through the harshest winter conditions. In this painting, the contrasts between Tongson’s loose, light ink applications and dark feibai (flying white) brushstrokes echo Shitao’s approach in Lotus (1704).”

Lotus
1704
Hanging scroll: ink on paper

Shitao
China, 1642–1718
BAMPFA collection, purchase made possible through a gift from an anonymous donor

“Within ink-blots, black blots, Blossoms and leaves extend from clumps of black ink. See if you can trace the brush through the inky mist, Where the waves crest and turn without end.”
Although not titled as such, this work can be interpreted as an image of a seated Buddha whose whole being is radiating beams of energy and light. It is a remarkable work of great energy painted with the artist’s hands and fingers.

Wesley Tongson
Hong Kong, 1957-2012
BAMPFA collection, gift of Lilia and Kenneth Tongson

“The challenge I’ve set for myself is to create landscapes in classical mode, using techniques and materials that would have been available to Chinese painters as early as the tenth century. I don’t include specific references to time, such as figures, and only include generic houses, purposely wanting to make them non-specific in time. The response I seek from the viewer is that the work has the look and feel of an old master painting. And yet, one can’t point to any specific image or artist that I am copying. In other words, my paintings are based on traditional brushwork, structure, composition, techniques I’ve learned through years and years of studying old paintings, but I’m now taking all of that experience and melding it into my personal vision of landscape.”

— Arnold Chang, Embracing Tradition: Ink Landscapes, 2006

Inspired to learn to paint after seeing a painting by Zhang Daqian at a young age, Arnold Chang received classical training in both painting and connoisseurship from renowned collectors such as James Cahill at UC Berkeley and C. C. Wang (Wang Jiqian) in New York City. Chang’s careful study of past works is demonstrated through compositional choices, brushwork, and subject matter. His commitment to composing timeless works conveys his own belief that in Chinese ink painting, there should not be any distinction between the traditional and the contemporary.
Classical Chinese ink painters drew from their knowledge and mastery of calligraphy — its strokes, rhythms, and movements — to first study the depiction of bamboo before moving on to more complex subject matter, such as plums, pines, and landscapes. The strokes for depicting bamboo are taken directly from the main strokes that compose classical Chinese calligraphy. Both Tongson’s sister and his longtime friends have commented on the artist’s continued practice of painting bamboo in ink monochrome, while he experimented with different techniques for other subject matter. Though seemingly simple, Tongson’s bamboo compositions showcase the artist’s art historical understanding of both calligraphy and painting. He effortlessly transferred such knowledge to his monumental paintings of flowers and rocks, completed through finger painting.
The calligraphy reads: “Calligraphy and literary knowledge has attained the state of perfection.”

Wu Changshi — an antiquarian seal carver, calligrapher, and minor government official — turned his attention to painting only in his midlife. Fascinated by and heavily invested in the study of antique scripts on pre-Han bronzes and earthenware, Wu transferred his knowledge of seal script calligraphy to his flower paintings, as can be seen in his use of broad, thick brushstrokes in this painting. The brushstrokes depicting the wisteria’s vines and flowers are written more than painted, never losing their calligraphic origin.

Xu Gu approached his subject much like the European Impressionists: he attempted to depict the world as he saw it, with an emotional directness and painterly immediacy that is compelling and charming in its naiveté. A former army officer, he became disillusioned with that world and rejected the conformity it demanded. His use of color as ink adds to the uniqueness of his paintings. Like Tongson, he retreated from the harsh world around him and immersed himself in his artistic pursuit.
Wesley Tongson, Hong Kong, 1957–2012

**Calligraphy 3**
2009
Ink on paper
BAMPFA collection, gift of Lilia and Kenneth Tongson

Tongson used his fingers to compose this calligraphic work of highly stylized characters with elongated horizontal brushstrokes and dramatic, rich brushstrokes contrasted with stark, dry sweeps—a contemporary take on the feibai (flying white) brushstrokes found in Shitao’s paintings. The style has been called “lines and dots” and has a very distinctive nailhead shape. This technique can also be found in Tongson’s 1998 painting of bamboo in this gallery. The calligraphy reads: “A loyal heart, being the strongest and bravest, brings forth righteousness. A noble spirit, fostering brotherhood, exemplifies the essence of kindness.” This couplet is installed in the Kwan Tai Temple in Sham Shui Po, Hong Kong.

**Orchid 1**
2010
Ink on paper
BAMPFA collection, gift of Lilia and Kenneth Tongson

This large painting of orchids and rocks exemplifies Tongson’s ability to allude to both macrocosms and microcosms. From afar, the composition could be mistaken for a monumental landscape painting of a waterfall among lofty peaks, but upon drawing closer, the viewer finds vibrant sprays of foliage among the layered, tonally dense masses of rock. Tongson was a true master of arranging compositional elements, and this work reflects his careful studies of earlier Chinese paintings to reach this level of spontaneity and speed. Fittingly, the seal on this painting can be translated, “Dancing and singing with brush and ink.”
Tongson’s plum blossoms draw on innovative ink works from the Qing dynasty, like Wu Changshi’s and Li Fangying’s works, to further push the boundaries of the medium and genre. A surprising, monumental format for a subject usually depicted in small, intimate album leaves or fans, Untitled (Plum) is also notable for the way the ink dances across the paper, turning suddenly and unexpectedly to point with staccato dots of ink.

With just a few brushstrokes, Wu Changshi showcased his ability to manipulate ink, brush, and compositional elements to depict plum blossoms emerging at the end of winter. This monochrome painting, reaching beyond the borders of the paper, is reminiscent of earlier artists’ images capturing fleeting moments in nature, like those in Li Fangying’s album of flowers, also in this section of the exhibition. Tongson’s Untitled (Plum) (2011), though painted with his fingers, draws from this long history of artists who pushed beyond compositional borders to capture moments in time.

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Though ink paintings were overshadowed by large socialist realist oil paintings during China’s socialist era (1949–76), Cheng Shifa continued to use ink as his main medium to create illustrations and paintings, especially of ethnic minority subjects in China. Perhaps his enthusiastic use of red and his decision to depict ethnic minorities in perfect harmony helped to mitigate his choice of a medium that was politically out of favor. His abstracted but engaging depictions of sheep embody the tradition of ink artists abbreviating forms through simple brushstrokes.

LI Fangying, known as one of the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, worked in several governmental posts during the Qing Yongzheng emperor’s reign. As a scholar/amateur painter, Li painted mostly in ink monochrome and continued to develop the groundbreaking approaches of the late Ming and early Qing period eccentrics. Li’s control of ink tones and viscosity comes through in his quick paintings of a chrysanthemum, orchids, and rocks and flowers.
Compared to the more conventional painting of bamboo in this gallery by Zhu Sheng, a Ming-Qing artist who specialized in bamboo and orchid paintings, Tongson’s experimental approach to ink, especially in his choice of application tools, allowed him to push beyond calligraphic traditions. Dynamic, gestural strokes suggest barely recognizable bamboo leaves and stalks, letting the viewer enjoy his innovative approach to the genre.