

Figuration and abstraction find balance in the paintings of **Calvin Chih Hao Teng**.

by Susan Byrnes

FLUID NATURE

Viewing a painting by Calvin Chih Hao Teng is like seeing two distinct works of art in one. Stand close, and the work is full of texture, with fluid lines merging into larger organic shapes, flecks and splashes of color. Soft mists of white obscure faint forms adjacent to bold, high-contrast strokes. Stand at a distance, and the painting becomes a sweeping vista of jagged peaks emerging from dense clouds.

Teng's vistas radiate an authenticity equal to realistic depictions of actual landscapes, but they're entirely abstract, emanating from the painter's imagination. "My work, which is heavily inspired by nature, is figurative, yet abstract," says Teng.

AMBIGUOUS NATURE

The artist's rural studio lies in a peaceful mountain area near Taichung, Taiwan. "I can't live in the city," he says. "It possesses too many distractions, and most importantly, it's too distant from Mother Nature, the main source of my creative inspiration."

Teng's compositions, often highly suggestive of landscape forms, intentionally leave ample room for the viewer's imagination. With their ethereal spaces and mesmerizing textures, his paintings emphasize a poetic approach to composition and mark-making—from the grand gesture to the most delicate detail. Teng suggests mountainous forms in *Enchanting* (right) by using a wide brush to place color over fluid, abstract marks. With thin white paint and visible strokes, he creates peaks and mist. His use of white as negative space in the



Enchanting
acrylic and oil on
canvas, 39½x35½

center of the composition creates a stark, undefined area that invites the viewer to see fields of snow or, perhaps, heavy fog covering a mountain lake.

“The inspiration for my work comes from nature, as well as the method of Chinese splash ink that employs the natural flow of ink on paper coupled with the style pioneered by Zhang Daqian (1899–1983) who married absolute control of ink wash with harmonious proportions of splash color,” says Teng. Daqian is among China’s most famous artists, considered the Picasso of the East. Teng’s work is also strongly influenced by *shan shui*, a Chinese painting style and philosophy that depicts imagined scenes of water and landscapes. Teng merges *shan shui* with the contemporary techniques found in the work of Zao Wou-Ki (1921–2013). A master of postwar abstraction, Wou-Ki combined Modern and traditional Chinese styles.

The influence of Chinese splashed ink painting is clearly visible in *Pureness* (below). The palette consists solely of black paint on a white surface. One doesn’t see brushstrokes, only streams of black flowing into lakes of gray. Islands of white emerge from pools of dark pigment to create sharp contrast. The painted form appears suspended, and its edges dissolve like tiny capillaries into the white ground.

The titles of Teng’s imagined landscapes often reference psychological and emotional territories. *Compassion and Aspiration* (opposite) suggests a narrative with its warm pigmentation in the lower left becoming increasingly pale as the composition rises to the upper right. “In Eastern philosophy,” Teng says, “one must first settle the physical body to settle the inner heart. To create, I bring my body and mind to total serenity. Only then can I harness the power of my brushstrokes to freely express my inner thoughts through my paintings.”

Pureness
acrylic and oil on
canvas, 59x63



Compassion and Aspiration
acrylic and oil on canvas,
60½x37½



MOVEMENT AND COLOR

Teng paints on large, primed canvases—ideal for his broad gestures and fine details. Once he's prepared himself mentally and physically, he works quickly. The fast drying time of acrylics is ideal for his pace. He starts with scrapers and large brushes from Purdy, a brand more commonly associated with house painting. He then transitions to medium and small brushes as he completes a painting.

Traditional ink paintings are created on rice paper that absorbs water, allowing the ink to flow across the page with ease. To create this look on his nonabsorbent canvas, Teng invented a technique that combines oil- and water-based paints. "Depending on the situation," he says, "I may apply shades of black oil and acrylic paint simultaneously to achieve my desired ink-wash look." The mixing of the two media causes the much denser oil to float on the water-based acrylic paint. "Once the colors start to flow," says Teng, "they're in constant motion, and it's difficult to control where the colors stop on my canvas. But with my scraper and brush, I'm able to create the effects I want."

Teng uses black primarily and adds hints of vivid color—blue, green, yellow, pink, orange—

but insists that color must remain minimal. These color choices lend to the quality of abstraction in his works. "When my colors begin to populate the surface, my scraper flows on the canvas, mirroring the movements found in tai chi—propel, scrape, circulate and pull—to control and guide the colors so as to form my desired composition."

For his acrylic colors, he uses the Amsterdam series from Royal Talens. *Vigorous Symmetry* (below left) uses a contrasting palette of orange and cyan against a sharp field of black and white. Here, the colors provide oppositional balance to a composition that plays with repetitive jagged forms zigzagging down the canvas.

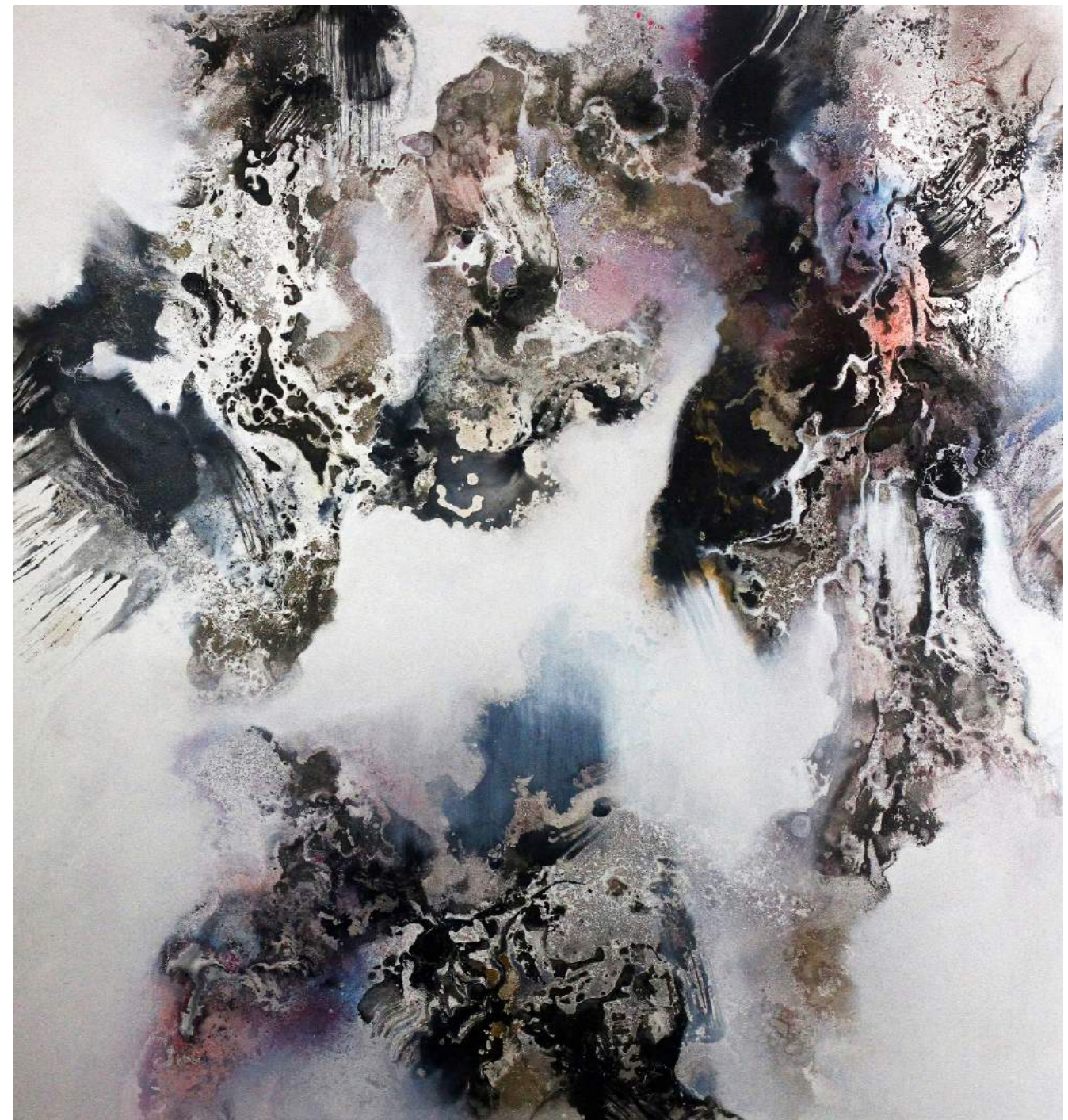
TENSION AND RHYTHM

The generous use of white or blank space as a compositional element is a traditional aspect of ink painting. In Teng's work, it creates ambiguity between the figure and the ground as well as the positive-negative space relationship of forms on the canvas, enhancing the abstract nature of the pieces. "The control of negative space depicts how opposing forces contradict one another and yet are mutually interconnected and inseparable through the fundamentals of the yin and yang,"

says Teng. "These polar opposites must be present in every painting to achieve equilibrium in one's mind, body and soul." *Serendipity* (opposite) is composed with visual elements connecting heavily to the top edge of the frame and circling around to the bottom edge, creating the effect of aerial perspective. The dense, opaque white sitting on the surface of the canvas gives way to deep black pools swirled with touches of gray, white, violet, blue and pink.

Teng's brushstrokes and color also create visual rhythm. Although originally trained as a mechanical engineer, Teng aspired to become a singer/songwriter prior to his pursuit of painting. After more than 25 years of painting, Teng is still strongly influenced by his musical and theatrical background. "Before beginning a new piece, I must find my external and internal rhythm. I then begin my first strokes of color," he says. In *Vigorous Symmetry* (right) the alternating right and left

Vigorous Symmetry
acrylic and oil on canvas, 51½x55



Serendipity
acrylic and oil on canvas, 63x59

thrusts of the zigzagged marks create a vertical cadence. Those same zigzags also set up a wavelike horizontal rhythm.

"I unite the essence of melody and poetic expressions in my paintings, allowing me to develop and evolve my current style," says Teng. "Eastern philosophy of art crosses all boundaries of art forms—life, poetry, music and theater. Therefore, I base my foundation through musi-

cality, principles of theater and the philosophy of life—all of which are forged within the essence of my works." ♣

Susan Byrnes is a visual artist whose work encompasses traditional and contemporary forms and practices, including sculpture, multimedia installation, radio broadcasts, writing and curatorial projects.