

Press release

# Chu Teh-Chun

## *In Nebula*

Curator: Matthieu Poirier

Fondazione Giorgio Cini,  
Venise

April 20–June 30, 2024



# The exhibition

***In Nebula*, a retrospective of the work of Chu Teh-Chun (1920–2014), takes place at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini from April 20 to June 30, 2024, on the occasion of the sixtieth edition of the Venice Biennale of International Art.**

Curated by art historian Matthieu Poirier, in partnership with the Fondazione Giorgio Cini and with the support of the CHU Teh-Chun Foundation, it is held on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, opposite Piazza San Marco, in Venice.

This is the most important exhibition devoted in recent years to this Franco-Chinese painter, a key player in gestural abstraction, whose work forms a link between Hans Hartung, Mark Rothko, and Helen Frankenthaler.

A new monograph on the artist by Matthieu Poirier, published by Gallimard, accompanies the event.

Boasting exceptional loans, including one from the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, the exhibition presents some fifty emblematic paintings mostly produced from 1955 onwards, the year Chu settled permanently in Paris, among the Western avant-garde. The exhibit unfolds in reverse chronological order from recent large formats to the earliest small formats, displayed in a panoptic way on three levels of an exceptional site, which resonates with the uncertain space of Chu's pictorial nebulae.

Chu Teh-Chun outside  
of Notre-Dame de Paris, 1955  
© Fondation CHU Teh-Chun

Previous page:  
Chu Teh-Chun,  
*Le Point du jour*, 1988–89  
Oil on canvas, 200 × 200 cm  
© ADAGP 2023  
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# The artist and his work

**Chu Teh-Chun (1920–2014) is a major figure in the history of gestural abstract painting.**

Born in China into a family of art lovers, he received an academic education that was open to modern Western aesthetic ideas. Then came the Second Sino–Japanese war, family tragedy, the loss of nearly all his early works, and finally exile—first to Taiwan, where he taught art, in 1949, then in 1955, to Paris, where he settled, started a family, and devoted himself to his studio work. This peaceful home witnessed the emergence of his tortured abstraction.

His painting results from a sensuous, unpremeditated confrontation with the surface of the canvas. Nebulae and maelstrom appear, their complex polychromy shaped by powerful chiaroscuro effects, almost without recourse of relief or impasto and systematically rejecting geometry.

The space of his canvases, out-of-scale and stubbornly non-figurative, is a fluid matrix into which our vision is projected and immersed, causing us to lose all spatial and semantic reference points.

To better understand his work, we need to identify the sources of his penchant for painting (classical and modern, Chinese and Western) and of his ability to translate the mnemonic sensation of nature and landscape, the dynamic essence of gesture and the emergence of light. Finally, the perspective, through parallels and analogies with other practices, reveals the singularity, intensity, and constancy, over nearly six decades, of an abstraction underpinned by the organic logic of life and landscape, by the movement of natural phenomena, between eruptions, lightning, storms, water currents and other cosmogonic revolutions.

Chu found himself somewhat on the margins of his era, due to his reserved personality and a principled rejection of any commercial strategy. The aim of this exhibition and the accompanying monograph are therefore, with historical hindsight and given the considerable success his work has enjoyed in recent years, to examine its essential aesthetic and help dispel some of the misunderstandings that have surrounded its reception.

The aim is also to assess, starting with his transition to abstraction in 1955, his contribution to the revival of painting in the era of color-field abstraction, especially after the waning of the vogue for Abstract Expressionism (in New York) and Informal or Lyrical Abstraction (in Paris), with which he was long assimilated.

Chu Teh-Chun  
*Composition 228*, 1966  
Oil on canvas, 195 x 130 cm  
© Paris Musées/  
Musée d'Art moderne





## **Excerpt from *Chu Teh-Chun. In Nebula***

**by Matthieu Poirier (Paris: Gallimard, spring 2024, 240 pages)**

Chu's chromatic turbulence, even when patiently observed, is difficult to imprint on the memory. Afterwards, it retains only the blurred, fleeting impression of a diversely colored flow of energy, of an unfinished Gestalt, of an uninterrupted process. For Chu guides his brush across the canvas with calligraphic precision, sometimes with the nervous tone of a conductor's hand beating the air, sometimes with the sensual fluidity of seaweed waving in the current. These myriad fine colored brushstrokes are much more than a trace of gestural action: they weave an enveloping, voluptuous womb, a continuum of complex harmony. There is considerable tension between, on the one hand, the material fixity of the painting-object and, on the other, the mnemonic phenomenon of an impossible mental cartography. In the same way, the viewer's associations of water, mountains, steep walls, vertiginous escapes, and other valley bottoms, or with skies bursting with sunshine or electric storms, have nothing to do with description, but come from painting practiced as the vehicle of a past reminiscence passed through the prism of the imaginary and the history of art.

Aquatic, atmospheric, or cosmogonic, Chu's pictorial nebulae are in fact part of an abstract tradition that is the coeval of technical and scientific modernity. They seek to transpose the invisible forms and forces that govern the universe into the realm of the senses and emotions, while figurative art is content with the anecdotal and the often-deceptive appearance of what is visible to the naked eye. Nourished by the optical and physical exploration of air and space, the artists to whom Chu referred never ceased to question the limits of representation and meaning, just as much as they sought to free themselves from the hegemony of gravity, which imposed its law—its meaning—on pictorial composition. For Chu, abstraction was above all a process of distancing himself from the image, of putting our cognitive capacities to the test, as they are accustomed to finding their bearings and situating themselves in the space of representation—even if we can rightly consider that the impossible architectural spaces of Piranesi's *Carceri d'invenzione* (1749–50) were already causing beholders to lose their spatial bearings. In Chu's eyes—and this was a constant throughout his career—distance in geography and memory, the distance of emotional impressions reawakened from within, went hand in hand with the action painting of immediate, unanticipated making. The eye, kept at a distance from the motif or natural referent, can then access the universal and phenomenal essence of the telluric, atmospheric, or cosmogonic forces experienced or felt by the artist. His hand is guided by certain muscular automatisms of the body, a vast pictorial culture, and the manifestations of his unconscious. It records not what he sees in front of him but what he knows to be there, through the prism of his experience and emotions: "Close your physical eye so that you can see your painting with the eye of the spirit. Then bring into the light what you have seen in the night," as Caspar David Friedrich, another champion of the sublime, once put it.

Chu Teh-Chun  
*Nature hivernale A*, 1985  
Oil on canvas, 97 × 130 cm  
© Adagp, Paris, 2024  
© Fondation CHU Teh-Chun



**About this painting:** In general, the worlds in Chu's paintings reject all figuration, all identifiable objects that would freeze vision and meaning. Snow, for example, is a static subject, an inert color in some of his paintings from 1965, when the artist had just flown over the Mont Blanc and the Pic du Midi. In January 1985, he and his wife Thérèse witnessed a snowstorm in Switzerland, which plunge the surrounding mountains, already covered in white crystals, into a blizzard. As an atmospheric precipitation, which triggered the series of "Snow" paintings, this snow is now airy, semi-solid, almost gaseous in nature. It acts as an optical filter, intermittently and dynamically masking the denser background. It thus offers the eye a multitude of identical elements that escape all visual grasp, awakening in Chu memories of the optical principle of juxtaposed, vibrant dots of color in the neo-Impressionism of Seurat or Signac. But there's a big difference: Chu's paintings have rarely seen their palette so restricted to values and shades of white and grey. The blizzard, for all its violence, has produced some of Chu's most serene paintings.

# Biography of the artist

## 1920

Birth of Chu in Baitou Zhen, China.

## 1920–34

He grows up in an educated family of art collectors. Following his father's advice, he learns painting and cursive calligraphy.

## 1935

Admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, he studies with Lin Fengmian, Fan Guannmin, and Wu Dayu, three pioneers of Chinese modern art who were trained in Europe.

## 1937–45

Fleeing westward from the Second Sino–Japanese war, he follows the Academy as it moves into the territories of the interior, crossing the spectacular, steep landscapes of the Anhui Mountains, the immense Yangtze River, and the vertiginous peaks around Chongqing.

## 1945–54

His father dies in a Japanese bombardment and he sees his mother for the last time. Having obtained his diploma, he teaches at the Academy and goes into exile in Taiwan in 1949. There he continues teaching until 1954. His painting is imbued with Cézannian modernism. Whether in storms or fires, his youthful works are, with scant exceptions, all destroyed.

## 1955

He settles in Paris. While his interactions are limited by his poor grasp of French, he is reinvigorated there, notably by his frequent visits to museums and galleries in Paris and around Europe. His painting breaks free of academic figuration and he is enthused by the existential outpourings of abstract expressionism and lyrical abstraction. He perceives artistic modernity as a sensorial interiorization of the world.

## 1958

First exhibition in Paris at Galerie du Haut-Pavé. All the works are abstract. The artistic director of Galerie Legendre sees the show and offers him a six-year contract. Chu devotes himself wholly to his art and moves beyond the Informel and *tachiste* concerns of the postwar years.

## 1965–70

Chu refuses to have any more exclusive gallery contracts; he wants to be able to choose freely. In Amsterdam, he admires a major ensemble of Rembrandt paintings. He continues to work on the idea of abstract landscape that at is at once airy, atmospheric, and even aquatic, in relation to the tangible, terrestrial nature of figuration, tied as it is to a material object.



### 1970s

Given the use of Parisian municipal artist's studios, Chu and his family move to Thiais and then Bagnolet. His canvases grow bigger in keeping with the spaces where he works. The painter develops large formats and has several solo and group shows in Europe. He also forges new artistic and family links with China.

### 1980s

In 1981, Chu gains French nationality. After thirty years, he makes several short trips to China. Several museums put on retrospectives of his work. In 1985, the experience of an extraordinary snowstorm in Geneva inspires his "Snows" series. He exhibits in several museums in Taiwan.

### 1990s

Chu has a studio built in Vitry-sur-Seine. There he makes his largest paintings yet and creates a room specially for ink and calligraphic works. He is involved in ever more large-scale projects and, aged seventy-seven, has his first exhibition in his home country, in 1997. He travels frequently around Europe, in the United States, and in Taiwan.

### 2000s

Over eighty years old, and still without any studio assistants, he makes a monumental canvas for the foyer of the Grand Theatre in Shanghai. Several major museums in France, China, and Japan put on exhibitions of his work. He also shows in New York. As the guest of the Manufacture de Sèvres, he executes a series of works in painted ceramic.

### 2009

Physically weakened by a stroke, he is forced to stop painting. He dies on March 26, 2014, at the age of ninety-three.

Chu Teh-Chun in the Huangshan mountains, China, 1983  
© Fondation CHU Teh-Chun



### **The Fondation CHU Teh-Chun**

The non-profit Fondation CHU Teh-Chun was established in 2017 in Geneva by the artist's family to pay tribute to his work through visits, exhibitions, conferences, and educational actions.

The Foundation manages an extensive archive documenting the artist's life and work since his arrival in Paris in 1955 and is working toward compiling his catalogue raisonné.

It is deeply committed to preserving the artist's memory and aspires to open new forms of communication with new audiences.

[www.chu-teh-chun.org](http://www.chu-teh-chun.org)

### **Matthieu Poirier, curator of the exhibition**

Matthieu Poirier holds a doctorate in art history from Paris-Sorbonne University. A former scholar at the German Center for Art History, he has taught at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and the École Nationale Supérieure d'Art de Paris-Cergy, and at Paris-Sorbonne University. He has curated numerous exhibitions including *Hans Hartung* (Perrotin, New York), *Soto* (Musée Soulages), *Buren & Pistoletto*, *Lucia Koch*, *Suspension*, *Artur Lescher and Carlos Cruz-Diez* (Palais d'Iéna), *DYNAMO* (Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais), *Spectres* (Roesler Hotel, Sao Paulo), and *Sous le motif* (Collection Société Générale). He has been a scientific advisor for exhibitions at the Musée d'art moderne de Paris, the Museo Reina Sofía, the Louisiana Museum, the Palais de Tokyo, and the Palazzo del Monte Padova.

### **The Fondazione Giorgio Cini**

The Fondazione Giorgio Cini was founded on April 20, 1951, by Vittorio Cini, with the aim of promoting the restoration of the monumental complex on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore and its transformation into an important international center for cultural activities, research, and meetings of great importance. During its seventy years of history, the Fondazione has promoted countless social, cultural, and artistic activities, in a constant dialogue with other institutions and illustrious representatives of Italian and international cultures.

The extraordinary importance of the Fondazione is well testified by the large number of events organized and hosted in its headquarters, documented in publications, and by the consistency of its cultural patrimony, especially artistic (featuring early printed books, drawings, miniatures, tapestries, paintings, furniture, sculptures) and archival (articulated in rich documentary and photographic archives coming from all over the world) preserved on the Island.

The Fondazione, in addition to hosting great exhibitions, research activities, study meetings and seminars, training and specialization courses, is located in an artistic and monumental setting that includes masterpieces by Palladio and Longhena.

[www.cini.it](http://www.cini.it)

Chu Teh-Chun  
*Le 8 juillet 1976*, 1976  
Oil on canvas, 162 x 128 cm  
© Adagp, Paris, 2024  
© Fondation CHU Teh-Chun



**Visitor information**

Chu Teh–Chun. *In Nebula*  
April 20–June 30, 2024  
Fondazione Giorgio Cini  
San Giorgio Maggiore Island  
30124, Venice  
Italy

Open from 11am to 7pm  
every day except Wednesday  
Free entry

Press preview and opening  
on April 18, 2024

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Chu Teh–Chun  
*Sans titre*, 1955  
Oil on canvas, 41×27 cm  
© Adagp, Paris, 2024  
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Chu Teh-Chun  
*La Grâce de l'aurore*, 2001  
Oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm  
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