Finding Irene

An untitled work sheds light on why one of Hong Kong’s most talented artists has not received the credit she deserves.

"In the 60s, there was what was then contemporary ink art in the lobby," she says. "Last year, I went to see the Lai Shou-kwan exhibition at the National Art Museum, in Beijing, and noticed a rare, large-scale painting by Lai that I recall seeing in the hotel lobby. With help from the Lee family archives and Hysan Development, it was later verified that that painting was commissioned by the hotel."

Chou was Lai's protégé and a close friend who might have been known to the Loo. Maudsley asked if anyone had seen a record of Chou's untitled work among the Lee family archives, and..."I'm not so clearly visible in a photograph of the hotel's Pavilion Restaurant. The painting wouldn't have exactly blended in with the high-class Continental European cuisine and fine wine. But based on photographs of the restaurant, it hung there from 1971 to around 1980 with four other commissioned ink paintings, including one by Lai. And then it disappeared, possibly into storage, until it reappeared in public in 2015, at the Christie's auction in Hong Kong."

"Looking at the smaller paintings from the time, it is clear that it's what was on her mind then and having the commission meant she had the materials and opportunity to work out this grander vision," Maudsley says.

What was on Chou's mind wasn't necessarily depression brought on by her husband's alleged extramarital affairs. And neither was painting a form of therapy for the well-to-do mother of three, who had five in-helpers and the time and money to take art lessons from the very best, Lui and Chao Shao-an. That narrative - promoted, for example, by a caption accompanying one of Chou's darkest paintings, *The Image* (60s), in the Asia Society exhibition - may explain why one of Hong Kong's greatest artists didn't become the household name she deserves to be.

"She definitely saw herself as a professional artist," Maudsley says. "The emphasis on a troubled life and putting it in the context of mental health is certainly not the way we want to present her. I would present her as a resilient artist who shows enormous inner strength when faced with heartbreak."

She points to how Chou masterfully employed both traditional Chinese and Western techniques and made historical references with, say, the colour of the ice shafts in the foreground, which is usually reserved for distant mountains in ink scrolls.

"This is a bold and gutsy image about normal life and what we all struggle with," Maudsley says.

*Irene Chou Rediscovered: Paintings from the MK Lau Collection* will run at Duddell’s, 3/F, Shanghai Tang Mansion, 1 Duddell Street, Central, until February 9.

"A World Within: The Art and Inspiration of Irene Chou" is on at Chantal Miller Gallery, Asia Society, 8 Justice Drive, Admiralty, until January 5.

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The collector | Enid Tsui

Auntie's audit work by Irene Chou that is now show at the "Irene Chou Rediscovered: Paintings from the MK Lau Collection" exhibition at Duddell's, in Central.

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Picture: SCP