

KU-SUNG LIU — "Rhythmic Fantasy"

ART

by Jean Charlot

D-26 Honolulu Star-Bulletin
Thurs., July 1, 1971



SNOSKY — "Segher's Sky"

At the Honolulu Academy of Arts, until July 25, two shows. One of contemporary Chinese painters who title themselves the Fifth Moon Group. The other, a one-man show by our young local master, John Wisnosky. Though definitely from East and West the shows are well paired, for they share a common concern with imponderables, fogs, clouds, air.

The problem faced by the Fifth Moon Group is one that few Western artists ever meet consciously, the cult of ancestors. Not the physical rite of burning joss sticks before their effigies or tablets, rather that inner dilemma that tugs at the innards of the modern Chinese artist: Granted that ancient masters have sucked out of objective nature all possible wisdom and, as well, have spewed it in black and white on paper and silk with all possible mastery, what remains? Should the wise man only walk in their steps.

BY FIGHTING against tradition these 'moderns' cannot escape from tradition. Stylistic rebellion is an essential ingredient in the history of Chinese art. Over the centuries one can follow cyclic mutations from primitive to Baroque and back to primitive again as a new cycle is begun. Great masters, East or West, are by definition great rebels.

In this latest stylistic episode, politics having pulled away mainland China from the Fifth Moon Group, there is injected a nostalgic element of exile. Another difference with the past is that the Taipei artists are well travelled, or well acquainted with foreign art magazines. Images wrought today in the barbarian West are as familiar to them as their own.

Happily they have borrowed from us little more than details. Their polite bow to the West consists in using collage as if to the manner born, in entitling a picture 'Untitled', in mixing sand with pigment for texture, or in calling a mountainscape an abstraction.

Abstractions the West does not lack. There is, however, in these modern Chinese paintings such a leaven of ancestral values as to make many a Western artist jealous. It must be great to conjure, from far into the past, the sensitiveness of masters long dead. As does the brush artist who communes with Master Mi-Fei who, 900 years ago, watched breathlessly as the rising fog met the descending clouds to wrap away valleys and peaks in majestic nothingness.

WESTERN artists set down as their task a logical probe of the solid world. They cast their geometrical net of perspective lines over the earth so as to catch it, helpless as a fish in a net.

The Oriental master works differently, rather as if he observed the spectacle of the world from the brink of a void. From the vantage point of his hermit hut, set kapakahi on the tip of a peak, our kind of perspective ceases to exist.

Distances are on the vertical, and graded by vertigo. Rocks and pines are little more than a condiment to give savour to the all-embracing presence of air.

For myself, I am glad that, in these impressive modern works, the grafting of Western modes remains at most skin deep and that, to that extent, the intended revolution failed. I well know that on their island these courageous artists are ostracized as rebels and that the portals of their academies, if they open to them at

all, do so grudgingly. Yet it would be an affectation in connoisseurship on my part to state that I see in these works anything else than beautiful traditional Chinese paintings.

THE SAME majestic nothingness that characterizes the rising fogs of Master Mi-Fei is also the essence of the art of John Wisnosky. Somewhat against the grain of our Western tradition, but not entirely.

In Spain, El Greco, saturated displaced person,

roamed through moonlit nights, his nose to the skies. It would not be quite proper to say that the saints and martyrs he painted are but props needed to introduce his beloved silver-edged clouds. It would not be entirely false to say so.

Dutch painters, Dutch etchers, mirrored their land as a thin strip tucked at the lower edge of the canvas or of the copper plate. Much of Dutch landscape art dealt with the theatrical display of colors and clouds over this flat land.

Wisnosky knows all this and more. And, unlike most Western artists, respectfully acknowledges his ancestors. One of his pastel skies he entitles "Segher's Sky", as a bow to the seventeenth century Dutch artist from whom Rembrandt also learned.

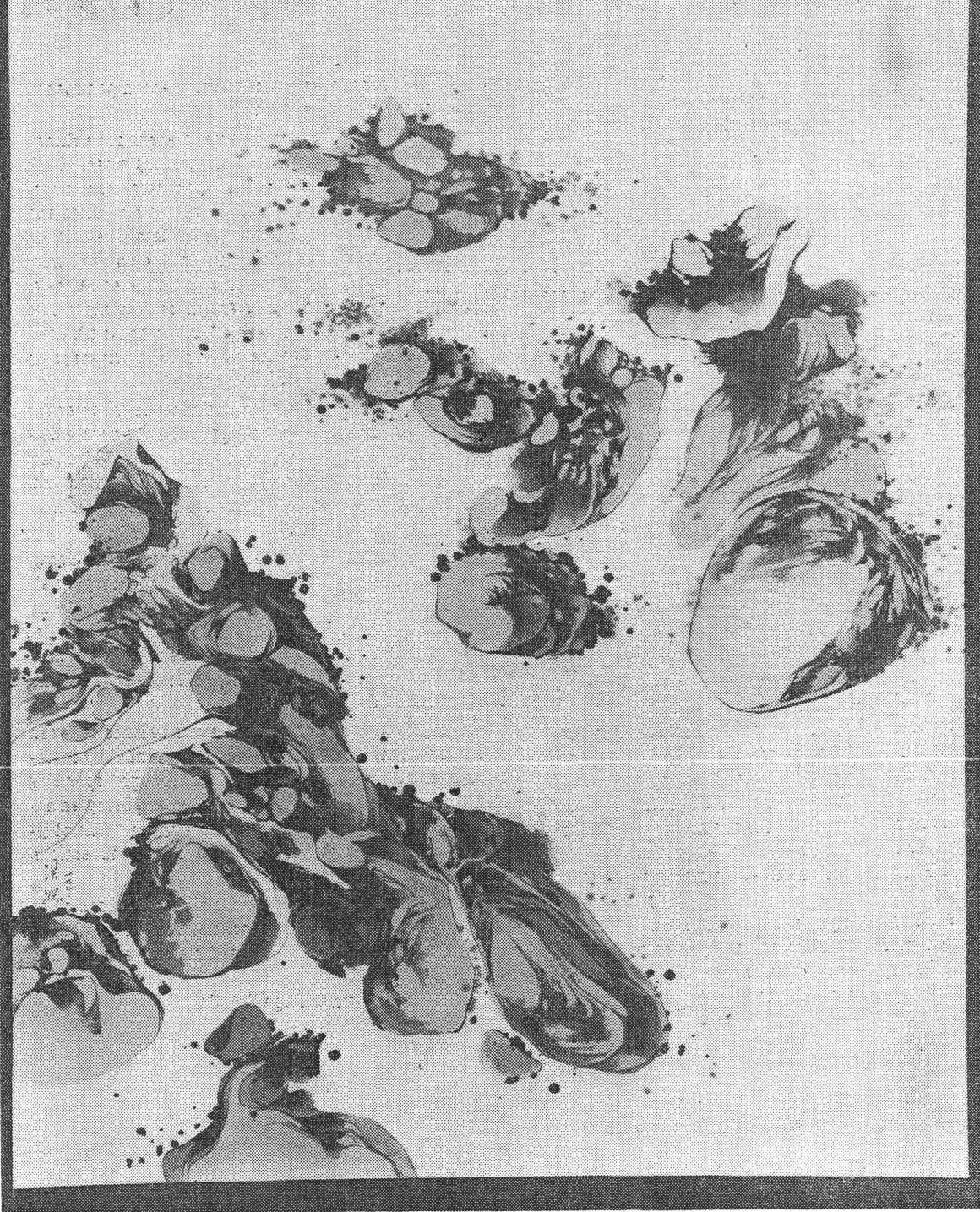
In a few of his early pictures, Wisnosky makes use of the Dutch device. A skeletal Holland, minus steeples and windmills, made of a series of receding horizontals, forces our eye into space. Simple though it is, this unobtrusive device is later jet-

tisoned as the artist soars higher into space.

His space, however, is not of the cosmical kind that always holds for me a touch of the comical. It is still familiar space, the one that the Hawaiians, who had more names for space than we have, called lewa nu'u, still within the reach of birds.

In his relentless quest, will Wisnosky ever reach the lewa lani, that of the astronauts, that airless one where blue is black and not only the birds but the clouds are gone?

I hope not.



HUNG HSIEN — "Spring Rock"

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The oriental master works differently, rather as if he observed the ~~spect~~² spectacle of the world ~~as seen~~ from the brink of a void. From the vantage point of his hermit hut, set kapakahi on the tip of a peak, our kind of perspective ceases to exist. Distances are on the vertical, and graded by vertigo. Rocks and pines are little more than a condiment to give savour to the all-embracing presence of air. [In a landscape of islets, or of rocks caught in the rising tide, the swirling currents are the essential reality, not the black dots of solid matter held in the vise of their eddies.]

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