

# Martial artist hits the big time

JIM MCBETH

HOCK-Aun Teh is preparing for another day as Britain's most sought-after artist by knocking seven bells out of his opponent, albeit an imaginary one.

His body free-flows with speed, grace and strength; striking, kicking, punching and generally giving the unseen opponent a right good seeing to.

The thumping over, a broad smile spreads on his face, Mr Teh picks up his brushes, dresses in a paint-stained over-all that could double as modern art, and is ready for the day.

Artists who double as world-class martial arts exponents are inspired to paint in perhaps a more off-the-wall way than your average Glasgow Boy.

"The energy, it flows, like colour on canvas, don't you think?" Absolutely, anything you say Mr Teh.

Unusual or not, Mr Teh's artistic contemplation, which doubles as grievous bodily harm, seems to work. His latest painting has just sold for £50,000 and his name has been appended to the Tate Gallery monitoring list where one purchase assures greatness.

Collectors in the United States and Europe gobble up his work and Julian Spalding, Glasgow's unquestionably talented, if controversial arts director, loves Mr Teh to bits.

In a few weeks, the singer, Elaine Page, of West End and Broadway fame, will unveil the latest collection of his work *A Tiger Leaps* at a major exhibition in London's Air Gallery.

Glasgow-based Mr Teh was one of a number of artists, including Scot Peter Howson, commissioned by the Artists for Nature Foundation to travel to India to paint endangered species and explore the plight of the tiger and its fight for survival.



Teh's *The making of the great Indian twilight*

It is a creature which Mr Teh, a black belt sixth dan in the Korean martial art, tae kwon do, and a master of the Chinese art of kung fu, can relate to.

"I was born in Malaya of Chinese parents and my first discipline was kung fu. As a child I only saw tigers from a distance, but on this trip I witnessed their speed, grace and strength, which was very much in my heart."

Mr Teh, who subsequently defined his own martial discipline, *tukido*, which is now taught throughout Britain, added: "It is like painting. It flows, filled with energy and is not limited by the rigidity of the old arts."

Mr Teh's prowess as a martial artist has now been subsumed by his reputation as a painter unique within a new generation of Scottish artists. Indeed, experts hail him as the leader of that generation by bringing together oriental philosophy and Western abstraction.

Patrick Davies, of Davies & Tooth, which is staging the Air Gallery exhibition from 15 to 27 June, said: "Hock-Aun Teh is

on the edge of greatness. One of his pieces has just sold for £50,000 and his work is in collections worldwide, especially America, where he has an immense reputation. He is extremely talented."

Mr Teh has painted since childhood. He came to Scotland in 1970 to study at the Glasgow School of Art. From 1974 he lectured in Chinese painting and calligraphy at the same school.

Mr Davies added: "He is unique in that he has gone in the opposite direction of other painters in that most western artists look east for influences. He is the reverse by taking the eastern style and calligraphic element and combined it with European expressionism."

Mr Teh said: "It's all a bit scary at the moment. I have painted since I was small and I came here to study. It was my first time away from Asia and I brought tae kwon do with me. It played a huge part in my life along with tai chi, karate and kung fu."



Hock-Aun Teh relaxes in his Glasgow studio after another high-energy session with the paintbrush.

Picture: Stephen Mansfield

"Martial arts are a form of performance which has complemented my paintings. They are married in the free flow of energy. I would be a very bad painter without my martial arts and vice versa. I train and paint every day.

"They both need action, speed and concentration; the release of the tension, physical and spiritual; a balance of energies, which naturally flow together.

"The point I have reached in my art is a clear direction. Painting the tigers was wonderful because I feel the cat's sadness. Kung fu reflects their movement and I felt kinship with the animal. Its movements are very familiar to me.

"I came back from India two months ago and the London exhibition reflects all that I felt in a very moving experience. I felt the tiger's despair, watching them move in the jungle, so beautiful yet endangered.

"Whether my paintings sold or not I would still paint. I have to. Moving away from my oriental influences has released me. Chinese painting, like karate, is very rigid with conformity that kills imagination.

"Coming to Scotland allowed me to express myself."