

Brushes break, colour dazzles

Sixth-Dan art powerful stuff

LIKE his paintings, Hock-Aun Teh radiates energy. Not yet 40, the man really is a powerhouse whose lifestyle would reduce most people to nervous exhaustion.

His mastery with brush and colour can be seen in *A Retrospective: Hock-Aun Teh*, a major exhibition surveying his work and opening on Saturday at Edinburgh's 369 Gallery. On canvas and paper, the paintings are mostly large-scale, abstract and powerful, full of movement and glowing with colour.

But Hock-Aun is also a Tae Kwon Do Black Belt Sixth Dan, a former chief instructor of the Scottish Tae Kwan Do Association who coached the British Wheelchair Basketball Team for the recent Para-Olympic Games in Korea; and a linguist (seven languages).

Also an athlete and gymnast, he trained in several martial art disciplines and has now developed his own self-defence and fitness system, Tukido, which he is marketing with the help of an EEC grant.

Hock-Aun paints and trains hard every day, finding no conflict between the two. In fact, he says, they are complementary.

"I think I would be a terrible painter without martial art. I need these two elements to balance and harmonise my life." This zest for living is reflected in paintings given enigmatic and sometimes witty titles such as *What would the horse say to the fish?* and *The play that never played*. But while a title

CLARE FLOWERS meets Hock-Aun Tae, the human dynamo who mixes the physical with the abstract and is a winner at both

can provide a starting point, people searching the work for clues to its meaning may miss the point.

"Abstract painting is spiritual. You can't expect a spiritual aspect of a person to be explained, you can only feel it. From the title people can activate their imagination, which is very important. They might see a tree or a landscape which is not what I paint. But memories, landscapes, feelings, places that I have absorbed may come out naturally in the flow of the work. When I paint, nothing occupies my mind, I just paint how I feel."

Hock-Aun admits to working with such a passion that he loses all sense of time and his attacks with paint on paper frequently result in broken brush handles. Once started, he doesn't stop until he has finished a painting.

Despite no artistic tradition, his family supported their son in his goals and, after art college, sent him to Glasgow School of Art in 1970 where he became the first Chinese student from Malaysia to achieve a post-graduate diploma in drawing and painting, combining disciplined calligraphic brush strokes with newly-discovered bright colours.

"People come to my studio and say, 'Hock-Aun, I need sunglasses'. I like a lot of red and gold and to experiment with pure colour. I'm always obsessed with colour and movement. When I see colour it's like an alcoholic with alcohol . . . I have to use it and do something with it."

The last thing gallery visitors expect is to be allowed to touch the work. But Hock-Aun thinks it is important that they do and is not afraid of damage — partly because the acrylic and gel media he uses (a secret formula, he says) is virtually indestructible.

This month, another of Hock-Aun Teh's projects comes to fruition with the publication of his first book, *Warm Up and Stretching for All Sports and Martial Arts*. It is a thick paperback of structured programmes illustrated with photographs designed as a preparation for sport of all kinds.

"A lot of people injure themselves by taking up aerobics or jogging or martial art without being fit enough. A friend of mine in New York injured himself playing tennis and I searched for a book like this to give him but couldn't find one in any bookshop in New York, Chicago and in Scotland. I checked all the libraries with no luck and decided to write one myself before someone else did."

Designed and published by Hock-Aun himself, a colour illustration depicts the Teh family — Sabina, his German-born wife and their two tri-lingual daughters, Xinyi Ursula (7) and Xinreng Denise (2) — seated at home, a painting in the background. The photograph seems to sum up the important elements in this unusual artist's life: his family and his dedication to two art forms.