



REPORT BY **MARY McCORMICK** PHOTOGRAPHS BY **DOUGLAS MacGREGOR**

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Hock-Aun Teh is a contradiction in terms. The Malaysian creator of tukido, a potentially lethal martial art, is also a master of the contemplative craft of abstract painting. This untiring advocate of mental calm and physical control can't sit still for two minutes

WHEN HOCK-AUN TEH arrived in Scotland from Malaysia 20 years ago to study drawing and painting at Glasgow School of Art, he expected to experience a certain level of culture shock. What he wasn't prepared for was the smell. His delicate nostrils, reared on the heady aroma of the lush forest fringing the riverside village of Sungei Gedong in western Malaysia, flared in alarm at the first whiff of the reeky air. 'It was. . .' he says, adopting the posture of Rodin's *Thinker* as he searches for a word to conjure up the malodorous urban atmosphere, 'yuck. Glasgow in 1970 was jet black with smoke. I had never come across anything like it.'

Happily, getting used to the natives wasn't so difficult. ▶

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Hock-Aun (the name means 'lucky peace' - he was born soon after the Japanese occupation of Malaysia ended) was delighted by their openness and friendliness. But they laughed at his yellow socks. And they called him 'China' in the streets. At first, he was deeply offended because he took this to be a racist remark. 'Yes, Scottish?' he would spit back waspishly. 'Later, I found out "China" means "good friend" so that was okay.' When they started calling him 'Jimmy', he became confused again. Hock-Aun slaps his thigh and laughs uproariously at the memory.

Two decades later, he is no longer confused. With the exception of the cold and chip shop food, he loves it. 'Apart from the weather, Scotland,' he proclaims from the dubious comfort of his paint-splattered chair, 'is the best place in the world. If my car breaks down, I don't have to call out the AA - I just phone a friend to come and help.'

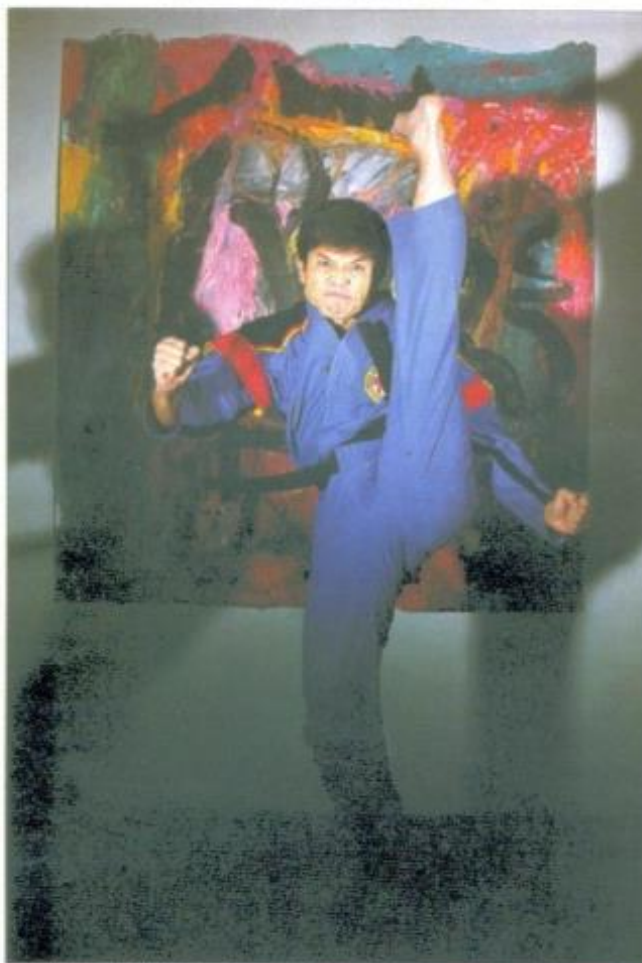
Hock-Aun is an abstract painter. He is also a martial arts guru, author, philosopher, publisher, sportswear designer, Scottish Arts Council circuit lecturer, British Olympic wheelchair basketball team coach, amateur psychologist and social worker. . . Probably the only thing the man with a million more expressions than professions can't do, is sit still. Legs assume yoga-like positions constantly, he flails his arms a lot and would make a wonderful mime artist.

As we speak, his trainer-clad feet tap out a rhythm against the leg of a hostess trolley, one of two he uses to wheel around his beloved pots of paint. When my tape recorder starts wobbling to the beat and I tick him off, he flashes me a schoolboy's caught-in-the-act grin and stops immediately.

'You see how it is with me?' Hock-Aun exclaims his exasperation in a strong Chinese accent. 'I was forever getting into trouble at school - I was one of the naughty boys - and even now I cannot sit still.'

Ten minutes later, the trainers are off again.

For a man who is the living embodiment of what positive thought can do for a body, Hock-Aun is strangely coy about his age. In fact, he hits 40 this year, a snippet that had to be gleaned from other sources. He is under strict orders from his German-born wife, Sabina, not to reveal his (or her) age. All he will say is that she is 'thirtysomething'. His own date of birth, printed in an exhibition programme which he gave me, had been sneakily blacked out with felt pen in a vain attempt to hide it.



Fighting fit: Hock-Aun Teh models his dishevel-proof martial arts suit

'Martial arts aren't violent. A lot of people think you learn them to go out and fight. No, you learn them to find peace within yourself. Originally, I wanted to beat people up because I was bullied, but the more I practised, the more my aggression diminished'

Age, it seems, is a very touchy subject around the Lenzie bungalow Hock-Aun and Sabina, a knitwear designer, share with their two daughters, eight-year-old Xin-Yi Ursula and Xin-Reng Denise who's either three-and-a-half or four - he can't remember which. 'Besides,' he wheedles, 'age really isn't important.' With his full head of short, black hair, all his own teeth and the physique of a man half his age, this is easy for Hock-Aun to say.

After paying rent to Glasgow's WASPS (Workshop and Artists' Studio Provision) for the past nine years, he has one of the biggest studios in their King Street complex. The other artists tell him it's a sign of success. He says he needs the room to hurl his paint. He thinks, feels and paints big - canvases up to 12-feet wide aren't unusual. Sorrow isn't allowed over the threshold of this white-walled space. Hatred, greed and all of the

other negative emotions are banned.

As we sit in his inner sanctum, two silent, smiling Malaysians, who have travelled almost 7,000 miles to learn a potentially lethal martial art from Hock-Aun, are made most welcome by their host.

'After six months in Glasgow, these two young men will take tukido back to the Far East as a *Scottish* export.' He slaps his thigh and laughs uproariously again. The fact that the Scottish Arts Council seeks him out to lecture on *Scottish* abstract painting seems to tickle him no end, too.

Tukido - which means the art of skilful combat - was devised by the multifaceted Mr Teh, as his students call him, five years ago in response to his frustration with the flabby face of modern martial arts.

'There are hundreds of different forms - judo, karate, bushido, kendo, jujitsu, tae kwon-do. . . All are very traditional, claiming several thousand movements, yet only a few dozen are truly effective for self-defence and keep fit purposes - the reasons that people take them up in the first place.'

A new concept, tukido is the all-in-one martial art, offering self-defence skills, co-ordination and fitness in less than 40 movements consisting of kicks and punches, softened by a gymnastic approach.

Teh's Institute of Tukido was made corporate flesh in 1987, funded by a 'very, very generous' grant from the EEC enterprise kitty. Today, more than 1,000 disciples from all walks of life - burnt-out business people, strung-out housewives, depressed pensioners, plus others who simply want to tone up their fat thighs - attend evening classes held at 30 sports and community centres throughout the UK. Another chain of classes is set to open in Australia sometime later this year.

Hock-Aun has been teaching martial arts in Scotland since the early Seventies. It was a high-school chum called Specky who introduced him to their positive side effects. Although he had learned the rudiments at his Chinese grandfather's knee, Hock-Aun didn't see the light until meek, mild-mannered Specky turned into Superman and broke down the door of a concert hall to which they had been refused entry. 'I thought that Specky was heroic,' he laughs. 'I discovered he was taking classes in tae kwon-do, a form of unarmed combat similar to karate.'

Hock-Aun followed suit and is now a six dan in tae kwon-do. He has held self-defence and fitness classes in girls' schools, army bases, universities and, for three years in the late

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Mental energy: sometimes Hock-Aun attacks the canvas so hard that he destroys his brush

Seventies, at RAF Machrihanish near Campbelltown. He has also instilled the need for a calm frame of mind and total physical control into the ranks of a police unit somewhere in Strathclyde. He won't say which one. 'I don't think they like to make a big noise about it. People in this country would probably get very nervous if they knew their police were being trained in martial arts.'

He blames the media – and Bruce Lee films – for martial arts' poor public image in Britain, where their pursuit is largely confined to the winter months. Even so, around 40,000 Scots participate, karate being the most popular form with adults, while many under-16s opt for learning judo.

'Martial arts aren't violent,' he insists. 'A lot of people think you learn martial arts to go out and fight. No, you learn them to find peace within yourself. Originally, I wanted to learn how to beat people up because I was bullied at school, but the more I practised, the more my aggression diminished. I don't think I was aggressive, just frustrated. Once you've learned the skills you become more self-confident and positive.'

Too many of us, he feels, have no aim in life. 'The life you want doesn't just happen. You have to go out and find it. At least if you have a sport, mastering it gives you a goal. If you're fit and feel good, you tend to look good. It spreads to other areas in your life.'

The indefatigable Hock-Aun doesn't waste a second of his own. By the end of this year he will have taken his unique brand of 'pep' art around the world. His first solo exhibition of

1990 opened in his homeland of Malaysia, followed by a one-man show in March at Edinburgh's 369 Gallery. He is currently taking part in a group exhibition there entitled *The New Scottish Colourists*. Come autumn, he'll be in Beijing, courtesy of the China International Cultural Exchange Centre.

In between, Hock-Aun intends to instil a warrior-like fighting spirit into the British Olympic wheelchair basketball team who are building up to The Big One in Barcelona in two years. They liked the way that he whipped up the team spirit last time round in Korea.

'Painting and martial arts are very similar. Each is a performing art requiring discipline and energy. I love bright colour – it makes me feel good and positive. I would be a terrible painter without tukido, and without painting, I would be useless at martial arts'

In addition, next month sees the arrival of his second book, *Clouds*. Published by his own company, Taurus Publications, it is aimed largely at coaches preparing competitors for big events. It is a cocktail of sports psychology, meditation techniques, warm-up and keep fit exercises, plus a *souçon* of oriental philosophy – thus the inscrutable title. His first book, *Warm Up and Stretching for all Sports and Martial Arts*, which he says has good advice for non-athletes, was published by Taurus in 1988.

Next year, he's planning to publish the tukido manual. Oh, yes, and he has also

designed the definitive martial arts outfit. Blue with coloured piping to denote the belt status and grades, it uses the same basic design as the normal judo outfit. But, he claims proudly, his one, which comes complete with zipped jacket, is totally dishevel-proof.

Painting is, however, his greatest passion and has been since the age of 15 when he first picked up a brush and announced to the world that he was going to be an artist, a great artist, and that nothing else would do. The suggestion almost broke his honourable businessman father's heart.

'In the end, my father, who's now retired, agreed that training me to do anything else would be a waste of money. He was a typical oriental businessman. He dealt in kerosene, paraffin and sugar, and worked seven days a week. All his business friends opposed his decision to send me overseas to study art, but he just shrugged his shoulders and said, "What else can I do? All the boy wants is to paint."'

After four years spent studying traditional Chinese art at Tan Guan-Hin Painting School in Taiping, Malaysia, he applied to Glasgow College of Art. This unlikely choice was due to a chance meeting with a loquacious Scottish soldier who told him that if his aim was to learn about western art, he would find all he wanted and more in the city.

As a student, he sold many paintings which encouraged him to think it might be possible to make a living in Scotland. 'Back home in Malaysia, painting is recognised as a non-profit-making profession,' he smiles. 'Nine out of ten artists are poor.'

He applied for permanent residency shortly after finishing the four-year course. Within a couple of years of leaving college he was exhibiting globally – Santa Fe, Hong Kong, even Glenrothes. He has also shown work at the Chicago International Art Exposition for the past nine years. Apparently he causes quite a sensation there, as abstract art has always found more favour in America than it has here in Britain.

Three years ago, Hock-Aun took out British citizenship. He doubts he will ever return to the East to settle. 'It's too repressed. Confucianism has killed everything. (The traditional philosophy and, until recently, the state religion of China, it demands strict codes of conduct and segregation of the sexes.) Men and women aren't allowed to mix. At home, you can't talk freely. At school, you are not allowed to express your opinions. If you do, the teacher beats you. Eventually, you lose your own true self.'

He sees no conflict in his love of painting and martial arts. 'They are very similar. Each is a performing art requiring discipline and energy.' The execution is similar too – sometimes Hock-Aun attacks the canvas so hard he destroys his brush. 'I love bright colour – it makes me feel good and positive – but after

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a couple of days of painting in the studio. I can become very drained emotionally.' To recharge his mental energy, he returns to *tukido*. 'I would be a terrible painter without *tukido*, and without painting, I would be useless at martial arts.'

Painting, he says, is like giving birth in a race against time, as the longest he can sustain any particular emotion is about two hours. Spontaneous personal expression is all. This being the case, there are dozens of his premature babies propping up the studio walls. He points to one that mangled a few brushes – a happy frenzy of yellows, greens, reds and blues shot through with a sinuous black line. 'Someone said, "Oh, that's the Year of the Snake, isn't it?" I said, "No, it's about the Year of the Snake."'

Downstairs, 12 of his live children frolic on the walls of WASPS Gallery. The spirit that moves Hock-Aun explodes onto the canvas in hues so bright that visitors have been heard to request sunglasses before viewing. Produced over the past two years, prices range from £1,000 to £4,000 per painting.

'My first concern isn't whether my paintings will sell, but to be honest with myself and show only work that I am personally satisfied with, not what I think people will buy. Once you start worrying about money, what you do becomes materialistic and without meaning,' he declares.

Ultimate satisfaction is, he believes, spiritual. Brought up in a loosely Buddhist-based religion, he doesn't believe in God, but is happy to go through the motions if invited along to a synagogue or mosque by friends. His motto is simple enough: Be good, and do kind things for other people.

Twice a year, he returns to Malaysia to exalt in its wild colours, which energise and give him inspiration. He can also see his parents, meet up with old friends, and eat fish. He loves fish. And chewing gum. It's his only vice. Surprisingly, although he does frown upon 'bad' eating habits, he isn't fanatical about diet. To prove it, he energetically chomps his way through a stick of Doublemint as he dissects Scotland's

notoriously bad record on health.

'What do they expect?' he queries cheerfully. 'The Scots eat a lot of deep-fried foods and overcook the few vegetables they do have. Exercise-wise, they do nothing. They come home, switch on the telly and go into a coma.' He slumps forward in his chair and mimes a brain-dead TV junkie.

'If someone calls they don't even want to get up to answer the doorbell.' He puts on an astonishingly good Glaswegian accent: 'Mary, ur ye gonnae get that door or ur ye no?' He looks pained for the first time. 'It is such a terrible waste of a life.'

His own is so busy, painting by day and training or teaching classes by night, he and Sabina hardly see each other unless they're training or jogging together. This, he thinks, is just as well. 'Closeness destroys,' he observes darkly.

The pair met in Germany during a martial arts thrash. She was a pupil and the only one tagging along in the wake of the German team who could speak any English. 'Then she came over here to train with me and *gosh*,' he goes all goofy, 'before we knew it, it was love.' Sabina divides her time between her knitwear business and helping run the administrative side of the Teh empire.

Most of Hock-Aun's family have also moved to Scotland. His elder brother joined him in the early Seventies, followed soon after by his two younger sisters. Another sister lives in Hong Kong. His parents plan to move here, but he expects that they will return home at the very first sign of cold weather.

These days, whenever he visits Malaysia, people there call him 'Bananaman'. 'Outside I'm yellow skinned, inside I'm white, just like a banana.' He laughs good-naturedly. 'It's their way of telling me that my thinking is white now. They look on me as a European. Personally, I happen to think I have the best of both worlds.' ■

Hock-Aun Teh's collection of euphoric, abstract, expressionist art is on show at WASPS Gallery, 26 King Street, Glasgow until 30 May. The New Scottish Colourists is at the 369 Gallery, 233 Cowgate, Edinburgh until 23 June. His latest book, Clouds, is published by Taurus in June, priced £10.95