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Clare Morin talks to the historically significant American artist Susan Weil

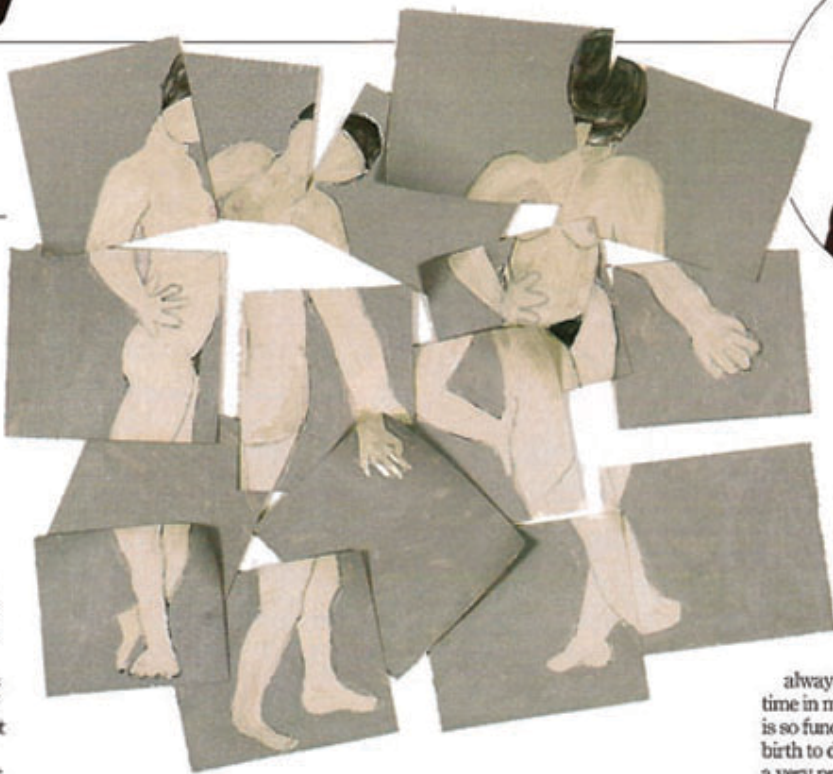
There is a sense of rarity to the exhibition *Motion Pictures* that opens at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery this fortnight. The show will be focusing on new works by the 78-year-old American artist Susan Weil, a respected figure in modern art history whose life story is truly extraordinary.

Weil began her career amid the exploding arts scene and Abstract Expressionism of 1950s New York. Formerly married to the great American artist Robert Rauschenberg, she counted among her contemporaries Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Jasper Johns – some of the most influential artists of the 20th century. Her sculptural paintings and figurative installations crystallise the ethereal movements of time; objects and moments are caught in startling new compositions.

She answers the phone on a winter night in New York, her voice warm and slightly shaking with age. Explaining that she has been spending all of her time of late working on a book that profiles her lengthy career, she adds with a chuckle: "I have been living my history, whereas usually I'm just living in the moment."

And what a history it is. Born and raised in Connecticut, Weil spent summers with her artistic family in the idyllic setting of Long Island Sound. Her father, a writer, spent summer nights reading everything from Chaucer to Joyce to the children. "On the island, salt water came out of our kitchen sink, so washing dishes was very difficult," she reminisces. "Our job was to wash and dry the dishes, and his job was to read to us. He read us *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, *Ulysses* by James Joyce."

Such unusual children's literature planted a love of words in the mind of the young Weil, and by the age of 18 the fledgling artist had travelled to Paris to study painting at the acclaimed Académie Julian. It was here that she met her future husband, and an artist who would go on to play a major role in the development of 20th-century art by pushing Abstract Expressionism towards Pop Art. The pair returned to the US, studying at Black Mountain College under the



The power of Weil's work is how she leads the viewer's eye through her paintings, reflecting the way that humans perceive objects and capturing the sequential, fluid nature of time. Her sculptural paintings and installations are made from an array of media, from paper, to fabric, wood and aluminium; then creased, cut up and assembled in unexpected new orders. "I

always was interested in expressing time in my work," she admits. "It just is so fundamental about life, from birth to death, morning to night. It's a very primary force... For more than 20 years, I've been doing a poem image every single day. Just a couple of days ago I did an image about the expression of time like that, it's just so central to me. Being now an older person, it's very curious to really have observed over and over again life from the beginning to the end. Of course, it's equivalent to a day – from morning to night – but it's broader."

Sundaram Tagore says he is thrilled to be presenting such an historically significant artist to Hong Kong audiences. "She has an ability to present a form that is ordinary in an extraordinary manner," says the gallerist. "There is the idea of displaying a flat two-dimensional form yet creating movement in a static plane, which is truly remarkable. One has to see the works in order to understand this sequential movement that captures the multifaceted nature of time in the 21st century."

The fact that Weil has remained relevant is testament to the enduring quality of her work. And the timing of the show is shrewd: amid the collective depression washing over Hong Kong's dwindling economy, it's a welcome reminder that despite the fierce changes that time ushers in, great art always lasts. *Motion Pictures* opens on Wed 18. See listings for details.

Changing perspectives Susan Weil's *I Forgot* and the artist in the 1970s

influential German-born American artist and educator Josef Albers.

Founded in North Carolina in 1933, Black Mountain College was a progressive arts university that spawned the most influential names in 20th-century culture – composer John Cage, dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham and poet Robert Creeley were among the alumni. "It was amazing, because it was a very small school but people there were all very creative and forward thinking in all kinds of fields," explains Weil. "There were poets, the music department was amazing, painting was unusual because Albers had come from the Bauhaus and brought us all these ideas of other ways to think about art."

By the time Weil and Rauschenberg landed in New York in 1960, they were liberated by the exploding scene of the Abstract Expressionist artists, who were rapidly turning the city into the centre of the post-war art world. "It was amazing," she says, the smile audible down the phone line. "I came from Black Mountain, which was very disciplined; you know the sense of formality in the work. In New York, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline and Rothko, all these wonderful

artists, were saying that painting can be whatever you perceive. It was so thrilling and exciting. I remember the first shows I saw by those people, it just practically made me faint. Because now you look at a Kline or a De Kooning and you admire it – but then it was like dynamite."

"Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline and Rothko were saying that painting can be whatever you perceive"

Weil and Rauschenberg's *Blueprint Paintings* were exhibited in a group show at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1960. Their imprints of human bodies on photographic blueprint paper were cutting-edge, and profiled in *Life Magazine*. The pair separated three years later but remained friends, and Weil grew into a respected artist in her own right.