

Scott Greene

HYPERALLERGIC

Remembering the Legacy of a Larger-Than-Life Artist,
Sam Tchakalian

By John Seed
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Sam Tchakalian, "Untitled" (1987), monotype, 11.75 x 18 inches, published by Magnolia Editions (courtesy Magnolia Editions)

When Sam Tchakalian — a longtime faculty member at the San Francisco Art Institute — died in 2004, a memorial gathering was held in Studio 13, his former classroom. “They

had to open Studio 14 and the adjoining rooms to hold all the people who came,” remembers Stephen Faulk, a former student. “The crowd flowed out into the courtyard.” Such a turnout was a fitting tribute to a teacher who had also been magnetic in life. Scott Greene, who studied with Tchakalian four decades ago, puts it this way: “He was a force of nature, or a cannonball barreling down the halls, and always with an entourage following him everywhere.” Yari Ostovany, one of Sam’s students, remembers another teacher describing Sam as having “the mind of a philosopher and the mouth of a sailor.”

Tchakalian’s former students still recount and debate the impact of the unforgettable and polarizing artist in a private Facebook group. “Of all the instructors I studied with,” says artist Amanaa Rendall, “I got the MOST from his classes. He saw right through people’s artistic posturing and pandering; that made him a great teacher.” Greene agrees: “He liked to point out the discrepancies between the artist and what the artist produces, and this would follow through into his critiques. If you took him personally you were crushed. If you separated your ego from your work you’d learn.” Karen Jelenfy has mixed feelings: “One thing Sam taught me is that when I went back to teaching I wanted his rigor without his cruelty.” Thomas Houston adds, “He did a lot of damage that was not necessary.”

Tchakalian was born in Shanghai in 1929, and his father was one of three Armenian brothers who ran a thriving chain of French-style bakeries. After the early death of his mother, he was raised by a Chinese stepmother whom he doted on. Rocked by the Japanese Occupation and the turmoil that followed, Tchakalian came to San Francisco with his stepmother and two brothers in 1947 and enrolled in college, earning Associate and Bachelor degrees at San Francisco State University in psychology. He served as a United States Army intelligence officer in Washington, DC between 1952 and '54; he then used his G.I. Bill benefits to earn an MA degree in art, also at San Francisco State.



Sam Tchakalian in the mid-1990s (photo by Heather Wilcoxon)

After establishing a studio on Duboce Avenue — where he would live and work for the remainder of his life — Tchakalian began to exhibit his Abstract Expressionist paintings. One high point was a one-man show at the de Young Museum in 1962. In the late 1950s and early '60s he held a variety of teaching jobs, including substitute work in public schools and adjunct teaching at art colleges. In 1966 he accepted a full-time position at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he would teach for 35 years.

Like many art professors of his era, Tchakalian believed in shaping artists rather than relaying rules. His artistic interests and teaching methods were rooted in self-exploration and the process of painting as a means of discovering different levels of consciousness. He disliked traditional teaching methods, including the use of brushes, and used clever quips to disparage academic techniques — for instance, “Glazing is for donuts.” Tchakalian treated his students as individuals and taught rigorously, but without a set program. “Someone in our grad seminar at California College of Arts and Crafts asked Sam at the beginning of the semester whether he had a curriculum,” says Bennett Horowitz. “He just laughed.”

Tchakalian’s own paintings were resolutely abstract. His works of the late 1950s included formations of crumpled and collaged mulberry paper. In the '60s he moved toward color-field paintings that included bold, glyphic brushstrokes. The following decade he began producing horizontal canvases — some as wide as 20 feet — that feature track-like stripes of monochromatic color. Critic Thomas Albright described these works as consisting “entirely of lush, unbroken fields of solid color produced by pouring, rolling,

and brushing layer upon layer of oil onto immensely scaled horizontal canvases.” Tchakalian often applied paint with squeegees and metal tools — before the German artist Gerhard Richter became famous for his squeegee abstractions.



Sam Tchakalian, “Diamond in the Rough” (1991), oil on canvas, 47 3/4 x 48 inches (courtesy California Art Company)

During his lifetime, Tchakalian’s works were widely exhibited and he was given a full retrospective by the Oakland Museum of California Art in 1978. Artist and critic Mark Van Proyen argues that “there was much more to Sam’s paintings than the fetish of paint for

the sake of paint; there was also an allusiveness to them that is still hard to pin down in words, something very basic. I think that it had to do with putting the erotics of touch into the foreground of experience, and this attribute applies to all good paintings from any historical moment.”

Part Zen Master and part Drill Sergeant, Tchakalian, who once taught kindergarten, had a gentle side, but it was his assertiveness that stood out. In his classroom teaching he used profanity unabashedly. “The first time I met him in drawing class,” Scott Greene recalls, “he said to me, ‘Don’t go fucking telling your fucking parents I say fuck all the time.’” In critiques Tchakalian liked to advise, “You gotta fuck the paint.” “Whose fucking painting is that?” he once asked Sally Dannels, “Did you fucking paint that Sally? Go get your fucking brushes and paint that shit out!”

Insults were also part of his arsenal, and he used them to break down egos that he felt could use restructuring. For example, he told one student that the paint on his pants was more interesting than the paint on his canvas. Tchakalian’s rants sometimes crossed a line. Cliff Hengst remembers seeing a student burst into tears, pack up her paints, and run out of class after a Tchakalian diatribe. Richard Felix frames it this way: “If Sam didn’t break you, he made you work harder. He pushed you to puke your ‘oh-so-precious’ self up all over the canvas and see where you landed — and then keep on going!” When this strategy worked, the result was a sense of accomplishment. “He did make us feel great,” comments Dede Pedroli. “Like we were really artists.”



Sam Tchakalian, “Untitled” (1987), monotype, 6 x 14.75 inches (courtesy Magnolia Editions)

His teaching methods were matched with an intense classroom atmosphere. Jesse Weidel, who studied with him in the 1980s, recalls that “he would always be blasting the same Led Zeppelin tape over and over again, pacing around, shouting, ‘Your drawings need to be strong like this music.’” Tchakalian’s legendary critique sessions were like his late paintings: sustained and lengthy. “I did witness a critique he was giving turn into the most moving speech about making art I ever heard,” states Robert Hyatt. “This started with a small group and his critique about one painting; within the hour the room was packed to the door. Everybody was mesmerized about what he was saying, and when he was done some students were speechless while others applauded.”

Despite his fiery demeanor and intensity, many of Tchakalian’s students describe him as “big-hearted” and Stephen Faulk remembers how he would buy a row of roast ducks in Chinatown to be given away to hungry senior citizens.

Today, Tchakalian’s painting “Hitwood“(1977) hangs in Terminal 2 of San Francisco’s International Airport, where his friends and former students often stop to look at it, baggage in hand. “I drive past his studio and his corner market every week and think of him,” says Sally Dannels. “He was a piece of work for sure. Not politically correct, but I will say he prepared me big time for my future as an artist.”

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