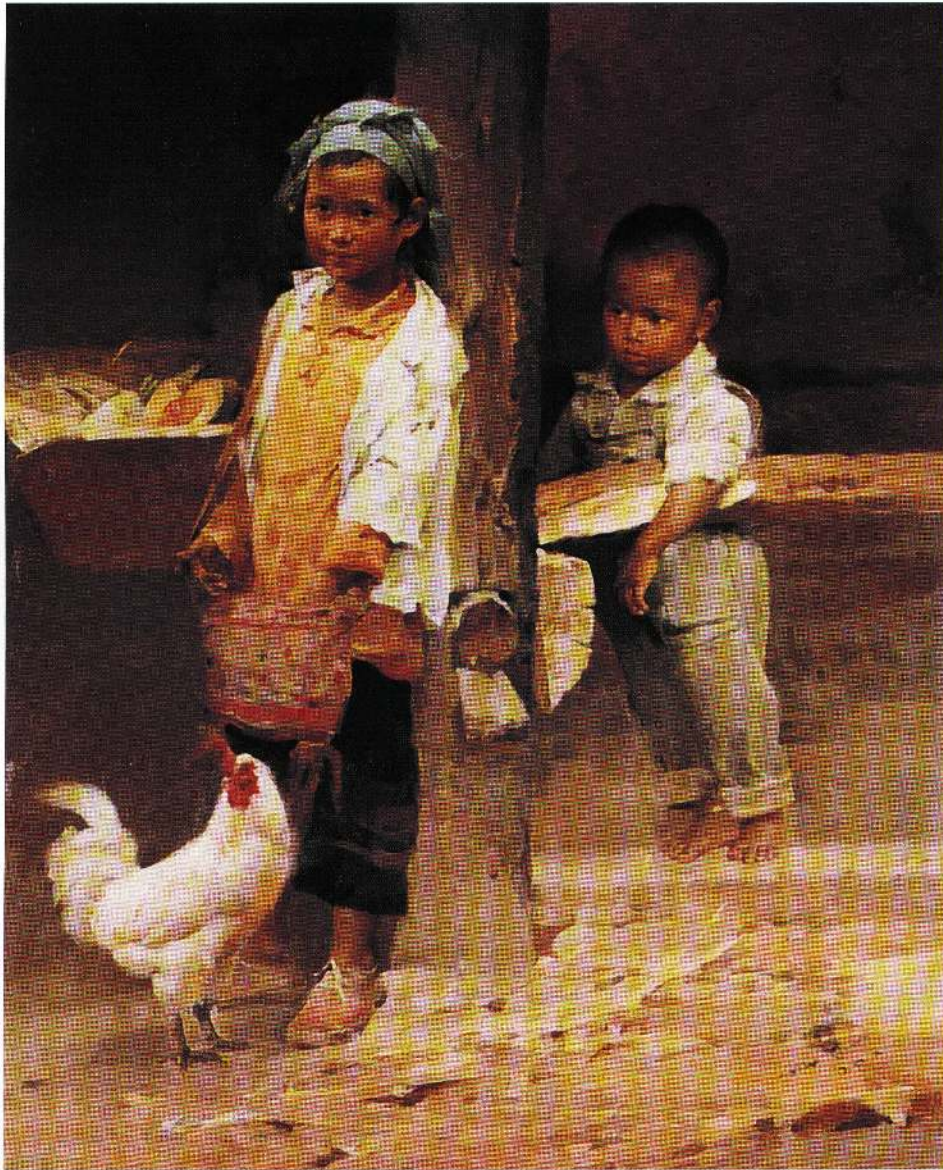


SouthwestArt

MIAN SITU



MORNING CHAOS, OIL, 30 x 24.

Mian Situ

A Personal Revolution

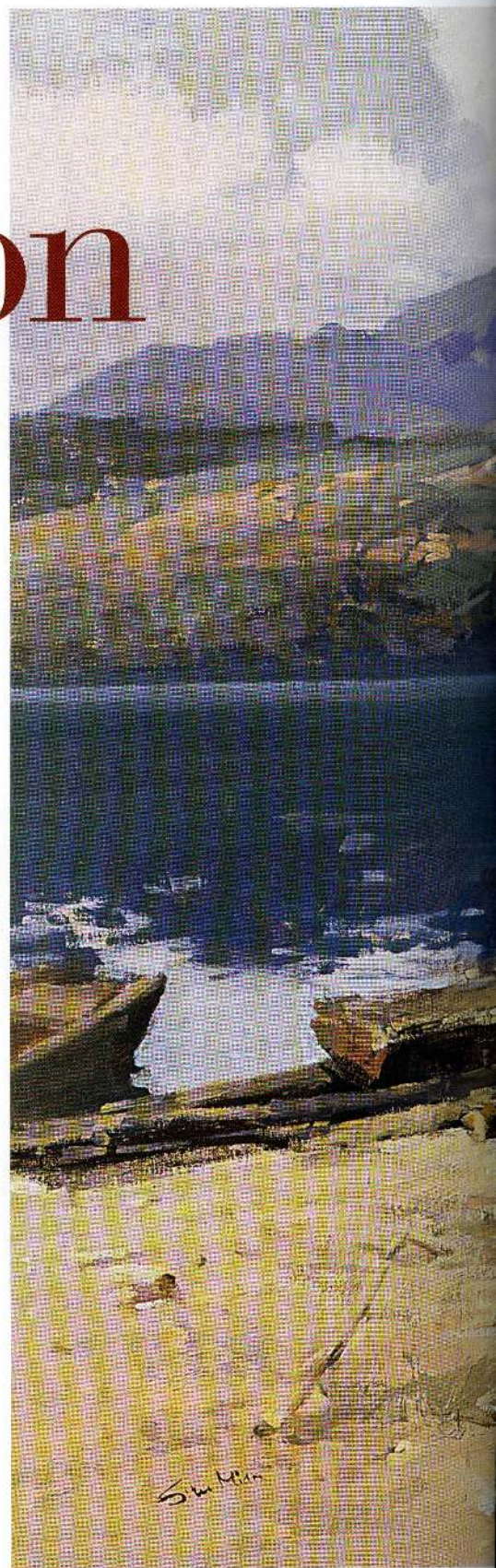
Mian Situ's paintings chronicle his journey from Mao's China to success in Southern California

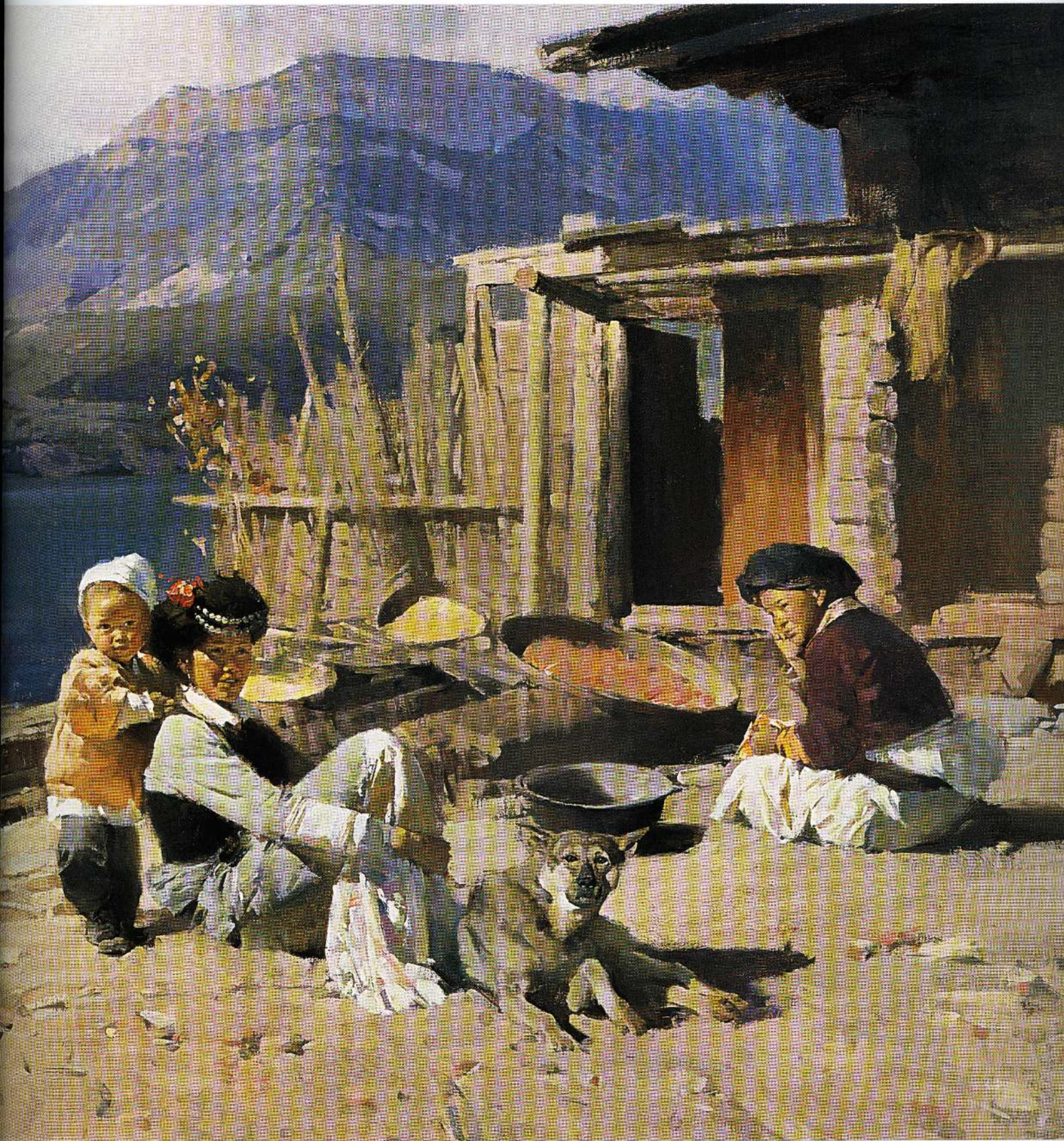
By Norman Kolpas

“MY STORY STARTS WITH THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION,” says San Dimas, CA, artist Mian Situ with a wry chuckle, referring to the turbulent political movement that swept China from 1966 to 1969. Just 13 years old when that unstable period began, Situ suddenly found himself “wandering around looking for something to relieve my energy,” he says; there were no classes to attend in his rural town in Guangdong Province.

One day, he discovered a friend drawing posters in support of the revolution. “Before that,” Situ recalls, “I didn’t have much interest in or knowledge of art.” But something about the process of making the Chinese leader’s image come to life on a large sheet of paper intrigued the teen. “I spent the next half a year just drawing Mao’s portrait. It wasn’t great work at all, but I thought it was art.”

Although Situ felt little of the revolutionary fervor that drove so many of his peers, he joined the Red Guard. Living in government barracks, he continued to paint scenes that glorified the communist leader. But Situ felt a different passion growing within him, a deep desire to become an artist. Realizing that there had to be more to art, he searched for books on its history; but the Cultural Revolution made that





FAMILY GATHERING [1999], OIL, 30 x 40.

task difficult: Libraries were locked tight and books on western art banned. In the homes of friends and acquaintances, though, Situ found illicit volumes and absorbed their contents. "They were very poorly printed books, mostly black and white, with no detail," he says. "I'd copy every word and every picture by hand in pencil. I learned from Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael. And I realized that I was going in the wrong direction. To be a good artist, you have to draw from a model or a landscape. I started going out and working from life."

Situ continued to teach himself in this way until 1972, when his

budding talent was recognized with admission to the oil painting department of the prestigious Guangzhou (Canton) Institute of Fine Arts. There he learned techniques dating back to 19th-century European academic realism—a style that became fashionable in Czarist Russia, evolved into what was known as socialist realism under Soviet rule, and finally was put to use in support of Mao's China.

Though the ultimate goal of the Guangzhou curriculum was to train artists to portray romantic ideals of noble peasants and workers, Situ says that during his three years there he learned what he needed: the basics of drawing,

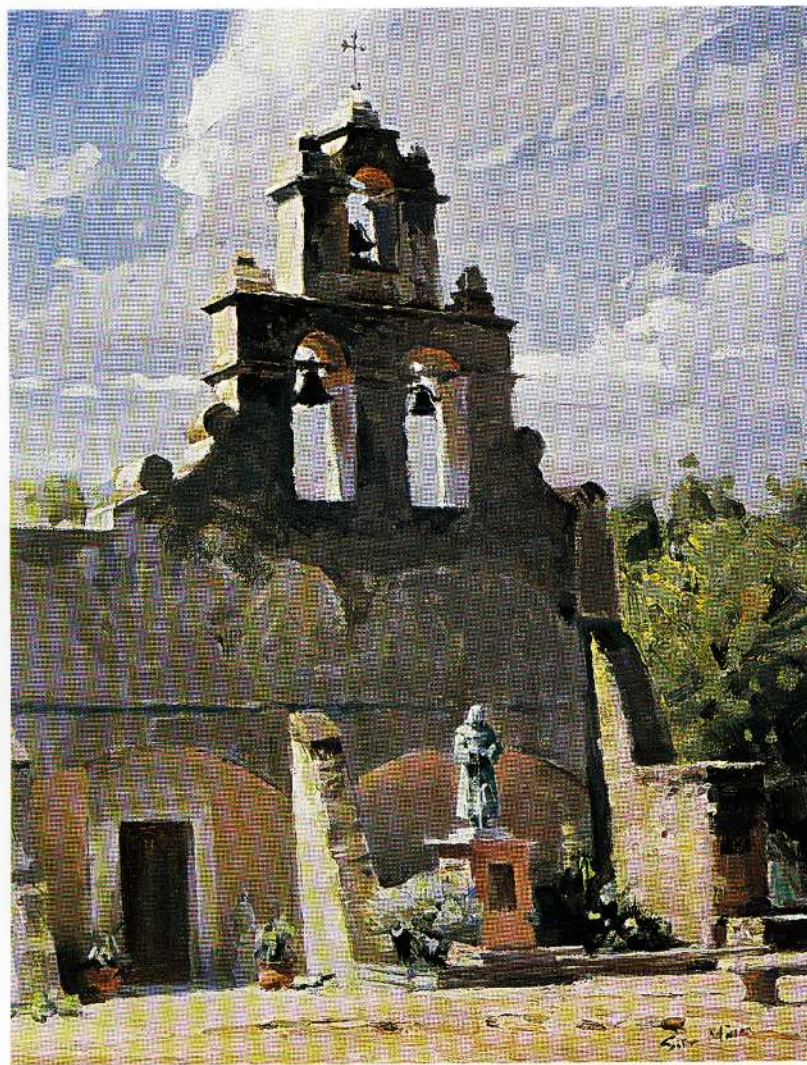
anatomy, and color. "It was a very good foundation," he says, "and though the teachers didn't dare to say that they disagreed with government policy, they would pass us subtle messages. It was a funny time."

Funny, perhaps, but Situ excelled at Guangzhou, so much so that he was invited back in 1978 for postgraduate work. "By then," he says, "the door was opened more widely to the outside world. I spent three years trying everything, every style—impressionism, post-impressionism, expressionism—and I realized that only my style was good for me."

His graduate project, a scene depicting young city people forced to work in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, was banned from official exhibition because it was deemed critical of the government. "I just considered it art," he says. "People came to see it privately in the college. Then a magazine from Beijing came to see it and put my painting on their cover."

Such notoriety, fortunately, did not land Situ in trouble. "Things were changing so rapidly that they just forgot about you," he says. After graduation he was hired to teach at Guangzhou. He spent six more years there, taking advantage of generous sabbatical time to travel with his camera in the rural landscapes of his childhood, sketching and taking reference photos of the countryside and the humble folk he loved to paint most.

Although Situ led a settled life, a yearning was growing inside him. "My interest is oil painting, which is not traditional Chinese painting," he explains. "So I dreamed of going to Europe or America to see the originals of the paintings in my books."





ABOVE: FIRST MARKET
[1999], OIL, 24 x 30.

LEFT: MISSION SAN JUAN,
SAN ANTONIO, TX [1999], OIL, 16 x 12.

That opportunity finally came in 1987 when Situ received foreign-student status and went to Los Angeles to study English. Soon after arriving, he made his first trip to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. “I was shocked,” he says. “I spent the whole day there and didn’t want to leave. I saw Rembrandt and some American masters like John Singer Sargent and William Merritt Chase and Childe Hassam and Andrew Wyeth. I would go closer, then farther away, then closer again—examining every detail, every stroke, to see how it was done. I felt just like a sponge absorbing water.”

A year later, Situ migrated to Vancouver and applied for

Canadian citizenship. He drew portraits in Stanley Park for \$20 apiece, making enough money during the summer tourist season to support himself and his painting during the rest of the year. “But drawing portraits was not my future,” he says. In 1992 he moved to Toronto to concentrate more fully on fine art.

Situ’s oils of scenes from his homeland began to sell, and such success led him in 1995 to submit a work to the *Oil Painters of America National Exhibition* at Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art in

San Antonio, TX. To his surprise, he won the Best of Show and People’s Choice awards. The American success that followed convinced him to return to Southern California in the summer of 1997. “People say that you always look back to the place where you took your first step out of your country,” he explains. “I was always dreaming of going back to Los Angeles.” There he continues to paint, in full command of his talent and skills.

To fuel his imagination, Situ has returned to China twice in recent years, traveling the countryside to capture its subcultures that have begun to vanish. When he lived there, he says, he “would see the minority people in their



native costumes. Now, the young people are wearing what we wear here in America.”

Time’s passage remains halted, however, in Situ’s canvases. *MATRIARCHS OF THE MARKET*, for example, portrays three women of the Naxi people from Yunnan Province. “What made me do the painting,” he says, “was their faces and their character. Their expressions make you have to guess what’s going on and what they’re looking at. I like to give some room for the viewer’s imagination.”

Such evident mastery in Chinese-themed works completed in America leads to an inevitable question: Will Situ ever choose to portray his adopted country? The answer is an intriguing mix of “yes” and “no.”

He has, in fact, already begun to paint landscapes and other

ABOVE: MARKET DAY IN THE VILLAGE [1999], OIL, 40 x 60.

BELOW: MIAN SITU.

scenes in Southern California, winning an Honorable Mention for *MEDITATION*, a deeply spiritual work completed at a plein-air painting competition held last August at Mission San Juan Capistrano. “When you’re working in the studio too long, you’ve got to go out close to nature to remind yourself how brilliant it is,” Situ says, adding humbly, “My paintings can never be as beautiful as nature.”

One thing Situ does not see himself doing anytime soon, however, is painting native peoples of America, despite the fact that his style might lend itself to such sub-

jects. He says he knows too little about their culture and history to portray them honestly. Besides, Situ continues, he is delighted to find that American collectors, though often not familiar with Chinese culture, nonetheless connect with his works. “My paintings portray universal feelings,” he

says. “With Chinese native subjects, I know their souls. And when you reach a person’s soul, it doesn’t matter what the subject matter is.” □



Norman Kolpas wrote about Nancy Guzik and Daniel Morper for the December issue.

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