



BY NORMAN KOLPAS

Converging Cultures

Mian Situ's latest works successfully blend his Chinese heritage and his American home

ALMOST 15 YEARS ago, though he was already an established and respected oil painter in his late 40s, Mian Situ still lived a working life that sometimes made him feel torn between two worlds. Only a major leap of faith—and the support of the man behind one of the western art world's premier events—would eventually enable him to bridge that chasm.

Situ was born and raised in the city of Kaiping in southeastern China's Guangdong Province. He came of age during the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution in the mid- to late 1960s. First recognized for the posters of Chairman Mao and heroic peasants he'd painted as a teenager under

government mandate, he went on to receive a top-notch education in Soviet-style realist art at the prestigious Guangzhou Institute of Fine Arts, where he eventually became a faculty member. Having long admired, and dreamed of studying, the realist traditions of the western world, from Rembrandt to John Singer Sargent to Joaquín Sorolla, Situ finally emigrated in 1987. He first enrolled in an English-language course for a year in greater Los Angeles, then lived and worked in Canada for a decade before finally settling for good back in Southern California in 1998.

Yet, despite all his time in North America, as the new millennium approached, Situ was still largely known and respected—and avidly collected—for scenes he painted of rural life in China, based on regular visits he made back to his homeland. “With Chinese native subjects, I know their souls,” he said when he was first featured in *Southwest Art* in 2000. Situ went on to explain that, although the landscapes of his adopted home in the Southwest inspired occasional plein-air paintings, he felt he lacked the necessary knowledge to portray the historic cultures and peoples of the American West.

Today, as he sits reminiscing in the studio of his spacious, contemporary mission-style home, nestled among the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains about an hour east of Los Angeles, Situ smiles modestly. “How my thinking has changed,” he says. “A lot of things change in your life that you don’t even know.”

FOR SITU, the change began through a conversation he had in 2000 with John Geraghty. A widely respected figure in the world of contemporary western-themed art, Geraghty has served as special advisor to the prestigious Masters of the American West show since its inception in 1998 at the Autry National Center. An admirer of Situ’s work, Geraghty invited him to submit paintings for the 2001 show.

Situ demurred, saying he felt unable to convincingly portray the required western themes. “John suggested that I could paint the Chinese in the American West,” the artist recalls.

The suggestion struck a powerful chord for Situ, and with good reason. Between the beginning of the Gold Rush in



Awaiting the Vendors, Yunnan Marketplace, oil, 32 x 38.



▲ Seamstress, oil, 24 x 36.

◀ The Newcomers, Deadwood, South Dakota, 1878, oil, 46 x 58.



representation

Trailside Galleries, Jackson, WY, and Scottsdale, AZ;
InSight Gallery, Fredericksburg, TX.

upcoming shows

Holiday Miniatures Show, **Trailside Galleries**, Scottsdale, AZ,
December 1-29.

Masters of the American West, Los Angeles, CA,
January 31-March 8, 2015.

American Miniatures, **Settlers West Galleries**, Tucson, AZ,
February 14, 2015.

Solo show, **InSight Gallery**, May 2015.



Firewood Gang, oil, 32 x 45.

1849 and 1890, well more than 300,000 Chinese immigrated to the United States, often to seek their fortunes in mining camps or to labor on the Transcontinental Railroad. An estimated 77 percent of them and their families wound up in California, eventually settling in so-called Chinatown neighborhoods of San Francisco and other cities—*islands of relative safety amidst widespread, sometimes violent discrimination.*

The vast majority of those brave souls came from Situ's own home province. Even a century later, says the artist, "in my hometown people still called America 'Golden Mountain,' because all they saw were people bringing back a lot of money from the United States, so the impression was that gold was everywhere. But the early immigrants' experience was another story, full of sweat and tears and blood."

That was a story of the American West that Situ felt he could authentically tell through his combination of personal experience, research, and artistic skills.

For the 2001 Masters of the American West show, then, Situ went on to produce

three paintings. The largest depicted a group of Chinese railroad workers taking a break in the High Sierra, while a Chinese doctor tends to one man's wounded foot. "I was not quite confident it would sell," Situ admits now, adding, "I made sure I had a wall ready at home to hang it on if nobody bought it."

But "JOHN CHINAMAN" IN THE SIERRA, a title Situ deliberately chose to echo a popular stereotype epithet of the era, not only sold for \$33,000, it also was selected for the Patrons' Choice Award as the most popular work at the show.

"That was so encouraging," Situ recalls, his voice hushed with an awe he still feels almost 14 years later. "It gave me the encouragement I needed. From then on, I had more confidence," he says, in tackling western subjects from a uniquely personal perspective.

In the years since, Situ's work has consistently received recognition. He has won a total of 18 awards since 2001. That includes the Patrons' Choice four more times since his debut year and five Gene Autry Memorial Awards—most recently in 2013—which are given in recognition

of the most outstanding presentation of three or more works.

Not surprisingly, demand remains strong for an artist of such acclaim, with Situ's larger canvases now easily commanding six-figure prices. And that has held true not just at the Autry and in private galleries but also at other premier events like the annual Coeur d'Alene Art Auction, where his works have appeared regularly. His painting JOURNEY OF HOPE AND PROSPERITY, a large scene of Chinese immigrants and westerners on board the crowded deck of a ship bound for San Francisco from Asia in 1880, went for a jaw-dropping \$431,250.

Situ seems only humbled, even slightly abashed, by such success. "When my paintings were well received, I realized that they were not only about the Chinese people but also about American history," he says. "This is part of America." Demand for his works provided him with a welcome opportunity to delve even more deeply into his highly personal subject matter. "Reading is very important to my research," he says. "Fortunately, there is plenty of historical material preserved,

in both words and artifacts.” He likes to travel California Highway 49 through the historic Mother Lode mining towns, including Chinese Camp, now a ghost town but once densely populated with fortune-seekers from his homeland. “Standing on the ground in those places gives me a feel for the past, imagining how life was, so I can envision the scene.”

He’s traveled farther afield, too, to destinations like Deadwood, the setting for his recent 46-by-58-inch painting *THE NEWCOMERS* [see page 80], in which a tight-knit group of Chinese arrivals to the South Dakota boomtown in 1878 regard—with a mix of wonderment and apprehension—the swirl of carousing, gawking westerners surrounding them. It’s a rich theme of cultural convergence he’s explored before in different ways, including his 2012 *MORNING ON MARKET STREET*, in which a multigenerational group of Chinese women and children carefully navigate a busy San Francisco intersection circa 1905.

Meanwhile, Situ’s deepening progress in this rich vein of historic content has also helped two other facets of his career. Every two years or so, he visits China to research its tribal peoples, particularly those of the Cangyuan autonomous county in the mountainous southwestern province of Yunnan. Carrying a camera with a good telephoto lens that enables him to capture candid images, he comes away with a wealth of reference shots that inform intricate, richly atmospheric paintings like *AWAITING THE VENDORS*, *YUNNAN MARKETPLACE* [see page 81]. “I like their traditions,” he says of Cangyuan’s locals. “And their costume style is unique and colorful. But now, things change at such a speed that I can see the difference. More and more are wearing western clothing. The traditions are vanishing.” All the more reason, he feels, to capture them while he can.

At the same time, Situ, now 62 years old, has begun at last to venture, if only occasionally, into subjects even closer to the heritage of his adopted homeland. His intimate portrait *THE PROSPECTOR*, for example, touchingly demonstrates his ability to forge a direct, authentic human connection with historical American subjects. “The Forty-Niners and the Indians are attractive subjects to me,” he observes. Then, he quickly adds, “I wish



The Prospector, oil, 16 x 12.

I had time to do more of those, too. But I will stay on focus.”

Right now, that means he’s hard at work on paintings for the next Masters of the American West event, which takes place early next year at the Autry. He hints that attendees can expect to see cultures converging once again in scenes set in the High Sierra gold-mining camps. At press time, however, Situ was still deciding what specific stories those paintings might tell and what the specific compositions would become. As always, he’ll proceed from a few simple thumbnail sketches to “working out the details right on the canvas,” using a style he describes as combining realism and impressionism, in which finely detailed yet rich painterly brush strokes “give the painting a lot of life.”

Regardless of the subject matter, set-

ting, or ethnicity of any particular painting by Situ, it’s that very real sense of life, and the human connection that comes with it, that ultimately makes his work so compelling. “Art is different from photography in that it shows emotionally how you look at a subject,” he says, summing up what he wants his paintings to achieve. “I want to show you not only *what* a subject is, but *how* it is.” ❖

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Mountain Living* and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.

See more of Situ’s paintings at
www.southwestart.com/featured/situ-m-nov2014.