



MIAN SITU

Following His Heart

By Clover Neiberg

For many people, “follow your heart” is a naively optimistic slogan on a motivational poster. For artist Mian Situ, it’s a proven life philosophy.

“I have a daughter,” he says. “She’s in college, and she always talks with me about what she’s going to do. She’s in her junior year, and she still doesn’t know what she’s going to do. Every time she asks for my opinion, I tell her, ‘I can’t tell you what to do; you have to do what you like. Other people will tell you what has good earning potential, what will make you lots of money, what will get you a job. But you have to follow your heart. If you follow your heart, if you have a passion for what you’re doing, you’ll find success.’”

Situ, who followed his heart from China to Canada to the United States in order to pursue his passion for art, knows whereof he speaks. He has seen both lean times and great success, and he has experienced discouragement and heartbreak, as well as triumph on the journey.

Situ came of age during the Cultural Revolution in China, a turbulent time for the creative class. Going to art school, he explains, was something of a gamble, because there was no guarantee that he’d have the freedom to actually pursue an artistic career. “In China, no market existed for art,” he explains. “You may get a chance to study art, but when it comes to getting a job . . .” He hesitates. His English is quite good,

but he struggles to express just how challenging the Mao regime was for an aspiring artist. He sighs, then says, “The government gives you a job, and you do the job.”

Situ accepted the gamble, attending the prestigious Guangzhou Institute of Fine Art, where he earned a degree and then became

Above - Firewood Gang, oil, 32" by 45"

“Years ago, when I visited the remote area in Yunnan Province, I came upon a group of children carrying firewood on their way to school. There, during their school days, the children, whose homes are far away, sometimes have to cook their own meals in school. They usually bring with them to school the firewood and vegetables, enough for a week. Collecting firewood is part of their routine at home, as well as other chores for the families.”



Fetching Water, oil, 34" by 30"

"Moving westward on the Oregon Trail, the pioneer women would see and experience hardship like none they had ever imagined. They would also find out how strong they could truly be."



Color of Tradition, oil, 28" by 22"

"Wa is a tribe that lives in Southwest China, Yunnan Province, in an area next to Myanmar. They like very bright colors for their costumes and head dress."

New Market Place, Yunnan, China, oil, 40" by 50"

"Within Cangyuan, Yunnan Province in China, the local government has constructed a modern building to be used by the people for their festivities and weekly market place. The Wa people, a minority tribe in Southwest China, are traditional and in their appreciation for the old ways have returned to the fundamental presentation of their goods, which they have brought to market. Sitting among themselves, they negotiate and discuss their life experiences."



an instructor after completing his education. "I received six years of training in a very good system we borrowed from Russia, which was then the Soviet Union," he says, describing the training as rigorous. "I loved it. I love drawing, I love to paint, and I got the chance to study these subjects. I was so lucky."

Because the Soviets favored a European-inspired style of art, Situ's Soviet-taught instructors at Guangzhou emphasized figurative drawing and oil painting, rather than the style of art more prevalent in China and other parts of Asia. "What I studied was not actually the traditional way," Situ says. "The Chinese tradition uses brushes and rice paper and water. It's very different from the Western style. I studied the Western style."

His education complete, Situ was restless, eager to find a geographical setting where an artistic career was more feasible. "We all wanted to leave China," he says. "The door to the outside world had been closed for so long, and we all knew what was happening in the Western world. I wanted to know what Western artists were doing. I wanted to study their tradition. I wanted to go to Europe or the United States."

In 1987, it looked like his wish would be fulfilled. He obtained a student visa to come to the United States, and he traveled to Los Angeles, California, to

study and to try to establish himself as an artist. The second goal proved elusive. His oil paintings, in which he used a Western style to depict Chinese subjects, failed to resonate with the American market. "I tried to find a gallery to sell my work, but it wasn't easy in the beginning," he says. "There weren't any works like what I was doing. There wasn't any style like my style in the market. The galleries had doubts. They



didn't think they could sell this type of art, because they hadn't seen anything like it before."

Discouraged, at a professional impasse, and out of time on his student visa, Situ moved to Canada, where he found a slightly warmer reception and, eventually, a gallery willing to give him a chance. "It was a very good luck beginning," he says, using one of the charmingly quirky expressions that still

pepper his speech after nearly three decades in North America. (When asked how many languages he speaks, Situ initially says, "Just Chinese and English," but goes on to explain that he's actually fluent in several Chinese dialects.)

In 1998, he was able to obtain a second U.S. visa, which he used to return to Los Angeles. This time things were different. Through increased exposure, Situ began to

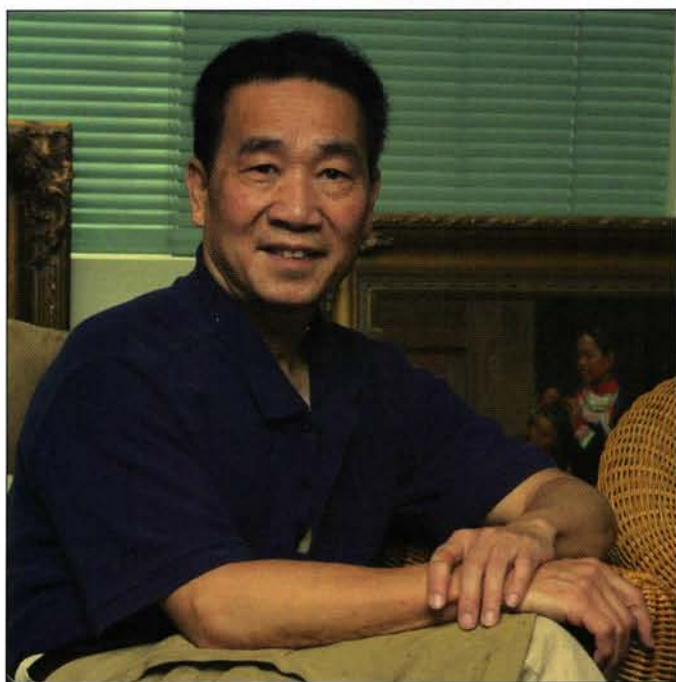
sell more pieces, commanding higher prices, and garnering awards. The awards in particular serve as a source of pride for him. "They represent recognition of your skills and efforts," he says. "They encourage you toward future success."

Situ attributes his success, in large part, to the fact that his style has evolved to better suit the U.S. market, while still retaining the unique influence of his Chinese upbringing



Cutting a Path, Sierra Nevada, 1866, oil, 32" by 36"

"During the construction of the transcontinental railroad, Central Pacific arranged with labor contractors to import large numbers of Chinese workers directly from China. By July 1865, the Chinese workforce was nearly 4,000. In February 1867, approximately 8,000 Chinese were working on the construction of tunnels, and 3,000 were laying track, representing 90 percent of the workforce."



and education. "The training I received was very solid," he's quick to emphasize. "The skill in drawing, the skill in color—I still base my style on the training I received. But the design had to be adjusted to the market. When you become a part of a totally new culture, you can't just bring what you have. To sell the art I'd been making would have been impossible. I started looking at what Western artists do and thought, 'There might be something I can learn there. The way they're telling the story is a little different than the Chinese artists.' So my style did change, especially the colors, the conversation, the feeling in the paintings. But the foundation remains the same."

A major career turning point occurred in 2001, when Situ was invited to take part in the prestigious Masters

Mother's Boy, oil, 20" by 16"

"Mothers and children are forever my favorite subjects. In this painting, they are from a peasant's family in Yunnan, China."

of the American West show. Up to that point, he had used the word "Western" to denote Western civilization and its artistic traditions. Western meant the great masters and, to a lesser degree, their American descendants and imitators. But the invitation to the Masters of the American West show caused him to think about the other important meaning of the word in American art: art specifically depicting scenes from the American west.

The show's advisor, the late John Geraghty, placed a condition on Situ's participation: He needed to create pieces for the show that were set in America. Up until that time, Situ's subjects had been Chinese people set in Chinese locales, but he eagerly accepted the challenge, turning to the stories of early Chinese immigrants for inspiration. "Early Chinese immigrants in the American West came here to mine gold, build the railroads, settle in the cities," he says. "They have a unique culture and history, and they gave me a completely new subject to paint."

Situ also drew on his shared experience with those subjects, in terms of both experience and ancestry. "I come from the same part of China as many of these immigrants," he explains. "I've heard many stories about early Chinese immigrants from my neighbors, my friends. Everyone has a family member or a friend who followed a dream and came to America. We're all familiar with that story. Those people brought money back to China and built beautiful houses in the village. Many Chinese people still dream of following previous generations to America to seek their fortune. We called America 'the golden market' and the American flag 'the flower flag,' because the country is so rich, and the flag is so beautiful."


The emotion rises in Situ's voice, as he speaks of his adopted homeland and of the way he relates to the Chinese immigrants he paints. Like



them, he came here in pursuit of a dream. Although many of his dreams have come true—he has a successful art career, and he is a U.S. citizen—he still has a few more dreams to pursue.

"I'm still learning," Situ says of his art. "I can still learn, I can follow others, I can pick up new ideas from others, from the techniques they're using and the progress they're making. I'm proud that, at my age, I can still improve my art and do better."

Situ has also found love again. On his own since his wife's death in 2013, he now is engaged to a woman from China. And he remains close to his daughter, whom he continues to encourage to pursue her own dreams.

Optimistic about the future, because the past has shown him what to do, Situ says, "I have to follow my heart and do my best." 

Clover Neiberg is a writer living in Portland, Oregon.