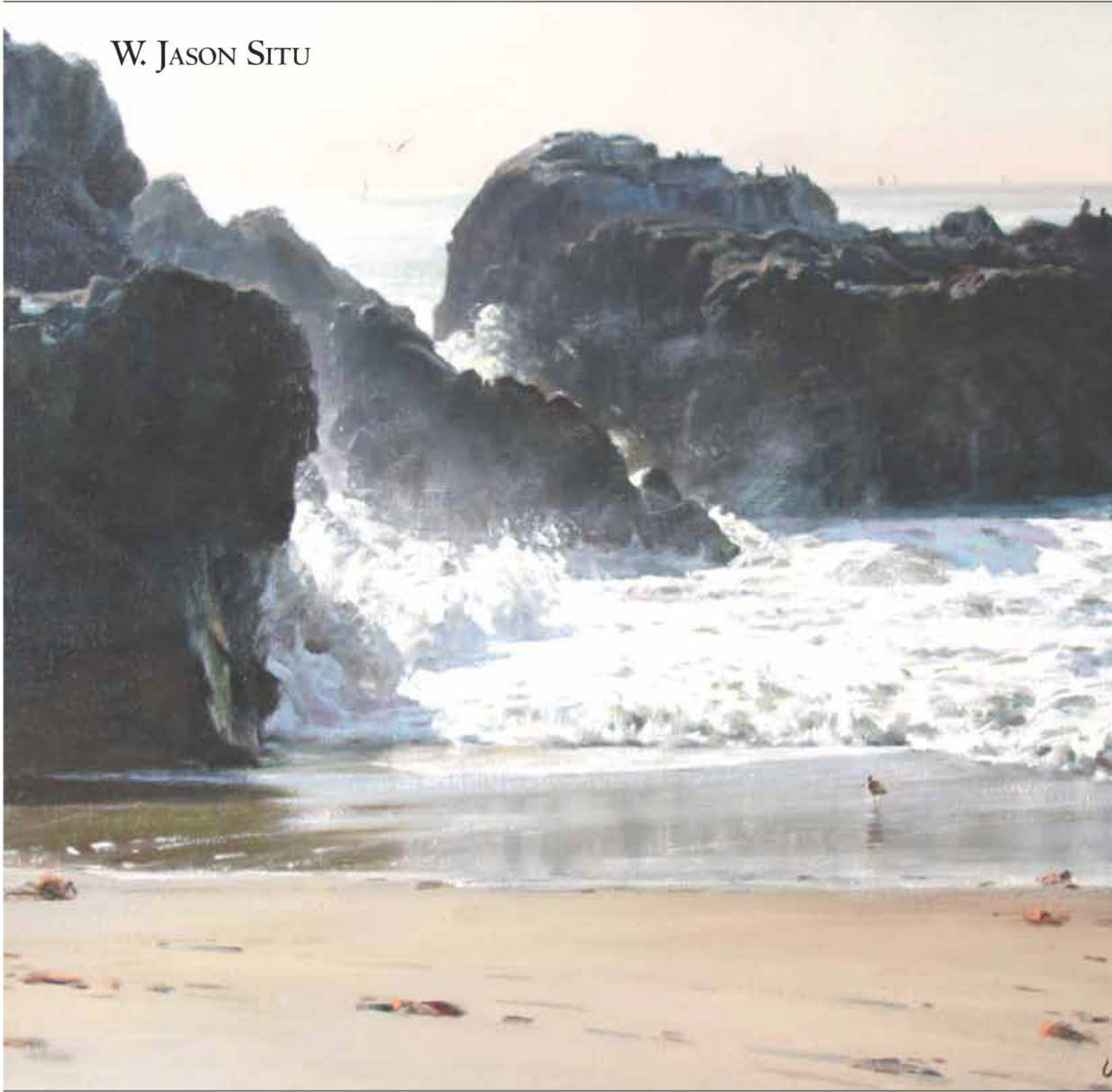


W. JASON SITU



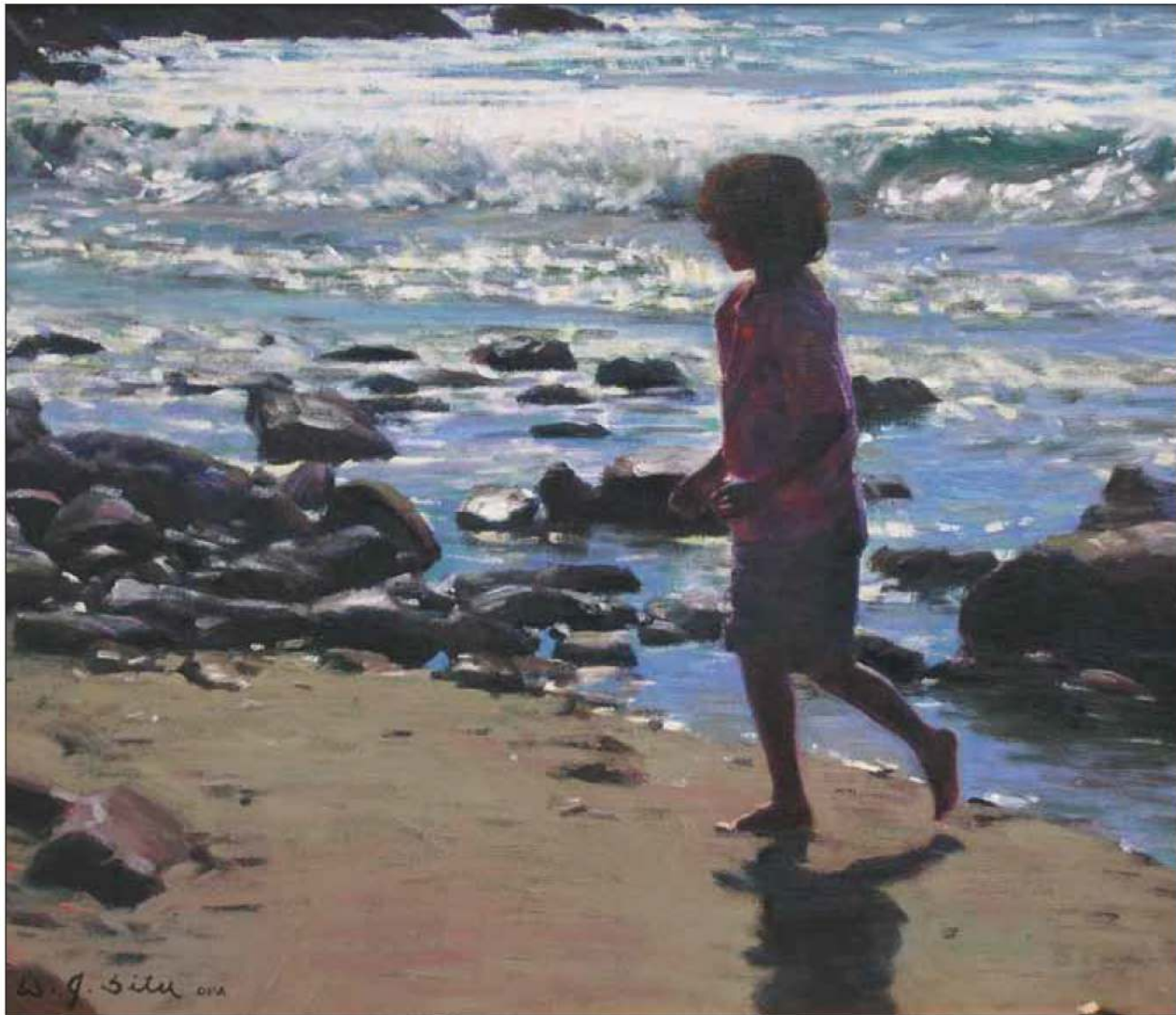
A REVOLUTIONARY CAREER

By Mary Nelson

China's Cultural Revolution had a major impact on its people—on its wealthy people and on W. Jason Situ. Prior to Mao Tse Tung's effort to strip the privileged class of its status, Situ was a normal kid. In 1966, when the Cultural Revolution began, however, his world was tossed asunder.

As a student at Kaiping #1 Middle School, in the small southern China village of Kaiping, where he was born, Situ had been a good boy in his teachers' eyes: an obedient, hard-working, straight-A student. Despite his academic success, he admits he had no idea what direction to take once he graduated from high school, but says Mao's Cultural Revolution provided him with an oblique opening to a career he'd never even considered.

ART CAPTURED SITU'S IMAGINATION IN A WAY THAT PREVIOUSLY HADN'T REGISTERED



Beach Boy, oil, 16" by 20"

"It's not my strong point to paint figures, but I often try a few to bring a plot to my paintings. It is fun."

Windy Morning, oil, 20" by 24"

"I came upon this view in a Malibu state park, while taking part in a California Art Club paint-out event, and later completed the painting in my studio. I really like the morning atmosphere."

Mao's main selling point for the revolution was to create a China in which peasants, the labor force, and educated people would work together for the good of China. No one was better than anyone else; it would be a classless society. In their zeal to establish their leader's wishes, Red Guards, who were just kids themselves, encouraged students to criticize education and their teachers. Ultimately, amid the chaos and unrest, schools closed.

"We then were sent away to learn revolution experiences," Situ says. "We were divided into different groups and fought each other. During that time, my favorite activity was to copy the propaganda [mostly woodcut prints] using the geometric square, or to copy Chairman Mao's head on the flier." He also enjoyed copying the large slogan banners. Suddenly, art captured Situ's imagination in a way that previously hadn't registered.

In 1968, he returned to Kaiping, sent there with instruction to be a peasant. But by then, Situ wanted to



Santa Monica Breeze, oil, 18" by 24"

"I stopped by Santa Monica on a summer afternoon and was fascinated with the beautiful atmosphere—the ocean, the sand, the buildings, the colors, and the wind."

learn about art and painting. As luck would have it, Szeto Lap, who is now a renowned artist living in Paris, France, also was sent to Kaiping to be a peasant. Already a proficient artist, Lap had grown up in the large city of Guangzhou, where he had studied art. The two young men became friends instantly, and Lap introduced Situ to painting plein air with oils, a love affair that continues today. Together they two men learned the fine art of painting, using the French Impressionists as their guiding force. Shortly after, they met Mian Situ and were enchanted by his beautiful drawings.

In 1972, Lap escaped China by swimming to Hong Kong, a feat attempted by scores of Chinese youth, many of whom drowned. He then sneaked into Paris. At about the same time, Mian Situ was accepted into Guangdong People's Art College, now called Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. With

his friends and fellow artists gone, Situ couldn't let his newfound interest languish, so he set out to find others in his small village who shared his passion for painting.

"I started to gather a group of young friends to paint plein air with me, using French Impressionism as our Bible," he recalls. "I became a big brother, but Mian was the real leader of our group. He spent all his holidays with us, shared all his knowledge teaching us." Also, every chance he got, Situ would go to the Academy where Mian was more than happy to teach his friend everything he had learned. They called their group the Chikan Art Association and invited Clement Kwan, now a renowned Canadian artist, to join the small band of budding artisans. Eventually, Michael, Situ's youngest brother, joined the group, as well.

When Mao died in 1976, Situ was hired to paint several large portraits of the new leader, Hua Guofen, and Mao that were hung in local convention halls and schools. As a result of his recognition, in 1977, when



Charleston in May, oil, 16" by 20"

"After living in California for eight years, I stopped into this historic town in 2007 because of the Invitational Wet Paint Show. It gave me a totally different feeling."

the revolution ended, Situ was asked to teach art at his former high school.

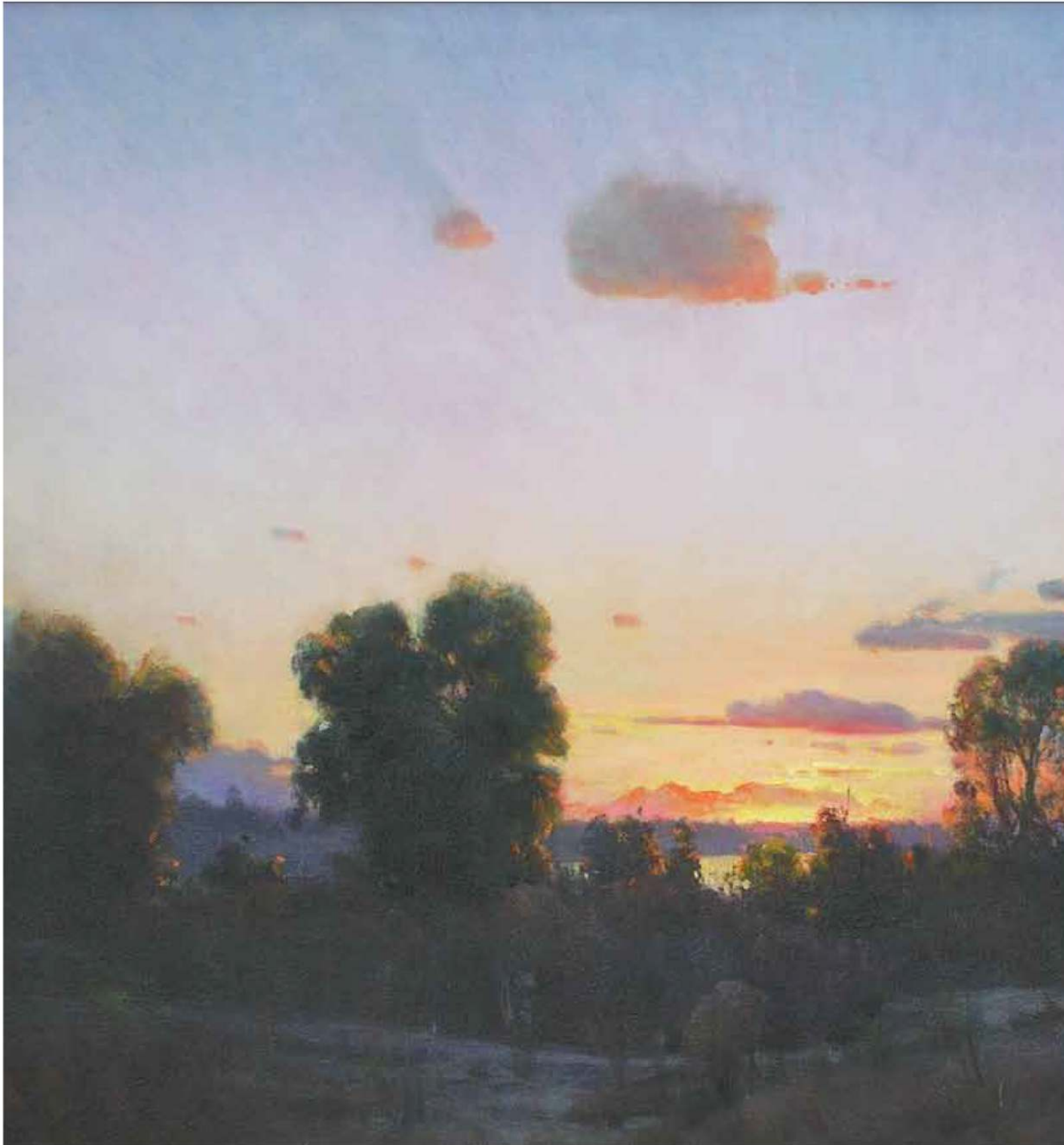
In 1982, Situ realized his dream when he was given the opportunity to study art at the famed Guanzhou Academy of Fine Arts, where he stayed for two years. "My main instructor at the Academy was Gao Shao Gang who used to study oil painting in Lepin Art Academy of Saint Petersburg in Russia," he says. "I learned a lot about Russian art in the school and came to love Ivan Shishkin and Issak Levitan's landscapes." The Russian influence crept into Situ's impressionistic style and subtly began to transform it to what he now calls impressionistic realism.

Situ left the Academy in 1984 and returned to Kaiping to continue to teach art at the high school there. "I have lots of artist friends and students in my hometown Kaiping," he says. "This is a very special place in China. She [Kaiping] nurtures lots of artists. Their unique buildings, Diaolou [multistory defensive village houses, which display a complex and flamboyant fusion of

Chinese and Western structural and decorative forms], are famous in the world." Even though it meant leaving good friends and fond memories, Situ left China in 1989.

Most of his family had already immigrated to the United States, and Situ took his wife Lisa and their two children—Sylvia, 11, and John, 6—to California. His parents helped out with rent for an apartment in Los Angeles, and Mian Situ, who had been in the United States since 1987, cautioned the aspiring artist to find a job as soon as he could, because making a living as an artist in California was a difficult endeavor.

Within a week of setting up a home in Los Angeles, Situ had a warehouse job for \$5 an hour. He chuckles as he recites the Chinese idiom his father had repeated to ensure that he got a job immediately. "Work first, ride a buffalo, then look for the horses," he told his son. Lisa, too, took a job in the warehouse, and the two worked side by side, ensuring a stable life for their children in their new home. Eventually, Situ moved up in the company and bought a house in El Monte, California. But, he says,



"The art never left my heart." He'd paint portraits and caricatures in the Chinatown markets during the weekends, both to feed his artistic hunger and to make extra money.

As Situ tried to sustain his family financially, he also began to become known among area plein air painting

associations. The American and California impressionist works had piqued his interest, and his work began to metamorphose. Thrilled that he could paint whatever he wanted to, Situ's plein air paintings initially focused on light and color. "I wasn't so keen about the subject,

and I kept my prices low, so people kept buying them," he says. "Later, I thought I should add some detail and give people their money's worth."

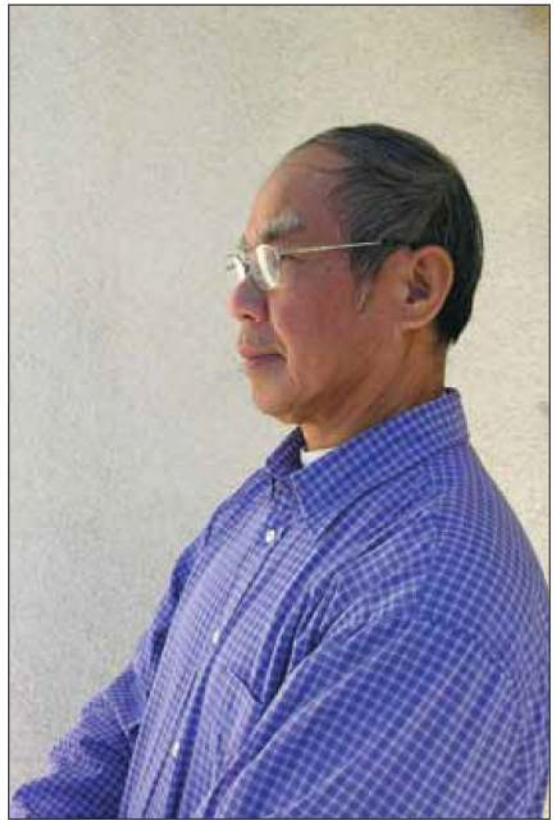
Harkening back to his father's idiom, Situ laughs and says, "I didn't find my horse until I started painting full time in 1997." He explains that



A Quiet Evening, oil, 20" by 30"

"This is one of my favorite paintings. I like implicit; I like tranquil. I worship nature."

1997 was a golden year for plein air, when it gained favorable attention from both artists and collectors. Plein air is still the basis for most of Situ's art, but detail becomes the focus in his studio. "On location, I mostly just paint what I see," he says. "I take more information from the location. In the studio, I have more freedom, and I change what




isn't good for the composition."

In 2001, Situ won a gold award at the Oil Painters of America, and says he knew he was headed in the right direction. As he has incorporated the finer points of his favored artists, his own unique style has strengthened and garnered favorable attention throughout the art community.

Even though Situ left the warehouse in 1997, Lisa stayed on, working to help him support his career and their family. In 2008, when the children had grown and Sylvia had a career in interior design and John as a web master, Lisa retired from the warehouse. That freedom has allowed the couple to lead painting excursions to Kaiping. "I invite some of my American artist friends to paint there, and meet my old friends," Situ says. "I will continue to do so every two years."

In the midst of convoluted adventure that landed him a career as a full-time artist, Situ has harbored a secret dream. "I want to just sit down to [paint] a few huge realism pieces (like Thomas Moran), not care about the bills, not think about the competitions, only for my dream..."

It is a dream that he believes is no longer beyond his grasp. 

Mary Nelson is a writer living in Minneapolis, Minnesota.