



BRIDGING CULTURES

By Mary Nelson

For California artist Mian Situ, 2016 and 2017 were banner years. In 2016, he met, courted, and married Gloria. Their romance began on the Internet and Gloria, a resident of the Yunnan Province in China, was a little reticent, when Situ made his first long-distance overture. Situ, who was familiar with the Yunnan Province from many trips he had taken to the province to garner resource material for his art, felt a kinship with her. Eventually, his knowledge of the area, combined with how much they had in common and proof of who he was as an artist won her over. She agreed to meet him in person, when she came to visit her sister in New Jersey—and that was all it took.

In 2017, with Gloria's support and managerial skills, Situ realized a longtime dream, when he opened the Situ Art Academy in Covina, California, providing a place for aspiring and recognized artists to come together to support each other's work and to empower each other to grow and succeed. Situ and other professional artists offer workshops and classes to help students learn the elements of producing art.

A master artist, educated in the Soviet-style realist art, Situ demonstrates his skills to teach new artists technique, artistic strategy, and composition. "I like to pass on my training to young artists to help them become skillful artists," he says.

Also in 2017, Situ's daughter Lisa, from a previous marriage, enrolled in a doctorate program in biomedicine

Lakota Princess, oil, 12" by 9"

"I met this lovely girl in South Dakota during a photo-taking trip. I love her face and her expression under the sunshine."



Canyon Shadows, oil, 26" by 20"

"Canyon De Chelly sits in the middle of the Navajo Indian Reservation and is still home to many Navajo, who live in and utilize the canyon's resources."

at Harvard, making him more than a little proud. Those golden moments stand as a tribute to his tenacity and persistence as an immigrant from a country that stifled creativity and freedom of expression.

Born in 1953, Situ was raised in a traditional Chinese family in Kaiping, a small village in the Guangdong Province of China. His first years were relatively stable, and his family, although not wealthy, was comfortable. Then, 1966 brought the Cultural Revolution and Mao Tse Tung's effort to strip the privileged class of its status.

"At that time in China, the door

to the outside world was closed," Situ says. Schools were shuttered, people's lives were constrained by the government, and Situ found himself at loose ends. Despite never having had an interest in art, at age 13, he became fascinated by a friend's artistic endeavor and soon began reading art books and sketching.

Situ quickly displayed a talent for art, and the government, which dictated what everyone did and how they did it, took an interest in the boy and commissioned him to paint propaganda: posters of Chairman Mao and peasant heroes. Because of his talent, Situ also was able to receive the best art education available in China and attended the Guangzhou Institute of Fine Arts.

After the death of Mao in 1976, China reopened its doors to other countries, and Situ became

an instructor at the Guangzhou Institute of Fine Arts. Despite his prestige and position at the school, however, he dreamed of studying the realist traditions of the Western artists, such as John Singer Sargent and Joaquín Sorolla. He also was young and restless and wanted to see beyond the strictures that he felt had hobbled his creative spark in China. After teaching at the Guangzhou Institute for six years—and without much planning—Situ immigrated to the United States.

When he did so, his life changed in ways he hadn't anticipated. He recalls being overwhelmed when he arrived in California and how difficult it was to bridge his Eastern culture with the Western culture. "All of a sudden I was thrown into a modern society without much preparation," Situ says. "I see an entirely different



society, not only geographically and materially, but a very much different culture. They saw things differently; they did business differently; they made art differently. With all these changes, I felt like I needed to start all over from the beginning.”

On top of all that, Situ needed to make a living. Galleries in California weren't interested in his paintings of Chinese landscapes and villagers, viewing as dreary and depressing “They were kind of depressed,” he says of his subjects, adding that his paintings accurately portrayed the pall that the Chinese and Russian political systems threw over the country's citizens.

“To try to convey the situation, we used more neutral, darker

colors, subdued colors,” Situ says. “That's how we felt in that environment, and an artist needs to convey what you feel.”

Situ had planned to take an art class at the University of California—Los Angeles, but decided against it, focusing instead on learning English. He also observed American artists' work, trying to understand what kind of art he needed to paint to be accepted as an artist in his new country and to make a living. “I started copying some artworks to see if some commercial galleries could sell them for a little money,” he says. “It wasn't enough, though. So other friends and I started a handyman business—renovation, little projects for houses, fixing things for people.”

The Heiress' Closet, oil, 30" by 30"

“This is a bride with her dowry of typical and auspicious gifts, including a sewing basket and a wardrobe cabinet. The kerosene lamp indicates that the scene takes place in the early American West.”

After struggling for a year in California, Situ moved to Canada, thinking he might have an easier time breaking into the art world there. He discovered a group of street artists at Stanley Park in Vancouver, British Columbia, and joined them, setting up his easel to paint portraits of tourists for \$20 each. Fortunately, his expenses were not excessive, and he managed to eke out a living for four years.

All the while, Situ continued to paint what he knew: the Chinese



End of Day, Chinese Camp, California, 1850, oil, 38" by 34"

"During the Gold Rush in California, the Chinese paid the tax of twenty dollars a month to stay in the goldfields. They could only work in the abandoned claims that the white gold seekers felt were not profitable."

people and landscapes. He'd tried painting brightly colored flowers, gardens, and Western landscapes, but it wasn't something that resonated with him. "My style is realism," he says. "Over the years I stayed in the realism style, because that is the way I was trained. [It was] training that emphasized drawing over use of color."

Yes, Situ's technique and skill were perfect, but his renderings lacked soul, and he is philosophical in his understanding of why his Western art didn't sell. "A lot of artists like to concentrate on the technique and skill of painting," he says, "but, to me, that is secondary. To me the spiritual motivation is the most important element in a painting. If you don't feel your emotion, your passion for the subject, you don't get the response from the viewer."

Eventually, a gallery in Calgary took a chance and began to carry Situ's paintings. Almost immediately, his portraits of ordinary Chinese

people in their villages sold very well and, after 10 years in Canada, he returned to California. His confidence bolstered, he began to portray the story of the American West through the experiences of the influx of Chinese immigrants who came to California to seek their fortunes.

"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."

In 1995, Situ won the Best of Show Award—and \$10,000—at the Oil Painters of America Show in San Antonio, which boosted his confi-



Silence before the Hunt, oil, 40" by 32"

"The mountain man's life was ruled not by the calendar or the clock, but by the climate and seasons. In fall and spring, the men would trap. The spring hunt was usually the most profitable."




Almost Home, oil, 14" by 20"

"After a long day of travel, the beautiful twilight comes with a release."



dence even more. Assimilating into a more American way of painting, he began to eschew the subdued, earthy tones of his training. "I emphasize more color now," he says. "I observed American artists, and that's where I learned more about color. American artists use brilliant color on their paintings."

Situ continues to expand his subject matter, painting his current surroundings, experimenting with color, and introducing his Chinese subjects with a more modern artistic treatment. Even so, he continues to make regular trips to China to research locals in the provinces. He's noticed a change throughout the country, however. Its people have adopted a more Western air. Although he understands that life goes on, at the same time he laments the loss of reverence for the Chinese heritage, "They have very fast Western lives now, and I feel sorry that they move too fast to remember what came before," he says.

Last year, Situ's trip to China was more about bridging the cultures with an art show he and some of his Chinese-American colleagues put together. All of them had received their training in China but have lived in the United States for a long time. "We are a unique generation, and we like to bridge the artistic differences between the East and West," he says. "When we came here, the Americans called us Chinese artists. Now when we go back to China, the Chinese call us American artists. We're in between." 

Mary Nelson is a writer living in Minneapolis, Minnesota.