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Southwest Art



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Munoz, 56

49 Introduction

50 **Darryl Trott**
Flowering Fields of Color
by Susan Hallsten McGarry

56 **Rie Munoz**
A Contagious Optimism
by Yvonne Mozee

62 **Gary Morton**
Bunkhouse Chronicles
by Byron B. Jones

68 **Kwan Jung & Yee Wah Jung**
Environmental Escape
by Jan Jennings

76 **Pat McCreery**
Like Walking a Tightrope
by Judy Crandall

82 **LaVere Hutchings**
Paints the Mother Lode
by LaVere Hutchings

86 **Stephen Naegle**
Interiorized Landscapes
by Mary Carroll Nelson

94 **John Jarvis**
The Sky Sets the Scene
by Athelia Tanner Woolley

100 **Mary DeLoyht-Arendt**
The Child is Mother to the Woman
by Kathryn Coe

106 **Thomas Moran**
The 1872 Yellowstone Watercolors
by Jeanne Snodgrass King

130 Artlook



Hutchings, 82



Moran, 107

COVER
Darryl Trott
(a detail from page 54)
MAGNOLIA SUMMER
watercolor, 34 x 25
Courtesy Windberg Enterprises
Austin, Texas

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Environmental Escape

by Jan Jennings

Optimism and an ambience of serenity is what Kwan and Yee Wah Jung paint with ease. There, any similarity between these two California artists, originally from Hong Kong, ends.... "We paint very differently," Yee Wah said, with emphasis on the *very*. "We paint from different ideas. We paint with different kinds of paper, paint and brushes. And we cannot paint together."



Kwan Jung invites the viewer into a dream world in his watercolor paintings. His desire is to take your mind "far, far away for just a while—to put you into something beautiful." He says he does not paint by mood. But as he is seated during a relaxed, contented moment, he stretches his legs, clasps his hands behind his head and says: "If the viewer were lying down and looking up at my painting, I'd imagine him going on a trip."

Yee Wah Jung, Kwan's partner in marriage, business, and pursuits artistic, is equally optimistic in her feelings about her painting and the inspiration behind it. "I want my paintings to make people happy," said Yee Wah, who is quick to point out that, for her, mood is important in her work. "If I am sad or upset, I cannot paint. There is no place for sadness in painting."

Optimism and an ambience of serenity is what each artist paints with ease. There, any similarity between these two California artists, originally from Hong Kong, ends.

And if an attempt is made to pigeon-hole them through masculinity and femininity of artistic approach, such stereotyping runs topsy-turvy. Viewers have confused their styles, assuming the soft, subtle washes of Kwan's work to be those of Yee Wah and the meticulous, hard-edge, maze-like

Kwan Jung

left: FALL ASPENS, watercolor, 28 x 38,

A. Huney Gallery, San Diego, California

right: MOONLIGHT MEETING, watercolor, 30 x 24



Photos courtesy the artists & A. Honey Gallery



patterns of Yee Wah's, to be Kwan's. "We paint very differently," Yee Wah said, with emphasis on the *very*. "We paint from different ideas. We paint with different kinds of paper, paint and brushes. And we cannot paint together."

And so, stepping into their shared studio—with one artist at a time:

Kwan Jung describes his paintings as "realistic. Each is a piece of landscape—the essence of landscape. The landscape is not fixed to one particular place. It could be any place in my mind or yours. It could be from Yellowstone Park, or 'anyplace park.' It may not be detailed, but it is real."

To Kwan, specifics (such as trees) are implied or abstracted. But overall, the generality (landscape) is realistic.

Kwan's watercolors are acrylic and water on rice paper. He begins by cutting out the area of paper upon which he wants to work. (Rice paper comes in rolls and the

artist can thereby vary considerably the size of his paintings, with the tendency now to work on ever larger paintings.) He places paper underneath the rice paper to serve as an absorbent for water. He selects two colors: a light and a dark. For the dark, he may use brown, sienna, blue, and for the light, orange, yellow or perhaps light green. After squeezing acrylic into a bowl, he dilutes it with water, then pours it carefully and selectively onto the delicate rice paper, the dark color first. With a two-inch coarse sheep-hair brush he mixes the colors, then places paper over the painting to soak up the water. What remains is the acrylic pigment on rice paper.

It is during this primordial stage of the painting that amorphous configurations, floating masses, and haze-veiled recesses and promontories suggest free-flowing abstraction. To Kwan, they suggest far more. After letting this first stage dry for three hours, the artist applies another color.

"When I add colors, I add them so as not to interfere with the basic tone of the painting," said Kwan. "I do not like multi-colors. Each color must have a place within the whole. There must be unity."

The next stage is the most complicated, time-consuming, meditative and exhausting. A mental hopscotch. "I sit back and look at the painting and decide what to add and where it belongs within the unified idea of the painting," said Kwan. The *what* and *where* are mountains, water, trees, rocks, fog, clouds, sky. When these details are worked out in his mind, he goes back to the painting, and with a smaller bamboo brush adds texture and suggests shapes and form with his brushwork, careful that the brushwork follow the flow of the painting.

Next comes more meditation, then the finishing touch—the addition of a tiny figure or figures into his environmental escape. Kwan describes people as "accent spots" on the painting. Practically, they



suggest the scale the artist has in mind; more philosophically, the minuscule place of man in his environment. ("Figures are a decorative device for paintings," said Kwan. "Just as humans decorate the world.")

From start to finish, each of Kwan's paintings takes approximately one week, with three days' actual painting time and the balance in thought. Unlike many artists who rely upon photographs or on-the-spot sketches, Kwan stores ideas for paintings in a memory bank; the fittest ones survive and emerge on canvas.

"When I face my painting, I let the things I remember come out and I reschedule them on the painting," Kwan explained. "Scenery just seems to come up from the paper." With this survival of the fittest approach, Kwan feels he has limitless freedom for continuously changing his lively compositions. "There's no way I can repeat my work," said Kwan. "Each painting is the melting together of paint and thoughts in different ways."

Of prime importance to each of Kwan's canvases is the blending of realism with subtlety to ultimately suggest his dream

world. "It is basic to my idea of art to be subtle," said Kwan. "Though I paint realistically, I do not just paint the face of things." Rather, by implication he suggests a particular environment—a waterfall in the mountains, a seashore, late afternoon at a lake—and invites the viewer to bask in its mysteries and fill in his own fantasies, plan his own trip.

His desire for subtlety is enhanced by his chosen medium. Rice paper, because it absorbs color, results in more subtle detail. (The paper is also reinforced by the acrylic pigment.) "If I use American watercolor paper, I must rub the colors to unify the composition," said Kwan. "With rice paper, I do not need to rub and meld, and so I save time."

Kwan's memory bank of painting ideas draws from his earlier years in China and, since 1963, from his experiences in southern California.

"But I will tell you a secret," he says with a grin. "I get many ideas from watching television—outdoor shows, wild animals, countryside, cowboys. It may just be a quick glimpse of something that will stick with

Kwan Jung

above left: WINTER SPLENDOR, watercolor, 24 x 38

above: LAGOON SHORELINE, watercolor, 19 x 27

me. It may be different scenery that strikes me. But with anything that I look at carefully—even if I don't pay attention to the program—I find something to store away for later. I see some clue to build a dream."

Born in Toison, China, Kwan, 49, studied at New Asia College in Hong Kong, where he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in painting in 1961. His career in the arts began in Hong Kong, where he worked in design, illustration and advertising display for a large manufacturing company. (Sometimes involved in everything from designing special advertisements for a brand of cola to editing jokes, he recalls with a laugh.) Upon moving to California, he did post-graduate work at San Diego State University in art history, oil painting and watercolor. He is a member of the American

Watercolor Society, the National Watercolor Society, Watercolor West, and the San Diego Watercolor Society, and is a frequent juror for competitive exhibitions. He has received more than sixty awards for his watercolors and is listed in *Who's Who in American Art* and *Who's Who in the West*.

Kwan's thoughts on art in general reflect his thoughts on his own art in particular. "Art should be uplifting. It should be understandable. It should be created to be enjoyed and admired. I do not like shock effects in art, or 'conceptual art'—confusing guesswork—or art that satirizes art."

He does, however, fancy the whimsical in art, particularly that of Joan Miro. "His art is fresh, bright, poetic. The colors, shapes and lines are flowing. I can look at his art and be refreshed. I think, maybe, he likes to create a dream world too."



YEE
WAH
JUNG





Also in a niche of fantasy, Yee Wah takes her place in the studio, offering new perceptions.

Yee Wah practices what may be called "sophisticated doodling" in her modern paintings, and "methodical building" of serene landscapes in her more traditional works—with each of her styles an entity unto itself.

She uses watercolors on American watercolor paper or silk mounted on paper, and occasionally works in acrylics. Though usually working on varying stages of three paintings at any given time, each painting takes approximately one week to complete.

In her modern paintings, she is primarily a colorist. A colorist who must be charged with a feeling she wants to share. "I think color first," said Yee Wah. "Bright reds, oranges, purples. The subject comes as I work the color."

She begins by selecting two basic colors. She sprinkles the first watercolor on the paper in a dab-here dab-there approach, then moves the paper around. She then does the same with the second color, and

allows them to dry naturally for two hours. The next step is to select both a dark and a light color for line. Taking a one-quarter inch brush to the darkest color, she commences the meticulous doodling. It goes on and on. Then she retraces the doodled maze with the lighter color. Then maybe even another color, and another.

"My hand seems to take over unconsciously," said Yee Wah. "As I am painting along the path, a subject takes shape." That subject is often the elegant shape of a dancing woman in luminous purples, or perhaps a dip into fantasy with an Aladdin's lamp awash in brilliant oranges.

Whatever the end result, in process there is the happy union of free-flowing hand and brush in abstract celebration of color, with subject matter welling from a state of mind of happiness, serenity and beauty.

In addition to being totally different from Kwan's paintings, these stylized hard-edge mazes of modified abstraction are also totally different from her traditional paintings.

above left: Kwan Jung, REFLECTIONS, watercolor, 30 x 38, Collection the artist

left: Kwan Jung, LATE AFTERNOON—THE LAKE, watercolor, 18 x 36, A. Huney Gallery

below left: Yee Wah Jung, GINGER FLOWER, watercolor, 25 x 31, Collection the artist

above: Yee Wah Jung, JAPANESE VILLAGE, watercolor, 22 x 30, Collection the artist

"The traditional paintings are of scenery," said Yee Wah. "These are easier for me to paint than the modern paintings. I feel less restricted." By less restricted, Yee Wah refers to traditional scrolls she is able to paint which may, like the lines of the maze in her modern paintings, go on and on and on, feet after feet after feet.

Typical of her traditional paintings are the four seasons. "For the traditional style, I have in mind a painting," said Yee Wah. "Let us say, it is the winter season. I have the idea for the whole painting and how it will look already before I have painted it."



Paradoxically, she does not sketch the whole idea first. Rather, she begins little by little, perhaps starting with one tiny rock, then another and another. She then draws an adjacent tree, painting each of the leaves, one after the other. As with her approach to modern painting, there is much methodical repetition, in this case moving from the specific on the canvas to create the generality which exists in her mind. She works this method until the pieces meld together into a whole, each integral part seeming to spring from another. Each painting is an exuberant exercise in patience.

"I only paint when I am happy or feel serene and thoughtful," said Yee Wah. "For happy paintings, I use bright colors, and for thoughtful pictures, I use quiet greens, blues and grays. I want to share beautiful moods with the viewer. And when I am feeling good, I feel even better if I am painting. It is a special time for me."

Yee Wah happily confesses to being both an idealist and an optimist, shunning sad or upsetting paintings, shock value, and the nonsensical in art. Like Kwan, she does

not use photographs from which to paint ("Paintings from photographs look dead."), nor does she do sketches which might later inhibit the flow as she lets her hand "take over unconsciously."

Yee Wah also studied at the New Asia College in Hong Kong, as well as the Tak Ming College in Hong Kong and the Cheung Nam Art School of the Woo Nam Province. She believes that knowledge and practice of the basics in art are essential to every artist.

"The artist first must learn to draw," said Yee Wah. "Draw a napkin and it must look like a napkin and have the texture of a napkin. Draw a piece of china, a cup, a plate, and it must look like and have the texture of china. These basics must all be learned first. Then, put them aside—or throw them out—and draw and paint as it feels right to you, the artist. But the artist can only put them aside, if he has at one time had mastery of them."

For each of the Jungs, a drawing or a painting must "feel right" before they will exhibit or even sign it. They believe that personal integrity is one of

Yee Wah Jung

above: UNDER THE SEA, watercolor, 22 x 30, Collection the artist

right: BURMESE DANCER, watercolor, 30 x 22, Collection the artist

the artist's chief responsibilities.

The Jungs are frequent exhibitors in competitive watercolor shows throughout the country. Their watercolors may be seen at the A. Huney Gallery in San Diego.

All styles of their varied paintings are also continuously exhibited at the Limehouse Restaurant in Mission Bay Park in San Diego. Here, as proprietors, the Oriental couple preside over an Oriental bill of fare for San Diegans and visitors alike—as well as an atmosphere graciously appointed with their escapes, fantasies and happy pictures.

SWA

