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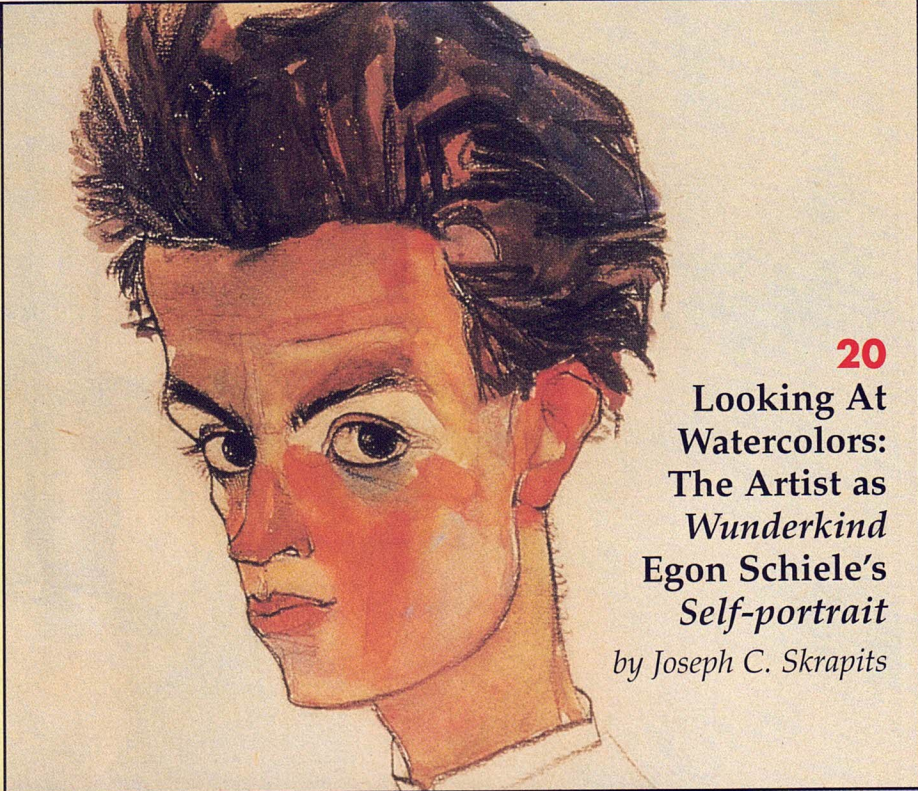
Cover: *California Composition*, by Gary Bukovnik

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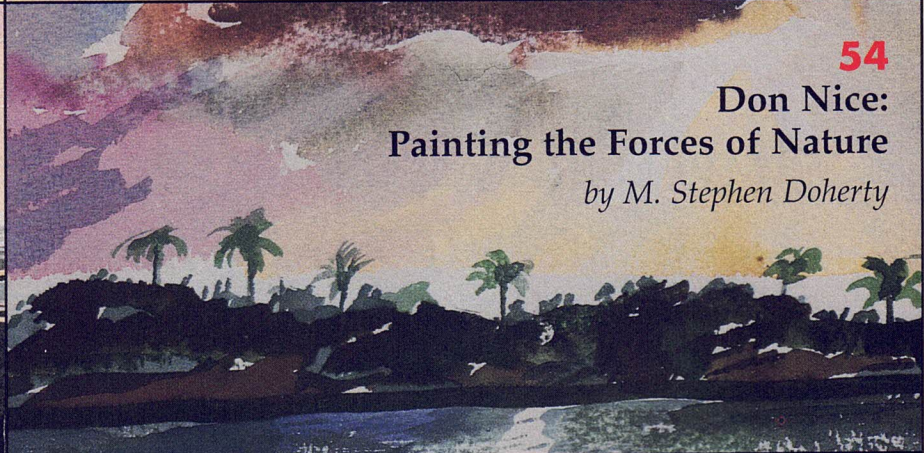
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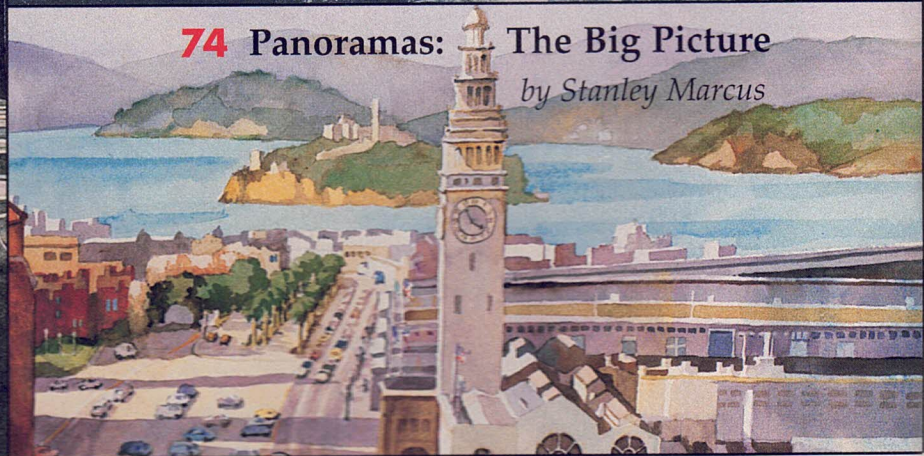
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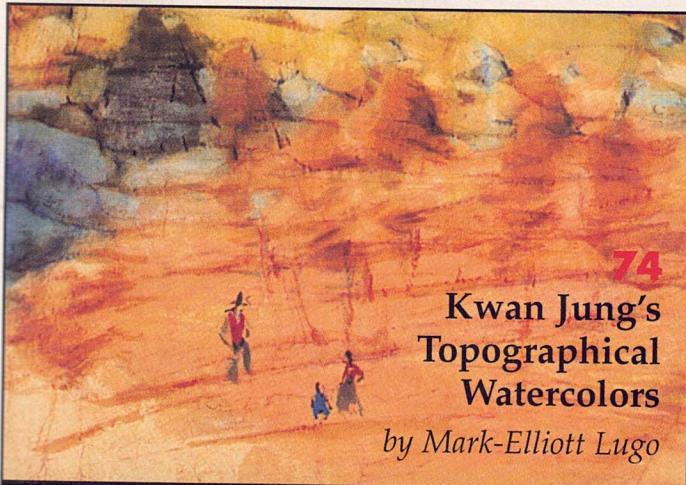
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Cover: California Composition, by Gary Bukovnik, 1998, lithograph based on original watercolor, 52 1/4 x 36. Courtesy Erickson & Elias Gallery, San Francisco, California.

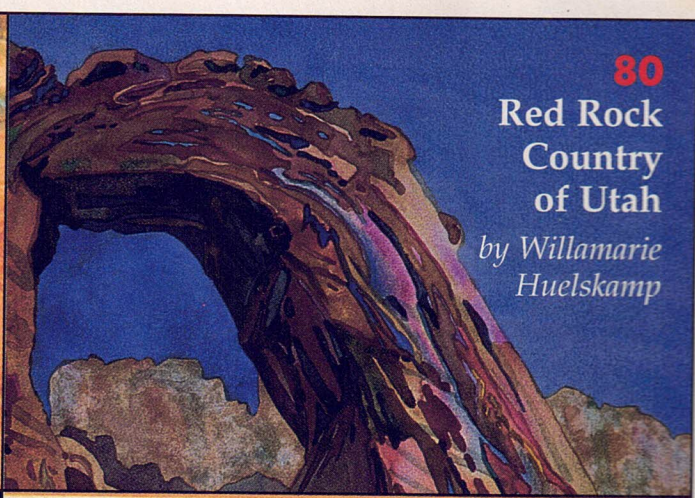


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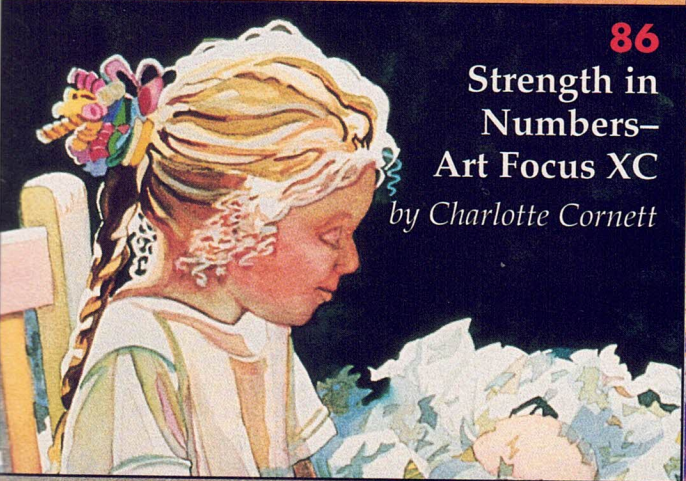
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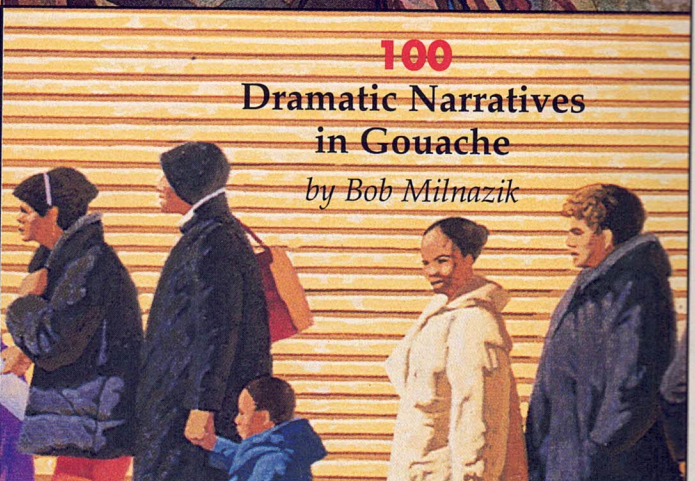
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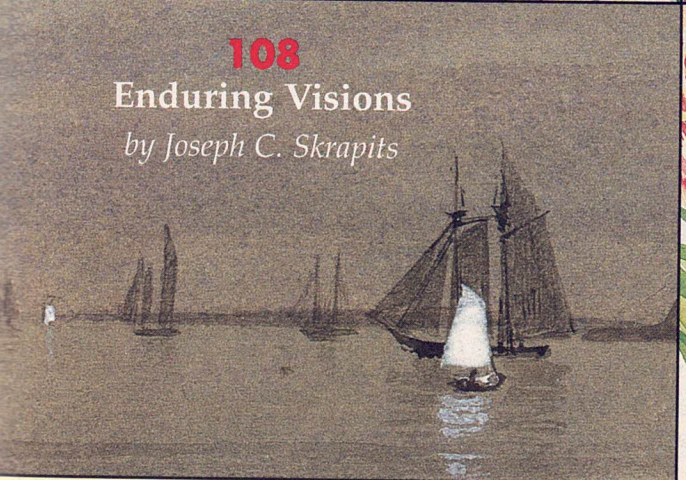
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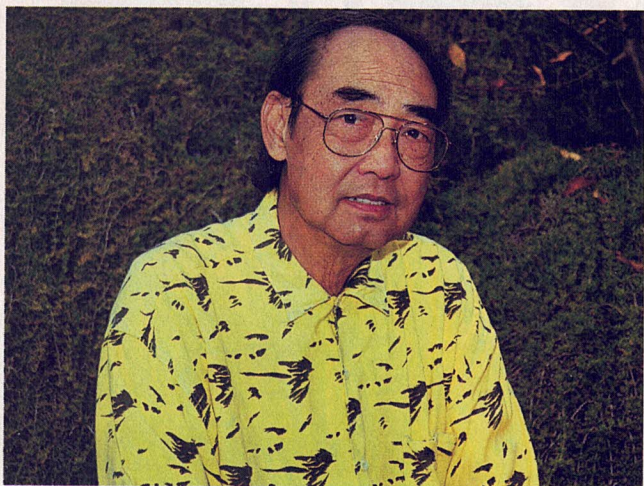
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Kwan Jung's Topographical Watercolors

BY MARK-ELLIOTT LUGO



This watercolorist's technique emphasizes the topographical features of his landscapes, transporting viewers to an imaginary realm of grandeur and understatement, strength and subtlety, and energy and tranquillity.

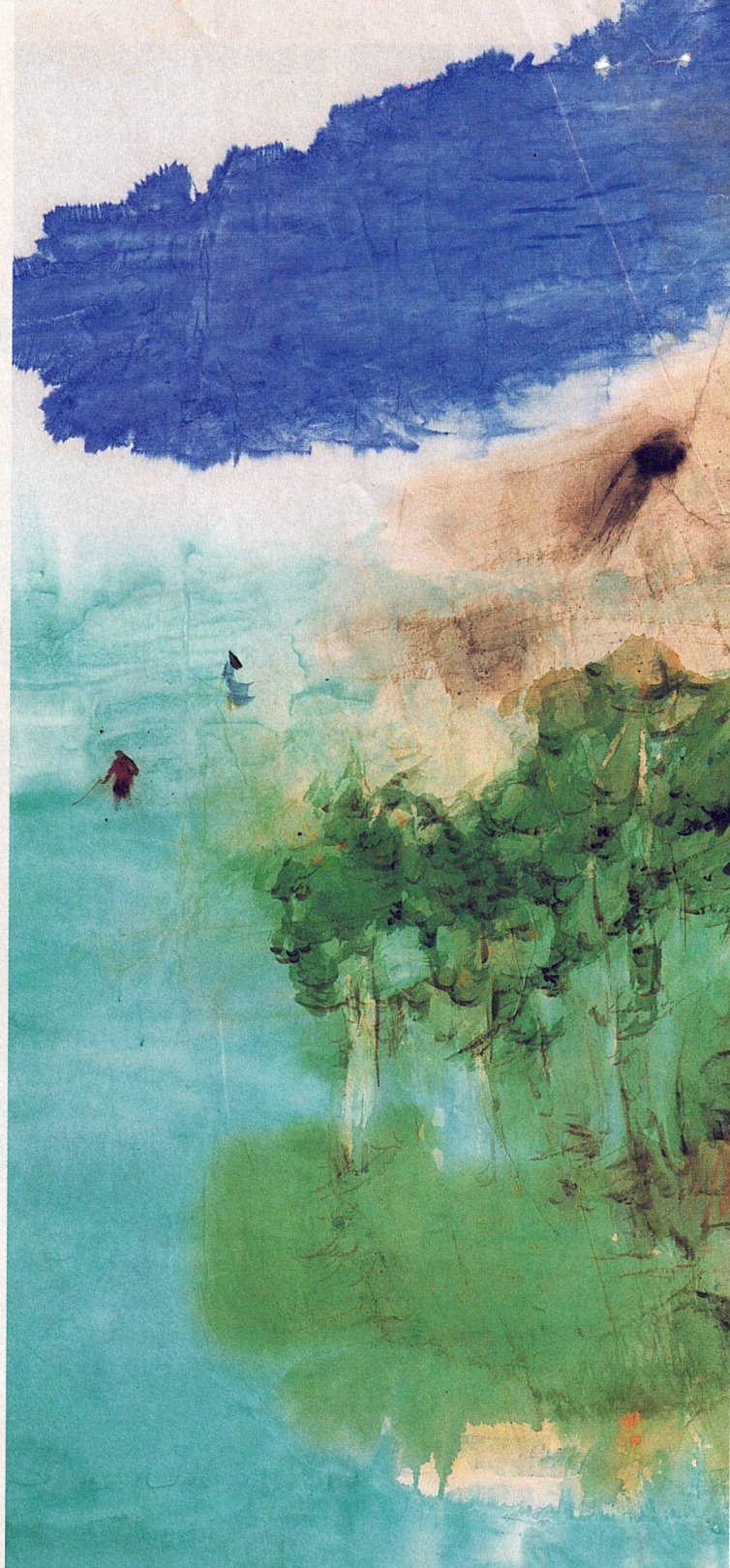
RARELY DO EASTERN AND Western artistic traditions meld more beautifully than in the poetic and evocative landscapes of San Diego watercolorist Kwan Jung. At first glance, especially from a distance, a typical Jung painting might be mistaken for a pure abstraction: a

modestly scaled, free-form composition characterized by a nature-based color scheme favoring earth tones, and attractive, although somewhat unusual, hues of purples and greens.

It doesn't take long, however, for viewers to realize

these translucent pools and textured veils of color, richly nuanced with a panoply of inventive techniques, represent panoramic vistas of rugged terrain. At the tops of the compositions, only the barest suggestion of a sky, conveyed in pale, otherworldly hues, bleeds into

the scene. The emphasis is on topography. The grand scale of these lyrical passages becomes more apparent when the viewer comes to another delightful realization: scatterings of small, colorful dashes of paint, which seem almost accidental, are actually minuscule





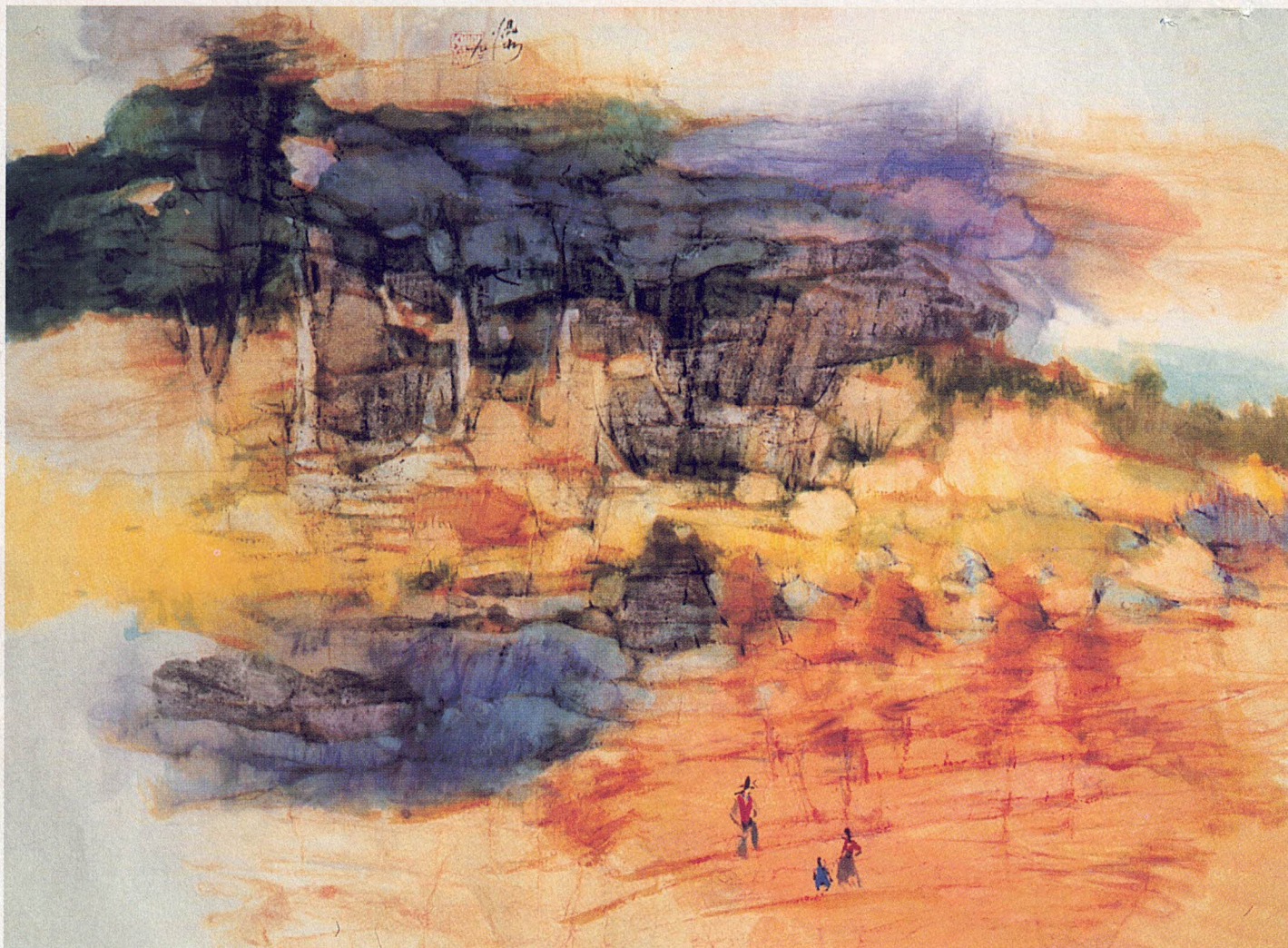
renderings of figures. Measured against Jung's majestic and beautiful backdrops of nature, the human animal appears to be an insignificant, if not intrusive, presence.

Jung's subjects, techniques, and materials are in perfect harmony. Every

aspect of his paintings—no matter how small—is resolved and executed with consummate skill. For example, the seeming effortlessness with which Jung juxtaposes two or three minute dabs of paint to suggest a human form is largely based on his expertise of

sumi-e, the ancient art of painting with ink. After some coaxing, Jung unpacks a dizzying array of hundreds of small sumi-e paintings he has created over the years. These depict traditional and not-so-traditional plant and animal subjects, including bamboo, orchids,

***Ocean Front*, 1996,
acrylic on rice
paper, 27 x 37.
All artwork this article
collection the artist.**



chrysanthemums, roses, hibiscus, peonies, asters, bok choy, mushrooms, butterflies, dragonflies, prawns, crabs, goldfish, mandarin ducks, sparrows, pandas, and horses. The greatest surprise is rather unflattering sumi-e caricatures of people Jung characterizes as "ordinary folks."

"I allow myself to have fun," he chuckles.

As a grand finale to this private exhibition, Jung unrolls several gigantic scrolls containing huge images of galloping horses. Seeing these, it isn't difficult to imagine why Jung is so adept at rendering just about any conceivable form with a minimum of brushstrokes. In his watercolors, however, the only place Jung uses ink is in the signature. "Ink blocks color," he explains.

Jung's technique is continuously evolving. It is

based on an openness to discovery and experimentation with materials and methods that might seem unorthodox to traditional watercolorists. In his studio, the converted lower level of a typical, split-level, suburban American home furnished with an eclectic mixture of Oriental and Western pieces, he demonstrates the processes that go into creating his works. The basic equipment is simple: a large worktable, a clothesline strung across the room, a miscellany of shallow bowls in which to mix paints, an assortment of brushes, and lots of old newspaper.

Jung uses acrylics and favors Winsor & Newton Artists' Acrylic Colors. Today he has set out tubes of burnt sienna, red iron oxide, Indo orange red, raw sienna, Hooker's green, Naphthol crimson, cadmium yellow medium, and cadmi-

um orange. In his latest works, Jung augmented these colors with traces of highly diluted metallic colors, just enough to impart a delicate, slightly sparkling sheen to some areas. The effect is marvelous, enlivening some passages that might have been a touch too flat. For this exercise, he used the metallic color blue topaz, manufactured by Folk Art Artists' Colors.

"I waste lots of paper," Jung comments as he layers his worktable with several thicknesses of newspaper. On top of this, the artist places a large sheet of rice paper, the foundation of the painting. This paper, with its intricate network of fibers, flecks, and imperfections visible through the paint, adds yet another dimension to appreciate. When completed, the standard size of one of Jung's paintings is 27" x 37";

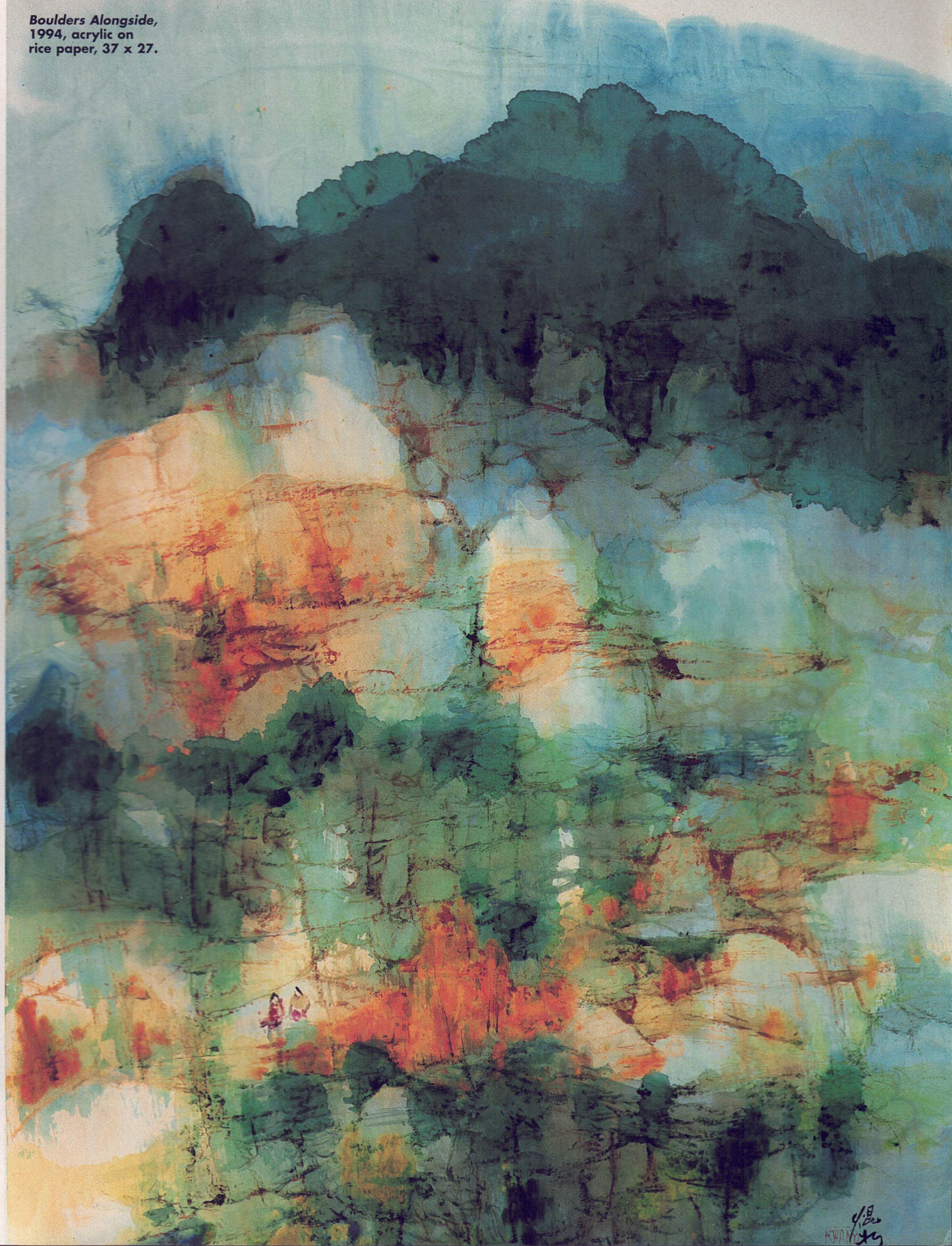
although for a recent show, Jung created an impressively sized work composed of seven panels hung side by side.

Jung squeezes out blobs of paint from each of the tubes into the shallow bowls, which have been filled with water. Each bowl gets more than one color. Using a brush, Jung stirs the contents. The large ratio of water to pigment produces a dyelike consistency to the paint. Some small lumps of paint are deliberately left undissolved and settle to the bottom of the bowl.

"The first stage is the rough composition," Jung explains. "I go for texture and use anything I can to make it." Rolling a couple of sheets of newspaper into a tube, he crumples, then unrolls it. Materials ready, Jung studies the bowls of color and the paper. Without taking his eyes off

Opposite page: *In the Valley*, 1993, acrylic on rice paper, 27 x 37.

Boulders Alongside, 1994, acrylic on rice paper, 37 x 27.





Lavender Hill, 1997, acrylic on rice paper, 27 x 37.



the table, he comments philosophically, "It's like life. Before you are here, you have all the elements in place."

With the assurance of someone who has done this many times before, Jung selects a particular bowl, one whose liquid is the color of pomegranate juice. Using graceful, circular gestures, he carefully pours most of its contents onto several areas of the rice paper. Momentarily, the dyelike liquid takes on a life of its own as it drifts and flows over the paper's surface; a process that quickly slows as the pools are absorbed by the rice paper and the newspaper underneath. Tiny lumps of undissolved paint protrude from the wet surface like miniature islands. Responding to the wetness, the rice paper puckers and wrinkles, creating continents, valleys, and mountain ranges in relief.

Working rapidly, Jung pours from the rest of the bowls, improvising and laying out the basic elements of a composition as the liquid flows. Sometimes the liquids intermingle, creating new color combinations. Satisfied the basics are completed, he takes the crumpled newspaper, lays it on top of the rice paper, which is still awash in unabsorbed liquid, and smoothes it down. To soak up any excess paint, he adds more layers of newspaper on top.

Barely a minute passes and the most painstaking part of the process begins—separating the wet, tissue-thin rice paper from the layers of newspaper. Jung peels away the top layers of newspaper first. "It's always a surprise," he says, as the rice paper, covered with a colorful mélange of abstract shapes is revealed. Even at this early stage, the pools of color have developed rudimentary character. Under the guidance of the artist, the flattened wrinkles and creases of the paper itself, and the pigmented, linear textures imparted by the crumpled

Continued on page 128



Inca Gold, by Kwan Jung, N.A., 1997, acrylic on rice paper, 27 x 37. Collection the artist.

KWAN JUNG

Continued from page 79

newspaper, will become fissures, canyons, crevices, cliffs, and rock formations of the rugged landscape he is about to create. Other pools will be transformed into verdant clouds of tree foliage.

Taking a soft 3" brush that he continually dips in clean water as he works, Jung floods the bigger lumps of paint with water from the brush. As he smoothes them out, lighter-hued washes are created directly on the paper. When he is finished, he blots the painting with more layers of dry newspaper, then carefully peels it away. At this point, the rice paper is so fragile, it sometimes tears. If this happens, he will repair it from the back.

Jung transfers the painting to a clothesline strung across the room, then steps

back to study it. The kitchen, which overlooks his work area, provides the best vantage point. Jung's wife and fellow artist, Yee Wah, watches him knowingly. "He takes a lot of time to study," she says. "He's usually spending more time watching than painting."

Some time passes and the grand scheme of things is becoming clearer to Jung. He removes the damp painting from the clothesline, replaces it on the table, and begins to work over the remaining clots of paint with a small bamboo brush. Continually rinsing and wetting the brush in clean water, he uses delicate stroking and daubing motions to enhance and delineate major topographical features, all the while being careful not to overwork any area and to preserve a lot of white space. If some areas are too intense,

Jung may add a touch of white paint.

For now, the painting must dry before the artist can develop it any further. In the final stages, the barest suggestion of tree trunks will be added, along with a few tiny figures to suggest scale. He cautions against providing too much detail, instead preferring to imply large parts of the image. When the painting is completed, wallpaper paste is used to glue the rice paper to a support of watercolor paper or single-ply museum board.

The finishing touch on Jung's works—the signature—reveals a lot about the artist. Minuscule calligraphic strokes in black ink spell out his name in Chinese characters. On top of that, KWAN JUNG NA is lightly stamped in red letters so small, they are barely legible. Jung weaves these identifying marks into the

fringes of his composition, content to see them as one small part of the world he has created.

Jung studied painting at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and San Diego State University. He is a member of the National Academy, the American Watercolor Society, and the National Watercolor Society. He has received many awards for his paintings and has works in numerous public collections, including the Springville Museum of Art in Springville, Utah, and the IBM Corporation in Austin, Texas. The artist's work has appeared in many magazines and books, most recently *The Best of Watercolor, Volume 2* (Rockport Publishers, Gloucester, Massachusetts). An exhibition of his work is on view through March 31 at the Earl Birdie Taylor Library, Pacific Beach Branch, in San Diego. ■