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THE ARTS ISSUE

CULTURAL DIFFUSION

Art and ancestry flow together
for silk artist Christine Leong

ANCIENT RHYTHMS

Veronica Valadez translates
Aztec culture to canvas and stage

PHAT CAT

Award-winning jazz musician
Gordon Goodwin

THE QUIET REVOLUTION

Cuba in the age of technology

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EAST MEETS WEST: While many of Leong's paintings reflect a distinctly Asian sensibility, she doesn't shy away from Western motifs when inspiration strikes.

CULTURAL DIFFUSION

Art and ancestry flow together in the silk paintings of
Camarillo artist Christine Leong.

BY KATERI WOZNY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL MONTANO

WHEN CAMARILLO ARTIST CHRISTINE LEONG PAINTS, she does it with soft elegance as she holds two bamboo brushes in one hand. One she uses for color; the other is for water to blend the color. Each brush has a different Chinese inscription. One is for "water," the other means "moon."

"It's all about how you use them," she says. "It's the technique, not the brush itself. I learned that from [my greatest inspiration, Hong Kong artist] Master Li Woon Ping."

Leong is a resident artist at the Studio Channel Islands Art Center and has been working with Chinese watercolor on rice paper for over 30 years. Her artwork combines Asian and Western painting techniques.

"Rice paper is very versatile," she says. "I can crumple rice paper to give my paintings texture or a wrinkled effect. I can also paint from behind the paper and allow the ink to go to the front."

In those 30 years, she has created more than 500 pieces — both 2-D and 3-D — each signed by Leong herself. Her specialties are flowers and koi. "Nature has a unique language," she says. "My paintings reflect my desire to capture the moment to be displayed and enjoyed in a traditional Asian manner."

Out of those 500, there is only one piece that Leong is completely satisfied with.

"It's called 'Sheer Beauties.' It's my favorite because I can't find anything to correct," she says. "I used to be hard on myself when I painted because I wanted it to be perfect. Now I know I shouldn't be."

When the recession hit in 2008, Leong became fascinated with painting wearable art on raw silk. Just like rice paper, raw silk is thin, fragile and absorbs the color fast. The design, however, must be simplified, as each section of color is enclosed with

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"Passion," 2014.
Painting on silk, 34 in. x 34 in.



"Fireworks," 2016.
Silk poncho, 26 in. x 45 in.



"Melody," 2014.
Painting on silk, 34 in. x 34 in.

a resist to keep the silk dyes in place. Leong says the dyes also spread uncontrollably on the silk, which makes it more fun.

"My rice paper paintings were selling very well and then [business] got quiet. I saw that women loved to buy things for themselves, so I decided to put my art on wearable silk so that women would become more interested [in purchasing]," she says.

To make her work even more fun, Leong listens to rock 'n' roll music to motivate her creativity. "It's the beat that cheers you on," she says with a laugh.

Leong is a firm believer in the Chinese system of balance, otherwise known as feng shui, and always uses two, three, six, eight or nine subjects. "It's considered to be good luck among the Chinese. A five means no and is considered bad luck," she says.

Originally from Hong Kong, Leong never formally attended art school; her talent came naturally. As a child, she loved to sketch clothes and cartoon characters. "My parents would bring me to church and wanted me to sit still, so they would give me a pencil and sketch pad and I would sketch until the service was completed," she says.

After taking secretarial courses in Hong Kong, Leong's next-door neighbor encouraged her to take Chinese art classes. Twelve years later, Leong made the journey to Camarillo in 2002 after meeting her husband, photographer Bryan McCall, online. The two share a love of art and photography.

"She promotes the Chinese culture and her talent is pretty rare in Ventura County," says McCall. "I like to show off her work to other people."

Leong's one-of-a-kind paintings have been seen in shows, festivals and art walks throughout California, including the Ventura Music Festival (which featured a tapestry, hope chest and screen chair), Vita Art Center, Bell Arts Factory, Ventura ArtWalk, Santa Barbara Art Association and the Camarillo Art Center, where she formerly served as president.

She has also exhibited around the world. In 2008, Leong was one of two U.S. artists selected to display her artwork at the Beijing Art Museum ("Nine Kois" was the chosen piece). The art exhibition, *Salute Beijing Olympics and Display Chinese Civilization*, was later featured during the 2008 Olympic Culture Festival, which assembled 100 emerging Chinese artists worldwide to showcase the Chinese culture and visual arts. "It was an honor and I was excited to be a part of it," she says.

Leong has also won many prestigious awards, including first place at the 2004, 2008 and 2010 Ventura County Fair's Professional Watercolor Division and Award of Excellence at the 2007 California State Fair in Sacramento. Her work is highly collectible as well. "Customers have told me that they have their paintings insured in their house. That's how much they value my art," she says. Price often depends on the intricacy of the design and the amount of material used, but larger and more elaborate pieces have sold for thousands of dollars.

For those who want to explore the art themselves, Leong also teaches Chinese watercolor and silk art classes at her studio. Beyond technique, she says the most important thing she teaches her students is to enjoy the moment. "I also give individual attention. One student said, 'It's better than going to therapy,'" Leong says with a laugh. ■

“I used to be hard on myself when I painted because I wanted it to be perfect. Now I know I shouldn't be.”

— Christine Leong

Join Christine Leong for one of her art classes, held in Room 5 at Studio Channel Islands, 2222 Ventura Blvd., Camarillo.

CHINESE WATERCOLOR CLASSES

Friday mornings 10:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

Supplies included.

Drop-ins welcome

SILK ART: ONE DAY, ONE TECHNIQUE WORKSHOP

First Saturday of every month

10:30 a.m. - 3 p.m.

Materials included

For prices and more information call (805) 312-2208, email ChristineLeong2008@gmail.com or visit www.ArtofChristineLeong.com.