

Once a physicist in the field of optical engineering, **Qiang Huang** found a second career by applying methods of scientific inquiry to his artistic process—and painting every day.

practice makes perfect

BY ROBERT K. CARSTEN

THROUGHOUT HIS CHILDHOOD in Beijing, China, Qiang Huang (pronounced *chong wong*) loved art and was inspired by his uncle, Hong-En Huang, a professional painter and educator. Despite this interest, Huang wasn't able to study art in art institutions; instead he pursued science and technology.

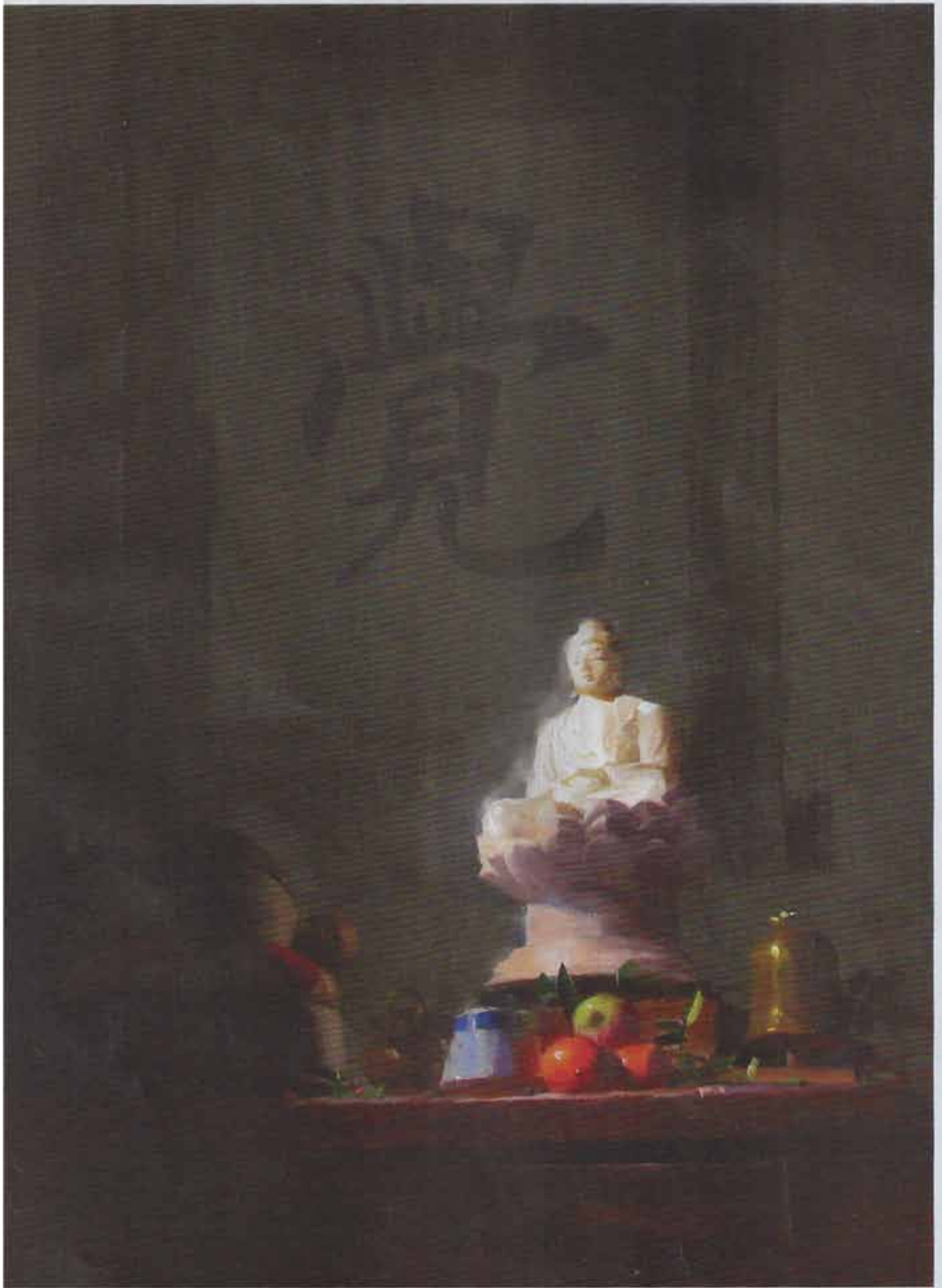
Immigrating to the United States in 1985, Huang obtained a doctorate degree in physics from the University of Alabama and began working as an engineer in the field of optics and later in the more specialized field of holography, creating three-dimensional images. "I considered this a good match," explains Huang, "utilizing my scientific background with my interest in light—the visual part of the electromagnetic field—and my love of art. I worked in that field for several companies before settling in Austin, Texas, where I joined a start-up company."

All the while, Huang endeavored to continue his art education with life drawing and painting workshops, typically painting for his own pleasure on weekends and evenings. "I was a full-time engineer and a part-time amateur artist," he recalls.

A Master of the Brush

This description of Huang's status began to change markedly when in 2007 a fellow artist introduced him to the daily painting process and helped him set up a blog. (See *A Daily Dose of Painting*, page 53.) It was Huang's intent to use this painting-a-day idea to improve his skills—which he, without a doubt, succeeded in doing. In 2011, because of his disciplined practice and inherent talent, he was able to resign his engineering position to become a professional painter and art instructor. His fresh and energetic still lifes are never overworked, demonstrating a brilliant facility

RIGHT: In his award-winning, relatively large painting, *Awakening* (oil, 24x18), Huang painted objects reminiscent of Buddhist shrines, many smoky with incense, in his native China. "People sometimes have small shrines, like spiritual still lifes, in their homes, where they leave offerings," Huang explains. "I wanted to create a painting in the Western tradition but using objects and ideas from Eastern culture. I chose the Chinese character which means *awakening* to symbolize the essence of Asian philosophy. The Buddha is a symbol of wisdom and awakening, so I depicted the statue in glowing light."



MATERIALS

Surface: most often **Centurion** Deluxe oil-primed, stretched linen canvas, **RayMar** linen panels, and **Ampersand** Gessobord panels (Huang generally prefers smooth, less absorbent surfaces.)

Oil paint: **Rembrandt** preferred, but sometimes other brands such as **Winsor & Newton**

Palette: Naples yellow, yellow ochre, cadmium yellow, cadmium orange, cadmium red light, alizarin crimson, transparent red oxide or burnt sienna, ultramarine blue deep, phthalo blue, and titanium white

Medium: none except for **Gamblin** Gamsol when Huang wants the paint to dry faster

Brushes: bristle and synthetic bristle flats—**Robert Simmons** Signet or **Winsor & Newton** in Nos.10, 4, and 2; **Creative Mark** Qualita Golden Taklon synthetics in ¼-inch and smaller-size flats

Other: painting knives



with an economy of brush and painting-knife strokes to aptly render form.

Huang describes his style as representational but impressionistic. “Some artists create superrealistic paintings with intricate detail,” he says. “I admire their skill level, but I don’t get excited about their work. On the other hand, I think artists who work abstractly or nonrepresentationally—perhaps just showing energetic brushwork or beautiful colors—really struggle to get across what they want to communicate.” Huang is enthusiastic about artists between these two poles, like John Singer Sargent, Joaquin Sorolla (featured in our March 2014 issue), Anders Zorn, and Nicolai Fechin. “Their paintings are representational in that we recognize subjects,” he says, “but the manipulation of the paint can be as abstract as possible.”

In his own work, Huang seeks a balance—something neither purely realistic nor

ABOVE: In his stunning *Song of Silence* (oil, 20x16), Huang first used cadmium orange with ultramarine blue deep to make a dark, greenish gray for the background. He then added some transparent red oxide to neutralize some of the green and added some Naples yellow where he wanted the color lighter. Rather than use white, which he says gives a more chalky effect, Huang likes to lighten darks with either Naples yellow, yellow ochre, or cadmium orange.

completely abstract. He likes to experiment and doesn’t want a clichéd style. “I have one guiding principle,” he says. “Art is a form of communication. I want my concepts to be understandable so they can be shared with and appreciated by a majority of people. This is the reason I choose a representational style. Also, the objects I use in my paintings are familiar to nearly everyone, so they serve as a good foundation for communication.”

An Avid, Lifelong Learner

In order to enrich his knowledge and fuel his imagination, Huang visits museums and galleries at every opportunity, studying paintings that he finds inspiring. He uses two different approaches to learning, the first being analytical. "When I really like someone's work," he says, "I study it and speculate, asking myself, Why do I find this exciting? Why does this painting attract me more than others? Then I ask, How does the artist do that? What types of warm or cool colors does the artist use? Perhaps the artist uses thin layers and allows them to bleed through top layers, achieving interesting color effects."

Huang then tries to generate some theoretical models. He may open a digital image of a painting in Photoshop, using the eye-dropper tool to pick up some of the colors to analyze the artist's habitual approach. In a detailed Photoshop "color space," he can determine the quantity and distribution of warm and cool colors, and then summarize and understand the artist's working methods.

Sometimes though, Huang is perplexed by a painting style and then resorts to an alternate manner of study. "I just cannot use a left-brained, analytical approach with some paintings," he says. "What they give me is pure impression, and no vocabulary can describe what's going on." In these cases he tries to duplicate the style or technique by mimicking the effects in whatever way he can. "This process is more experiential, more experimental," he explains. "Even though I don't have the guidance of a theory, by attempting to replicate the effect—often several times and perhaps blindly at first—I eventually figure it out. Then, to whatever extent I desire, I can transfer this technique onto my own."

Small Works, Powerful Results

Huang sets up his still lifes to help him achieve his light effects, employing a plywood backboard hinged to a side board for suspending a drape and blocking out peripheral light. Using his optical engineering background, he discovered a simple lighting system that roughly duplicates north light. He uses a halogen Par 16 or 20 flood light bulb (available at Home Depot or Lowe's) in a reflector, to which he clips one or two color-correcting, blue transparency filters (available directly from Huang through his website at www.qhart.com/Q_and_A/north_light_filter.htm).

Preferring smoother, less absorbent surfaces to paint on, before he begins, Huang sometimes wets down the canvas using a paper towel to apply a very thin coat of linseed oil. This prevents the canvas from absorbing too

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A Daily Dose of Painting

In 2007 a fellow artist introduced Huang to the daily painting process and helped him set up a blog. It was his intent to use this painting-a-day idea simply to improve his skills. He never dreamed that the blog would eventually link him to thousands of artists and art lovers who regularly express genuine interest in his work and actively communicate with him.

Huang put his daily paintings on Daily Paintworks (DPW—www.dailypaintworks.com) auctions, linking the DPW auction page to his blog so anyone interested could check his site, follow his progress, and bid on finished paintings. Noting the quantity and regularity of his sales, galleries began buying directly from the artist and reselling his work and later extended gallery representation. With so much activity and interest, it wasn't long before Huang was asked to teach workshops, first locally, then regionally, and now nationally.

"I didn't expect that people would take such interest in my work," Huang says. "I lacked confidence in my painting, and I didn't think it had much monetary value. But sharing my experiences and techniques and establishing two-way communication on my blog, plus teaching and selling my art, have changed all that."

After resigning his position as an engineer, he found that, for him, the keys to being a successful, focused artist are daily painting and maintaining his blog. Huang concludes, "Creating and finishing a painting nearly every day keeps me painting regularly with the impetus that I feel an ongoing responsibility to share my daily struggles, revelations, and accomplishments on my blog."



LEFT: Although bathed in a softer light than *Putney Roses* (page 56), **Captain's Roses** (oil, 8x6)—one of Huang's daily paintings—equally exhibits facility of brush and painting-knife strokes. In this piece, Huang introduces a subtle balance by harmonizing the warm, saturated colors of the roses with adjacent warm darks, while the saturated, cooler colors of the leaves are placed against the cool, dull color of the table and darker parts of the background.

Seven Steps to a Painterly Still Life

BY QIANG HUANG



I place the setups for my works at almost eye level. The center of focus in the arrangement for *Delicate Porcelain* (oil, 9x12) is the orange and the lighter part of the white porcelain pot. The dark bottle enhances

the contrast in the central area. The entire composition has a linear reading path starting from the small cup on the left and ending at the lime on the right.

1: Drawing: Using simple strokes with a brush, I indicate the size and location of each object. At this stage I don't draw details and I ignore value and color.

2. Underpainting: I determine the basic value design. I mix transparent red oxide and ultramarine blue for darks and show general shapes of the dark, light, and midtones in a transparent underpainting.



3: Value and Opacity: I start to introduce opacity. I mix grays, cover the light area, and keep the dark area transparent. I'm still ignoring color and am now paying attention only to value and opacity.

4. Color Temperature and Relationships: I observe the color temperature and place color patches to indicate the color distribution and the temperature variation. I pay attention only to color relationships, not to the detail of the shapes. I make sure the color values don't deviate widely from my early value design.

5: Modeling Individual Elements: After I lay out the basic color designs, I begin working on each object to make it look more solid and three-dimensional. This image shows how I modeled the dark bottle.

6: Edges and Details: After modeling the porcelain pot, I manipulated the edges and put in detailed handles and design patterns. In this stage, I allow myself to temporarily ignore the integrity of the painting and just focus on individual objects.



7. Consolidation and Finessing: After I get enough details and edge work on the individual objects, I start to give my attention to the entire painting, working on the relationships between objects and linking them together. At this stage I even add a sufficient number of objects to the painting to make the

design more dramatic—I added the grapes, stems, and leaves to *Delicate Porcelain* (below; oil, 9x12). In this finishing step, I make parts of the painting more realistic and other parts more abstract. I also emphasize the center of focus and soften areas where I don't want the viewer to pay as much attention.



BELOW: To accomplish the brilliant light captured in *Putney Roses* (9x12), Huang first painted the form shadows of the flowers with saturated, transparent yellows and reds. Later, separately mixing cadmium yellow and cadmium red, each with a large quantity of titanium white, he created bleached-out colors, which he applied with a painting knife to describe the shapes of light on the edges of the petals.

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much oil from the paint, resulting in dry marks. He starts by painting large areas first, thinning the paint with Gamsol for quick drying. This allows him to apply more layers right away, usually without any medium, to finish the painting in his painterly style in one session.

When he teaches, Huang typically works small (9x12 or smaller) in order to complete the painting for the demonstration, which usually takes between two and three hours. Afterward, he resists any urge to do further work on a painting, preferring the fresh look and experience of *alla prima* (wet-into-wet) painting.

Dramatic Light, Sensational Color

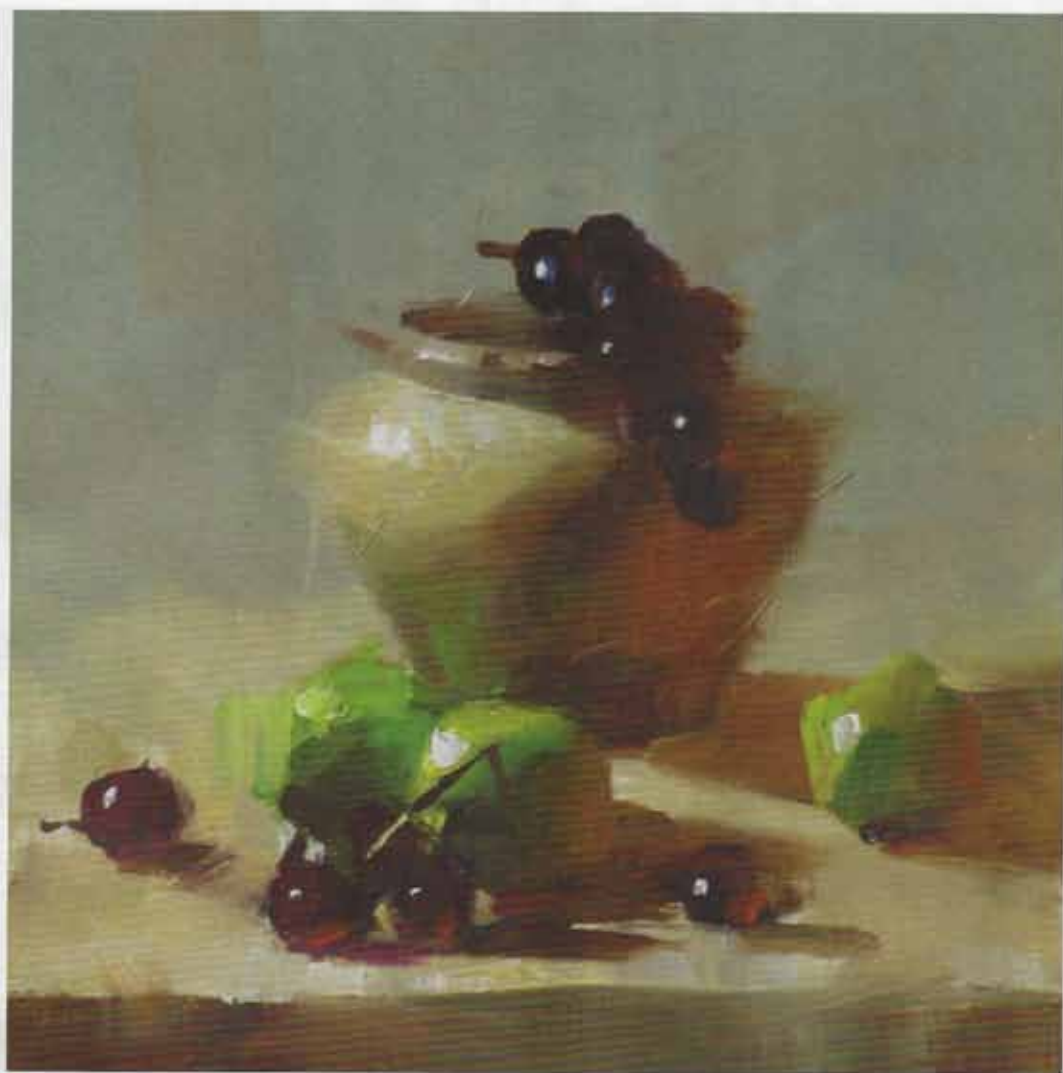
Essentials to the drama in this artist's paintings are very strong light and painterly effects. To highlight particular edges or details with dazzling light, Huang uses a very gentle touch with a painting knife to apply the paint thickly, carefully, and expressively. (See *Putney Roses*, below).

From the start, Huang's primary concern is to show energy and power, so he may apply high-chroma colors directly out of the tube. In the meantime, he also considers how to harmonize the pure colors with duller areas, working with the way the duller background colors lead the eye to the pure color in the center of focus. "I like to have a muted background," says Huang, "and that's why I can put a lot of pure color in my center of interest. The muted color enhances the pieces of pure color so those colors can sing."

Huang's marvelously atmospheric backgrounds are designed to complement his subjects but are never so "jumpy" as to interfere with his foreground subjects. For background color he typically applies a mixture of transparent red oxide with ultramarine blue deep. By changing the ratio of these two colors, he can tune the temperature cooler with more blue or warmer with more red. To make areas warmer yet, he sometimes mixes in alizarin crimson.

Mostly, Huang prefers paintings in which





LEFT: The shadows in *Limes and Grapes* (oil, 6x6) don't contain much of the local color because of the reflections, so Huang had opportunities to play with the more abstract nature of color. For example, note the amount of warm color on the limes. "I also wanted atmospheric, dreamlike effects," says Huang, "so I softened edges of some forms, especially of the pot, in order to push it toward the background. In turn, I emphasized the grapes with sharper edges to pull them forward."

"most of the color happens in the light," so he most commonly uses the lighter areas as the focal points. In variance, for *Limes and Grapes* (above), the artist organized the lighting to bleach out the lighter parts on the objects, choosing instead to enhance the colors in the shadows and reflections.

The remarkable contrasts Huang regularly achieves—by utilizing to great advantage thick paint against thin, subtly tinted whites against saturated color, glowing light against sophisticated darks, and soft, atmospheric edges with sharply defined ones—all contribute toward building dramatic light, sensational color, and sterling spontaneity: the hallmarks of this artist's work. ■

ROBERT K. CARSTEN, artist, instructor, arts juror, and writer, had the good fortune to cross paths with Qiang Huang at InView Workshops, Landgrove, Vermont, where they were both teaching. Visit Carsten's website, www.robertcarsten.com.

About Qiang Huang



A signature member of Oil Painters of America (OPA), Qiang Huang received the Still Life Honorable Mention Award at the 20th OPA National and the Still Life Award of Excellence at the 22nd OPA National. Huang attended the graduate school of the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, studying with well-known figurative artist Zhaoming Wu. Additionally, he attended workshops taught by David Leffel, Sherrie McGraw, Scott Burdick, and Carolyn Anderson. His work is represented by InSight Gallery, Fredericksburg; Capital Fine Art Gallery, Austin; and Marta Stafford Fine Art Gallery, Marble Falls—all in Texas. To learn more, visit his website, www.qhart.com, and his blog, www.qiang-huang.blogspot.com.