

arts & sciences

BY JUDITH FAIRLY

Katherine Chang Liu's mixed-media collages begin with a word, a lodestar she follows on a subtractive voyage through color and form to create paintings that look like "one breath."

WITH PINK FLOYD playing in the background to block out external noise, Katherine Chang Liu seizes fragments of time to work in her studio. When she first began painting in the late 1970s, Chang Liu often worked deep into the night, and she's maintained that discipline throughout her career. Now caring for an elderly parent, this new schedule is a challenge for her, but she has resolved not to allow the demands on her time to become an excuse not to work. "It's your life and you learn to use it," she says with the same measure of equanimity and positivity that have contributed to her success as an artist.

The Path to Art

In the same way that "life is what happens when you're making other plans," art was not even a port of call on Chang Liu's more practical career path. She was born in China and reared in Taiwan during an era when students were encouraged to study math and science in order to catch up with technological advancements in

the West. Chang Liu attended the University of California, Berkeley, on a full scholarship, eventually earning a master's degree in nutritional sciences, but delayed making a decision about pursuing a doctorate when she and her husband moved to Indiana for two years. Unable to find work, she took a sculpture class at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, where she ultimately concluded that three-dimensional art was not her strong suit.

When her husband was offered a position in Roanoke, Virginia, a series of events were set in motion that would divert Chang Liu away from her background in science and set her on the road to becoming an artist. "Roanoke was the birthplace of my life as an artist," she says. In the flourishing arts community of southwestern Virginia, she made friends with other artists and joined a group that often met for figure drawing. "All my growth as an artist had to do with my friends," says Chang Liu. The natural beauty and mild climate of the Shenandoah Valley, bordered



to the west by the Blue Ridge Mountains and to the east by the Appalachians, beckoned to Chang Liu, and she began painting landscapes *en plein air*.

Ann Masters, who ran the Roanoke Fine Arts Center (now the Taubman Museum of Art), gave Chang Liu an opportunity to show her work at the Borrow and Buy Gallery, adjacent to the main exhibition space; later, Masters invited

ABOVE: The title *Is There Anybody Out There?* (acrylic and collage; 36x36) is a line from one of Chang Liu's favorite songs by Pink Floyd, "Comfortably Numb." Since childhood, Chang Liu has pondered that question regarding life in outer space. The collage materials, generated from her computer, include combinations of letters, implying language systems; and images of plant and cell forms, representing life forms on earth.

All photos courtesy of Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art, Santa Fe

her to teach classes there. Within three short years, Chang Liu was receiving awards for her work and judging competitions. "It was lucky that I learned to paint in a small, supportive community instead of a large city, where the competition can overwhelm fledgling artists," she says. "Roanoke was the determining factor in my becoming an artist."

A Progression to Abstraction

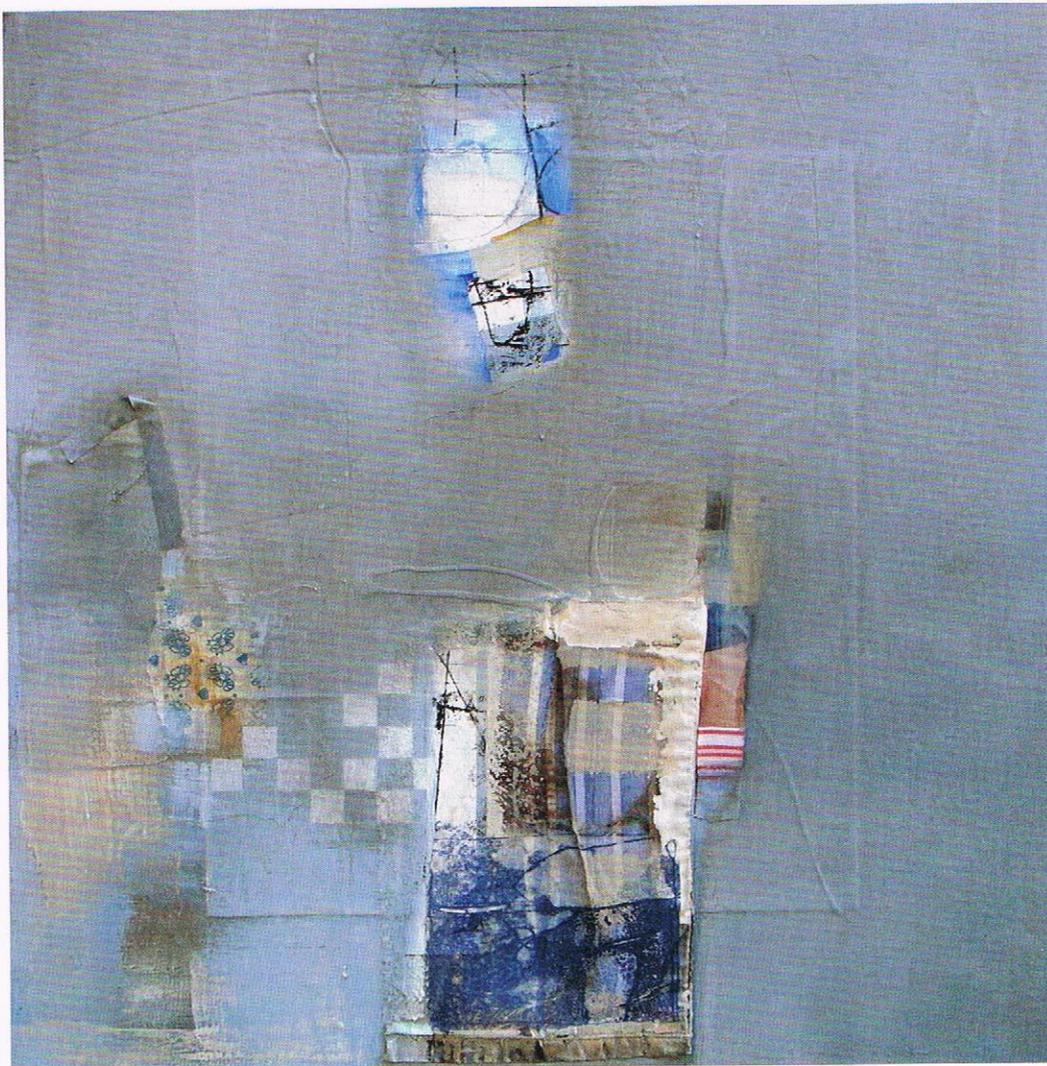
Several years later, Chang Liu and her husband moved to southern California, where she still resides. All along, she thought that art was a temporary pursuit, just a way to buy time until she went back to science. Chang Liu, rearing her kids, delayed the decision to finish her doctorate; she started painting, in part because she needed something to put on

her walls, but she didn't think of art as a career. She loved what she was doing, though, and worked very hard at it, sometimes painting through the night. Her career took off in Los Angeles; doors opened for her, even when she didn't know where those doors would lead. "If I had tried to plan a career," says Chang Liu, "I don't know if I would have come to the same place as an artist."

Chang Liu's early paintings were watercolor landscapes; over a period of time, they evolved into more abstract compositions. Her progression toward abstraction seems natural, as finely detailed paintings of rocks and small miracles of nature gave way to an increasingly focused approach to breaking down imagery into fragmented planes of color. It's not difficult to perceive the scientist's eye guiding

RIGHT: "I'd kept the word *qualia* (plural of *quale*) in my 'notebook of words' since graduate school," says Chang Liu. "Of the word's many definitions, the one I chose for the painting *Qualia* (acrylic and collage; 36x36) is 'a unit of conscious thought of any kind.' On the right is a textured area that Chang Liu built up with layers of cardboard pieces cut into small, random shapes. These pieces represent complex and random thoughts always passing through a person's mind. To unify this area with the rest of the painting, Chang Liu painted over it several times with a grayish, neutral color.





the artist's hand in Chang Liu's work, the two working in tandem to tease out the poetic from the practical.

Division of Space

In Chang Liu's mixed-media work, her titles come first—a word or phrase that provokes a visual image, a thought that she strives to maintain consistently throughout the process. She wants the final painting to express the word she began with, to condense the narrative into “one breath.” Much of this effort is conducted on an intellectual or emotional level, with technique almost a secondary activity. The finished work becomes a reflection of this process, a map of her internal landscape.

Though her method relies on intuition, Chang Liu's paintings are always planned, which frees her to improvise or make changes as she goes. Once she has decided on a title, she decides on the division of space, placement of the major shapes, and areas of transition or contrast. She can “see” the painting in her head; by

ABOVE: Chang Liu painted *Screen Turning Silver* (acrylic and collage; 20x20) in her father's bedroom as a tribute to the man and his influence on her life. “I sat through the night during a particularly difficult week when my dad was ill, waiting for the window to show the first sign of light,” she says. “In my mind, this painting is almost realistic. The rectangle in the lower center is the bed, and the smaller, upper rectangle is the window.” Chang Liu emphasized these key areas by veiling the surrounding background with a neutral wash.

the time she lays down the drawing on her surface, she has already done eight to 10 sketches.

Constructing a Stage

Chang Liu paints as if she were constructing a stage; each painting has a minimum of eight layers, and some have as many as 20. Though she finds paper the most “seductive” surface to work with, it's not as practical as wood panel, which is sturdy, lightweight, and easier to ship than canvas or paper. She gives the panel two

MATERIALS

Surfaces:

Lanaquarelle 300-lb. cold-pressed watercolor paper in a roll, **Winsor & Newton** Artists' Deep Edge canvas, and custom-made wood panel with birch veneer

Paint: **Nova Color** or **Golden** acrylics carbon black, white (any), cobalt blue, all browns

Medium: **Golden** matte medium

Brushes: **Home Depot** inexpensive white brushes and the best available house-painting brushes (not sable)

Adhesives: usually **Elmer's** glue, which dries clear; wood glue for heavier pieces of collage

Varnish: **Golden** acrylic polymer matte varnish

Collage materials: found materials, clippings, and personal papers for collage elements; **Faber-Castell** Pitt oil-based pastel pencils and India ink for making marks on elements

RIGHT: At a time when Chang Liu was deeply involved in caring for her parents, she created *Undercurrent* (acrylic and collage; 36x36) with its “cheerful, bright red” in the upper three-quarters of the picture plane and neutral tones at the bottom. She also felt the color red suggested the “currency” of trillions of texts crossing digital space every day. The lettering is partly generated by computer and partly painted directly on the canvas.



coats of flat gesso, letting it dry between coats without sanding in order to maintain the texture. As she builds up the layers, Chang Liu draws on the strata of collage—found elements, letters, family documents, magazine and newspaper clippings, as well as designs and drawings created on her computer for the specific painting—with Pitt oil-based pastel pencil and India ink.

Subtraction as Process

Over time, she has changed her approach to how she uses color. Though she seems to work

from a relatively limited palette now, often staying with neutral hues, she has become more mindful of using color in a meaningful way rather than as a decorative element. She’s likely to use more color in the foundational layers, diluting or strengthening the hues as she builds up the layers. As she works, Chang Liu pays as much attention to taking out things as she does to adding new ones. “When I paint, I don’t back up or try to ‘fix’ problems until the painting is almost complete,” she says. “I am quick to find fault, and that takes the joy out of painting.”

At the end of the day, she makes comments on sticky notes and affixes them to the painting; this draws her back to the studio with a place to start the next day. Once the painting is 70 to 80 percent done, Chang Liu gives it a critical evaluation. Her analytical left brain dominates when it comes to planning her paintings and judging artwork; she can give a painting the “quick eye”—a cool-headed, objective assessment—to ascertain whether it’s working. Two or three

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days after the painting is completed, she comes back to it and adjusts the elements, simplifying them or making them more ornate, always looking for a balance of simplicity and complexity. Finally, she coats the piece with a couple of layers of matte acrylic polymer varnish, using a flat, natural-bristle house-painting brush and allowing each layer to dry completely before applying the next.

Learning to Stretch

Chang Liu has been teaching for more than three decades, and she still derives pleasure

from helping her students develop their own art language. She has watched a small cohort of students grow under her tutelage. "We're all stretchable in our abilities," she says. "We just need to learn to stretch." As with her own paintings, she analyzes her students' work with her left brain; with her right, she envisions

BELOW: Chang Liu built *Wallmarks* (acrylic and collage; 20x20) around Chinese calligraphy marks done in ink. She integrated the calligraphy on a cotton fabric collage element with her marks on the canvas behind the cotton piece, and then added other small drawings to the painting.



RIGHT: Chang Liu finds a parallel between haiku and the reduction-ism in abstract art. "There are times these two forms of expression combine to convey what passes through my mind," she says. The inspiration for **Winter Haiku #1** (acrylic and collage; 12x12) was a haiku by Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694), which, in one translation, speaks of looking through a paper window and seeing the galaxies. Even as Chang Liu created the sketch for the painting, she knew that the handkerchief remnant, which she later brushed with paint and sepia ink, would be a key element.



what they are trying to achieve, thus earning from them the affectionate sobriquet, "The Art Whisperer."

Navigating a path between East and West, art and science, parental expectations and unexpected opportunities, academic achievement and latent talent, and complexity and simplicity with a balance of grace and assurance, Chang Liu is something of a paradox; she has worked hard to achieve success as an artist without really having that ambition in mind. To this day, she sometimes wonders if she made the right decision not to pursue a career in science, though she's in demand as a studio artist, teacher, curator, and juror. "Unlike science, art is a combination of so many complexities," she says. "If you pay attention to your personality, the kind of art you make reflects it." ■

JUDITH FAIRLY writes about the visual arts and is a frequent contributor to *The Artist's Magazine*.

Meet Katherine Chang Liu



Katherine Chang Liu, born in China and reared in Taiwan, received a master of science degree in nutritional sciences from the University of California, Berkeley. She

has had solo exhibitions in Lyon, France; Hong Kong; Turku, Finland; Copenhagen; and in the United States in San Francisco; Santa Monica, California; and Santa Fe. She's a recipient of grants from the NEA and Virginia Commission of Arts and Humanities. Chang Liu is represented by Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art, Santa Fe; Sandra Walters, Hong Kong; Kathleen Faletto Warner Consultancy, Rome; and other international galleries. Chang Liu will be the juror for the abstract/experimental category in *The Artist's Magazine's* 2014 Annual Art Competition.