

West Meets East

The paintings of **Rick Howell** and **Huihan Liu** bridge cultural differences.



Rick Howell *Bitterroot Sunrise* oil 18 by 24 inches.

Artists Rick Howell and Huihan Liu are from worlds apart. Howell is a fifth-generation New Mexican, born and raised in Albuquerque, while Huihan left his native China in the late 1980s to make a new life for his family and himself in California. And whereas Howell was free to invent himself over again, moving through careers until he found the right fit, Huihan faced a singular struggle to obtain the education he believed was his birthright and his destiny. Now, both are represented by Total Arts Gallery and will be featured in a two-man show that has them standing squarely at a modern cultural crossroads.

Perhaps it is not so surprising that this premier contemporary gallery has chosen to spotlight such unlikely partners in the same show. After all, Total Arts is located in a town whose heritage is an amalgam of many ethnicities, a place where diversity is celebrated. And visitors to Total Arts will be genuinely taken with this juxtaposition of West and East. The brilliance of the pairing pushes past their differences and instead highlights a common thread of authenticity that Howell and Huihan both bring to their subject matter. The emotional honesty and ability to

By Dena Miller

communicate through painting are perfectly synchronized, proving that art is indeed the universal language.

Rick Howell comes from a creative family—his great-grandmother was an artist—and admits his parents still have paintings hanging in the kitchen that he did as an adolescent. In spite of his evident talent, Howell earned a science degree then chose a career in finance before deciding to try and make a living as an artist. Today, the self-taught *plein air* painter is acclaimed for masterful landscapes that capture pure and unembellished moments of beauty in the American west. His style is tranquil but not quiescent; his oil paintings offer a soothing whisper that invite viewers to move in closer. “If you paint the entire landscape with singing color, it is difficult to appreciate the beauty of the more subtle voices you want to hear,” he says.

Huihan Liu came of age during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and likewise displayed an early talent. After several applications for admission to the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art in southern China were denied, his perseverance eventually paid off and he was accepted in 1972. Once he arrived in the United



Huihan Liu *Tibetan Beauty* oil 30 by 24 inches

Sates Huihan continued his formal studies, earning an MFA from the Academy of Art College in San Francisco. Now regarded as a virtuoso of nuanced portraiture, Huihan acknowledges the Impressionist Nicolai Fechin (1881-1955), the renowned Russian artist who resided and painted in Taos from 1927 until 1933, as one of his greatest influences. Huihan's favorite subjects though are the rural Tibetan people for whom he has developed an affinity in his travels. Working from sketches and photographs taken during his visits, he brings his subjects to life in his studio; they emerge tentatively, then with increasing clarity and reverence. Their countenances, their postures, communicate soundlessly with the viewer. "I love the people," he says. "It's the connection that I learned from Fechin."

The authenticity that makes the art of Howell and Huihan so evocative is due largely to the belief in self-honesty and self-knowledge that they hold in common. Both eschew formulaic, commercially driven methodology and hold true to their values. "There has to be a balance with the market and yourself," Huihan says. "You don't want to lose yourself." Howell relates a similar perspective. "Over the long haul the artists that stick to their principles tend to be the most respected, as they will stand out from the crowd," he explains. This clearly resonates with the collectors who recognize that the real value of art is its unfeigned depiction of life, of nature, of the human condition.

Howell spends most of his days working *en plein air*, either painting studies for his final studio compositions or conducting

workshops. He often finds himself in the company of a nameless donkey who will mosey over to watch him paint. "He's great company, until he decides to mess with my painting bag. Then I have to ask him politely to leave," Howell says with a laugh. Howell has released a how-to DVD entitled "En Plein Air: Painting with the Right Side of Your Brain," and is expecting a book, *Chasing Shadows*, to be released in 2011.

Huihan shares a Bay Area studio with his wife Weizhen Liang, where he continues to chronicle the boundary between ancient and modern China through his gorgeous portraits. Weizhen is a talented artist in her own right who is enjoying critical acclaim for still life paintings that impart a distinctive Asian flair. The couple's third book, *The Oil Painting of Huihan Liu and Weizhen Liang*, is now available, as is Huihan's DVD, "Twilight in Tibet."

An exhibition preview of new works by Rick Howell, Huihan Liu and Weizhen Liang will open September 23 at Total Arts Gallery, 122-A Kit Carson Road, with a champagne reception from 5 to 7 pm. A book-signing event is scheduled for September 24, 1 to 3 pm. The show will hang until October 16. 575.758.4667. totalartsgallery.com.



Weizhen Liang *Warm Shadow* oil 20 by 16 inches