

competing *in painting* Katherine Chang Liu

Some thoughts on competitive exhibitions from an internationally recognized artist and juror.



"Visceral Map #1" by Katherine Chang Liu

Mixed media on paper, 36" x38"

Question: *Should less-experienced painters begin by submitting work to local shows or should they immediately try to compete on the regional or national level?*

KL: If you haven't exhibited much, you'll probably be more comfortable starting with local shows rather than regional or national shows. However, there are some experienced artists who continue to hang on to regional shows or non-competitive exhibits. They feel they have a little more control

Question: *When you're more experienced, should you enter every show you can?*

KL: I usually tell artists in my seminars that three juried shows per year is enough. Otherwise you become a shipping company. If you've done one or two outstanding paintings that year that you want to exhibit, you have to carefully schedule the shows you send them to. I think submitting to three shows a year will give you a realistic measurement of your progress. And I think when you have been accepted into the same show three times, you should move on.

Noted painter and juror, Katherine Liu explains the selection process.

Question: *When selecting paintings to submit, should you be concerned about who the juror is and what style he paints in?*

KL: Not at all. How the juror paints should have nothing to do with how he or she judges the show. You should send the paintings that represent what you do best. When the jurors are artists you admire and respect, you want their assessment—what they think of your work. Still, that's not an entirely reliable measurement, because they are only comparing your work to the other paintings submitted to a particular show. Your most important competition is with yourself. How does this year's work compare to last year's? Does it show change and growth?

Question: *When you're allowed to submit more than one slide to a juried show, should you send in two or three pieces that are consistent in style, technique, or content, or should you send in a variety of styles and approaches?*

KL: Some artists send a variety of styles in the hopes of "hedging their bets." Maybe one of them will get in. That's the wrong attitude. Usually slides are shown in the order they are submitted. No juror, when he sees three different styles from the same artist, thinks, "Well, look how versatile this artist is." His response is more likely to be, "How amateurish! This artist still isn't clear about what he or she wants to do." Of course, some artists will still try to outguess the juror; but, I believe, if you've done one dynamite painting that year, you should just send it. Uneven or inconsistent work leaves a bad impression.

Question: *Does the juror decide on the number of paintings accepted into a show?*

KL: No, the juror is told. It's never entirely his decision. The exhibit director will say, We would like an eighty painting show, or Our space can allow for about seventy medium-sized paintings. However, one usually can add or cut a few paintings that you feel are worthy or unworthy.

Question: *When judging a show, do you try to be supportive and include as many different artists as possible, or do you only select what you think are the very best even if it means including 2 or 3 paintings by the same artists?*

KL: I often try to be supportive. I try to include as many different painters as possible without affecting the overall quality of the exhibit. When I really look at it, I feel it won't make a big difference in the appearance of the show. For example, if I were to rate what I felt was one of the very best paintings I'd ever seen as a 10 and one of the worst as 0, I find that I see very few 10's or 0's when judging a show. Most of the paintings would fall between 4 and 8. If I found there was a huge drop in quality between the best and worst, I wouldn't compromise the show just to encourage less experienced painters. But I rarely see that. More often, I have to decide between a 4.5 and a 5. Most of the paintings range between roughly 5's and 8's. And, towards the end I may have to drop the line a little in order to fill the show. I find the difference between the very last painting I have accepted and the first painting that I rejected is extremely close. So, this is another reason artists should not take rejection too personally or put too much significance on it.

Question: *When selecting awards, do you see most shows having two or three paintings that are clearly better than the rest of the accepted show?*

KL: Always. I always know which paintings I'll choose for the few top awards. Most shows are initially judged by slides. Before I'm done, I'll have seen each painting at least seven times. And I'll review the accepted painting easily ten times. When I see the originals, I don't see a lot of surprises. I know immediately which paintings I thought were outstanding.

Question: *When you select a show or judge awards, are you concerned with the design of the painting or the technical proficiency of the artist? Or do you have some other criteria you apply?*

KL: I have a very simple criteria for deciding which painting will get a top award: I pick the one that really grabs me. I think most of the paintings that are entered into the shows that I judge are well-designed and well-executed. But that's not really anything I even think about. What I look for is the artist's sincere involvement. Some artists are so removed from what they want to say that it's as if their brush couldn't have a long enough handle. They seem that detached. And some other artists will paint so close to their heart that they almost seem to be bleeding onto the page. Of course, that is a simile, but it's something I sense. The paintings in a show that stand out for me are usually the ones that are most heartfelt. I always like to reward them.



"New Cycle—Same Spin" by Katherine Chang Liu

Mixed media on paper, 29" x 28"

Question: *When judging a show, do you apply some form of hierarchy according to style or approach? In other words, do you always think non-objective work is superior to realistic?*

KL: I don't believe one type of expression is better than another type of expression—non-objective painting is not a better form of expression than realism. Nor is realism better than non-objective painting. They are parallel. Both are valid forms of expression. I think that we, as artists, should worry more about choosing a form that is effective. Does it say what we want it to say? Does it match our personal temperament? Many less-experienced painters wrongly believe that they should start with realism and, when they get better, go into non-objective painting. I totally disagree. I totally do not believe that. I think we should find a way—a form of expression — that matches our artistic temperament and effectively delivers what we want to say, and that's how we should paint.

Question: *When judging a show, do you feel that paint-*

Question: *When judging a show, do you feel that paintings produced with acrylics are better or more creative than those done in watercolor?*

KL: No! And on top of that, mixed media is not necessarily the most sophisticated medium. I feel that there are more trite and tiring paintings done now in mixed media than in pure watercolor. We should be concerned about whether our painting is honest, whether we're clear and sincere about what we want to say. The medium we choose should fit our message, and exotic, new materials will not make our painting more creative or honest. The answer is never in the art supply store!

Katherine Chang Liu has served as an invited juror to the National Watercolor Society Annual, Watercolor West, San Diego International, Rocky Mountain Watermedia, plus 36 regional and state competitions. She is a full-time exhibiting artist who shows internationally. Her work has been featured in 19 books and over 30 articles.