

## Maine Artist Embraces Chinese ‘accent’ in Her Art

Mei Selvage finds her voice, translating ancient traditions into modern medium

By Amy Paradysz

Mei Selvage was born in a remote village in Sichuan, China, with the Himalayas as the backdrop. After growing up toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, when creative types and independent thinkers were tortured, her life today is one she never would have imagined as a child. In a continual merging of East and West, she balances a full-time job as an IT analyst for Gartner Inc. and a passion for incorporating ancient Chinese art forms in modern ways.

“Spirituality connects everything I do,” says Mei.



(Mei Selvage at her art studio; photo by Amy Paradysz)

She arrived in the United States in 1997 and studied at the University of Montana, where she met her husband, Dan. After graduation, she was recruited by IBM as part of its diversity hiring program.

“You never know how the universe works,” Mei says, reflecting on those pivotal years in Montana, where the Rocky Mountains welcomed her like the Himalayas of her youth.

In the early years of their marriage, the Selvages moved to Texas, California, Idaho, and finally, in 2010, to Maine, where Dan took a job at the University of New England. “I was like a military wife, except an academic wife,” Mei laughs. She took a leap of faith and joined Gartner after a 12-year career with IBM.

Her introduction to traditional Buddhism was, oddly enough, through a Dutch-born Zen teacher in Pocatello, Idaho. There, Mei immersed herself in the Buddhist community.

“It’s almost like a family—you cook, sleep, chant, meditate, and do chores together,” she says.

When she moved to Maine, it took some time to find a zen Buddhist community. And she noticed the teacher cared more about religious rituals and prestige than living out the teaching. After a string of scandals erupted from various Buddhist communities in 2012, Mei cut off ties with Buddhist groups and search the way on her own.

Having always enjoyed art, she threw herself into its pursuit with the same devotion she had formerly focused on Buddhism and the study of koans. “Creating art is my main practice now,” she says. “But Buddhist teachings are always with me. And I married the two in one action.”

In her professional life, Mei was devastated by anonymous derogative reviews on her Chinese accent after her public speaking. She attacked this issue with her characteristic determination and sense of practice.

“I went to accent reduction class and to tutoring and listened to CDs; anything I could do, I did it,” Mei says. “But I consciously have developed a Chinese accent in my art to empower myself. Before that, my paintings were mostly influenced by the post-Impressionist style. The troubles at work become rich soil for my art.”

That was a turning point for her develop her own artist style—translating traditional Chinese art into modern medium. Her work is playful yet well balanced with a mix of ancient and modern stories and references.

“This translation process allows me to embody the spirit of Chinese art,” Mei says. “If I had stuck with just traditional brush ink painting, it would have been easy to slip into a well-worn path... Free translation gives me more freedom to find my own voice.”

Her days begin and end in her art studio at home with her Maine Coon cat Ernie, named after Ernest Hemingway. In between, her professional life is filled with “big data,” “data integration” and “internet of things.”

“Work is a practice, art is a practice, and life is a practice,” Mei says. “If I can be centered in whatever I do, it’s a spiritual practice. To me, real practice is to live moment to moment, live in our true nature. Before a work meeting, I often remind myself: It’s not just about a paycheck; it’s about helping other people. So I take time to connect with people first. I don’t want to be one person at work and then another person the rest of the time.”

Case in point: Mei’s artwork was recently displayed at ThinkTank Coworking, her office away from home.

Around the same time, she co-founded an initiative to foster intercultural exchange, Ya Ji East/West Cultural Gatherings, with Suzanne Fox and Clare Tyrrell Morin.

Mei is currently showing her art in the two-person exhibition “Expressing Archetypes and Visual Poetry,” at Lakes Gallery at Chi-Lin in Meredith, N.H. (<http://thelakesgallery.com>).

Two other shows are in the planning stages: one with MECA library in March and another with 3fish gallery in Portland in May.

“I feel very integrated,” she says with a smile, lifting her mug of tea.