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Global Expressions

An exhibit at the Columbia Art League showcases work of local artists from around the world.

By JENNA KAEGEL of the Tribune's staff
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When the Hubble Space Telescope began transmitting images from outer space in 1994, Earth suddenly seemed smaller. The cold, impersonal reaches of space bloomed with color, movement and energy. It was as if you could stare through the lens and uncover all the mysteries of the universe.

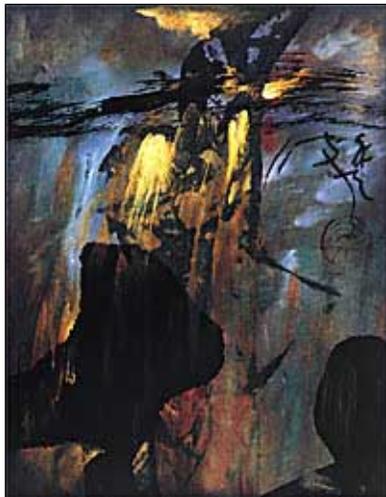


photo courtesy of Lampo Leong

Lampo Leong's "The Gathering of Nebulae," and "Terra Tectonics," below, are acrylic and mixed media on canvas pieces from his series "Contemplation-Forces."

"The Gathering of Nebulae" by Lampo Leong has the same effect. The title alludes to clouds of interstellar gas, but the painting speaks of something larger — the cogs and wheels of physics, biology and the origins of life. In the background, the barely decipherable strokes of Chinese calligraphy are a link to Leong's heritage.

Leong and five other international artists will showcase their work in the Columbia Art League's "Expressions in Cultural Heritage," an exhibit that opens Tuesday. Jody Spriggs, executive director of the art league, says the show is a chance for the community to experience diverse cultures of China, Cambodia and Nigeria.

"Every year we try to create something that's a little different," she says. "Maybe it's a component that we feel is lacking in the community as far as exhibits that have been shown recently or exhibits that haven't been highlighted at all in our area."

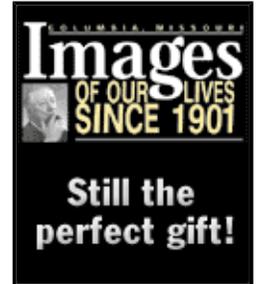


photo courtesy of Lampo Leong

of the past.

The local artists were invited to participate in the new show because their work is strongly rooted in their backgrounds and ethnicities. Each artist has a distinct contemporary style, but their work still reflects the traditions

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Born in different regions in China, artists Leong and Yueying Zhong share similar artistic backgrounds. Both men grew up during the Cultural Revolution when universities were closed and art education was not a priority in schools. Both studied traditional calligraphy and painting, which have been developing in China for thousands of years and are known as the twin arts of the brush.

"China's culture has a long, long history," Zhong says. "If you train children in art, you teach them the traditional rules. You begin from there."

When the universities reopened in 1979, both were selected over thousands of other candidates for places in art schools —

Zhong went to the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts in northern China, and Leong went to Guangzhou Fine Arts Institute in southern China.

Despite the similarities in training, the two artists have taken different paths. Now an art professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia, Leong creates abstract depictions of the unseen forces of the changing universe; Zhong turned to the lakes and forests he saw around him for inspiration.

Zhong moved to Columbia five years ago after his wife took a job with MU's psychiatry department. Now a full-time artist, he says the scenery around town has inspired him to develop a contemporary voice and technique.



photo courtesy of Lampo Leong



Jenna Isaacson photo

Local artist Yueying Zhong stands next to his works "Winter in Columbia" and "A Son of the Great Land," which he has displayed in his basement. Zhong is among six artists who will have work on display at the Columbia Art League's Expressions in Cultural Heritage exhibit, which opens Tuesday.

Last year, after a heavy snowfall, he walked down Rock Quarry Road to Capen Park, where he stood on the cliffs looking down at the barren trees. The view took his breath away, but he wondered how he should express what he was feeling. Zhong is an expert with the brush, but the traditional rules for painting didn't apply to the low hills and woodlands of Central

Missouri.

"I wanted to create a new language to explain my new environment," he says. "The Chinese landscape has high mountains, but in Columbia, there are just hills and a lot of trees. If you use the traditional techniques for this scenery, it seems" imperfect.

Reinventing his technique has been a fruitful process for Zhong. In his basement studio at home, portraits of farmers he painted in China sit next to landscapes of Columbia's brilliant autumn colors. His brush is equally

comfortable in both worlds.

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Leong's fiery, colorful murals are born on pure-white rice paper. It's the spontaneous, expressive movement of Chinese calligraphy that he's looking for and can only achieve using the traditional paper.

"There is inherent beauty inside those strokes," he says. "I want people to get away from the literal meaning of the characters and get into the beauty of the shape and stroke."

Leong scans Chinese characters into a computer, where he alters their shape or color before printing them on canvas to paint and reshape again.

"Technology is central to this process of reconstruction and deconstruction," he says. "It's more like a chemical or biological change where you start at the beginning, and then a new species can grow out of both cultures. It's different than the sum of the parts."

Peppered with words such as "particles," "cirrus" and "magma," the titles of Leong's paintings read like a science textbook. Microscopes and telescopes are common instruments in creating his art.

"A lot of the ideas for my images come from outer space," Leong says. "I'm very interested in science and quantum physics. Studying science helped me to understand the importance and size of the universe. A human being is very insignificant. It's just a little dust in the whole universe. That's the feeling I want in my paintings — the sublime feeling, the grandeur feeling."

Leong sees his work as a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures. He hopes art will bring people closer together.

"Asian culture is not just an ancient culture. It is a lively, living culture that still grows," he says. "I can pull from both cultures and synthesize elements into something that can help unify the whole globe."



Brendan Smialowski photo

Lampo Leong's computer is a key component in his artwork. Starting on rice paper, Leong creates calligraphy that he then digitizes and enhances in PhotoShop before printing it on canvas and finishing his art with paintbrushes.

Expressions in Cultural Heritage

Tuesday through Feb. 28
An opening reception will be at 6:30 p.m. Saturday at the Columbia Art League, 1013 E. Walnut St. The reception will feature ethnic foods, music and slide presentations about culture and art. There also will be demonstrations of Chinese calligraphy and brush painting.

Featured artists
Lampo Leong, Yueying Zhong and Lillian Sung - China

Vannak Phouk - Cambodia

Patrick and Anthonia Akinbola - Nigeria

Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. For more information, call 443-8838 or 443-2131.

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