

Three to Watch: Artists Making Their Mark

There is a lot of superb art being made these days;
this column shines light on a trio of gifted individuals.



HONGNIAN ZHANG (b. 1947) is a leading figure in the dramatic story of 20th-century Chinese academic realism, yet his paintings are still not as well known in the U.S. as they should be.

Born in Nanjing during China's civil war, Zhang revealed an early talent for drawing and thus began a beaux-arts training at age nine. Comparing its rigor to that of Russia's young ballerinas, he believes this regimen "has proved very valuable for me, something I can use anywhere I go." At 14, Zhang entered the highly selective Central Art Academy Affiliated High School in Beijing, which had, a decade earlier, embraced the socialist realist method deployed in Russia since the 1930s to transmit uplifting propaganda to the masses. As soon as they graduated, however, Zhang's class was sent "back to the countryside" for four years of forced agricultural labor. Denied access to art supplies during this period, Zhang was fortunate to ultimately land a post that allowed him to travel across China creating art glorifying the government and people.

From 1974 to 1984, Zhang was groomed for a leadership role in Beijing's official art establishment, despite his active role in the "Scar" generation of artists who produced images critiquing Mao's failed Cultural

Revolution. In 1985, Zhang risked it all to study art at New York's City College, arriving in Manhattan with \$30 and no English skills. His talent was apparent and his timing ideal: Just a year later, he figured prominently in an unprecedented selling exhibition of recent Chinese realism mounted by New York's Grand Central Art Galleries. Having settled in Woodstock, New York, in 1991, Zhang is now a U.S. citizen, married to the distinguished portraitist Lois Woolley, and a beloved instructor at the Woodstock School of Art.

Over the past decade, Zhang's subject matter has broadened from modern China and Tibet (the troubled region he first visited in the early 1980s) into carefully researched tableaux from Chinese and American history and legend, as well as still lifes, idyllic landscapes, and figurative compositions. Zhang is particularly fascinated with America's colonial period, identifying as he does with the Pilgrims and other immigrants

HONGNIAN ZHANG (b. 1947)

SONG OF ENDLESS SORROW: THE TRAGEDY OF YANG GUI FEI

2008, OIL ON LINEN, 72 x 116 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION



who forged new lives in a foreign land. He has been especially pleased to receive commissions for Chinese historical scenes from the magazine *National Geographic*, which has acquired four of them for its permanent collection.

Zhang's manner of painting is simultaneously 19th century and contemporary. "In China, I studied classical ways of making things look real," he observes, "but in America, I have studied abstract art. Underneath, all of my paintings start off abstract." After completing dozens of small oil sketches that focus on specific figures and groups, Zhang knits their imagery into a larger, more complex canvas that he builds up carefully. Sometimes this requires as many as 15 layers of pigments and glazes to achieve the soft, glowing effects he admires in forerunners as diverse as Jean-François Millet, John Singer Sargent, and N.C. Wyeth.

In 2000, Zhang co-authored with his wife *The Yin Yang of Painting*, a volume that outlines his theories and methods. And just last year, a Chinese publisher produced a richly illustrated, oversized monograph (with texts in both Chinese and English) available via Zhang's major U.S. representative, San Marino Gallery, Pasadena. Zhang's work can also be seen at Fletcher Gallery in Woodstock, New York.

MICHAEL GIBBONS (b. 1943) hails from Oregon, a state his family helped settle. Having won art awards throughout his youth, he always believed he would become a professional artist, though the diversions *en route* included three years in the U.S. Air Force. At age 25, he left his post as co-owner of a Portland firm that designed accessories for Porsche and Volkswagen in order to pursue painting full time.

This transition brought him to the town of Toledo, a 10-minute drive inland from the Pacific coast. Home to 3,700 people, Toledo is surrounded by thickly forested hills overlooking Yaquina River and Bay. Gibbons and his wife Judy have been instrumental in fostering the Toledo Arts District, which centers on the studios of several artists, and on the Yaquina River Museum of Art. Founded by the Gibbonses five years ago in an 1887 building that once served as a Sunday school, the museum collects and exhibits artists associated with Oregon. It holds 80 paintings and drawings made by Gibbons, as well as paintings and sculptures by an array of historical and contemporary artists. Gibbons's studio nearby occupies a former Methodist church, and his gallery was the Episcopalian church's vicarage.

Gibbons is best known for painting landscapes in oil, outdoors and in, particularly images of his own scenic state. "As a fifth-generation inhabitant of this region," he notes, "I have a sense of communion with the land itself and the spirits of millennia of humans who lived with it. To develop an artistic expression (painting) which expresses the accumulated



MICHAEL GIBBONS (b. 1943)
SUMMER RAIN CLOUDS
1998, OIL ON CANVAS, 15 x 15 IN.
YAQUINA RIVER MUSEUM OF ART, TOLEDO, OREGON

character of this place and my love of it is simply my reason to be." Gibbons also paints in Arizona, where he had a second home for nine years, as well as Florida, California, Scotland, Ireland, England, and France.

Gibbons's pictures immediately betray his longstanding admiration for the sensitive, poetical landscapes painted by such 19th-century Tonalists as George Inness. "There is a mysterious quality about them which beckons," Gibbons says. "The details are, more often than not, suggested, leaving the viewer in a continual state of tension. The phenomenon is much the same as carrying on a conversation with someone who pauses mid-sentence, searching for a word. I find myself supplying the appropriate word, and the dialogue continues."

In 1998, eager to immerse himself in such an aesthetic conversation, Gibbons ventured into the tidal marshes of the scenic Arnold