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Art: Works by 12 Chinese-Americans in Show

By MICHAEL BRENSON

AT first glance "Chinese Art in Transition," at the City Gallery, suggests a street art show. The subjects are traditional — still lifes, portraits, landscapes and cityscapes. Many of the 38 works, by 12 Chinese-American artists living in New York City, are dressed in familiar Western Realist styles. The show seems to lack urgency or edge.

But in fact, it is revealing and even moving. Many of the paintings, photographs and lithographs have something to say about what it means to be a Chinese artist in New York. The works are defined by discretion, a strong feeling for craft and materials and a belief in art as a way of participating in something larger. Memory is of paramount importance.

Nevertheless, the exhibition, organized by Chen Dan Qing, a painter, and presented by the Chinese-American Arts Council, should have been more professional. No information is provided about the age of the artists, the length of time they have been in the United States or whether they were trained in China, the United States or both. Interviews, or a statement about the living conditions of the artists, would have been welcome. At a

time when many Western artists are drawn to the conceptual framework of Chinese esthetics, it would be useful to know why many contemporary Chinese artists are drawn to Western Realism.

Behind the Western facade of this show, China is always present. Pa Sui Ma made four watercolor sketches of the Hudson River Palisades, then selected one and used it as the basis of a Pop-colored, three-part, watercolor screen in which the cliffs of New Jersey are ironically transformed into steep, unassailable Chinese mountains.

Gao Jin is fascinated by light. In "The Light," the oil inside the paint seems to be burning. In "Dusk," a woman who is little more than a spot of yellow rides a hay wagon, pulled by a yak, followed by a dog, with huge green hills rising up behind her. Conceived in the fastest American city, this painting moves with the slow, heavy rhythms of another world.

In the still lifes of Ying Ying Zhu, set against plain, wine-colored backgrounds similar to those in still lifes of Manet, there are further signs of uprootedness and difference. When peaches and pears are placed in baskets or bowls, the containers seem to become vessels and the fruit like boat

people. The vessels appear to be at sea, offering themselves to any place that will take them in.

In traditional Chinese painting and throughout this show, pictorial method matters profoundly. In Hong Nian Zhang's "Long, Long Thoughts of Youth," a woman in shepherd clothes walks silently with her child. If the style and subject matter bear traces of Soviet Social Realism, the work is saved by the sheer force of its texture. Paint is used to recapture the rough, knobby, run-down wood fence behind the walking figures, as well as the hill behind it.

In the two realistic portraits by Quan Wu Li, brushwork is perceived as the vehicle through which essential currents are channeled into the image. In both portraits there is an awareness of the possibilities of abstraction. In "Portrait II," one loose, flowing, inky curl of hair unlocks the warm iciness, or icy warmth, of the woman. In "Portrait I," a pearl or shell earring sets in motion a compositional play that almost takes off on its own but always remains in the service of the elegant young woman the painter wants to understand and depict.

There is a similar feeling for abstraction in "Landscape" by C. C. Wang — the best-known artist in the show — whose hills and stones pull against tiny clusters of blue-roofed houses, almost becoming independent of the imagery, but ultimately building into the work a feeling of wrathful immensity.

In his portrait photographs, Hong Qing Ling uses geometric patterns to create a sense of definition and clarity. The sense of abstraction is no less prominent in the cityscapes of Vivian Tsao, where a Jane Freilicher-like tension between three-dimensional space and décor triggers a Chinese meditation on illusion and reality. Beneath the flat surface of this show, there is depth.

(At the City Gallery, 2 Columbus Circle, through Sept. 4.)



"Portrait II" (1987), an oil on canvas by Quan Wu Li, is in show at the City Gallery.