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My journey: eight thousand miles of clouds and moon

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**MY JOURNEY:
EIGHT THOUSAND MILES
OF CLOUDS AND MOON**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art

in

The School of Art

by
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B.F.A., Louisiana State University, 1978
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explains the thoughts behind the body of art work that the artist produced for the MFA program. These three large paintings (72"x40") will lead viewers through a seventy-year-old woman's personal journey from the East to the West. The paintings display compositions in a bio-epic representation of traditional oil on canvas. The thesis not only expresses the artist's thoughts through formal means, but also the manner by which the emotions evolved.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of art, artists have given us glimpses into their lives. With the use of formal devices such as perspective, linear composition, harmony of color, and the use of light and shade, they have created works of art, “visual chapters,” documenting distinct eras and civilizations. Over time these principles have evolved. Art associated with certain time periods took on individual characteristics. Classical Chinese ink painting centered on a two-dimensional monochromatic representation of figures and landscapes. Renaissance art featured the development of a one point perspective. Rembrandt manipulated the use of light and darkness to express mood and humanity, and abstract expressionists focused on capturing the expression of inner emotion. For many artists, the power of art lies not in its mere recording of events or expression of ideas, but in its power to transform one’s imagination. As Post-Impressionist painter Georges Seurat recognized, artists do not reflect reality or open a window to it; they appropriate elements of reality for their own purposes, using visual rhythms, contrasts, colors, lines, and textures to guide and even instruct the viewer. It was with this guiding principle in mind that I embarked upon my thesis project.

Having decided to paint a narrative biographical epic, I then began to think about the canvas - what form should it take? I was initially inspired to paint a triptych in the manner of religious renaissance paintings. However, I found that the vertical orientation of the paintings and their common focus on one historical event was limiting. I looked to the Chinese tradition of storytelling using horizontal narrative scrolls and knew that I wanted to use a horizontal canvas. Three discrete horizontal canvases were better suited for recording the three pivotal events in my life. I thus abandoned the idea of a triptych, but kept the concept of using three mural sized panels instead. Deciding upon the dimensions of each horizontal canvas came easily. The canvases would be 72” x 40”, a “golden rectangle,” in which the ratio of the length to the width of the painting is the

aesthetically pleasing golden ratio $[(\text{length} + \text{width}) / \text{length} \cdot \text{length} / \text{width}]$. With the form of my thesis set, I then spent the better part of one semester brainstorming, planning, and doing preliminary drawings of each of the subjects of my paintings. I focused on the three turning points of my life—my ancestral past, my departure from East to West, and the future potential of my grandchildren.

Composing each panel was a creative challenge. I rifled through old family daguerreotype photos and old Chinese culture magazines, as well as books on Chinese architecture to obtain ideas for my first panel. For my second panel, I was influenced by the religious historical fresco paintings of Masaccio. For the third panel, rather than a traditionally posed portrait, I wanted to capture the movement and energy of my grandchildren. While my memories of my ancestors are static snapshots, those of my grandchildren are dynamic - they are constantly moving, evolving, and growing.

Over winter break I made preliminary sketches, about one-tenth the size of the real paintings, and cut out each of the figures. Then I enlarged or reduced the figures and placed them in various indoor settings or outdoor landscapes. In this way, I experimented with composition, and out of this seemingly chaotic process, a certain order and harmony emerged. Studies of water color and oil of the small scale were completed, and by the second semester I was ready to start painting.

Rather than work on one painting at a time from start to finish, I worked on all three panels simultaneously. During this process, I continually reworked and refined each figure, particularly the faces. From the time I put the first wash on the canvas, to applying the second coat of paint and the final finishing touches, I gradually rekindled a personal relationship with each character in my paintings. I spent hours in my studio, pouring my emotions into each painting—hours with my ancestors and my grandchildren. In this way, I was able to bring my ancestors and grandchildren, so distant from me in time and space, to life.

My thesis is a bio-epic representational composition. It tells a story about my life in three stages. I have narrated it from a unique, bicultural point of view that is neither Chinese nor American, neither Eastern nor Western. I was initially inspired by the Italian and Northern European Renaissance painters' use of perspective, symbolism, and linear and simultaneous narrative. However, after reading about the late 19th century painter Puvis de Chavannes in Jennifer Shaw's book *Dream State*, I decided to follow Puvis' approach of combining traditional imagery with a "modern" style, covering a flattened surface with color arranged in an orderly fashion, and his "suggestiveness" of visual form. I wanted to convey "the inseparability of the internal and the external elements of content and form" by composing the paintings in a way that leads viewers to their personal aesthetic experience - a state of mind in which the viewer sympathizes with the artist's sincerely expressed sentiment. I invite my viewers to use their own imagination to create stories with my characters.

This body of work is composed of three panels that record my journey from the East to the West. The title, "*Eight Thousand Miles of Clouds and Moon*," alludes to a Song dynasty poem "Man Jiang Hong (The River Runs Red)" by Yue Fei (see attachment), that describes a famous general's sense of worthlessness after having fought and won countless battles for the good of his mother country. The title, "*Eight Thousand Miles of Clouds and Moon*," also represents Yue Fei's lyrical description of the physical and emotional distance that the general has traveled. It is this poetic image that I have in mind when I think about the journey that I have taken.

PANELS

Panel 1: *Homage to My Ancestors*

The first panel pays homage to my dearest ancestors. From disparate memories of each of my relatives, I have imagined them sitting all together on a type of stage in my grandmother's living room at sunset. The foreground is composed of three male figures on the left side, forming a triangle in front of a round-shaped window, with three female figures on the right. The three male figures are my father and two uncles. An old man smoking a pipe sits outside of the living room, admiring the mountains at sunset. He is the great grandfather that I never met. My great grandmother is sitting on the far right side of the painting, with a very sad expression on her face. At the age of sixteen, she married my great grandfather while he was already in his sixties. She was his fourth wife. After only four years of marriage, she became a widow and never remarried. The woman holding a painted round fan in the center of the painting is my grandmother. When I was nine years old, she shared with me her painful experience of having her feet bound. As a child I had a secret wish to unbind my grandmother's feet, to transform them from their diminutive, deformed state to a normal size and shape like my own feet. In this heart-wrenching painting, my childhood wish has come true. My mother, the woman in the center of the panel, is playing a sad song on the pipa, a traditional Chinese stringed instrument. The song recounts the sadness that the women of that generation felt.

Panel 2: *Chronicle of My Departure*

The second panel chronicles my departure from a small village in Taiwan at twilight. Since I arrived in the United States via steamship, I intentionally placed my female relatives around a waterfront setting with a symbolic rowboat in the distance. The full harvest moon rising on the horizon is a symbol of a family's solidarity and togetherness. However, instead of uniting with my

family on this night, I am leaving my beloved family members and embarking on a new adventure. I am the young woman holding a book in my left hand and carrying a sack over my shoulder, filled with memories and a dream of becoming a painter, ready to face the challenges of the New World. The book is the *Tao Te Ching*, the “bible” of Taoism that espouses humanity’s oneness with nature.

Panel 3: *New Generation*

The third panel takes place in the present time. It represents the vitality of the new generation - my five grandchildren frolicking in my house during a visit. The children’s active play creates movement across the canvas and leads the viewer from the foreground to the background. The geometric pattern on the rug is a recapitulation of the carved, wooden lattice windows of the first panel and hints at the Eastern culture that is carried on through the generations. The cat, nearly immortal with its nine lives, is present throughout all the panels to witness the unfolding of my life.

CONCLUSION

In real time these three panels span almost a century, but in my artist's conception of time, they represent the past, present, and future. The images of the characters that I include in my work come from snapshots residing in my collective memory, discrete memories from different times of life. These characters are juxtaposed in each panel in fictionalized scenes. They are fragments of my past as seen through my eyes, and are as authentic, emotional, and sincere as I can be. I have absorbed the lessons from many master artists and teachers and have synthesized what I have learned into a new form of personal expression. I hope that through the depiction of my life, viewers can compose their own stories with my characters. It has taken me three years to come to the conclusion of this body of work. But it is also the commencement of more tales to come. This last year of exploration at LSU has been an adventure - full of meaning, passion, anxiety, discipline, and joy. While I have traveled the physical and emotional distance of Yue Fei's eight thousand miles, in contrast to his sense of inadequacy, I have found my soul.

APPENDIX: THE RIVER RUNS RED

Yue Fei (1103-1142)

In anger my hair hurls my hat from my head;
as I lean over the rail,
the rain's fine mist ceases.
I raise my eyes to Heaven
and unleash a long cry;
how fierceness fills my breast!
Thirty years of work and fame - like dust and dirt;
eight thousand miles of road - like clouds and moon.
But I won't wait in idleness
for white to take my youthful head,
for empty sorrow.
Jing Kang's shame
is not yet washed away;
this minister's hate -
when will it be quenched?
I'll drive a war chariot and smash apart
the Helan mountain pass.
Then with a strong spirit,
I'll feast on the flesh of Hu prisoners;
talking and laughing,
I'll swig barbarian blood.

Count on me - I'll make a new beginning,
gather up our ancient mountains and rivers
and present them to the Emperor, at the palace gate.

VITA

Frances Hu, born in the city of Chongching, China, in 1938, was the eldest child of three children in a cultured family. Her father was a university professor of International Law and her mother, a high school art teacher. They lived in Shanghai and moved to Taiwan in 1948. She spent her formative years in Peitou, Taiwan, a small town by the Mountain Guanyin and the Dansuei River. She earned her BA in English in 1961 and came to the United States in 1962 for graduate studies at Catholic University in Washington, D. C. She was married to John Hu and raised two children in Michigan. The family moved to Baton Rouge in 1973. She earned a BFA degree in studio art, specializing in oil painting from LSU in 1978, and worked for a major law firm in Baton Rouge for twenty-five years before she was admitted to LSU to pursue her MFA degree. Frances Hu expects to earn her MFA in May of 2009.