

Art as the ultimate teacher

Mimi Chen Ting explores the meaning of her work in her life

Betsy Carey, *the Tempo Magazine of the Taos News*, August 14, 2006

In Shanghai, China, where Mimi Chen Ting was born, she lived in a house filled with grandmothers and great aunts, one of whom handed her a sizable chunk of brown sugar every morning when she first appeared in the kitchen. It was accompanied with a prayer that would help make her life sweet, and it seems to have done just that.

When she was not quite three years old, her mother brought her and her older brother to Hong Kong to join her father. By the time she was a teenager, her father was working in Malaysia where she often visited.

With her allowance of 40 cents a week, she said she would run to the corner store and buy a sheet of large white paper that cost 30 cents. Occasionally, the Children's Corner of the South China Morning Post would publish her drawings.

"When I was five, my mother started me in both ballet and piano lessons. When she pulled me out of ballet after a mere three months, fearing that I might become too honed and muscular, I fought back by refusing to practice for my piano lessons for the next seven years. I was definitely very skilled at cutting off my nose to spite my face," laughed the artist.

Chen Ting attended Maryknoll Convent School in Hong Kong from primary through high school. There were no visual arts courses offered, but she said she was always asked to make cards for the nuns on feast days.

When she began college at the San Francisco College for Women, she carried a double major in English Literature (18-19th century Romantic poets) and sociology, with the intention of returning to Hong Kong to become a social worker. She also took an overload of courses in art every semester. After her junior year, fully comprehending her utter disinterest at functioning within bureaucracies, she changed her major to fine art and went to San José State University, which had one of the best art departments in the area. She graduated in 1969.

"At San José, I encountered one of the most influential art teachers I ever had, the innovative watercolorist Eric Oback, who, having given me a C- for my first mid-term grade, told me that if I would just first find the 'what' I want to do, the 'how to do it' will surely follow. And it did not matter a bit to him that I never did become proficient in his medium. A year later, he told me to show my work to the Lucien Labaudt Gallery in San Francisco, where I had my first one-person show in 1970," she said.

"Eric also chaired my graduate advisory committee," continued the artist, "and was

always supportive, even when after six and a half years of graduate school, and barely six months before my thesis exhibition, I completely changed my style of painting!" In 1976, something happened that made her change priorities. Her children had short school days, and often she would bring them with her to work in a studio she had on the second floor of a warehouse. It had floor-to-ceiling windows, which opened to the rooftop of an adjacent building. On a hot summer day, she was working on a piece and lost track of time. When she looked up, she realized she had also lost track of the little ones as well. After frightful moments running to the rooftop to see if they had fallen onto the street, she finally found them fast asleep under her desk in the office. She decided on the spot that her young children should be her top priority, so she took a sabbatical from studio work.

She also went back to school to study performance and "resumed" her formal training in dance, until her modern dance teacher asked her to join her new dance company in 1981.

In 1983, Chen Ting resigned from the dance company and built her first art studio next to her home, and resumed painting and printmaking, while continuing her site-specific performance work. Chen Ting's more recent performances were at the Millicent Rogers and Harwood Museums in Taos. Her next performance is scheduled for July 2007 at The Albuquerque Museum.

While teaching at San José City College, two of her senior colleagues began letting her use the etching press and got her started in intaglio and monotype printmaking. In 1984, she bought her own press and was hooked.

"In 1988, after the sudden loss of my older brother, and still in mourning for the death of my father three years earlier, I was spiraling down into depression," she said. "My husband Andrew and I took the train from California to come to the opera in Santa Fe, something I had wanted to do since I had read about it in the *Geo* magazine 15 years before. It was our first trip to New Mexico. When our Santa Fe hotel told us that they could only accommodate us if we moved out for a night in the middle of our stay, we came up to Taos, and stayed overnight at the Taos Inn. Over lunch the following day, Andrew observed that I had regained a sparkle in me. He suggested that if I felt Taos was the right place for me, then only I could do something about it. I agreed, went to a real estate agent, and found and bought my little one-room house on the mesa two hours later."

She had thought that Taos would provide a respite from the demands of the studio in California. It gave her time to "catch up on my reading. However the first summer here saw me actually completing a watercolor a day, and I added a studio onto the house the following summer." At first, she only lived in Taos during the summer, but when her son finished high school and she began cutting back on her teaching load, eventually in 1994 she was free to live here full time. Her husband, Andrew, made a career change and came to live with her in Taos. She said that they try to attend every chamber music concert, and go to the Santa Fé Opera. They practice yoga and

taiji (tai chi), hike, cross-country ski, snowshoe and revel in the friendships they have built over the years.

"As an artist," Chen Ting said, "I feel greatly privileged and humbled to be able to devote my life and resources to the development of my work. I am relieved that after almost 40 years, I am still thrilled when I enter my studio, and feel gleefully irrepressible when I pick up a brush or set the pressure on my press." Her works do not generally have easy births, the artist explained. Often, they come out of belabored and torturous incubations, "but I fall absolutely in love with each one of them as they struggle to live, and ask only they become my teachers for the next work to come. I am grateful that in recent years, I have found another teacher in the dance pioneer, Anna Halprin, who at 85 still lives the power of the dance in every class. I am fortunate that over the years, I have developed an infrastructure of curators, and other art professionals who have maintained a sustained interest in my work. They are generous with their time for honest dialogue, and forthcoming with opportunities that give my work much appreciated acknowledgment and exposure."

She said she is blessed with family and friends; a home that is warm in the winter and cool in the summer; a dog, who likes her company; and a garden that continues to thrive against all odds. "My fundamental wish is that my generation not fail in passing on to our children and grandchildren a world that, if not better, is at least no worse than the one that has been given to us. I am committed to this stewardship of our legacy," Chen Ting said.