

A Day in the Life of an Artist

Ying-He Liu by Wende Caporale



during such a turbulent time, Ying-He remarked that a very basic instinct to survive the hardship was the motivating factor. Her art became a refuge; it sustained and nurtured her. This ability fueled her dedication and this combined with discipline and perseverance opened doors

The day in the life of the artist, Ying-He Liu, may seem familiar to many of us.

Even her biography suggests a steady path towards an outstanding career as a sought-after portrait artist. What I learned from my friend and colleague suggests a more complicated history, which I am certain, affects how Ying-He approaches her art.

Ying-He Liu was born to two prominent scientists and raised in Shanghai, China. At the age of 16, Ying-He was sent to the country and spent two years doing hard labor on a farm.

Mao Zedong had issued an ordinance that all young people be “reeducated by the peasants” which was implicit in the Cultural Revolution. Later she was recruited to work in the theater company when she had rare access to two very prominent Chinese artists and developed her own talent as a gifted artist; she remained there for eight years while being paid by the government. During the Cultural Revolution, the doors to university remained closed until 1977. At that time, Ying-He passed the exam to attend the university in China and later moved to the United States with the help of a generous uncle who was a Harvard professor. When I inquired what drove her

for her that had previously been closed.

This early lesson of overcoming adversity continues to inform the way Ying-He conducts her life. She takes nothing for granted and continues the work ethic combined with increased enthusiasm. Let me share with you the brief yet enlightening time I spent with Ying-He recently.

Friday October 9, 2009

11:30 a.m. – Ying-He arrives at the dock to pick me up from the ferry, which is minutes from she lives on Long Island, New York. We arrive at her home and studio and she shares with me the recently completed work on her property including extensive landscaping and some renovations to her home. She tells me that she and her husband, John, did much of the work.

I am particularly curious how Ying-He organizes her time knowing how active she is as a portrait artist. In the downstairs studio, there are many portraits in various states of completion; the Presidents of Bryn Mawr College and SUNY Stony Brook, Ying-He’s alma mater, that are almost complete and awaiting final approval. The double portrait of a father and son, which Ying-He tells me is at the point where she will photograph it and send images to the clients for approval, as well as several head and shoulder portraits and a wonderful portrait of Ying-He’s husband, John, against a winter landscape. The large portraits of the father and son and the President of SUNY have notably strong compositions that exhibit rhythm and balance, something Ying-He strives for in her work. In questioning Ying-He about



Girl with Silver Headband, (portrait of the artist's daughter Ming Min), oil, 32 x 30" (82 x 76cm)

her process, she generally has five to six projects she works on simultaneously and shoots her own reference photography. She showed me her upstairs studio, which includes an elaborate set up for photographing her artwork as well as a workspace for her students, storage space for equipment for travel and a separate office space. Ying-He teaches limited three-hour classes, in still life and in portraiture, in her studio as well as another class at a local art academy each week.

12:30 p.m. – We head to a local favorite restaurant of Ying-He’s where we continue our conversation. I ask Ying-He about how she balances her time and finds the stamina to maintain such a busy schedule. She makes a point of exercising most days for 50 minutes that includes yoga or aerobics in addition to a daily walk with her husband along Long Island Sound. She noted that when she spent extensive time landscaping her property or when doing physical household activities, this served as a substitute for her daily workout. Her day begins between 9:00 and 10:00 a.m. and ends between 5:00 and 6:00 p.m. with actual painting time being seven hours a day, four days a week. With email being so important a part of communication, Ying-He checks it first thing in the morning and when she breaks from painting during the day, answering only the urgent emails, which require an immediate response. She handles phone calls in a similar way; she screens calls and



Dr. Karl Koht, CEO and President of Battelle Memorial Institute, Ohio, oil, 32 x 20" (82 x 51cm)

picks up only if she is at a convenient point in the painting process.

On Tuesdays, Ying-He teaches two classes and another on alternate Sundays when she is not working on her own painting. Business activities other than painting literally involve an entire day each week; communication with clients and galleries/dealers, student inquiries and most recently submitting her work for portrait commissions. She emphasized how diligent she is about responding to both clients and agents. Although the galleries keep her quite busy, she augments her work schedule with commissions that she pursues directly while indicating she finds that it is necessary in this economy.

I asked Ying-He to elaborate a bit on maintaining five to six projects simultaneously. She indicated that they are frequently at different stages; planning the sitting, reviewing materials, and a “chunk of painting time”. The earlier stages can be accomplished on the one day per week not spent painting, which can also include stretching canvases, ordering supplies, organizing sittings and travel arrangements. Saturdays are spent running errands, doing paperwork and other household activities. Evenings allow the time for perusing art books and magazines, as well as reassessing daytime work and any photography, which can include downloading photographs.

2:30 p.m. – We take some time for a brief tour of nearby SUNY Stony Brook, where Ying-He was once a student.

She has just completed a portrait of President Shirley Strum Kenny and



Dr. Ilona Ellinger, Prof. of Art, SUNY at Stony Brook, New York, oil, 60 x 40" (151 x 102cm)

wanted to show me the transformation of the campus under the president’s leadership. Ying-He photographed President Kenny at the end of her tenure in May at her office overlooking the campus and newly established landscape that includes a fountain and cherry trees. Ying-He had previously photographed the trees in full bloom. When we return to the studio, I am anxious to see President Kenny’s portrait now that I have seen the actual setting. She generously shares with me her reference material and explains how the portrait is a composite of the photos she has taken. Ying-He tells me that the sitting had been postponed several times because of scheduling conflicts, which leads me to inquire how much time she spends on travel. She indicated that on the average, she does one major travel a month (one night or more away from home) and that spring and fall are the busiest times of the year for this purpose. She has had as many as three sittings some months and several months without sittings or unveilings.

We discuss the exhilaration of painting and how to handle the challenges that inevitably occur. Ying-He confided that when she feels bored, she will quit for the day. She must remain excited about the painting process and she feels more excited by painting than ever because she sees growth.

We discuss the current economy and how it has affected portrait painting and conclude that although there is hardship, it can also be a time for reflection and



Katie and Tyler Earle, oil, 50 x 39" (127 x 100cm)



Portrait demonstration in class at LAFA

contemplation. At the recent Portrait Society Conference, Ying-He and I particularly enjoyed sharing insights and exchanging ideas with other artists and dealers. We concur that the slower pace of commissions allows time to refresh our work by painting other subject matter or using a different medium.

Ying-He coincided my return on the ferry with her daughter’s arrival. Ming Min is a senior at Yale University and was coming home for the weekend. It was an added treat to meet Ming Min, who Ying-He has told me so much about. I was reminded that an artful life has to be well orchestrated to maximize creative time. Returning home on the ferry that evening, I felt fortunate to have spent a day in the company of such an extraordinary woman. Ying-He’s paintings have such power and yet maintain such delicacy. It is more than skill and craftsmanship; her soul and intelligence resonate through the images. □

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Wende Caporale is a highly successful artist whose portraits are always in great demand. Her biography and list of awards and accomplishments runs to many pages. As you’ll read in this ongoing series, Wende’s pro-active approach to work and life make her the ideal columnist for the subject every artist has to face on a daily basis.

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