

## The Akron Beacon Journal

### Thoughtful 'Awakenings'

## Danko and Hui Chu different, but they work together well in show

By Dorothy Shinn

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Susan Danko, Crystalline Acrylic on Canvas 46"x 52"

At first glance, you think that their work shouldn't go together, yet somehow it does.

Susan Danko paints imagined and remembered landscapes that have been combined with poured backgrounds, lace stencils, masked silhouettes and bent and folded metallic-looking forms reminiscent of the jagged three-dimensional shapes that computer drawing software is so good at creating.

Hui Chu Ying overprints Arabic, Chinese and Hebrew language forms with birds, kites, arabesques, mandalas and hand gestures that refer to Buddhist teachings and meditations that follow the eightfold path.

The two have been paired in Susan Danko & Hui Chu Ying: Awakenings at Harris-Stanton Gallery, 2301 W. Market St., Akron, through June 6.

The thing that brings their work together is their contemplative quality.

Each likes to populate her work with disparate images that seem to float above hugely complex backgrounds, be they the landscapes remembered from Danko's childhood home in Charlotte, N.C., or the woods outside her Parma studio; or perhaps the forms that advance and recede in Hui Chi's prints, defying the eye's attempt to pin them down.

It also doesn't hurt that they both seem to gravitate to similar palettes: hot pinks and acid greens, chrome yellows and watery blues and grays.

But there the similarities end.

Danko seems to strive in each painting to bring unrelated forms and elements into harmony, even going so far as to introduce stark white elements (lace, tangled string, outlined plant forms) into a decidedly aquatic-seeming environment.

Some of her most appealing works are the Scape installations, which consist of smaller paintings on 6-by-8-inch wood blocks. In these small spaces, she has compressed the entirety of her visual language, from the floating botanical and microbial shapes to the references to manmade materials tucked into the edges.

She says the "disparate qualities within the paintings cause the viewer to pause and question their discord, while simultaneously being engaged by their beauty."

Actually, Danko is playing on the biological imperative inherent in all humans to make sense out of chaos, to find paths, patterns and symmetry in visual tangles and to bring order into seeming disorder. All that is needed is a unifying factor, which she supplies in duality of patterning and a simple, basic structure.

In other words, she is creating language Ñ a visual language, to be sure, but language nonetheless.

Hui Chu, on the other hand, uses existing language as the structure that unifies her space, be it Arabic text from the Koran, Hebrew from the Torah, Chinese from Buddhist sutras or Spanish from the Christian Bible.

Over this she lays intricate patterns, such as a combination of birds, which symbolize messengers of relief and peace, and hand gestures, which symbolize the Buddha's mudras of giving, sharing and blessing.

Some of the prints contain small Chinese kites floating above the outline of mandalas, faint circular patterns, vining arabesques and Chinese cloud symbols.

She uses not only printmaking techniques to create these images, but often combines them with painting, drawing and collage.

All this she unifies with her own strong sense of color harmonies and structural balance.

A word on language: At least two of the four languages Hui Chu uses in her work have mathematical properties.

Each letter in the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value. These letters can be used as numerals, as the Romans used some of their letters (I, V, X, L, C, D, M) as numerals. Indeed, much of Jewish mysticism, as in the readings of the Kabbalah, is taken up with the numerical properties of Hebrew words.

Somewhat the opposite is the case with Arabic calligraphy. What appears to be complex mystical, even magical linear forms, often end up being rather Puritanical-sounding Koranic commandments.

For instance, in Robert Irwin's magnificent 2004 treatise *The Alhambra*, we are told that the graceful and intricate form we call arabesque is actually known in Arabic as *al-tawriq*, meaning vegetation, reflecting the palaces' relationship with their gardens.

Irwin notes, "In the Middle Ages, the palaces were inhabited by people who could read the squiggles.

"Wherever they walked or sat, they were instructed by inscriptions to fear God and cringe before the magnificence of their ruler. . . . Those who enjoyed the pleasures of the Alhambra were reminded that those pleasures must one day come to an end."

Moreover, that elusive and seemingly free-flowing script wasn't nearly as free as it appears to Western eyes. "Calligraphy was the only branch of medieval art where there were explicit rules and a canon of beauty," Irwin tells us.

And unlike much contemporary use of their pleasing forms, their meaning is quite explicit and not subject to interpretation.

Nevertheless, for those of us who can't speak or read anything but English, the decorative and soothing qualities of Arabic, Hebrew, Chinese and even Spanish handwriting, especially as employed in Hui Chu's prints, is not lightly to be dismissed.

For, as Irwin points out, a common saying throughout the Islamic world in the days when that world extended from Baghdad to Cordoba held that "handwriting is a spiritual geometry by means of a corporeal instrument."

Something to think on in these days of keyboard construction.

Dorothy Shinn writes about art and architecture for the Akron Beacon Journal.

Send information to her at the Akron Beacon Journal, P.O. Box 640, Akron, OH 44309-0640 or dtgshinn@neo.rr.com.