

Suemae Lin Willhite:

Fusing East and West

By **Jeanette Casillas** / CASA

A HARMONIOUS BLEND OF COLOR AND SYMBOLISM in 28 works cultivated in the mind's eye of Suemae Lin Willhite are on view at CASA Magazine through February 25th.

"Painting is a spiritual experience for me," explained Willhite. "When I paint, I become one with the brush."

Willhite's love of art was instilled in her as a child. She recalls watching as her grandfather practiced calligraphy and painted ocean crabs. "I was so drawn to it. I enjoyed it a lot, but I didn't think I wanted to be an artist," she shared.

She didn't give it much thought, until she was in high school. One of her teachers noticed her talent and encouraged her to develop her skills. However, Willhite's parents discouraged her from pursuing it as a career. Instead she chose a career in business. Willhite received a B.A. from Cal State San Bernardino and worked in sales and marketing for 20 years.

It wasn't until 2004 that she decided

to pursue her love of calligraphy and watercolor painting full-time. As she meditated and prayed, she heard an inner voice that told her, "I am going to redeem your heritage and reclaim your identity." After hearing that, Willhite took out her art supplies and started painting again.

"Within six months I had my first exhibit," she recalled.

While her work was on exhibit, an SBCC adult education teacher saw it and asked her to teach. Willhite didn't have any experience teaching, so she started out teaching brush painting and calligraphy to her children's friends and seniors. "Then one thing led to another and I started teaching adult education classes at SBCC," she shared.

Willhite has been teaching for about three years.

"I enjoy sharing the joy and passion that I have. When I teach, my students are enlightened," she shared. "There is a treasure hidden behind each Chinese word. You have to break down the word and explain the symbolism. It's not just about painting bamboo, but the meaning behind the symbol."

"My collages are my east meets west," she shared. She combines her training in calligraphy and brush painting from her childhood with her "western" training in watercolor and collage, evolving unique style combining Chinese impressionisms, abstract, and mixed media that transmits a quality of peace and tranquility.

"I incorporate symbols from my heritage, like the koi which represents



Suemae Lin Willhite

Photo by Pricilla@SantaBarbaraSeen.com



Resilient Bamboo, Chinese brush painting on Shuen by **Suemae Lin Willhite**

abundance. Although, I use watercolors and collage, my work still maintains the Asian style and feel."

Through this traditional art form and its rigorous training, Willhite has created a daily meditation discipline for herself. Before she paints, Willhite often takes a walk on the beach or in a park to meditate and visualize. "When I pick up my brush, I am in a meditative state of mind, where I am one with my brush and subject," she explained of her creative process. "I pour my whole essence into my work, and this produces artwork with spirit and vitality."

Willhite tries to paint and practice her calligraphy at least three times a week in her home studio. "I do it to keep the rhythm going," she shared. "I let the Chi flow... you need to have a positive outlook in life."

Aside from her grandfather's training, Willhite is mostly self taught. She credits Dr. Ning Yeh, Ph.D., a master in Chinese painting in L.A., for taking her painting to the next level. "It is important to stay fresh and excited about what I do," she shared. "It's not about selling my work, it's about keeping the passion and joy alive.. It's a spiritual high for me."

CASA Magazine is located at 23 E. Canon Perdido. Hours are 9am to 5:30pm, Monday through Friday. For more information, call 965-6448 or visit www.suemaeart.com.



Koi Joy, watercolor and collage by **Suemae Lin Willhite**