

SUCHAN YU (JOHN)

A Life's Reflection with Chris Cummins



Suchan Yu (John) has always been his own master. Like many artists, he ekes out a living through his creativity hoping one day his paintings will be accepted and prized amongst private and public collections. He has never cared for fame though.

In his younger days, John was a philanthropist. No sooner had he finished a painting, he would give it away to a friend, or someone he'd just met who had inspired him.

For the past 34 years, he has crisscrossed the globe solo in search of himself, new people and a full life and ended up in Phuket, Thailand.

Back in the 60's, a Chicago congressman contacted John's sister in the US and asked her if John would paint a portrait of John F Kennedy to be displayed in Washington, DC. The wife of an Australian military general also sat patiently as she was captured on canvas during his time in Australia.

John was born in Osaka, Japan 72 years ago to Korean parents. In 1944, just after he turned 13, Osaka came under heavy night bombing from US forces and life, as he knew it, went up in smoke.

"I can remember hearing bombs falling and seeing fire everywhere. People were just jumping into the river" he said.

The following day, the family left Osaka for the mountainous region of Kobe, Japan but the war endured and it too was to prove unsafe.

"My father decided to take us to (South) Korea to start a new life" he said.

John's high school years were nothing of note and he never liked having to study English.

"I would say to myself - why do I have to study English" he smiled. "So I stopped going and started drawing".

He painted his first portrait at 25 and sold his first painting at 30. That same year, he opened his first art gallery and began exhibiting his work at places such as the Officers' Club just outside Seoul.

"A commander from the hospital at the US military base, asked me to go to Chicago, Illinois to study art but I couldn't pass the English language test. That was the only reason I never went to America" he said.

In 1968, he left Korea for Saigon, Vietnam. As his money started to dwindle and the war continued, John was eager to find work.

"I started doing artwork for the American exchange" he said. "My parents were old and they could not do anything for the family. I had to survive by myself so the best way to get money was the portrait. Portraits were always good money" he said.

"Customers would order many kinds of paintings....abstracts, landscapes, animals. I sold many paintings when I was in Vietnam".

Between 1972 and 1973 John lived in Bangkok, Thailand and continued painting. By the end of 1973 he still hadn't settled and was looking at other possibilities.

"My memory of Bangkok in 1972 was a mass of construction and many people looking to start a new life" John said.

On a visit to the American

Exchange Headquarters in Bangkok, he had a chance meeting with the Commander and they became friends.

"He came to see my paintings and liked them very much. I told him I was tired and I wanted to go to Europe" he said.

The Commander put him in touch with the European Exchange Commander and he left Thailand the following year.

In 1975, John arrived in Spain and stayed for 10 years. The bullfights, Spanish dancers and the lure of a hedonistic lifestyle reached for him with both arms and engulfed him. He would lose himself completely, find himself again and go on to enjoy the happiest days of his life.

"I remember people saying to me "bullfighting is an art" but I have always found it a very strange art" he said.

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