

The Arts

Diana Liu Benet's passion for art runs in the family

By **DIANE SMITH**
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When 93-year-old James Yeh-Jau "Jimmy" Liu died in 2003 following an auto accident, his daughter, Diana Liu Benet, had to clean out his art studio, the Han Syi Studio on Tiburon's Main Street.

Liu, a renowned Chinese watercolorist who served a stint as Tiburon artist laureate and for years taught Chinese watercolor at San Francisco State University, had opened the studio 35 years earlier.

Along with myriad paintings and papers, Liu Benet found a bundle of 80 letters tied together that her father had written to her mother. The letters were written after World War II while Liu, an army colonel, was traveling around the world, sent by Chiang Kai-shek, to seek the best way to rebuild China.

"He wrote nearly every day, telling her what he had done," Liu Benet says. "For instance, he wrote about riding a camel in Egypt and of his dilemma as to which segregated restroom to use in the South, because he figured he was neither black nor white."

These letters serve as the basis of Liu Benet's art exhibit, "Remembrance," which runs July 6-27 in the Belvedere-Tiburon Library's Founders Room. There will be an artist's reception from 6 to 8 p.m. July 6. Liu Benet will give a public talk about her background and discuss the meaning of her



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Diana Liu Benet finishes up 'Friends Playing Chess in the Park,' one of several of her oil paintings that will be on display July 6-27 at the Belvedere-Tiburon Library.

art in the library's Founders Room at 2 p.m. July 9.

Prices for Liu Benet's pieces start at \$150, and greeting cards will be for sale at the reception, with a price of \$12 for four cards.

Other works in the show will be Liu Benet's still-life works and her depictions of scenes of the Bay Area and China. These Chinese scenes include paintings of a group of men playing chess in the park and of

farmers working in the rice paddies.

"When I was growing up, I was always told to never waste even one grain of rice because it is so hard to grow and harvest," she says.

Born in central China, Liu Benet moved to Taiwan with her family in 1949 when the Communists took over the mainland. Her father moved to California to teach at San Francisco State in 1962, and Liu Benet,

if you go

Diana Liu Benet's "Remembrance" runs July 6-27 in the Founders Room of the Belvedere-Tiburon Library at 1501 Tiburon Blvd.

Artist's reception: 6-8 p.m. July 6.

Cost: Exhibit and reception are free; pieces start at \$150.

Hours: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday-Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Sunday.

Artist's website: dlb-fineart.com.

More info: beltiblibrary.org or 415-789-2665.

her mother, and her two older sisters and brother eventually joined him.

Liu Benet's artistic family stretches beyond her father. Her grandfather was a famous Chinese calligrapher and her mother was also an artist. Liu Benet enrolled at the ArtCenter College of Design in Los Angeles and majored in illustration and design. There she met photography student Ben Benet. The two were married in 1973, with the stipulation set by her father that she finish college, which she did — with honors — the following year.

After graduation, the couple moved to the Bay Area and eventually bought a home in Greenbrae, where they brought up their two sons, Michael and David, and where Liu Benet still lives. Ben died two years ago.

"I lost my best friend, my soul mate and

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my teacher," she says.

Liu Benet has had a long career as an illustrator and as a product designer for gifts, toys and home décor.

Some of her jobs included creating dolls for Galoob toys, Sky Dancer dolls and clothing and accessories for Spice Girls dolls. Later on, while working for SPI Home, she made trips to factories in China to check on product progress.

Now semi-retired from commercial work, Liu Benet paints nearly every day and says she loves being able to indulge herself.

"I mainly paint in oil, either on canvas, linen, panel or

marble dust gesso panel," she says. "Ever since I was a child, I have been fascinated by light and shadow. The interplay of shadow is light's compliment."

Always interested in learning something new, she has taken art classes from painter Chester Arnold at the College of Marin, where she learned to do egg tempera painting on true gesso panels.

"I think he is the only art teacher qualified to teach materials and techniques in the Bay Area," she says. "I find him inspiring, the techniques intriguing and the results unique."

Liu Benet has been in a number of juried shows at the Marin Museum of Contemporary Art, Mill Valley's O'Hanlon Center for the Arts, the Falkirk Cultural Center in San Rafael and the Marin County Fair, among others. For

the past six years, she has helped set up the Marin County Fair art shows.

"I love to see all the different art that we hang," she says. "Marin County has so many talented artists."

She also is the representative of disabled abstract artist Mia Brown, who paints with a head-wand positioned on a special helmet because she can only move her head.

"I feel inspired by Mia's spirit and appreciate how lucky I am," Liu Benet says. "It makes me feel good to be able to help her."

Diane Smith has been contributing to The Ark since 1980, writing and taking photos on everything from personalities to events.