

REVIEWS

VISUAL ART

Bridging cultures

TWO WORLDS, ONE LANGUAGE THROUGH ARTIndianapolis Art Center
Through Aug. 23

Much has been made of Chinese-American relations in recent months, from trade imbalances and toxic toys to the Olympic Games and the repressive political situation in Tibet. Cultural exchanges, though, are alive and well, with sister city relationships often glossing over, or ignoring altogether, these tensions. That said, the recent exchange between the Shandong College of Arts in Shandong Province and the Indianapolis Art Center represents the best of what such cultural exchanges can offer: a humanity to individuals, those who are outside of the political and economic power structure, and those who would, one could argue, like to see the negative tensions disappear.

And yet it is not possible, nor is it advisable, to ignore the larger context. That said, *Two Worlds, One Language Through Art* is the kind of moment that can suggest hope for such ills. Art may or may not save, but certainly it can enlighten, and the exhibitions on view now at the Indianapolis Art Center, including work by the master artists of the Shandong school and related exhibitions by



'Morning Scenery' by Song Qiming is part of 'Two Worlds, One Language Through Art' at the Indianapolis Art Center.

Indiana artists, are lovely reminders that art-making transcends differences, and in many cases, bridges them.

The exhibition of 60 prints and paintings by faculty from the Shandong College of Arts — *Art, Harmony and Nature: From the Land of Confucius* — is, on the whole, flawless. Traditional Chinese landscape and

calligraphy merge with European academic style, from languid landscapes to reclining nudes, from impressionism to realism — and the many derivations and offshoots of each. Smiling peasants, sleepy villages, flowering branches: These are the fodder for contemplation — brilliantly made into art.

There are many striking moments: Ren Yesheng's abstracted landscape "Spring" is a white expanse punctuated with a high horizon line bordering a blue sky, the landscape brought to life by bold lines of color. Wang Like's "Reflection: Sunflower" is a photo-realistic rendering of three dried sunflowers pinned to a wall — a metaphor, perhaps.

There is no political art here, at least not in the overt sense. And notions of contemporary art seem largely absent, too, save the contemporary spin on traditional themes: a smiling figure in modern dress, for example, or the image of a cell phone tower barely discernible on an inky mountainside.

This entire effort came into being as the result of another kind of exchange. Becky Hall Fehsenfeld, artist and longtime benefactor of the Indianapolis Art Center, traveled to China with her husband on business, and through a chance meeting with a Chinese woman visiting Indiana, the cultural exchange with the art school was born.

Fehsenfeld's own work, inspired by her visits to China, comprises an exhibition as well — *Outside Looking In: Paintings by Becky Fehsenfeld*. The work is equally accomplished and similarly traditional in its bearing. Fehsenfeld's paintings of villagers and city

dwellers are highly polished and yet dreamy, infused with a dusky light that suggests a perpetual dawn or sunset.

The Art Center maximized the exchange by filling all its galleries and hallways with art that speaks to the Asian theme: from the highly polished calligraphy of the late Dick Beasley and the *Calligraphy Guild of Indiana Members Exhibition to Visions of China: Photographs of Todd Lundeen*. Lundeen's color photographs are as tranquil and optimistic as Fehsenfeld's paintings, and offer the only suggestion of the growing disparity between rich and poor that is, in part, feeding political tensions. Finally, outside the gift shop, Lou Hii's *Papercuts* speaks to another aesthetic tradition: the rural folk art of paper-cutting. Flowers, birds and animals are seen in relief, shaped by precise silhouettes.

On the whole, this is an effort that is second to none when it comes to exhibitions in the city during the past year. The Art Center has wasted no opportunity to make it meaningful.

Two Worlds is up through Aug. 23. Visit the Art Center's Web site, www.indplsart-center.org, or call 317-255-2464 for a complete list of exhibitions and related events, including lectures and demonstrations by visiting artists. The Indianapolis Art Center is located at 820 E. 67th St.; all exhibitions are free and open to the public.