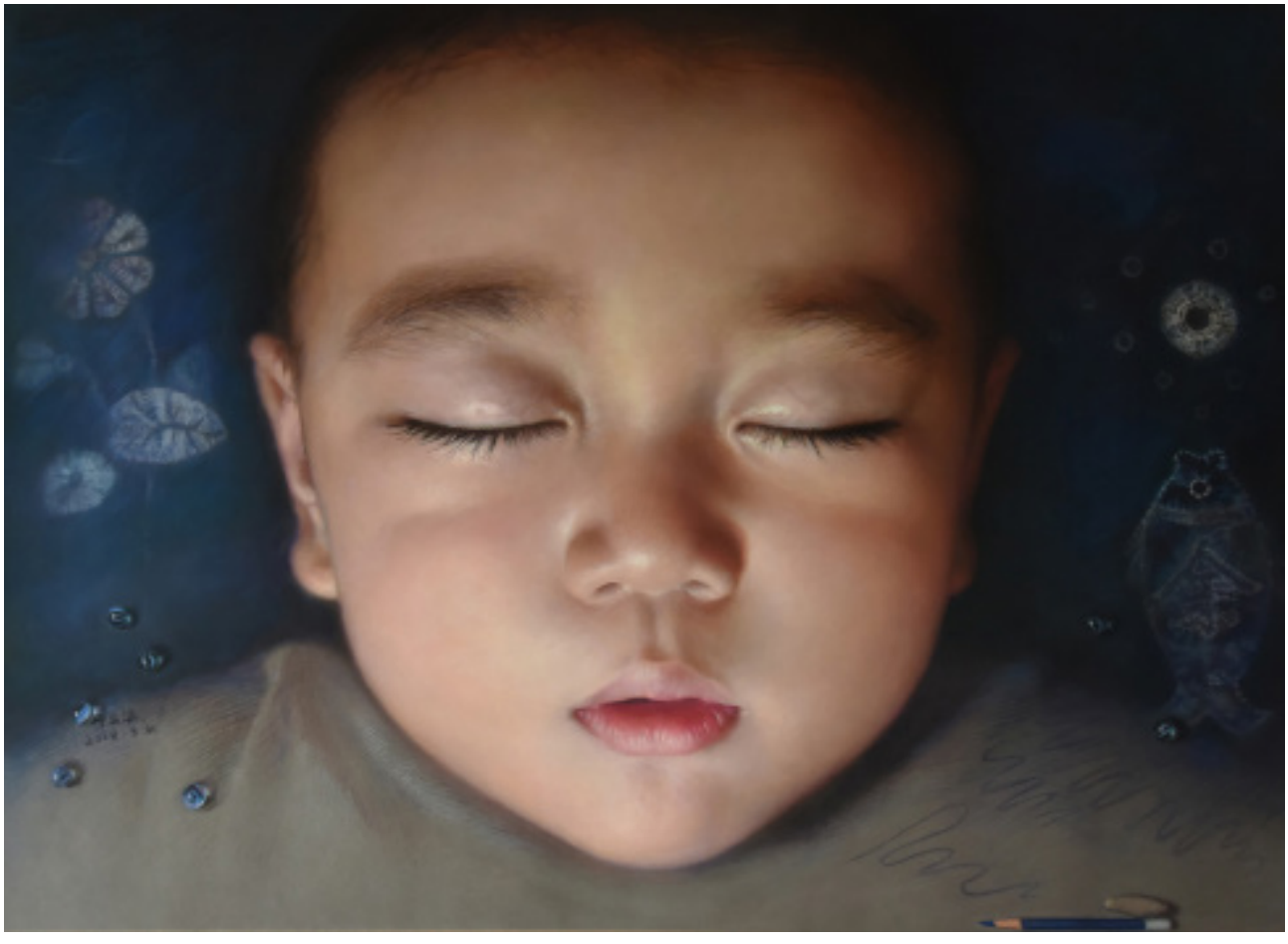
PASTEL GOLD AWARD

A Tranquil Repose

BLENDING MASTERFUL REALISM WITH TENDER EMOTION, **LIHUA YU**'S PRIZEWINNING PORTRAIT IS A POETIC MEDITATION OF LOVE. By Doreen Manning



IN HER PASTEL GOLD AWARD-winning portrait *A Quiet Afternoon* (above), Lihua Yu captures a moment so tender it seems as if time itself is paused. The work features her young son in blissful sleep, his eyelids faintly illuminated so that the tiny veins beneath the skin glow through. The hyperrealism of the portrait is countered by the presence of tiny glass toy beads scattered around the child's shoulder. Although painted realistically, these beads, Yu explains, are the kind she played with as a child. Here, they mingle with a blue batik fabric to form what she calls "the dreamscape of my imagination."

When venturing into surrealism as a form of expression, Yu says, "I believe striking the right balance is crucial. I pondered this question as I painted, striving to master the relationship between illusion and reality."

That balance between precision and feeling, reality, and dream is what gives *A Quiet Afternoon* its quiet electricity. Pastel, a medium known for its immediacy and fragility, demands control and patience in equal measure. Yu spent nearly six

months creating the piece, layering pigment particle by particle until every eyelash and glimmer of light found its place.

"This portrait immediately captures the viewer with its quiet stillness and intimacy," says Portrait & Figure Juror Michele Ashby. "The artist has chosen a deeply tender subject and rendered it with love, devotion and remarkable sensitivity to form and light. The skin tones are luminous yet natural, with subtle gradations that speak to a sophisticated handling of pastel. The closed eyes, relaxed Cupid's bow lips, and serene expression evoke a universal understanding of innocence and peace that transcends portraiture into the realms of poetry."

MOTHERHOOD & IMAGINATION

The inspiration for the painting, Yu says, came from the tender ritual of naptime. "It's such a peaceful and beautiful moment for a child," she recalls. "As a mother, I could gaze at my little one and find him utterly precious, so I captured the moment with my camera. When I revisited the photo later, my imagination took flight, wondering what kind of dream he was in. That sparked the inspiration for this painting."

That imaginative leap—between observation and invention—runs through much of Yu's practice. She describes her photorealistic approach not as a stylistic choice but as an emotional one. "I believe this approach most directly and authentically conveys my feelings at that moment, capturing what drew me in," she says.

Ashby concurs, noting, "The delicate interplay between realism and atmosphere is what makes the work memorable. The exceptional portrait demonstrates superb technical command and emotional weight, standing as a testament to the power of pastel to convey both tenderness and love between the artist and their muse."

PROCESS & PATIENCE

Yu's process begins with conceptualization and sketches. Once the composition is settled, she drafts and refines the structure before adding color. "I typically begin coloring and detailing the areas I wish to emphasize most," she explains, "though sometimes I work from the top left to the bottom right. Extensive adjustments occur throughout the process."

For *A Quiet Afternoon*, she allowed variation at the edges and corners, freeing her hand to create livelier textures while preserving the central calm. Because pastel particles rest on the paper's surface, her every gesture had to be deliberate. "Moreover," she says, "because the composition feels quite tranquil, I sought to add some lively brushstrokes."

A JOURNEY IN PASTEL

Working hyperrealistically in pastel demands not just an artist's eye, but also microscopic attention to nuance. Unlike oils, there's no binder to darken or shift color as it dries. Each mark sits on the surface, which leaves little room for error. The artist's



OPPOSITE **A Quiet Afternoon**
(pastel on paper, 30¾x42½)

ABOVE **Chess Game**
(pastel on paper, XXxXX)

control over edges, transitions and microtones must be absolute.

A hyperrealist pastelist balances several paradoxes: blunt tools, shallow layering capacity and optical color mixing. Touch is critical: Press too lightly, and the color won't grip; press too hard, and detail disappears.

Yu, who lives in Changzhou, in China's Jiangsu Province, began working in pastel in 2016. Although she has mastered the demanding medium, she remains humble about her journey. This may be because pastel painting has historically remained on the margins of the Chinese fine-art world, where ink-wash, oil and installation dominate. Yet recent signals suggest the medium is quietly gaining ground. China's pastel-supply market—including soft and oil pastels—is estimated at nearly $300 million and is projected to grow more than 6 percent annually, reflecting rising material availability and interest among artists and hobbyists. The existence of organizations such as the Shanghai Pastel Painting Society, founded in 1985, also hints at growing institutional recognition. For artists like Yu, who balance teaching and creative practice, that momentum is quite promising.

TEACHING, LIVING, CREATING

At age 48, Yu balances her studio time with teaching sketching and painting courses at an art-training institution. Her students are mostly children, and she admits that the classroom offers both joy and stability. "I quite enjoy spending time with them," she says, "and it provides me with a relatively stable income."

In many ways, Yu's dual life as educator and artist mirrors her own painting practice: structure and spontaneity coexisting, logic and wonder intertwined. The tenderness she extends to her

"By creating portraits, I feel that I've incorporated a lot of my own understanding and imagination, which has made me feel closer to myself and the people I love." —LIHUA YU



Flying for the First Time (pastel on paper, XXxXX)



Under the Roses (pastel on paper, XXxXX)



Balanced World (pastel on paper, XXxXX)

subjects—whether it's her sleeping son or art students in the classroom—is what animates her art.

EMOTION OVER TECHNIQUE

Ultimately, the artist believes that emotion, not technique, is the invisible thread that binds her work. "I try to get to know the people I love, but I find it difficult to fully understand them, just as I'm not so clear about myself,"she notes. "By creating portraits, I feel that I've incorporated a lot of my own understanding and imagination, which has made me feel closer to myself and the people I love. The characters in the picture are 'combined' with me and arranged in specific scenes, and they belong to me to some extent."

Ultimately, it's the emotion Yu puts into each stroke of pastel that brings her paintings, particularly *A Quiet Afternoon*, to life. As she explains, "I hope viewers can sense the thoughts and emotions I felt while creating it."

Massachusetts-based writer **Doreen Manning** is a regular contributor to the Artists Network brand of magazines and other arts publications.

HEADSHOT TK

Lihua Yu, of Changzhou, in China's Jiangsu Province, is an award-winning portrait and figure pastelist who has been working in the medium since 2016. She's also an art instructor who works primarily with children.