

HAI-OU HOU

# Pushing the Envelope

"My paintings are often very different from other plein air artists' work," says Maryland artist Hai-Ou Hou with a laugh. "That's because I have to be myself and paint what I think really matters."

By M. Stephen Doherty



A comment one often hears from people reviewing paintings created during a plein air festival is that much of the work looks like it could have been created by the same artist. Whatever the reasons, it must be admitted that there is a certain amount of commonality to paintings displayed during a plein air event.

Yet there are exceptions; one immediately thinks of painters like Charlie Hunter and John Brandon Sills. But those artists would acknowledge that there is a risk associated with being different from most other participating artists, and they know that a person who strives to be unique may go home without having won an award or sold a painting.

Another such risk-taker is Hai-Ou Hou. Her oil paintings are complex both in layers of paint and in terms of the layers of subject matter and conceptual ideas. They result from her looking inward on herself rather than outward on nature. In recent years, Hou has been creating plein air paintings that incorporate her reflection in the windows of public buildings and retail storefronts. The combination of reflections and clear views, interior lights and outdoor sunlight, real people and mannequins sets up rich dichotomies that reflect her own experiences and inner life.

An example of the method Hou uses to paint her inner self *en plein air* is demonstrated with her piece *Time*

## Night Window Shopping

2014, oil, 10 x 8 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

## ARTIST DATA

**NAME:** Hai-Ou Hou

**BIRTH YEAR:** 1967

**LOCATION:** Maryland

**INFLUENCES:** "Contemporary, classical!"

**WEBSITE:** [www.haiouhoufineart.com](http://www.haiouhoufineart.com)

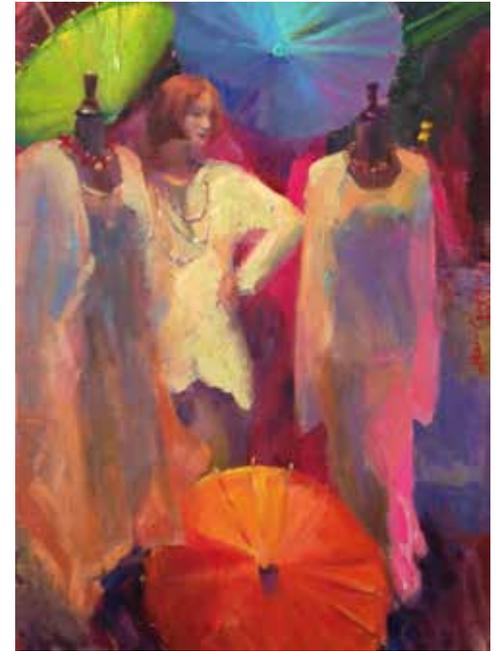


**Morning Reflection (Quick Draw)**

2016, oil, 24 x 24 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air



**Fashion Window Reflection**

2017, oil, 16 x 16 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

to *Reflect: In or Out?*, painted during Plein Air Easton. The artist's reflection shows her in the act of painting, but instead of holding a brush, she grips a pamphlet from the art school she owns and runs.

"My persona as an artist, as symbolized by a brush, has been replaced by my responsibilities as the owner and director of a school, as symbolized by the pamphlet," Hou explains. "I feel a lot of tension and struggle between my identity as an artist and my role as an administrator."

Another layer of this struggle is revealed through the symbol of the identity tag she wears around her neck; it seeps out from the world in the mirror to the world being mirrored. "I try to suggest that my identity is not fixed in one or the other, but is struggling to exist in both the art world and the business world." The title itself, *Time to Reflect: In or Out?*, implies that a choice must be made to resolve the tension.

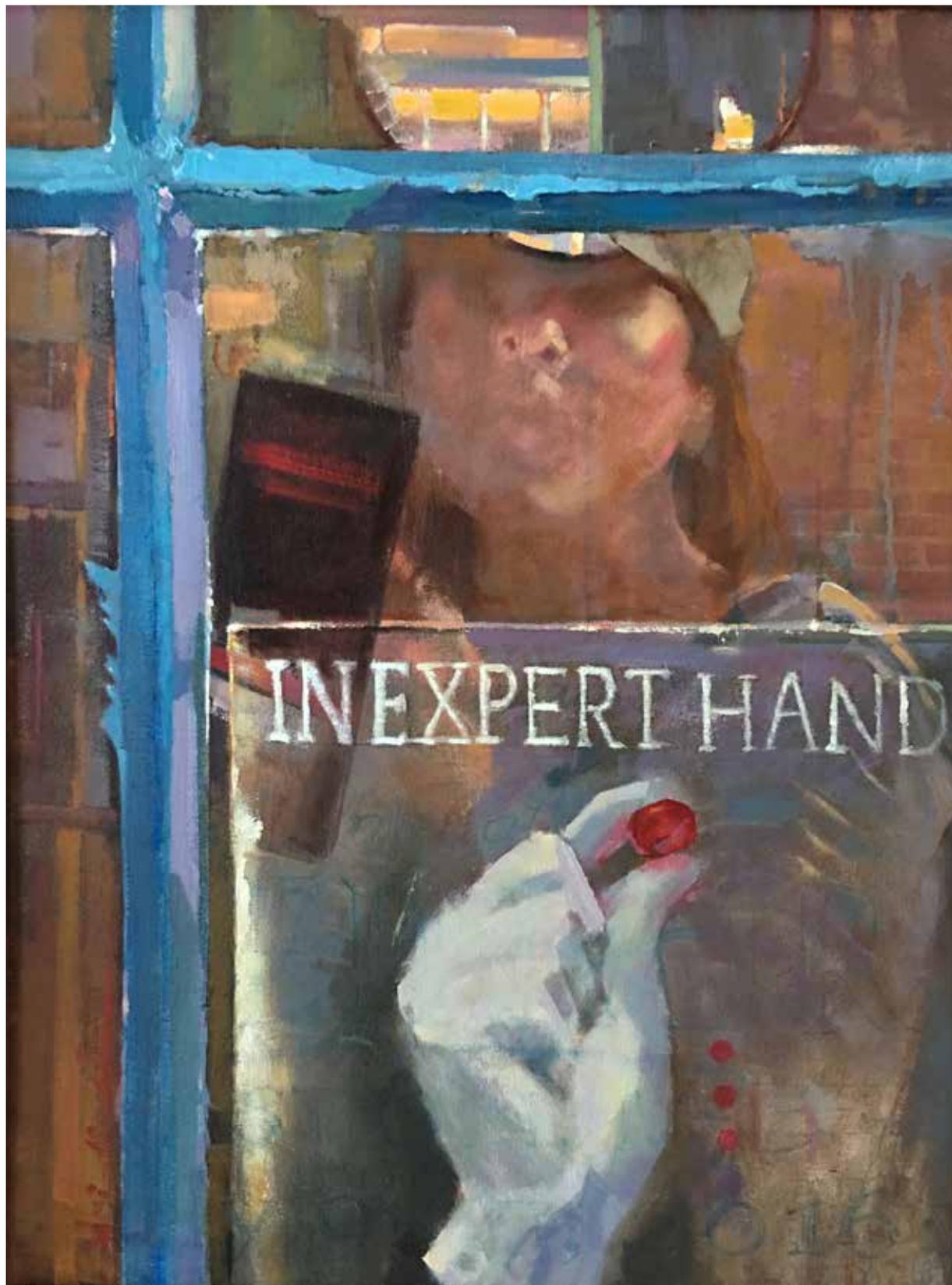
**Self-Reflection: Evening at Maritime Museum**

2017, oil, 24 x 24 in.

Private collection

Plein air





**Reflection**  
2017, oil, 16 x 12 in.  
Collection the artist  
*Plein air*



**Cuba Study**  
 2016, oil, 12 x 12 in.  
 Private collection  
 Plein air



**Che's American Dream**  
 2016, oil, 30 x 24 in.  
 Collection Jim Burrows and Patrick Mackesey  
 Studio



In another painting, *Reflection*, the artist is reflected in a jewelry storefront and is superimposed over a window advertisement that reads "In Expert Hands." Hou, however, excludes the final "s" from the field of vision of the painting and draws together the first two words so that it might read as "Inexpert Hand." The ambiguity itself is a symbol of doubt, and the idea of an inexpert hand in connection with the making of art is self-critical. "There is always doubt when experimenting," says Hou. "You can't be sure about what you are doing when you try new things, and I am always trying new things."

The paintings Hou creates are characterized by layers of color and texture, often applied over several sessions in the same location. "I don't create a large number of paintings during a festival because I develop relatively large pieces over several days," the artist explains. "I don't follow rules or standard practices, and I become so immersed in the painting process that the image keeps changing and evolving almost on its own."

**Marsh**  
 2016, oil, 12 x 12 in.  
 Private collection  
 Plein air



“I think of creating art as a way for an artist to entertain himself or herself by playing different games. Each new subject, set of materials, or process is a game of challenges and rewards, and for me there are no rules to those games. I find my way by making decisions with each step along the way. Ultimately, I may change the game entirely every five or six years and pursue a new way of painting.”

The Chesapeake Fine Art Studio in Stevensville, Maryland, the school Hou established, has 3,200 square feet of open working space in which Hou and other nationally known artists host classes, workshops, personalized instruction, and open life drawing sessions. Special events and exhibits are programmed to bring together artists

and art lovers and foster growth of the arts community.

“People say I am crazy for running a full program of classes and workshops, but I just had to provide a place where I could share my enthusiasm and knowledge, and where top professional artists and students could work together,” Hou says. She also travels to teach workshops and will be offering classes in Florida this coming winter that promise students an opportunity to enjoy “quick, loose, bold, colorful, and fresh” plein air painting. 

**M. STEPHEN DOHERTY** is editor-in-chief of PleinAir.

**Quick Draw Impression of Lily**

2013, oil, 12 x 16 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air