



WHEN EAST MEETS WEST

Eyebrows were raised when a part-time painter born in China, educated in America and residing in Hong Kong was chosen to paint for a new villa at the Diaoyutai State Guest House in Beijing with his semi-abstract works. But as **Desiree Au** explains, he was an inspired choice.....

FOR CENTURIES, Diaoyutai (which means Fishing Terrace in Chinese), a two-kilometer-square oasis of lush greenery and lotus ponds about 10 kilometers west of Tian An Men Square in Beijing, has served as a royal resort for China's emperors and their guests. Even after its conversion in 1959 into the Diaoyutai State Guest House, the official residence for visiting foreign dignitaries and retreat for Chinese leaders, its rustic and tranquil charm has remained unchanged in a city that seems to be developing at a break-neck speed.

The guarded and enclosed compound, accessible via a private road, houses more than 20 villas amid meticulously maintained gardens. But it is the recently completed Fangfei Yuan, a 20,000 square meter meeting facility that stands out from the rest. Instead of employing traditional classical designs, the new Fangfei Yuan, designed by French American architects, is avant-garde ---- its glass roof allows ample sunlight to filter through the minimally but elegantly decorated meeting rooms with wood and granite walls.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that when Chinese leaders were selecting paintings for the two most important rooms in this building, they chose something away from the classical tradition. Two enormous semi-abstract works --- *A Galaxy on Earth*, composed of four panels each measuring 8 meters high by 2.2 meters wide for the Four Season Room, and *This Land is our Land*, a curved painting nearly 10 meters long and 2.5 meters high for the round VIP Conference Room -- became the focal points of world leaders when the building held its inaugural meeting, the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) Finance and Development Programme Annual Forum this May.

For a start, there have never been abstract works at Diaoyutai. And it wasn't long before people found out they were created by a part-time painter from Hong Kong. To add yet another twist, Dominic Lam Man-

Kit, the research doctor and art lover bestowed with this daunting task, is a naturalized American, another first for Diaoyutai.

It's hard to explain why the powers in Beijing took a chance on Lam against an overwhelming population of great painters in China. But they are obviously pleased, for Lam has become Diaoyutai's major guest artist, recently invited back to create several smaller works that will adorn other villas, which house important meeting rooms frequented by President Jiang Zemin, Premier Zhu Rongji, Vice Premier Qian Qichen and others.

"I was quite surprised when Ambassador Feng Shusen, the Director General of Diaoyutai invited me to create these paintings. Why me when there are so many professors from the various art academies in China who are more obvious choices?" Lam asks. "I remember thinking to myself, 'I'd better not screw up'."

It took close to a year for Lam to complete his works. He began by making several visits to Diaoyutai to study the ambience of the building under construction and to discuss his ideas with Feng and the French-American architects and designers. By September 2001, after his designs were finalized, the artist began painting each panel of *A Galaxy on Earth* on a single sheet of rice paper, turning one of the indoor tennis courts into a temporary art studio. "They had never seen a painting so big," Lam laughs. "I had to paint by standing on a hydraulic lift, sometimes reaching a height of 28 feet!" A number of Chinese leaders, including Vice-Premier Li Lanqing, met with Lam when he was painting.

Lam's works are now one of the most striking aspects of Fangfei Yuan. *Galaxy*, its black strokes on a white background mimicking the rapid motions of a waterfall, utilizes the traditional Chinese brush and ink medium on rice paper to portray the spatial interactions between points, lines and surface, an contemporary theme.

In contrast, enamel, a thor-

oughly modern Western medium, was used to paint *Land*, a traditional Chinese theme of mountains and waters. These two paintings truly represent East meet West, itself also a prominent characteristic of Lam's life.

These masterpieces now hang proudly along with the timeless and priceless *objets d'art* such as vases from Emperor Qianlun's period 300 years ago and immortal scrolls by Qi Baishi. Lam may be only recognized by a tiny plaque next to his works, but for the Shantou-born, Hong Kong-raised scientist, making it to the Diaoyutai collection is enough to validate himself as an artist --- a passion often overshadowed by his considerable achievements in medicine and biotechnology.

When asked how much he was paid to produce these works, Lam said that he did them for free, maintaining that it is already a great honor to paint for the government. "But I do get to stay at Diaoyutai for free," he says.

We met inside Lam's luxurious suite in villa 16 of Diaoyutai, its large windows looking out on to a manicured garden with groomed trees. For one week, this is his artist's retreat, where he will complete several works for Diaoyutai's collection. For the rest of the time Lam is the founder of a biopharmaceutical company he started in the 1990s.

He left some calligraphy to dry while we sat and talked. "It's great here, so peaceful and serene, I can think and paint late into the night," Lam said. "Ambassador Feng never gives me a deadline. I come here whenever I can; there is no pressure to produce."

The Canadian-educated, Harvard-trained professor of ophthalmology and biotechnology has spent most of his life building his research career, nurturing a family, and becoming a biotech entrepreneur before he devoted his time to painting.

"I am not trying to be philosophical or whimsical, but I feel like I am already living my third life In a cosmic sense," Lam says. "I

spent my first life as a student, my second life as a father and building my career in science and business. Now I have moved on to my third life, as an artist and thinker."

Lam is one of very few people with the ability to excel both in the analytical world of science and in the subjective world of art. In the West, Lam has been called the "New Renaissance Man". "I think modern society puts too much emphasis on categorization and specialization, you are either this or that," he says. "For me it makes no difference. Leonardo da Vinci was a great artist, but he was also an outstanding scientist and innovator".

Lam has always tried to straddle both worlds, but it was only in later life that he was able to merge them naturally. At an early age, he was already dabbling in both science and art. "My family didn't know what to do with me, one minute I'd take apart toys, goldfish etc. to find out how they move, and the next minute I'd paint over the pictures hanging on the wall," he recalls with a chuckle. Although his family allowed him to study traditional Chinese paintings, it was science in which they wanted him to make a career of. So he did his B.Sc. in math, M.Sc. in theoretical physics and doctorate in medical biophysics in Canada, before proceeding to train in visual science at Harvard Medical School under Professors Torsten Wiesel and David Hubel, who received the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1981. By the late 1970s he was professor of ophthalmology at Baylor College of Medicine in Texas. He married and had two children, Yee Yee and Fong. It would be a handful for anyone, but Lam managed in his spare time to remain loyal to art --- painting in both traditional Chinese and modern Western styles. Lam's two worlds suddenly collided in 1980, while he was developing black and white photographs of the retina. He spotted intriguing colored markings on the paper, and was puzzled by the discovery because he knew that none of the black and white photo-

graphic materials that he used contained any color dyes or pigments. For the next several years he experimented with this medium, using only black and white photographic paper and solutions to create photographic paintings, and discovered that the colors he produced followed a similar principle as to why the sky is blue: namely because of light scattering. Dr. Bryant Rossiter, a former Kodak scientist named these *Chromoskedasic Paintings*. More recently, they have also been called *NanoArt*, because the silver particles on the photographic paper that produce different colors are between 10 to 70 nanometers in diameter (see "To Run" painting above).

Lam's works proved popular among collectors, many of whom were surprised to learn about his research career. But once he found a way for his scientific and artistic

pursuits to co-exist, Lam was on a roll. During the 1980s, Lam and Dr. David Paton, the founder of Project Orbis, took the flying eye hospital, which provides visually impaired people with free operations to restore their sight, to China. During these visits, Lam made a point to meet distinguished artists such as Guan Shanyue, Zhu Qizhan, Li Keran, Zhao Shaoang, Huang Zhuo, Yang Shanshen, Zhang Daqian and others.

"We built a rapport very quickly, do you know why?" Lam asks. "Because the eye is the most important organ for an artist, they all seek my advice. Then they were amazed to find out that I was also an artist: they didn't think a person could do both. So they were happy to do collaborative paintings with me."

In Lam's Hong Kong office hangs one such collaborative work, created in 1982-83 with three of China's most outstanding artists, Zhang in Taiwan, Guan in China and Zhao in Hong Kong. "I first painted an orchid on a piece of rice paper," Lam says. Then I brought my painting to show to Zhao in Hong Kong and he added bamboo. Next Lam went to Taipei to see

Zhang, who painted on it a longevity and the herb ganoderme. Finally, Guan completed the painting with a plum tree. Zhang Daqian died a month later. Lam says the painting symbolizes the unity of Chinese people worldwide.

In recent years, Lam has found solace and drawn inspiration from master sculptor Ju Ming in Taiwan, whom Chang Tsong Zung introduced in 1990. "I learned much more than technical skills from Ju," Lam says. "He taught me that the most important qualities in art, as in life, are truth, compassion and beauty."

Having obtained professional and artistic satisfaction, Lam has reached a happy medium in his life. "I just want to create, whether in art or science." When asked how he would like to be remembered ---- as an artist, scientist, businessman or philanthropist, Dr. Lam said, "I wish to be remembered as a trailblazer, a person who treasures creativity and vision, one who opens the paths, whether in art, science, business or philanthropy, that might lead others to find the treasures or satisfaction as I myself have received."

Photos: top to bottom

1. **To Run**
(Chromoskedasic painting)
2. **A Galaxy on Earth**
(Ink on rice paper, 8 x 8.8 meters, January 12, 2002)
3. **This Land is our Land**
(Enamel on Canvas, 2.5 x 9.5 meters, May 12, 2002) Lam and Professor Torsten Wiesel, September 12, 2002





This Land is our Land (2.5 x 9.5 meters) Collection of Diaoyutai State Guest House, Beijing

錦繡河山 (2.5米 x 9.5米) 北京釣魚台國賓館收藏



A Galaxy on Earth (8 x 8.8 meters) Collection of Diaoyutai State Guest House, Beijing

九天銀河 (8米 x 8.8米) 北京釣魚台國賓館收藏