

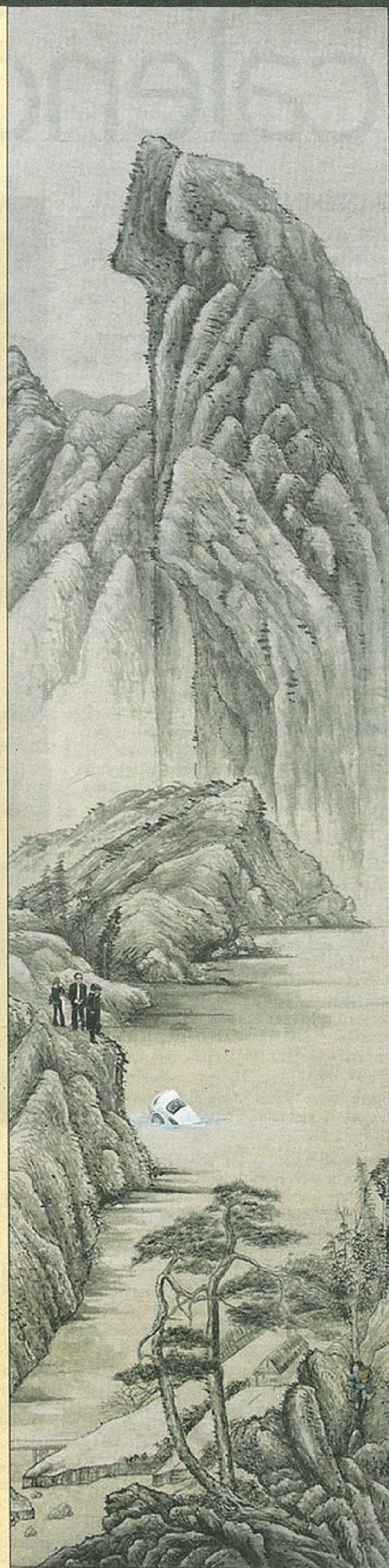
weekend



Pamela Joseph, "Dragon's Gorge", Oil and Acrylic on Linen, 2011

Giving and Receiving

Local artists meet their
Chinese counterparts in Boulder



Wang Nanfei, "Find a Beautiful Place: Kill"
Acrylic and Oil on Linen, 2008



Robert Brinker, "Finger Tangle," oil on linen.

Image courtesy of the artist

Making a cultural connection through art

Stewart Oksenhorn
The Aspen Times

In just nine years at the University of Colorado, Lisa Tamiris Becker has seen notable growth in the school's embrace of the outer world. The CU community has adjusted its vision to see beyond the Flatirons that surround the picture-postcard campus. "CU is really expanding in global scope. The growth in all of that from 2002" — when she took the position as director of the CU Art Museum — "is tremendous," Becker said.

In under a decade, Becker has seen the languages department add numerous options to go along with the traditional campus favorites (which is to say, French). For the current academic year, CU's Center for Humanities and the Arts chose China as its overriding theme. (By contrast, in 2002, when Becker came to Boulder, the theme was the more inner-focused Bodies, Voices, Performance.)

In perhaps the most significant example of CU including the broader world in its view — particularly signifi-

Giving and Receiving

Showing through July 22
CU Art Museum, in Boulder

cant from Becker's perspective, at least — in the mid-'00s, the student government voted to fund \$30 million toward a \$63.5 million visual arts complex as part of a larger renovation initiative. What struck Becker was that the funding came from the general student building fees — meaning that people studying chemistry and physical education would be contributing to the arts complex in the same way as aspiring painters and photographers.

"Nationally, that's very unique. It's very unusual to have a student government that wants to fund the arts like this," Becker said. "They felt the arts complex would serve the entire student body. It could enrich the educational

life of all majors. It wasn't like a law school, which is just for law students."

The result is a handsome, new collection of arts buildings, prominently located next to the University Memorial Center, or the UMC, the center of student life. Becker says that the arts complex is a suitable home, at last, for the major collection that the university has already amassed.

Becker has gladly joined in the expansion of the school's vision. The mission statement for the CU Art Museum makes reference to "a global ... context," and she points out that the museum collection features works from Greece and Rome, the Renaissance and the Baroque, Latin America and Asia. "We want students to receive an education of global scope," she said.

In that spirit, Becker programmed exhibitions with a broad-minded essence to inaugurate the museum. The museum opened last September with archiTECHtonica,



James Surls, sculpture

Image courtesy of the artist

ART FROM B5

which reached across disciplines to spotlight how art intersected with architecture and technology. "It was contemporary art in which the metaphor of architecture was significant," Becker said. The exhibition featured work by artists from Korea, Uruguay and Morocco; alongside it, in the video gallery, was a piece by the Argentinean-born Liliana Porter.

Following archiTECHtonica came a show of work by CU faculty, which took up all the museum's various galleries.

The current exhibition, *Giving and Receiving*, which opened earlier this month and runs through July 22, spotlights a handful of artists from the Roaring Fork Valley. But it hardly represents a retrenching of the international outreach, and a focus on the parochial. In addition to the roster of locals — James Surls, Robert Brinker, Pam Joseph, Jody Guralnick, Charmaine Locke, Tai Pomara and Linda Girvin — *Giving and Receiving* features work from eight Chinese artists (as well as one artist each from New York and Texas) and thus reflects the emphasis on international flavor.



Giving and Receiving doesn't immediately strike the viewer as "alternative" in any way. The show is in the CU Art Museum's main space (known none too poetically as the Changing Exhibition Gallery); the museum itself is spacious and welcoming. The artists are all established, not kids eager to make a dramatic impression. The art, taken as a whole, is mature — formally balanced, not generally aiming for personal or political statements.

But the road to *Giving and Receiving* began from alternative thinking. For one thing, it started with artists, rather than established curators or museum directors. The first seed for the show came when Surls, a Missouri Heights artist with an international reputation, and his friend Charles Dukes, a writer and photographer, were driving from Houston to Aspen several years ago. It was mid-winter, they

were transporting a tractor trailer, the going was slow, and the conversation turned to female artists, and what a woman needs to go through to have a career in visual arts. (This is a pervasive subject for Surls, who is married to Locke, and who has seven daughters. Dukes is likewise married to an artist, Wang Nanfei, who is represented in *Giving and Receiving*.)

The two decided to give a boost to female artists, and pledged to create a show that included their spouses — alternative thinking indeed.

"That's a strike against a show from a curator's perspective," Surls said. "If an artist puts himself in a show, that's bad. Put in their wives, that's really bad. Few places would express interest in that. It would have to be an alternative thing."

Instead of an alternative space, Surls settled on an alternate country. Dukes lived in Beijing, Nanfei was Chinese, and China apparently had no problem with a couple of artists putting together a show, and including their wives. Surls also decided to include his Colorado friends in the exhibition, continuing a concept that began with *Finding Balance*, a 2006 show Surls curated for the Houston Center for Contemporary Art. When *Corresponding and Responding*, featuring artists from the Roaring Fork Valley and China, opened in China, in 2007, it was not in an alternative space. The show was in the National Museum of China, Beijing, and the reception was unlike what the Americans were accustomed to.

"It was very formal, a ribbon-cutting ceremony, red carpet, lilies, speeches in Mandarin," recalled Guralnick. "Everybody rushed in to take photos. It was easily a thousand people."

The experience of going to China, exploring art supply stores in Beijing, and taking in the sensibilities of Chinese artists allowed the Americans to reflect on their own art-making. One consensus observa-

ART FROM B6

tion was that the Chinese artists were far more constrained in their work. They tended to stick to one medium; their color choices were muted.

"One of the artists there said she was amazed how many different things we explored," Girvin, who tends toward experimental forms of photography, said. "There, if you went into painting, you stayed in painting."

"We have this amazing mixed art education," said Guralnick, who works in multimedia paintings and ceramics. "We get to explore anything we want."

At a symposium in China, the Chinese critics made much of the fact that the Americans demonstrated such free thinking in their work. "The Chinese art critics were so hard on the Chinese. They said the American showed so much more freedom — which is so unfair," Guralnick said.

"The color of Beijing is so gray," added Girvin. "That's why there's not a lot of color in their work. That's not their world."

In addition to the environment, there were also institutional influences evident in the Chinese work. "They're so steeped in the academy," noted Surls. "That's where the work comes from, and you can't get rid of that."

The American artists were also struck by how focused their Chinese counterparts were over financial aspects of art. Girvin said that the mantra of one Chinese artist seemed to be: "Will it sell? How much does it cost?"

Guralnick said exhibiting in China allowed her to indulge her creative side fully. "To me, the opportunity to show in a museum made me pull out all the stops," she said. "That opportunity, to show in a museum, gives the work room to breathe."



The opportunity to exhibit the work in China came with a responsibility for the Americans — allowing the Chinese artists to show in the States. And given the Chinese characteristic of saving face — living up to the standards that have been set by own's contemporaries — the Americans knew they needed a suitable venue. "The Chinese showed in a major museum. We had to come up with the equivalent," Girvin said.

It wasn't going to be an easy task: the space had to have some prestige, but it also needed to have enough alternative grounding to allow artists to participate in creating the show, and to let family and friends of

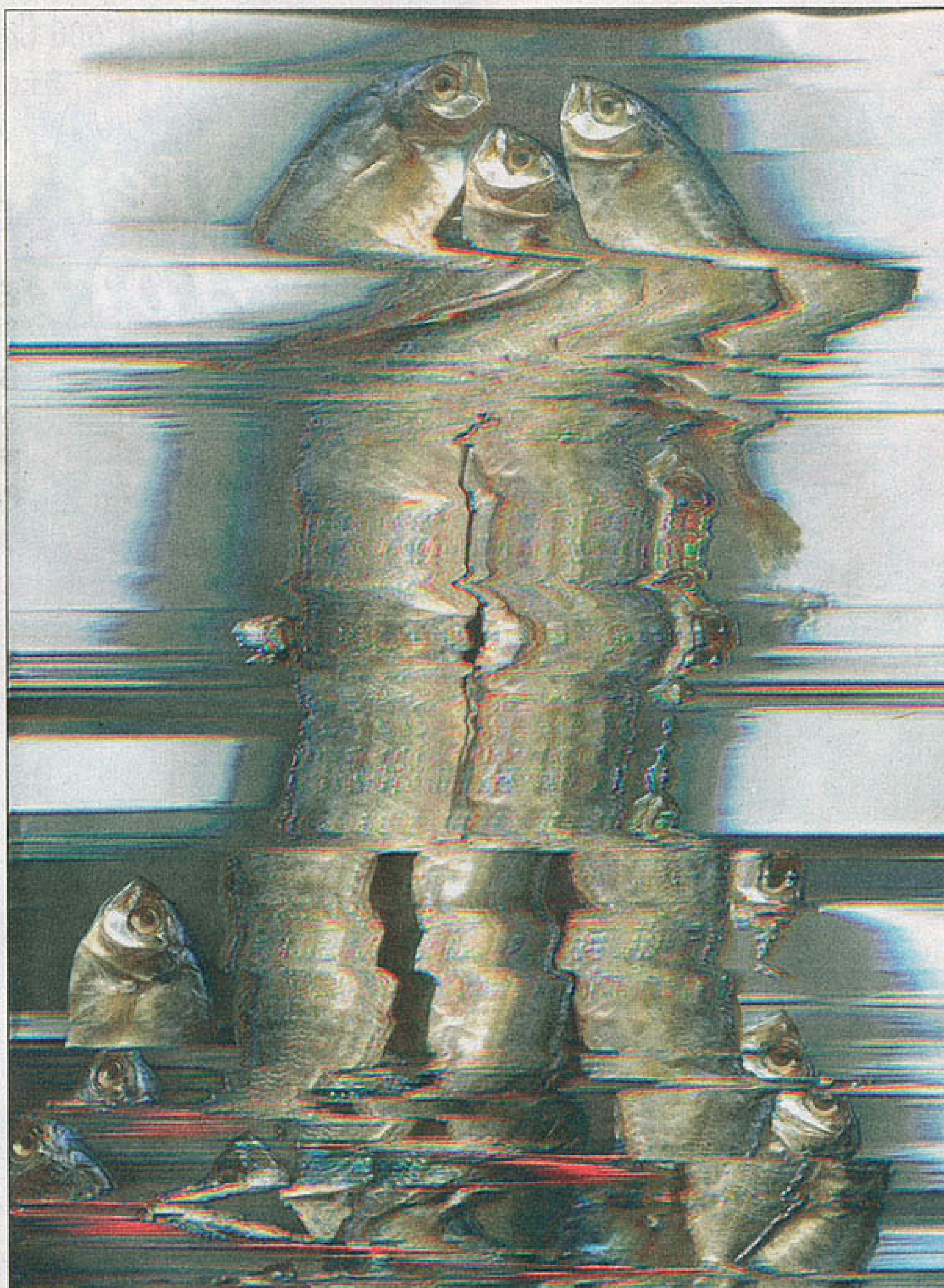


Image courtesy of the artist

Linda Girvin, "Dance Transmission 7, inkjet print

the organizers be represented. But Surls, a Texas native, isn't one to dismiss an idea simply because many others would.

"The way my personality is geared, there's no way we're not going to do it here," he said. "Whether a museum says no, that's a moot point. You just find somewhere else to go. I thought it would be a horse arena in Missouri Heights" — a joking reference to Surls' own oversized studio.

Surls spared everyone much embarrassment by finding the new CU Art Museum. (He never seriously considered the Aspen Art Museum, thinking it not alternative enough.) Becker was receptive to Giving and Receiving, which had both global and education aspects to it, making it a good fit for a college campus. And Becker herself had come from an alternative background: She studied math, along

with art history and studio art, as an undergrad at the University of Pennsylvania; her MFA, from the University of Texas, was in studio art and theory.

In the materials for Giving and Receiving — including a catalog that will be published later this year — Becker isn't listed as curator. But she played an active role in selecting the works to be exhibited. Visiting Joseph's studio, she saw a study with a dragon in it, and encouraged Joseph to finish that piece, thinking it formed a good bridge to the Chinese art.

While the American artists note how different their backgrounds are from the Chinese artists — the Chinese art is, on the whole, tightly tied to Chinese traditions they point out — Becker adds that the Americans often show Asian influences. Brinker's work is made from cut paper — a common Chinese technique; his piece in Giving and Receiving, "Finger Tangle," is an oil painting, but could easily be mistaken for paper. Guralnick's piece in the show, a collage titled "Worker Ants Have Lost Their Wings," includes a Chinese cartoon. Joseph's "Dragon Gorge," an oil and acrylic on linen, looks as it could have been contributed by one of the Chinese artists.

Becker notes that the American artists, mostly in their 50s, came of age when China was opening up to the world, and when Asian ways were being incorporated into American life, especially in the creative realm.

"They've been looking at us, and we've been looking back at them, and that's been going on for a long time," Becker said, noting how abstract expressionism, which borrowed from Chan Buddhism and Asian ink painting, now appears to influence the Chinese artists in Giving and Receiving. "It's one culture looking at another. And if you really look hard enough, it's hard to separate the two. To think of these as completely distinct — I don't think that's accurate. It shows how intertwined our visual culture is."

Becker's mission is likewise multifaceted. As part of a Colorado institution, she aims to feature art that speaks of this region. But she also has that instinct to think globally. Giving and Receiving manages both.

"This is a great way to feature Colorado artists, but in a way that connects them to the world," she said. "It's Colorado artists in dialogue with Chinese artists."

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