

TRIP OF A Lifetime

Traveling to China to paint *en plein air*, Andy Evansen returned not only with broadened horizons, but with a widened circle of friends.

By Christine Proskow

The lure of visiting and painting in the Far East is one that Minnesota watercolorist Andy Evansen merely dreamed about. That is, until September 2007, when he and fellow artists—oil painters Jason Situ, Kevin Macpherson and John Budicin—had the opportunity to travel to the sprawling city of Kaiping in southeastern China for a seven-day *plein air* painting trip. “It was such a great opportunity,” says Evansen, who felt eager to start painting right away. “Everything in the Far East is so different from the West, culturally and in terms of its landscape and architecture. It gives you an immediate jolt.”

He and his companions needed plenty of energy: The loosely organized trip revolved around daily *plein air* painting excursions in and around Kaiping, with the group hitting the road early each morning and painting outdoors until dinner time. Their physically demanding painting pace, however, proved to be an ideal means for the artists to experience the landscape, culture and people of China. For Evansen, the trip was as much about creating lasting memories as it was an exploration of the Eastern world through the eyes of an artist.

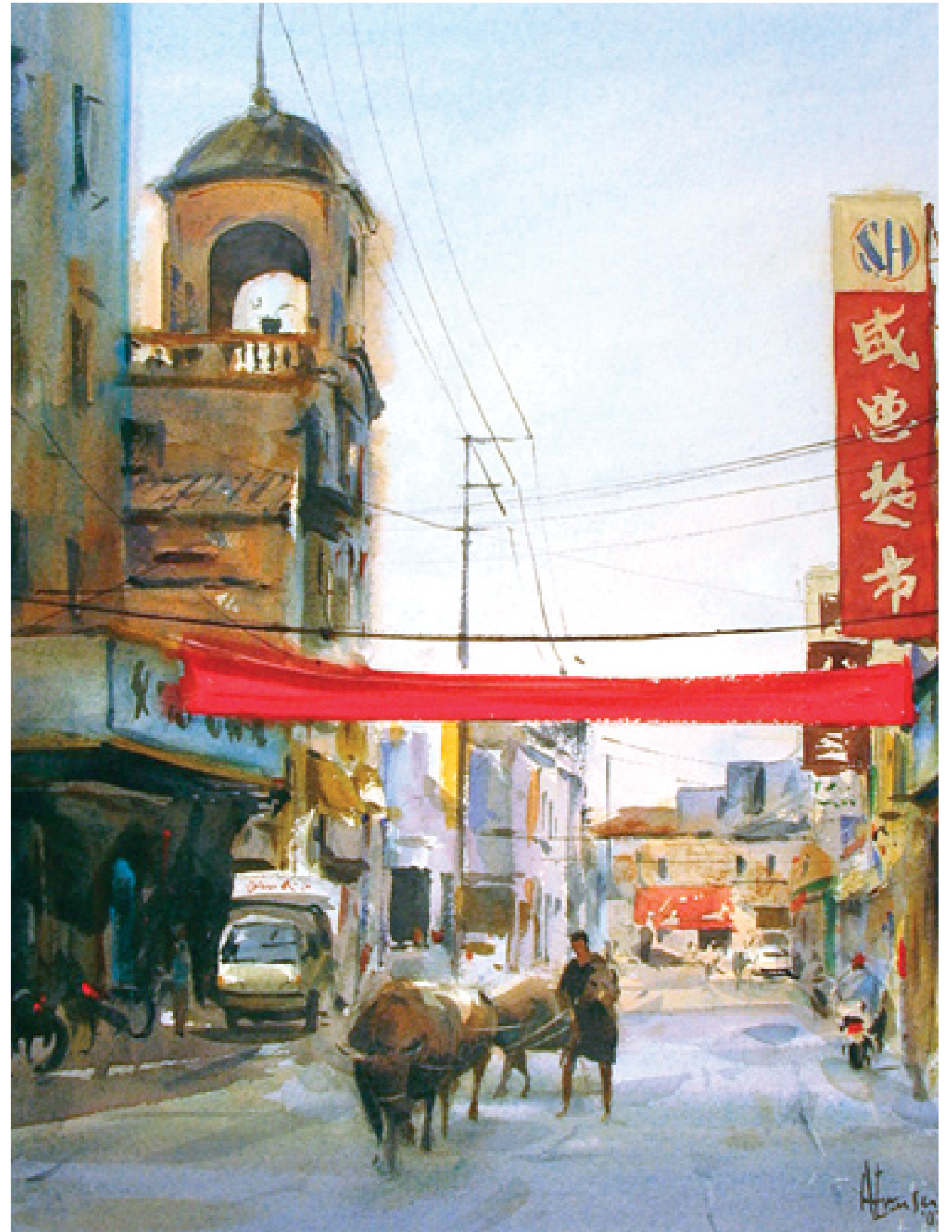
Like all good things, the China trip came about in a rather impromptu manner. As Evansen explains, he first met Situ at Coleman Fine Art’s Wet Paint 2007, an invitational paint-out in Charleston, North Carolina. While there, the two struck

up a friendship. After that, Situ talked about gathering a small group of painters to accompany him to his hometown of Kaiping, where he hadn’t visited in more than a decade. With additional organizational assistance from the Kaiping Art Gallery, which sponsored the China portion of the trip, and Selia Tan, director of the Kaiping Diaolou Research Center, the journey was soon underway. “Up until the time we departed, none of us really knew what to expect,” says Evansen. “The trip, however, was wonderful. We stayed at the beautiful vacation home and garden of Wingchi Ng. Dongda Xie, director of the Kaiping Art Gallery, and Bushi Lu, chairman of the Kaiping Artist Association and a well-known sculptor, drove us around the city and to our elected painting destinations for the week. Our hosts were exceptional; they really rolled out the red carpet for us.”

A Welcome Arrival

Among the first things to which Evansen had to acclimate himself upon arriving in Kaiping was the widespread construction going on in the already jam-packed city. He also had to adjust to the region’s tropical climate. “It was overcast, hot and humid throughout our stay,” he says. The grey days were a disappointment, admits the artist, who usually paints *en plein air* in the

Downtown Kaiping (watercolor on paper; 18x13)





Wingchi Ng's garden



Goose Shack reference photo



Goose Shack (watercolor on paper; 10x14)



Diaolou reference photo

early morning or late afternoon sunshine for dramatic lighting effects. Yet what the weather seemed to lack, the subject matter more than made up for.

“Our first morning in China, we had breakfast with our hosts in Mr. Ng’s garden [see photo above] before they drove us around Kaiping and to some of the outlying villages to give us a feel for the environment,” he says. “From that introductory tour, we decided to paint in Zili village the following day, our first full painting day, and ended up spending a couple of days there. In all, we visited four or five of Kaiping’s surrounding villages, including Chikan village where Jason grew up.”

Evansen’s paintings of Zili village reveal a lush, green landscape. “The villages are very small. We didn’t have to drive far outside the city before the landscape transformed into picturesque countryside with mountains in the distance,” he says. “Going into the village felt like stepping back in time. It marked just one instance of a frequently stark contrast between the old and the new.”

Emphasizing that sense of the old were the *diaolou* (see photo on page 5)—unusual tower-like structures—unique to this region of China. “The *diaolou* were built beginning in the 15th and 16th centuries for housing, and for protection of the citizens from bandits and extensive flooding,” the artist says. “Today the buildings [of which 1,800 still remain] are preserved, though you can go into them. Some still have relics of exquisite shrines with gold leaf and statues.” To capture a different perspective of

the landscape, one that offers a glimpse of more of the area’s pastoral setting, Evansen painted a scene from atop one of these multi-storied structures. (See *View Atop Diaolou*, on page 5.)

People Watching

If the villages were quiet and remote, the artists found painting in Kaiping (a city of approximately 650,000) to be highly stimulating. The city streets, riverfront and constant action of locals going about their daily lives were an endless source of fascinating subject matter. Yet to the Chinese passersby, it was Evansen and his fellow artists who made for a captivating source of interest; wherever they set up their easels, they attracted a crowd. “When we painted in the village, a few of the villagers would stop by to see what we were doing,” he says. “Painting in Kaiping, however, I’d soon have 50 or more people crowded all around me—some even standing directly in front of my view. There was little sense of personal space there. Often, at least one person would videotape the whole process. When I finished a painting, everyone would applaud and then they’d all pull out their cameras to have their picture taken with me.”

This kind of intense interaction with the public was at its height when Evansen painted *Downtown Kaiping* (on page 3). “I was drawn to the old clock tower with the bright red banner across the street. I had a huge crowd around me that day; people just kept coming and coming,” he says. “Then a truck came and parked right alongside me, so I had to pick up all my gear. Some of the onlookers helped me reposition



View Atop Diaolou (watercolor on paper; 10x14)



Midday Umbrellas (watercolor on paper; 14x19)

my supplies several feet forward along the sidewalk. Everyone was so encouraging and obliging.” The original *plein air* painting of that scene, which Evansen subsequently donated to the Kaiping Art Gallery, didn’t include the man with the ox. “He came around the corner while I was painting. I stopped everything, pulled out my camera and snapped a photo of him as the crowd cheered me on. Later, when I re-created the image in my studio, I inserted the man and the ox,” he says. “The crowds in Kaiping were quite phenomenal because of the energy they gave. A few times, I found myself getting distracted and working too fast, but overall that energy seemed to help the paintings vibrate.”

A more regular presence among the artists were the 10 or 15 students from the Kaiping Art Center who observed the group of traveling artists as part of its sponsorship. “We had

so much fun,” says Evansen. “They’d find out where we were setting up in the morning and then meet us at our location. Despite the large language barrier, Evansen and the students managed to communicate. “We laughed a lot, even though often I didn’t know what about! One or two students could speak broken English, but for the most part I was surrounded by all this chatter that I couldn’t understand. As the week went on, it was really hard to say goodbye,” he says.

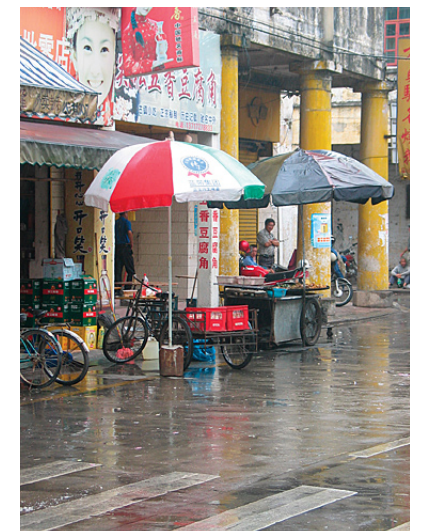
Getting In the Groove

One thing that interested the art center students were Evansen’s supplies, which he pared down for the trip. “They kept checking out my Soltex easel and Arches 300-lb. cold-pressed watercolor paper. They couldn’t believe how thick the paper was. They paint, in comparison,

on very thin paper,” says the artist. A foam board backing, Black Velvet round brushes in sizes 12 and 16, Winsor & Newton watercolors and a full-sized John Pike palette rounded out his painting gear. “Most of my paintings took about an hour to paint; you don’t have much more time than that *en plein air*. I try to finish the painting in three washes by getting down the whites, knocking in all my middle tones and then adding my darks to accent and define the piece. And that’s it.”

Although Evansen worked directly from each scene, such as the one depicted in *Fishing Nets* (on page 9), he always began by taking a digital photograph (on page 8). “Often I’ll do a larger

studio painting of the image, using both my *plein air* painting and the corresponding photo as reference,” he says. Yet his camera served the *plein air* painting process on location as well. He used his camera’s viewfinder to crop the scene and referred to the display screen to quickly draw structural composition lines on his paper before closing up his camera to paint. The translucent fishing nets with the old houseboats and mountains in the distance attracted Evansen to this particular sight. “I liked the unique shapes of the boats,” he says. “I always look for interesting shapes—I don’t necessarily go for the prettiest scene.” By squinting at his subject, the artist painted the large shapes



Street Vendor reference photo (above)
Street Vendor (at left; watercolor on paper; 14x10)

first, simultaneously allowing colors to mix and merge on his paper. “I don’t get too bogged down with details to begin with—those can come later. Generally, the painting comes together on its own if you do that.”

Midday Umbrellas (on page 6), with its colorful umbrellas and glistening rain-soaked street, was a subject that caught Evansen’s eye in the moment. “We were just driving into the city when it started to rain. Suddenly a sea of umbrellas popped open, almost in unison. We all shouted, ‘Stop the car!’” The artists hopped out and began a picture-taking frenzy, which became the basis for this studio painting.

“Nothing stopped; everyone kept going about their business. Even the bicyclists kept riding with protective rain coats thrown about them. It was so pretty,” he says. A short while later, Evansen painted *Street Vendor* (on page 7) as he stood under an awning to keep from getting wet in the rain. “That was later in the week, so we were all getting in the groove by then. We decided what we should do: either take a break or find a sheltered spot to paint,” he says. “I eliminated probably 100 people from that



Fishing Nets reference photo

scene because I wanted to focus on the vendor. My goal is to keep the painting loose and to create that sense of movement, or whatever’s going on in a scene.”

Winding Down

In the evenings, the artists relaxed and were entertained by people in the community. One night, they visited a karaoke bar. On another, they were treated to an informal calligraphy demonstration at the art center garden, where a couple of local artists shared their techniques. “By pushing hard on a large calligraphy brush, they’d make these big, bold shapes,” says



Fishing Nets (watercolor on paper; 10X14)



Group at Hot Springs



Evansen (at left) donating a painting to the gallery

Evansen. “Then they’d switch to a smaller brush and create delicate writing. It was wonderful to watch.” The artists in Evansen’s group also tried their hand at calligraphy, using the demonstrators’ samples as guides. “The calligraphy brushes are similar to round watercolor brushes, so I felt comfortable with them,” he says. As a final touch to the calligraphic design, special stamps were used around the image—one that identified the calligrapher’s signature, others carved with happy words. Each artist later received his own stamp, carved with his signature in Chinese.

The week culminated with a special reception for the artists at the Kaiping Art Gallery. “The place was packed. The Chinese media were there and the director of cultural affairs presented each of us with gifts and a plaque of

appreciation. We brought our paintings so that everyone could look at them,” Evansen says. The artists, who each donated paintings to the gallery and to Mr. Ng, also got to see some of the students’ work. “I was amazed at their talent. They take their art, and especially watercolor, very seriously,” he says. Overall, Evansen’s visit to China went beyond anything he had anticipated. “It was the trip of a lifetime. The people were so generous and kind, and many friendships were made in the course of the week. One of the sentiments painted on the night of the calligraphy demonstration translated to, ‘use the painting to make friends.’ That seemed to sum up our trip very nicely.”

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