

# M I N M A

## *A Lifelong Student of the Arts*



*Four O'Clock Shadows*, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 in.

**M**in Ma's rise to become a successful artist living in the stunning coastal city of White Rock has been one of endurance, persistence and a passion to create in times when creativity can be dulled

to a blurred memory. It is Ma's eternal quest to learn and experiment that drives him, and the joy of his craft that has fueled his amazing journey.

For more than twenty years, Ma has crossed borders and cultures while put-

ting paint and brush to canvases, from busy cities in China, windswept prairies of Regina and the culturally-rich San Francisco to the laid back west coast charm of Vancouver. Along the way, he has continued to grow as an artist, experimenting



*Rock Seashore*, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 24 in.

with different methods as he developed his own vivid style that features clarity of color and tones that add depth to his canvases. His subject matter is ever-evolving and ranges from landscapes, portraits, city scenes, lifestyles, still lifes and more.

Today, Ma's life as an artist is far removed from his early days when inspiration came from recreating the image of Chairman Mao on posters that plastered China during the Cultural Revolution.

Born in 1955, Ma grew up in the city of Jinan, in the Shandong province of China, which is four hours away from Beijing. "I was the youngest of four, with three older sisters," he says, and the only artist of the family. His mother was a doctor, and his father worked for the government. In 1966, his entire world changed with the onset of a nationwide revolution.

The Chinese Cultural Revolution was started in 1965 by Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Communist Party, as a comprehensive reform movement. It was a time

of violence that created social, political and economic chaos; even manufacturing plants stopped production. Ma was a young school boy with no regular classes to attend and a desire to draw.

"During the Revolution, universities were closed and art classes were not offered. Even when I went to school, the only classes that were taught were about the Revolution," says Ma. The intrepid 12-year old didn't let this deter his artistic sensibility. "I decided to learn about fine arts by myself." Encouraged by his parents, Ma began his artistic journey through self-discovery.

When I asked Min which art galleries he liked to visit in China, his answer surprised me. "There were no art galleries in China at that time," he explained. To practice his art, Ma repeatedly recreated the image of Chairman Mao's head, which was plastered on posters throughout China. "It was an opportunity to develop skills in creating colour and scale," he explains.

At the time, Ma's mother was treating a patient who was a high school teacher. She arranged for Ma to receive private tutoring in basic arts training from the teacher. At night, Ma wandered around his neighbourhood, standing near groups of people playing cards and sketching their images.

By 1973 the Chinese revolution was essentially over but it took time for life to return to normal. "The universities weren't opened but there was a three-year painting program at the Shandong Fine Arts College," says Ma. He passed the fine arts test for entry and at the age of 18, Ma finally began formal training in the arts.

When he completed his program, Ma was sent to work. "The government placed people in jobs," he says. For the next two years, Ma created stage backdrops for a local theatre company. "I didn't really like it, but it was a good way to practice some of the skills I had earned in the arts program."

By 1977, the doors to the country's uni-



*Summer at Coast*, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 36 in.

versities reopened and Ma continued his studies at the prestigious China National Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. "I was one of only 15 students in China to be accepted into the program," he says. The four-year program was taught by a famous Chinese artist, Quan Shanshi, who had trained in Russia.

University exposed Ma to a new level of artistic expression and to a new world of style. For the first time in his life, Ma saw the work of western artists. "I'd never seen anything like it before. Up until then, everything I learned was about Chinese artists and style."

Ma traveled south by train for several hours each day to attend classes in an area of China known as 'Venice of the East'. It was a polar opposite to the city where he grew up, a maze of canals where homes sprouted from the water and people traveled by foot, bike or boat. The area left a lasting impression on Ma; one *Misty Morning* showcases the unique atmosphere of the area. The painting

shows a man with a pole steering his boat along a canal between homes. Ma talks about his inspiration, "It was always wet in the area; every morning a mist hung over the city."

Ma stands next to his latest work *Neighbours*, a triptych that shows a series of homes next to the canal. "It's the first time I've done three paintings together," he says, adding that he enjoyed the process. The striking group of canvases offers a snippet of everyday life in the series of homes that rise out of the water. Ma captures fine details from the woman doing her laundry to the simple print on curtains dangling in the windows to the craggy shingles on each roof.

Influenced by western art, Ma traveled to Canada with his wife, a fellow artist, a few years after he graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from university. "It was my dream to travel to North America. I wanted to speak with other artists and see how they worked," he says.

Ma was invited to work as a visiting

scholar in Regina and lived in a variety of cities throughout North America before settling in White Rock. During the past ten years, Ma's paintings and sketches have been exhibited throughout Canada and the States as well as in many private collections.

It's hard to pinpoint Ma's style because he is so skilled and is known for his ability to paint in any style. He credits this to his intensive training. "In university I worked very hard, practicing over and over how to paint light and use colour. We studied the work of old masters," he says of the disciplined approach that meant he literally followed and repeated the brush strokes of artists to learn different techniques.

Today, Ma follows his heart and inspiration and paints what he loves. He still is inspired by the western landscapes and lifestyles, traveling across B.C. for inspiration.

*One, Two, Three* is a classic and ecstatic painting of three boys captured in the moment after they leap off a pier. They



*Up Hill* acrylic on canvas, 9 x 12 in.



*Back Alley Snow*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24 in.

are forever poised above the still water in an exuberant cloud of anticipation.

Ma also creates awe-inspiring landscapes that capture the vast eternity of the Prairies to the moody cliffs of Moor in Ireland. As he stands before his latest work, Ma tells me that each painting stirs a physical memory of its presence.

"I'm a lifelong student of the arts," says Ma. "I constantly try to learn and develop my skills." He started painting in oils until he discovered the drying benefits of acrylics. Ma takes pictures of scenes that inspire him and occasionally paints en plein air.

After his intensive training in China, it took some effort for Ma to develop a style of his own; a harmony of western, Chinese and Japanese styles. He admits that he



*Cliff Top*, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 24 in.

doesn't know how his style will develop next.

"I don't like to stay the same all my life. When I am inspired by something, I follow that to a new direction," he says with a grin. **I**

### Ingrid de Jong

Min Ma is represented by the following galleries: White Rock Gallery, White Rock, BC; Gainsborough Galleries, Calgary, AB; The Artym Gallery, Invermere, BC; Hampton Gallery, Kamloops, BC; Art Beat Gallery, St. Albert, AB; Tutt Street Gallery, Kelowna, BC; Rendezvous Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC; The Lloyd Gallery, Penticton, BC.



*Winter Road*, acrylic on canvas, 9 x 12 in.