



## ORAL HISTORY SECTION

### Post-War Chinese Australians Oral History Project

**Recorded interview with :  
MARJORIE HO**

b 1932

**Interviewer: Diana Giese  
Date of interview: 9th May 1997**

### Conditions of Access

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**NOTE TO READER**

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**MARJORIE HO**  
interviewed by **Diana Giese**

**Tape 1:**

**Diana Giese:** This is an interview with Ms Marjorie Ho, Director of the East and West Art Gallery. Opening in 1973 in Armadale, East and West was one of the first two commercial galleries in Australia to specialise in both traditional and contemporary Asian art. It now operates from East Kew in Melbourne. Marjorie Ho was born in Singapore in 1932. Her family then moved to India where she attended school in Bangalore. They returned to Singapore in 1946 at the end of World War II. Her remaining education was at the School of Architecture, University of Melbourne, then in London. She married and moved to Amsterdam. Ms Ho now has three daughters and eight grandchildren.

East and West Art specialises in both antiques and contemporary Asian Fine Art. It shows paintings, prints, textiles and ceramics by both local artists and those from countries including Singapore, Malaysia, India, China, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Germany, Sweden and the United States. It holds some eight exhibitions a year. Marjorie Ho is also a qualified valuer to State and Regional galleries in Australia. Ms Ho will be speaking with me, Diana Giese, for the Oral History Project conducted by the National Library of Australia. On behalf of the Director-General of the National Library I would like to thank you, Ms Ho, for agreeing to participate in this program.

**Marjorie Ho:** Thank you, Diana.

**Diana Giese:** Do you understand that copyright is shared by you and the Library?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, I do.

**Diana Giese:** This being so, may we have your permission to make a transcript, a written version of this recording?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, you can.

**Diana Giese:** We hope you will speak as frankly as possible knowing that neither the tapes nor any transcripts produced from them will be released without your authority. This interview is taking place today, May 9, 1997 in Melbourne. Now, can we begin with your personal history - which is pretty interesting and pretty multi-national, isn't it? Why did you go to India from Singapore in your childhood?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, it was the fall of Singapore to the Japanese. When the Japanese invaded Singapore.

**Diana Giese:** But why India?

**Marjorie Ho:** Why India? Because, I think it was the only ship - we were on the second-last ship that left Singapore and no other ships left for Australia. Australia was the other destination. We had to get on to that ship or be left behind - and so Dad just dumped us on it. He himself had to stay behind because he was in the Army. And together with two cousins, my mother and five children, we were landed on the ship that was about triple-loaded according to what it should have been.

**Diana Giese:** What route did it take to India?

**Marjorie Ho:** Directly. Straight to Bombay.

**Diana Giese:** And did you know people in India?

**Marjorie Ho:** Not really. Not a soul. So we were utter refugees when we got there.

**Diana Giese:** What happened when you landed?

**Marjorie Ho:** Gosh, it was one of those things that we were all stuck in a godown, we call that, or a warehouse - and Mum had to queue up for warm clothing because they knew already they were sending us straight up to the Himalayas. I mean, from the equator to the Himalayas is no joke, so that she had to line up for woollen singlets, woollen underpants. I was left in charge of my brothers in the corner of the warehouse. We waited the whole day, and we were quite terrified (because I was about 10 or 11 years old) before she came back.

**Diana Giese:** So what other people were on the boat? What other people were with you?

**Marjorie Ho:** Quite a lot of Chinese from Singapore.

**Diana Giese:** And Indians from Singapore, as well?

**Marjorie Ho:** No, no Indians, but very - I don't know whether one should say this - but there were a lot of military from the English Army who were really jumping ship. We had a very interesting incident where we were playing around the ship. We lifted this basket of laundry, we lifted the lid, and there inside was this English gentleman.

**Diana Giese:** So a few stowaways on board, do you think?

**Marjorie Ho:** I think so, yes - but as children we just were too scared of them for words. So we just popped the cover back and ran away.

**Diana Giese:** Did you tell anyone?

**Marjorie Ho:** Only Mum.

**Diana Giese:** What did she do? Did she tell anyone?

**Marjorie Ho:** I think not. I mean, in those days, you know, everybody was so terrified that if you could get away, well, you were lucky.

**Diana Giese:** But I guess you thought it was a bit of an adventure, too, as a child, did you?

**Marjorie Ho:** Oh, it was fantastic. I think it changed my whole life and my way of thinking. Somehow as a Chinese brought up in a well-off family, I would have been quite spoilt, and couldn't do very much. But this made me another person altogether - because I had to go to boarding school. We went straight [directly north] from Bombay to Raniket. It was a terrific train journey up to the foot of the hills, then we had to take a bus journey. And there were a lot of us. I think there were over 100 of us Chinese, all from Singapore, and we were very lucky, we were relegated into houses that were owned by the British, so they looked after us very well. And the houses were looked after by caretakers, so all we really had to do was supply our own clothing. Everything else was there.

**Diana Giese:** And you could get that made in the bazaar, presumably, could you?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, we didn't have very much money with us. [You were given warm clothing by the Red Cross.]

**Diana Giese:** What were the circumstances of your leaving Singapore? Was it very rushed? Did you have to get things together very fast? Were you allowed to take only a little bit of luggage?

**Marjorie Ho:** We didn't take much luggage, just a suitcase each, because Singapore was constantly bombed at that time. In fact, as I said, it was the second-last ship out and then about a week later it fell [- to the Japanese -] so we were really quite lucky. But the car trip between our home and the ship was absolutely packed with everybody - some who didn't even have a booked passage. Everybody was trying to get on those ships. And during the passage through there was a bombing raid, and we had to get out of the car and shelter in a house, and then run back to the car and head for the boat. And we [one brother and I] got separated from mum and dad. In fact, the ship nearly left without us. [The gang plank was up.] We were just thrown on at the very last minute.

**Diana Giese:** Did you have other relatives in Singapore who also made an escape?

**Marjorie Ho:** Not really.

**Diana Giese:** Beyond your nuclear family, did you have extended family there?

**Marjorie Ho:** Only my two cousins came with us, because they were supposed to help my mother look after us, because the ages just went down from 10 years old to a baby in arms - which was my youngest brother. So she couldn't have managed five children on her own. Took my two cousins, who were then about 15 years old.

**Diana Giese:** What was happening to your father when you were going up to the Himalayas?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, he was a prisoner of war when Singapore fell, and he had a horrific time. I mean, they were all - - -

**Diana Giese:** And you were out of communication with him, presumably, at that point, were you?

**Marjorie Ho:** You couldn't contact each other until around 1945.

**Diana Giese:** So your mother must have been sick with worry?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, I think so - but then there's not much you can do. See, the British gave us some kind of a pension to look after us - but that wasn't anywhere near enough, with five children. We were sent to Raniket, which is right up in the Himalayas... During the winter the inhouses were empty in the mountains, so we were sent there. In the summer, the houses were needed by the English, and we were sent down to their houses on the plains like at Bareilli and New Delhi - and it was boiling hot with sand-storms and monsoon rains. But then come winter again, we had to go back to the Himalayas. So we just yo-yoed for a couple of years between the plains and the Himalayas, until mum said we had to start studying, resume our studies. And that's when we went to boarding school in Bangalore.

**Diana Giese:** What was that like? Tell me about that experience.

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, that was interesting because we had nowhere to go to before the boarding school except one lady, an Indian friend of my mother's, who gave us her garage to sleep in. And during that time we had to put all the names onto the children's clothing for boarding school. You had to tag all your names in so that took quite a few days before we were all shoved in. It was very strange in the beginning. Very awe-inspiring, I think, to see hundreds of little girls. My brothers went to an all boys-school.

**Diana Giese:** Were they little Indians girls? Little British girls? What kind of little girls?

**Marjorie Ho:** Mixed. It was Americans, Indians, Anglo-Indians and I think I was the only Chinese. I always seemed to be the only Chinese in the big group, somehow or another.

**Diana Giese:** And how did they accept you or perceive you?

**Marjorie Ho:** I think it was okay. [Easily – they had all seen Chinese before.]

**Diana Giese:** Were they curious about your background?

**Marjorie Ho:** Not really. Children accept each other very easily. It was a missionary school. American missionaries, called Balwyn Girls High School in Bangalore, and Miss Weston was the principal. She was one of those die-hard missionaries - she was good to everybody. But school itself was interesting, because we had to study Indian history and Hindustani. So that was already veering off from my normal Chinese education, where a lot

of Chinese view Indians and other people very suspiciously. So that intermingling already helped.

**Diana Giese:** So what had you learned at school in Singapore up until this point? You'd been educated in English at an English school?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, at an English school. I also had Chinese.

**Diana Giese:** Cantonese?

**Marjorie Ho:** No, Mandarin. Cantonese was just a spoken language. Whenever you learned something you had to study it in Mandarin.

**Diana Giese:** Did you speak Cantonese?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, fluently. I mean my grandmother was Cantonese spoken only.

**Diana Giese:** What did you do with those languages in India? Did you keep them up?

**Marjorie Ho:** No, you couldn't. I mean there were things like Chinese restaurants where the majority of them were owned by Cantonese. Cantonese seems to be the language which floats around most, and Cantonese people seem to migrate more than others.

**Diana Giese:** What did you talk with your mother and siblings?

**Marjorie Ho:** I think mainly in English - because of the people around you. If you spoke in Chinese they were a bit hurt, and you could not afford that as refugees, you know, so you kept to English.

**Diana Giese:** And what about your life outside school? Was it very much within the confines of the institution of school?

**Marjorie Ho:** Unfortunately, we had no money, so therefore mum either lived at the YWCA. She is a qualified nurse, so she was a matron in a hospital, and she used to come and visit us on her bike, and that was a sight and a half to behold. When she took us out on the weekends, she would have my baby brother in a basket in the front, and another brother seated on a cane seat behind her and myself - well, I was seated on her cross-bar or running.

**Diana Giese:** Did you get a lot of ribald comments from the Indians passing by on the road?

**Marjorie Ho:** No, just curious glances. Very polite. We got on very well.

**Diana Giese:** Sounds as if you really enjoyed this period?

**Marjorie Ho:** As a child I think you enjoy everything. I mean, we were well looked after and secure. I think that was basically it.

**Diana Giese:** Just money was a bit tight?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, you didn't even worry much about that because in the holidays we had to spend a lot of it in boarding school, especially Christmas holidays, because they were long and mum had to work. But she brought us our toys on Christmas day and we had that whole day together and the principal and whoever was left in the boarding school, because everybody left except us. We had the run of the whole school. That was paradise! We climbed mango trees, we ran around and we learned how you are not supposed to talk to the Untouchables. They were a select clan of people that you just do not [talk to], no matter how you like them. They were the gardeners; they were the cleaners of the toilets, they were the laundry people and things like that. But, other than that we were okay.

**Diana Giese:** So this period came to an end at the end of the War, didn't it? How did you get relocated back to Singapore?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, the government got hold of us. I mean, everybody who they had on the list and, of course, by that time my father was chasing us up and wanting us back.

**Diana Giese:** What was his story? When was he freed?

**Marjorie Ho:** I don't know exactly - because he doesn't like to talk about it - but they were imprisoned in one room. For instance, there were a hundred of them in one room and he was freed probably around the end of 1942 only. When the Japanese surrendered to the British, and handed over at the signing of the papers - dad was already behind Mountbatten, I think, who took the papers. I have a photo of him standing behind Mountbatten, because he was always in politics but, you know - he was one of the lucky ones to survive. He went through a very strange period also where everybody had to bow whenever they passed a Japanese soldier, from the waist down. But he is so stubborn. He refused to do it. So one day this man, the soldier, got so mad he took out his sword and slashed [my father's] ear so a bit of it came off. But that was not all. Another episode was when somebody actually was going to report him for what he was talking about, just discussions, and he happened to pass that person's desk and saw the typewriter, and this report was still in the typewriter. And so he managed to rip it out of the typewriter before it went in. He would have been dead otherwise.

**Diana Giese:** When you say he was always in politics - what was that? How was he in politics?

**Marjorie Ho:** He stood for the Legislative Assembly and that went on for quite a while, in the government

**Diana Giese:** He got elected, did he?

**Marjorie Ho:** I don't think so. He stood for the more conservative side, so that - I mean, I don't always agree with him - but it is one of these things. He has his own ideas and we have ours.



**Diana Giese:** Why do you think he was interested in politics? Was his family a political family?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, I think my grandfather was a very important person. He is written into the history of Singapore.

**Diana Giese:** What was his name?

**Marjorie Ho:** His name was Ho Siak Kwan. He was the interpreter for the British Government, in English. He knew a lot of Chinese dialects, about ten of them, and he knew English; he knew French; he knew, I think, Russian as well. But he was also working with what we call the Chinese Protectorate. People he tried to protect from the British law in Singapore. People who did not understand and could not speak English, so did not understand what laws were. People like prostitutes and wharf workers. Normal ordinary men who were constantly in court. They did not understand, so they reappeared time and time again in court. One day they asked him whether he could speak English – which of course he could, so he listed to the complaint and he interpreted it to the court. From then on he was the constant interpreter.

**Diana Giese:** Excellent.

**Marjorie Ho:** And you know, he was also secretary to the secretary of the British Government.

**Diana Giese:** So, did your family inherit that facility with languages? Clearly, you did.

**Marjorie Ho:** In a very minor way. I wish I could be much, much better. But not enough, not enough. I mean, I can understand bits of Dutch and bits of French, Malay or Indonesian, but - - -

**Diana Giese:** Which is probably quite useful in your business.

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, it is, it is very helpful when you have to travel around. Except when I went to Japan.

**Diana Giese:** So now we're back with you, just after the War. You're re-united with your family. How did that happen? How did your father and mother re-unite?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, the government sent us back. Took us all out of school. We were all together with a whole lot of other Chinese who left Singapore at the same time to Mysorey where we stayed at the Maharajah's Palace, which was turned into a hotel at that time for refugees. Then we were put onto a ship and then sailed back to Singapore.

**Diana Giese:** Same route, return route?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, - probably shorter. Because [there were no air raids]..

**Diana Giese:** Now how did you feel about that - going back to Singapore?

**Marjorie Ho:** I can't remember. I didn't even mind not going back - because we were so used to India.

**Diana Giese:** Did you ever consider staying in India?

**Marjorie Ho:** No, too young. You know, we wanted to see our father.

**Diana Giese:** But I mean, your whole family? Maybe your father might have come over there? There was never any question of that?

**Marjorie Ho:** No, no, never, never, never. Not in India, not at that time.

**Diana Giese:** So by then your mother and father were in communication again, personally, were they?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes.

**Diana Giese:** When did that start?

**Marjorie Ho:** That was in 1946, about February.

**Diana Giese:** But that's the first communication they had had - for how many years?

**Marjorie Ho:** About four years, something like four years.

**Diana Giese:** Did your mother ever talk to you about how she weathered that time? About how she coped with that kind of responsibility?

**Marjorie Ho:** You mean while we were in India?

**Diana Giese:** Yes.

**Marjorie Ho:** I think so. I've got a lot of photos. I knew what she did, the friends she made.

**Diana Giese:** Did she confide in you? Or did she confide in adult friends?

**Marjorie Ho:** No, I think - I was too young to confide in at that stage. And she didn't want to worry us children. The thing was to make us feel quite secure. And when we asked for our father she would say, 'Well, he can't be here because he is in Singapore.'

**Diana Giese:** Did she say he was in a prisoner-of-war camp?

**Marjorie Ho:** I don't think so. I found all that out later.

**Diana Giese:** Where did you think he might be? You thought he was just in the Army still fighting?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes. Well, I knew Singapore had fallen. And I knew that it wasn't very easy - we got bits and pieces of news, you know, from the Red Cross, from the government itself. But as children you were in boarding school and you had rules in boarding school. And there were lots of other children there whose parents were also mucked up with the war. So somehow or another you didn't worry.

**Diana Giese:** Back in Singapore - can you remember when you first arrived in Singapore? Was it ruined, devastated? Was it very different from the place you knew?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, there were a lot of bombed-out buildings and even my school, the original school I went to, Raffles Girls High School, we couldn't get into it yet because it was a prison for soldiers. The Japanese took it over. And because of that it was still cages and funny things around, that we weren't allowed to see as children. So we were billeted in another school, which had to have morning school and afternoon school to cope with the amount of studies that the children needed. And when we finally got back to Raffles Girls School, even then, I think that was about '47, end of '47, a year and a half. Later, we were studying in our classrooms with wide verandahs on either side of us, which is Asian architecture. We could hear the tinkering of the Japanese digging up the graves for the remains of people buried in the school grounds, who had died from torture. But curiosity, of course - we would peek over whenever the teacher was not there - and we were often reprimanded, told not to look.

**Diana Giese:** Was there a lot of discussion about what had gone on in Singapore during the War when you went back, or were people trying to forget that already? Trying to make new lives, that kind of thing?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, I think they didn't talk because many people had lost so many relatives. See, I, myself, had lost many, many cousins and uncles who were just taken away and disappeared. And it was probably years later when you recounted and found out. I mean, people would say - I would say, 'Where's uncle so-and-so?' They would just reply, 'Gone' and you just accepted it. I think you learnt to accept a whole lot of things without questioning for a while, until everything was back to normal.

**Diana Giese:** How long did that take? Everything getting back to normal?

**Marjorie Ho:** Normal - '46 to '50. In '50, at least, about three years.

**Diana Giese:** That was food supplies, that was housing?

**Marjorie Ho:** No, that happened a lot faster. But it was the mentality of people, who hated the Japanese, you can understand, after that. Even my own father did not want the name of Japan mentioned. It took a long time.

**Diana Giese:** What were your parent's roles in building the new Singapore after the War? What did they do? Did your father go back to the Army?

**Marjorie Ho:** No.

**Diana Giese:** Did your mother go back to being a nurse?

**Marjorie Ho:** Dad was a volunteer. He wasn't actually in the Army for, you know, the love of it. He was an accountant. And, therefore, he went back to accountancy straight away.

**Diana Giese:** And did your mother work in Singapore?

**Marjorie Ho:** No, she didn't have to. She did a lot of charity work, Red Cross, Tuberculosis Association, they started that up with a bang because so many had TB at that time - the hospitals were chock-a-block full of sick people, starving people. And there was quite a bit of work. So she went into that in a big way. With all of us in school, we had school from - it's different times from here. You started about half past eight or eight o'clock even, and then you would, school until one only. Now, if you had sports and you were keen in sports, you would go on until about three o'clock, but only on specific days. Or you went to afternoon school, Chinese School, which we did. And in those days also, they didn't give us extra classes in French. If you wanted to study a different language or Latin, which I needed to do because I wanted to go into medicine, nothing to do with Art at that time. And we had to learn Latin. So you had to take it after school.

**Diana Giese:** What was Chinese School? What did you learn there?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, Chinese School was normal. You had history, you had writing, you had literature. The same as normal Western school, cut short. I mean, the hours were shortened. And solid study in the afternoons.

**Diana Giese:** So you had really had a fairly cosmopolitan education by now, hadn't you?

**Marjorie Ho:** More or less.

**Diana Giese:** Why Medicine? Why were you looking to become a doctor?

**Marjorie Ho:** I loved Medicine, I still do. And I wanted to go to England, Glasgow, actually, I was supposed to head for. Because - well, there were many doctors in our family, both my mother's side and my father's. And it just fascinated me.

**Diana Giese:** And what happened?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, I finally left school, I think they call it Matric in those days. I just took the subjects I loved: drawing and sketching. And even sewing and craft. I took that subject and got honours, very high honours for that. And I don't know how it happened, but I suddenly thought, 'I don't want to do Medicine. There are too many people doing medicine.' But there was also a need to rebuild Singapore. So I just felt I would love to build - and

Architecture was obvious. But then the trouble started - because we didn't have an Architectural course in Singapore, and we had to find somewhere else. Mum happened to know Professor Lewis, who had stayed in Singapore for quite a while. And she contacted him and he happened to be the Professor of Architecture in Melbourne. So that's how I enrolled in Melbourne.

**Diana Giese:** So what did you know about Australia at this time?

**Marjorie Ho:** Nothing, absolutely nothing. I had friends who had migrated here when we were sent to India. They were sent to Australia, so they had school here. They had a much easier time than we did. No War, really, as compared to what we had.

**Diana Giese:** So tell me about that whole process of applying to go to Melbourne and arriving in Melbourne and what you thought of Australia when you first arrived.

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, applying wasn't so difficult. For the first year I had, basically, the necessary subjects. We applied to Professor Lewis to look after me - mainly because there were not many Chinese in Australia, no friends, very close friends. One young man, who had started ahead of me, was the son of a friend, a very close friend.

**Diana Giese:** There is a very well-established Chinese community in Melbourne that's been here for a long time.

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, but somehow they were quite different from the ones that came in. They looked on us suspiciously, at first.

**Diana Giese:** You had no contact with them?

**Marjorie Ho:** None at all before we started in university - - -

**Diana Giese:** What period are we talking about? What year did you start?

**Marjorie Ho:** 1950.

**Diana Giese:** Yes.

**Marjorie Ho:** And that was the time I made a lot of friends from people that were born here, called ABCs today. Wonderful friends like, Jean Ling, Elizabeth Chong - all those people were around. And we just socialised, I guess. A lot of them did courses: Jean did Interior Design at RMIT. And there were the Chongs who did different courses, dentistry and things like that. They welcomed us into their tennis clubs and things like that. We were full of seeing Australia, wanting to move around, and I mixed more with Australians who invited me to their houses and various different houses. In reciprocation, I invited them back to Singapore. That was fun. But that was something quite different, because I invited three people, in my first year, back to stay with me for the three months' holiday. Well, after three people none came - because their parents were very suspicious of how we lived. They thought we lived in houses on stilts with tigers and snakes roaming underneath.

**Diana Giese:** You couldn't show them photographs?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, they - at that time I don't think we posted photographs backwards and forwards.

**Diana Giese:** And these were girl students, were they?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, college students: one who did Architecture, one did Music and one did Arts, you know. But in the end one of them came along whom I didn't ask in the beginning, Nicholas - Dianne Nicholas. She loved it.

**Diana Giese:** And she, presumably, reported back to the others that you did live in slightly different accommodation.

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, well you see it didn't matter to her what and how, nor her - well her mother was single, her father died in the War - so that they were again a different type of people. One of the girls I invited came from Wagga. Well, you can imagine how conservative that was. Another one, her father, whom I spent many holidays with, was a road-maker. He worked with the Victorian Roads Board actually supervising the making of roads in the country around Sale. And I had wonderful holidays out that way, the Ninety Mile Beach, Coringle and all those towns round the lake district.

**Diana Giese:** So they would accept you as an individual but not you as part of a culture, or not you as part of a family, or not you as part of another country?

**Marjorie Ho:** I don't think they worried about culture in those days. And they didn't wish to learn either. It was just that we were people that came from outside, we wanted to study in Australia and accept Australian ways - - -

**Diana Giese:** So they would kindly reach down and help you to do this?

**Marjorie Ho:** Oh yes, they did.

**Diana Giese:** It was paternalist.

**Marjorie Ho:** Oh yes. I had no problems because I spoke English. You see that helped no end. Whereas a lot of kids that came in a little bit later than myself, or with me, did have problems because they could not communicate so easily.

**Diana Giese:** And also you'd already been in another country so you knew the problems of adaptation to a different culture. You were probably more adaptable and more open-minded than a lot of other people.

**Marjorie Ho:** I think that's it. I think that helped a lot. That's why I say what I am was based mainly [on the fact] that I left Singapore and my normal life, for a different, completely

different life. You could say I had the life of a normal person rather than a very spoilt rich girl.

**Diana Giese:** Okay, so you studied Architecture for four years, didn't you?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, because I didn't finish.

**Diana Giese:** Why didn't you finish?

**Marjorie Ho:** Personal problems I think. It was too involved to speak about. So that I went over to England to finish and well, I got married before I did finish and that was a disaster. My professor never forgave me, and I've always meant to finish, but then he said, 'Well look, it doesn't matter because you've learnt enough to do what you have to do.' It was only a thesis I had to hand in and I could have done that at any time. In fact my young brother and his wife both did Architecture after that and I helped them with their thesis -which was really ridiculous. But by that time I had already two children, and I just didn't feel the need.

**Diana Giese:** What was your husband's background?

**Marjorie Ho:** He was Dutch. And how- - -

**Diana Giese:** Where did you meet him?

**Marjorie Ho:** We met on board a ship. Actually I was going to England to complete my course and he was going back for leave from Java. You know, the Dutch sent out a lot of their young people to start off offices in Jakarta. Well, we just - I don't know, it was just love at first sight, I guess. And somehow or other we never expected it to last - but it did last 40 years. So that is quite a miracle.

**Diana Giese:** And you went to work in Amsterdam, as a result of his background, presumably?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, I only worked in a place that spoke English because my Dutch wasn't good enough. So I worked in a place called Excepta Medica which were making précis of English and international magazines for doctors. I think all the doctors know it - it's quite famous. The information had to be all précised and put in each month. This job lasted for a while.

**Diana Giese:** Now, what about the relocation to Australia? There's a little bit of a gap in the story as you've told it to me so far, between living in Amsterdam and coming back and starting a gallery in Australia. Now how did all that evolve?

**Marjorie Ho:** Evolve. We were living in Amsterdam and somehow or another Dirk was a bit unhappy with his position, because in that time you had to wait until the person above you died before you got a new position. This was straight after the War, mind you. So that we decided that that was too slow. So I said, 'Look, in Australia - if you work hard you get a

long way.’ At the same time other friends went to America because there was the White Australia Policy in Australia which would be difficult to, you know - - -

**Diana Giese:** But you hadn’t experienced a lot of that, personally, had you? You don’t sound as though you had - apart from the fact that the parents didn’t want to perhaps send the daughters back to stay with your family. There wasn’t a great deal of racism, was there?

**Marjorie Ho:** There wasn’t racism, but we had this peculiar rule when I was studying that you had to report every three months with your results. They kept a very close tag on you. And then you had to report every year, final term, to show that you passed. And that was a bit annoying. So that you couldn’t move like other people. But, I mean, that was a - I just took it as, it had to be done.

**Diana Giese:** Petty bureaucracy.

**Marjorie Ho:** Exactly. So you just did it and forgot about it. Whereas a lot of people got upset with that and hated it. Anyway, that was part of Australia - but to get back to how we came back here, we just applied, and we had little things like the photo that I sent in on my application form. The Australian, what would you call it, Embassy over there would say: ‘Couldn’t you lighten this photo?’ And I said: ‘Why. Why?’ and he said: ‘Well, it would look a bit more, you know, mixed.’ I said: ‘Mixed what?’ He said: ‘Well a bit of mixed blood.’ I said: ‘But I’m Chinese – it’s too bad.’ You know, this sort of thing crops up every so often – and I said: ‘No, I’m sorry – it cannot be changed,’ – and that was it, and we left it at that. Well, the strange thing was, both permits came through about the same time. The American one came through and the Australian one and we chose Australia because I had been here before and there were friends here.

**Diana Giese:** Why Melbourne? Because you’d been here before, I suppose.

**Marjorie Ho:** Because of the University days.

**Diana Giese:** It was actually Armadale, wasn’t it, that you went to?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, Armadale was just a place friends looked for us to stay - because we couldn’t afford to when we came in. We didn’t have much finance at all. That was exactly why we left Holland, you know, we were living pretty down to the line. When we came in I remember we had to use the bonus Australia gave us to fly to Melbourne from Sydney. They gave us a certain amount of money \$100. In fact, we didn’t even have the money to come from Sydney, where the plane landed, to Melbourne. We used that for our ticket. We got to Melbourne, then it was wonderful because my - all our friends met us. They had already found a house which we shared with two others, two Germans, actually, who were both migrants as well. And we started life again.

**Diana Giese:** How did your husband find it, initially?

**Marjorie Ho:** Pretty hard, I think, in the beginning.



**Diana Giese:** Was his English good?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, his English has always been very good. And he is quite a linguist, himself. He can speak Dutch, German, French.

**Diana Giese:** What did he do here for a job first?

**Marjorie Ho:** That was very difficult because we had to find a job that suited him but at the same time there weren't any. He was used to working in an import-export company. He finally found a job with Canberra Television in the storeroom, organising the store and tidying it up and making sure that there was the right amount of TVs.

**Diana Giese:** What were you doing at this point? Looking after your children?

**Marjorie Ho:** Children - I had one, and she was born just before we boarded the plane, so there was no chance of doing anything else. Also, we were in one room, sharing this house with other people - so we had to put up with what we had.

**Diana Giese:** So when did the idea of the gallery start to incubate?

**Marjorie Ho:** A long time after that, because we already had three children by then., and we had moved from where we lived in Armadale into another house, in Caulfield, which we shared with a Chinese friend and her German husband. From there, we moved to our own little block of land we bought in Bulleen. From there we built. After that the children had horses – which they loved – they still do. But the neighbours couldn't understand this love of horses, which we kept at the back of our block. Finally, we had to move and find a bigger area. That's we started in Warrandyte – and I'm still here. Once you get into Warrandyte, you cannot move.

**Diana Giese:** So why Armadale for the gallery?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, because we looked around, everywhere. And Armadale at that time had quite a few antique shops.

**Diana Giese:** Antique shops and businesses.

**Marjorie Ho:** Still a very scruffy street - but High Street was one street away from Toorak Road and Malvern Road, where the people were pretty substantial. An antique gallery was what we started with. The art gallery came one year later. People who buy antiques would need to have a bit of spare cash somewhere, you know, but not today, because they would use an antique piece of furniture as a functional piece. So young people even buy today.

**Diana Giese:** So what did you know about Asian art at this point, and how did you know it?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, my grandfather has always been an antique collector and my father, in ceramics. In fact, he collected at the same time as Malcolm McDonald, who was then Governor-General of Singapore and the two of them had a very close connection. Of course,

Malcolm McDonald's collection is now in Durham - they brought it over, Durham University. And now he's dead. They had a good time, learning about antiques, and grandpa had already left Dad quite a few pieces. Grandpa used to sit me on his knee and - in his living room, which was full of antiques - and tell me piece by piece what they were. But I wasn't allowed to touch. And he used to tell me: 'Look, maybe one day you will love them.'" I mean, I liked them at that stage. I was about six years old. And I thought: 'What's the use?' you know. But you don't realise that that had a lot to do with what I do now.

**Diana Giese:** And so you kept that interest up yourself, did you? Collecting yourself, reading about it, yourself?

**Marjorie Ho:** It disappeared - for a long time it disappeared until we had to start our own business. See, my husband left his job, he was actually director, at one stage, of Canberra Television, which is quite a big rental company and retail. But then we decided: 'Well, we better start something up of our own that we really want to do.' And he always wanted his own business. So we began East and West Art.

**Diana Giese:** The '70s was probably a very good time in Australia - 1973, wasn't it? - to start reaching back towards Asia - because the big push in the universities and in government was going on - - -

**Marjorie Ho:** Had started.

**Diana Giese:** - - - towards Asia.

**Marjorie Ho:** That's right.

**Diana Giese:** People were putting money into it. They were thinking about our relationships with others in the area.

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes.

**Diana Giese:** Were you keying into that sense that we wanted more cultural contact with the area?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, I always felt that Australia had a lack of the very serious cultural things. And they [the layman] always looked on our culture as paintings on bamboo blinds in restaurants. That annoyed me like mad. And even in the university, they used to call me: 'The yellow peril.' And I got so angry I went out and bought a bright yellow coat and put that on so that I could be seen miles away. And they would say: 'Here comes Ho,' you know. That got to be a real joke. See, that was just something that had to be done.

So when we started East and West - we couldn't just start East, we had to add the West because we started with Victorian antiques and furniture to get the people to come into the place. They looked at the shop very suspiciously as we had divided it exactly into two sides with a passage in the middle, one East and one West. They would pop their head in the door and walk straight over to the Victorian side and look at those antiques, you know. Very

gradually they would wander off into the Eastern side, look at all the ceramics and the textiles and furniture that was there. And, well, they would eventually come in for a Victorian piece and walk out with perhaps, you know, an Asian painting.

**Diana Giese:** Now, where did you get those first artefacts, those first Eastern artefacts from?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, the very first, of course, came from Singapore, where I come from. It was easy. And Indonesia, where my husband was basically, - he knew more about Indonesia than I did.

**Diana Giese:** So you used all your contacts to get it started?

**Marjorie Ho:** That's right. I used my grandfather. He was already dead, but all his friends, because they used to give me their collections and we would bring it here to sell. I had an art teacher called Dr Chen Wen Hsi whom I learned Chinese painting from. Now, he was our backbone, because he would give us paintings and we started the gallery - actually, with Young Artists from Bali. They were very modern, very colourful and very easily acceptable to everybody in Australia. Because at that time in the '70s, the Australians hadn't ventured into Bali yet. So we were really very early with that.

And straight after that I put on the exhibition of my teacher's paintings. Of course, we didn't have to pay him ahead, you see. Well, Dr Chen Wen His wasn't known here in Australia although we had tried to put on a very big show before that which [Arthur] Calwell opened at the Victorian Artists Society. In fact, I didn't do that, it was little brother, Charles Ho, who also studied with him. And Charles and his wife Lesley put that on while they were still studying at Melbourne University. That was really funny. That was when Calwell had his famous saying: 'Two Wongs don't make a White.'

**Diana Giese:** So why did you ask him to do it, then?

**Marjorie Ho:** I don't know. I think we just felt it was needed to be expressed openly.

**Diana Giese:** And what kind of a speech did he make, do you remember, at the opening?

**Marjorie Ho:** I can't remember, properly. Although, I think, my brother might have it documented somewhere. I've got the newspaper cutting, that's about it. But he did do a good speech - even if he ended with that saying which I thought was rather - mm.

**Diana Giese:** So you were trying to involve people who were prominent in Australian public life in this whole endeavour of bringing Asian culture to Australia, and reaching out to the area?

**Marjorie Ho:** I think it was necessary to show them that these people had to be involved as well if they wanted to get into Asia. If they wanted to know Asia, they had to know its culture. And its culture is its customs, its paintings, its writing and its language. It's obvious.

**Diana Giese:** And the two cultures you keyed into first, obviously, were those that your husband had connections with and those that you had connections with.

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes.

**Diana Giese:** But you've really fanned out across the region, haven't you? Now, how did that gradually build itself up?

**Marjorie Ho:** I think because people, as they gradually got to know us, and because we specialised in Asian paintings, we did rigidly keep to that. Because even my own professor did sketches from the tin mines of Malaysia, and he wanted me to hold an exhibition. And I said: 'I'm sorry, Prof, I can't, you're not Asian.' And he said: 'Are you a racist?' And I said: 'No, I specialise. You asked me to specialise and I did. And, therefore, your things don't belong.' And I said: 'One day we will get to that point where we will amalgamate.'

**Diana Giese:** So when did you get to that point? Because you now have other European-background artists on your books, don't you?

**Marjorie Ho:** That's right. That was only in the '90s. After we had moved from Armadale to Kew - and we realised that really more and more people came in. Because at one stage we were teaching them Chinese painting. And all the people, the majority of them, were Australians. I thought: 'What are they going to do afterwards? What's the point of learning painting if you cannot exhibit?' I mean, a lot were housewives and even men - but others were actual artists already. So that we - I sort of had to think that we had to exhibit them, so it started with the teacher exhibiting with the students.

**Diana Giese:** When was that?

**Marjorie Ho:** That was, I think, in Armadale. We had already started in the '80s. Because we started the art classes in Armadale, and the amount of people that came to those because they were the relatives and the followers of all the artists, it made me think, we had to do something else.

**Diana Giese:** You say that Australia influenced the art of the young Asian artists you were also showing at that time. How did that happen?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, because of the schooling. I mean, so many Asians came here to Art schools, RMIT, University. Victorian College of the Arts, VCA started also, and the very lucky ones got into VCA, because they were all hand-picked. I mean, my own daughter has gone through VCA but she was what you call an experimental guinea-pig because she went straight from school into VCA. They wanted to start a group of children who had no tertiary art education in a strict form; they wanted them as artists straight from the beginning. But it doesn't quite work that way, so they've changed the curriculum now.

**Diana Giese:** So let's talk about the styles then. How did international styles or Australian styles influence the Asian paintings that you were exhibiting at this point in the '80s?

**Marjorie Ho:** I think because the teachers that were teaching them in the art colleges had to teach what they had learned - and that was in a Western style.

**Diana Giese:** So describe some of the paintings that resulted. This is a sound tape, so you'll have to paint a word picture.

**Marjorie Ho:** I see. Well, we had people that started to use the effect of even the landscape. The teacher would take them out sketching and then they would see this landscape that had nothing to do with a Chinese landscape which they had learned traditionally, right? They had these fields; they had the gum trees. I mean, myself, I had to do sketches of gum trees when I was in university, and I found it really difficult. Because gum trees are like no other tree. They are very lacy, and then very solid at the base, so that it just feels quite different from an oak tree, right? These kids had to just look at it and probably, they had to ask the teacher how to do it in the beginning.

**Diana Giese:** Okay - landscape influence. What about abstraction?

**Marjorie Ho:** Abstraction came later. They had to feel the people, they had to feel the colours. There was this, well, you always had bright sunshine in the East. But the Australian sunlight was different. It is sharp and glarey, right? So that they had to get that into their paintings as well. And then they had Winter, which we never have. I mean, the ones from China, for instance, that came later, would have a Winter - but in Singapore and Malaysia, we don't. And all of a sudden they had this gloom and this mist and this cold. So that crept into their paintings. In fact, there is a painting right at the back of you, which shows it quite well. And that was another major thing. Then they had a life of people being so free-thinking, acting. You didn't always have to remember that you came from a particular family and you had to uphold the family name. So that whatever you did was always looked on by other people and traced back to your family and you would let the family down if you behaved in a ridiculous manner. So that here, nobody knew you. You could do exactly as you wanted to - and that was freedom. And that is the freedom they are putting into the abstractness.

**Diana Giese:** So you were fostering a lot of these young artists, weren't you, in their work, presumably, and in their life over the years that you've had the gallery? You were taking their work; they were coming in to talk to you; their work was developing; you were watching this happening?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, yes.

**Diana Giese:** So tell me something about those interactions between you and those young artists. Let's take a single case, somebody like Eric Quah who's been with you for a long time. A Malaysian artist.

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes. Well, Eric had a very interesting time - because he actually graduated from CIT at that stage.

**Diana Giese:** CIT being...?

**Marjorie Ho:** Monash University, Caulfield Institute of Art - and he was a brilliant student. Also, straight after graduation he came for an exhibition, and it was about '74. I looked at his work and I thought: 'My Gosh, I don't think people are going to accept this from an Asian student yet.' You know, from an Asian artist, because it looks Chinese, but it is totally Australian, in a way. It was oils. And at that stage Chinese hadn't started to use oils. It was always still water colour and ink.

**Diana Giese:** What did he depict?

**Marjorie Ho:** It was - from what I remember, very blue, I lot of his paintings. And he had a nude as well, right? That was taboo in Chinese painting. You weren't allowed to depict someone with no clothes on. So we did include one of his nude paintings, in his very first exhibition. We said: 'We will put it in and have a try.' We did sell to his friends and to a few people, Australians mainly, who could see the actual art rather than who he was or what he was, taking a punt on the name. But on the whole - - -

**Diana Giese:** What clientele did you have when you had an opening at this period? Who came?

**Marjorie Ho:** A lot of people came in the beginning. We still have quite a lot of people but not as many as those days, because it was rare, you see, an Asian art gallery. We had everybody from all walks of life. From teachers, students, schoolkids, to nurses and doctors and lawyers - everybody curious about what sort of art these Asians were bringing in. That's literally what it was. So that a lot of people saw the work, but there were a lot keen to learn what Chinese painting was. And I think from that time we even have some people who are still coming, that started with us in those years. Now it is 20-odd years later.

**Diana Giese:** So you're fostering your clientele as well? Now, tell me a bit more about how you fostered Eric Quah's career.

**Marjorie Ho:** After that first exhibition, I said to Eric: 'Look, we are too traditional. We cannot - I don't think I will be able to manage to sell your work much, because there's no point putting on an exhibition that everybody loves but will not buy.' Right, he has got to live; I've got to live. And so he found another gallery, Young Originals with Carlotta Bush, who really loved his work and actually, to be honest, Carlotta gave Eric a wonderful start to life and carried him right through until she died. And after she died only, did Eric decide to come back to us. Because by that time we had gone into contemporary art.

**Diana Giese:** So what period was this?

**Marjorie Ho:** This was about the '80s.

**Diana Giese:** The end of the '80s.

**Marjorie Ho:** The late '80s.

**Diana Giese:** And by this stage there was much more transaction between the various styles, wasn't there?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes.

**Diana Giese:** There were people of all different backgrounds borrowing from everywhere.

**Marjorie Ho:** That's right.

**Diana Giese:** Anything went.

**Marjorie Ho:** From Korea to India. I mean, we had Indian artists [Satish Gupta] that made his own paper, that printed piece that was so Zen in attitude that he was more Zen than the Japanese or Chinese. So, you see, we would take him on. We have still got him. And then there would be other artists who would be very Chinese, but loved very Cubist art, right? So Chok Dee would go off and draw things in a Cubist manner. Well, unfortunately he has gone back to Singapore to work. And a lot of them would travel backwards and forwards, too. They came here to have a different lifestyle. But then that was during the period that the East was, you know, mainly concentrating on the economic - bringing up their own standard of government. Sorting it out and trying to get on their own feet. And no time for art. So the artists all came here then, but when it all settled down and the government decided now to go back to art, a lot of our artists have gone back to just exhibiting. They still live here but they exhibit back there.

**Diana Giese:** Do they make a better living doing that?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, they love the style of living in Australia. You see, they still love the freedom, they love their children to grow up in the way that Australians grow up. But unfortunately, this is a time when Australia's economy has gone down. So nobody is concentrating on buying paintings as much as the East, which has just reversed roles. And they are the ones who are looking at art and buying art. So that it doesn't harm them to be revived over there. That's exactly what we are doing now, taking them back to their original countries or into other Asian countries.

**Diana Giese:** You're doing that through international art fairs, aren't you?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes.

**Diana Giese:** Now, how do they work? Who organises them?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, they're organised by different big companies, groups, right?

**Diana Giese:** Such as?

**Marjorie Ho:** Such as Tresor's, Singapore. There is another group called NICAFA. There's the Hong Kong Art Fair and the China Expo. These are all very big concerns that put up this huge competition, I would say, between anybody who actually wants to take part - but is very

finely culled because you can make your name, but your work might not be good enough internationally, and you won't be accepted.

**Diana Giese:** Who are the arbiters of this taste?

**Marjorie Ho:** I think it would be art professors and not necessarily only of that country. Usually they have an international board selected from various continents.

**Diana Giese:** Well, name some of those people who would be involved with this selection?

**Marjorie Ho:** I don't think I know them by name - I just know them, through a company or through a board that we apply through. China, for instance, has quite big names. Well, there's always a politician and then there are many professors and then there are journalists as well. They don't have dealers when they're judging who is to go in, because that wouldn't be fair. But, so far, we have managed to get into them all in the East, but we've never tried the West [Europe or the USA] although people send me application forms all the time.

**Diana Giese:** From where in the West?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, from Switzerland [Basle], it's one of the biggest ones - and from America [Chicago], from Germany [Cologne], from Holland - everywhere. But we can't afford to go there yet, so we'll try that later.



**Tape 2:**

**Diana Giese:** This is Tape 2 of an interview between Marjorie Ho and Diana Giese. Now, we were talking about the International Art Fairs that you have participated in. Let's talk about some of the biggest ones. Perhaps the early ones that you got into and the things that you were surprised by and the things that you found stimulating in these fairs.

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, I think the very first one was the local one called the ACAF and that is called the Australian Contemporary Art Fair. We never bothered about that before because we felt that we were too small and we were too limited. But then one day Eric Quah walked in. He had to leave the other gallery because Carlotta died and he felt that our gallery had reached the stage where we had to compete interstate with the other big galleries to put our Asian people on the market, and then go on from there. So, we took part in the first ACAF fair, which was ACAF 4 [1994].

**Diana Giese:** What kinds of things did you exhibit besides his work?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, by that time we had already merged the Western influence with our artists, and also vice versa. We had already accepted Western artists who were influenced by the East and painting with the feeling of the East [Zen], but keeping to completely abstract work.

**Diana Giese:** What is the 'feeling of the East'? Tell me a little bit more and see if you can put it in visual terms about this interaction between the East and the West. What is this Australian-Asian art that you talk about?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, it's difficult. In our case there is lots of Australian-Asian art which other galleries handle, right, like the Contemporary Art Gallery in Dallas Brooks and also Heide. They are looking at it basically with Australian eyes, and then Asian creeping in. I am looking at it with Asian eyes. Basically they have got to still speak of an Asian culture. They have got to be proud of being Asian as well as being Australian. If they are completely painting in a Western way it does not interest me - and I have been criticised for that a lot.

**Diana Giese:** So, what are some of the markers of identity of Asian art? You say it is a 'feeling'.

**Marjorie Ho:** It *is* a feeling. Sometimes, like Eric's work, he uses collage which is a Western technique. But at the same time he uses his childhood. He will put in little anecdotes of his childhood. He would put in calligraphy, which Western people would use to show that they had been influenced by the East, but the calligraphy would be slightly different, because it would come from little things like packets, the red packets you get at [Chinese] New Year. It would come from joss paper greetings, things that only a Chinese would know or be very used to, and little anecdotes that are Chinese history and mythology also. Other things would be a twist in a way of drawing a tree.

**Diana Giese:** The way the brush strokes are formed?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, the way you twist your brush - which probably a lot of people cannot see. And also a serenity. I don't know how to explain that even when you don't see it. When you look at it, even if it is very colourful, underlying that is basically a feeling of calm.

**Diana Giese:** But some people now, with a Chinese or other Asian background, are painting in a very expressionist sort of way, aren't they, which is the reverse of calm, obviously.

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, that's right - because they are angry. You see, a lot depends also on the state of the artist. When the artist is upset, the paintings go grey and monotonous. When he is happy, [it is bright, like Junichi Tatsukichi], because he cannot help it, he still paints. There are some who stop painting when they are sad, but others must go on. It is in their blood. They have got to create and therefore they just put it down anyway - a lot of these paintings are hidden away. Whereas when they are happy the colours go bright and gay. It could be empty, the palette could be empty, with just one or two spots of colour. That's enough to tell you that he is happy.

And the Westerner is quite in control, I think. Because he is being influenced he does not work in that way. We have Peter Dittmar who is a German. Now he is very much into Buddhism and he lives both in Munich in Germany as well as a studio in Bali, and then he comes to Australia for three months of the year. I think he is going to eventually be an Australia. He meditates a lot and after his meditation he paints and you can see it in his work. It is empty again because from before the time he became so affected by Buddhism his work was wild and quite the reverse. It was wonderful but in a different manner. Today he keeps minimalising his work, just subtracting, stroke after stroke - and he has gone so Zen sometimes it is just one stroke - which is the ultimate, a painting made up of one stroke. Right, and then we have a Japanese who is an actual Zen monk. These are the people who have now merged into East and West Art and these are the people we feel that we are exhibiting away. They are not exactly Australians but they have that Australian feeling of vastness. We have others like Eric and Anthony Sumi. Lou Xiang is very important because he is someone from Shanghai. He came in during the [Beijing] massacre period, to study. Instead of going into strong colour he has kept to the Chinese ink and brush, and another one that is cutting out so much from his painting that you really have to look hard. He has one very strong black stroke. The rest are very fine like a cat's face and the cat's face disappears half the time. You only see his back or tail, but you know it's a cat.

**Diana Giese:** And do you influence these people in this kind of spiritual journey they are making? Do you talk to them about these influences on their lives?

**Marjorie Ho:** I try not to - because I want them to be who they are. I mean, we discuss ideas. We all get together and laugh and discuss and rib each other - but you don't ever try to say to someone: 'Don't do this. Don't do that.'

**Diana Giese:** But what about if you think a certain style would sell better, or you could sell it better because you are more interested in that kind of style. You clearly have a sense that minimalist art is in some ways 'better' than art that is wild and Expressionist.

**Marjorie Ho:** No.

**Diana Giese:** You see, I discern you making subjective judgments on some of these works.

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, you can't help it. You do, but I don't sell - I wish I could sell for the sake of selling. I would be rich - but a gallery is a very hard job and survival is really one of the major things, because we only get a commission. And because we share costs with the artist and most of the time, even today, we give all our labour for nothing. I mean, I employ people who help me look after the gallery, but when you count on costs like expenses of \$2000 for the artist to come up with, we have to balance that with another 2000 really before a show gets off its end.

**Diana Giese:** So what does the \$2000 from the artist go to? What kind of expenses?

**Marjorie Ho:** That goes into - in fact it is impossible compared to Japan. Anyway I will tell you that later - but it goes into advertising. To print an invitation costs you \$400 for about 1000 invitations in colour. It is cheaper in black and white. Then you have got the postage - which sending out 1000 invitations will cost you nearly \$400. This is with a 20 per cent deduction from the Government for bulk postage, over 500 pieces. And then you've got advertising in various art magazines, from the National Gallery to the local paper. The Age newspaper charges about \$400 for about 8 centimetres in one column. That's impossible. If you want something any bigger you are going up to the \$800 mark. What is \$2000 - and that is only for one week's advertising. So it is nothing. Then you have not even counted the venue itself, with all its lights and its area and the cleaning and the people who look after it and the selling.

**Diana Giese:** And presumably putting up the exhibition as well in the first place?

**Marjorie Ho:** That we love doing. We don't even count that as work - and taking down. So they have a duration of three weeks of being shown to the public, [some] of which we keep on trying to contact people from critics to schools. I mean, I do a lot with schools and universities to try and get them to come in and study the work.

**Diana Giese:** So how does that work?

**Marjorie Ho:** I think most of them are very good to us.

**Diana Giese:** But you write to a particular school that you know has a particular interest in - - - ?

**Marjorie Ho:** No, we send them an invitation and a media release, but sometimes if we are very limited to, say, artists who want only 500 invitations printed - like this very show on - then we cannot send to schools. We have got to cut them out because they cannot buy. You see, we just send to people like the actual collectors, or the gallery followers, and even these are divided into different categories, from people who collect ceramics, to textiles, to furniture, to paintings, divided into prints, contemporary and traditional, and paintings, contemporary and traditional.

**Diana Giese:** These are wonderful lists you've obviously built up over many years.

**Marjorie Ho:** We have quite a few thousand on our lists - and that was another hard part. We have got to always cull as to who we are sending an invitation to, because out of 4000 names, you can only send to maybe 500 or 1000 at the most. And that is a job nobody considers.

**Diana Giese:** So how do you find the artists responding to this need to come up with quite a large sum of money, for an artist I guess, \$2000?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, really, if they sell they make it in a very short time, in just one or two paintings. Whereas the poor gallery has to sell quite a lot to make up \$2000 before they make a profit.

**Diana Giese:** What would you have to sell and what would they have to sell? They would just have to sell the \$2000. What would you have to sell to get your basic return and start getting some good returns?

**Marjorie Ho:** We have to sell - well, because we get a third, we have to sell over \$6000 worth, right. Sometimes the paintings are very small; they are the \$200 mark or even down to about \$100. Then sometimes, if you're lucky, you have paintings that go up to thousands. See, we're very fortunate, we sold 27 paintings of Peter Dittmar's for \$20,000 - so that was a lovely windfall. But, I mean, we have other means, the antique side, I must say, does sponsor the gallery.

**Diana Giese:** Let's talk about that. Let's talk about the mix of what you show and how you plan a year's exhibitions, how you plan the mix of paintings and prints?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, in the gallery curriculum we have to have at least two shows of prints. That means Japanese woodblock prints or Western prints - you know, not Western influence prints, modern and contemporary prints.

**Diana Giese:** You've decided that that's what you want to have, two print shows?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, because the print shows do very well and people will pay a certain amount of money for a print because it is within their limit: a print is cheaper.

**Diana Giese:** What sort of prices are we talking about and how many would you sell, what percentage of the work you exhibit for a print show?

**Marjorie Ho:** Prints can go down to about \$50 for a small print, or something like \$150 for a larger print. Whereas Peter Dittmar's is \$250 for a lithograph. Other paintings go up to well over \$5000 or \$8000 a painting.

**Diana Giese:** So would you sell 80 per cent of a print exhibition?

**Marjorie Ho:** Eighty per cent? Sometimes; that would be very lucky. I think if you sell a third you've covered costs and that's more or less the bottom of the line.

**Diana Giese:** Are most of your exhibitions in that category? Do you sell more than a third of most of your exhibitions?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, most - otherwise we couldn't survive. But there have been disasters and they really occurred round about the beginning of the '90s. Even now it's not back up to the maximum that we used to have in the '80s.

**Diana Giese:** Why is that? Is it because people just don't have the disposable income?

**Marjorie Ho:** That's right - it's the economy all over again. You see, when you come to the nitty-gritty, a painting is still a luxury, like an antique. So we are trying to educate the kids into saving up for one good painting or print, rather than having six what we call photographic prints - because the limited edition print will still always resell, whereas the photographic print is nothing, you see. So the same thing applies to the antiques. But it takes dedicated people to do that.

**Diana Giese:** Let's talk about the antiques then - we haven't really covered them. What kind of antiques do you sell well?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, we concentrate mainly on the ceramics - because that's the field I love most. I mean, there are the paintings as well, but nobody here will pay for the really good painting, Chinese traditional painting, say in the Ming period, early Ming. [15th century]

**Diana Giese:** What would they be worth, that kind of painting? What would that be worth?

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, it would be worth over \$3000 at least, right - so therefore, it's a limited field. And because of our Australian population, there are not many people here, as compared to America or China or even England.

**Diana Giese:** But you could make contact with these people through the international art fairs.

**Marjorie Ho:** Well, we don't exhibit traditional work in international art fairs, because we've limited ourselves to contemporary. I've never taken an antique show away - no, sorry, I did, to San Francisco very early on [70s], we took two shows. But we didn't necessarily show Chinese traditional paintings because San Francisco was full of it. We introduced something new called Yao paintings and they are from a group of people that is more into - in between folk art. The Yaos live on the border of Thailand and China and they have quite a primitive society, where they paint these paintings, and it's only brought out on ceremonial occasions. It's a whole set of paintings, nearly 30 of them, the head chief puts it all over his house. Nobody else's house - because it's a festival. After the ceremony it's all put away again. So it belongs to that particular village and it's very hard to get hold of the whole set. Well, we managed to get hold of one set which we took to San Francisco. That was the one and only time we really did the traditional paintings.

**Diana Giese:** Were you aiming to sell that or just exhibit it?

**Marjorie Ho:** To sell, we sold it to Avery Brundage Museum. Somebody bought it and gave it to them - so that was wonderful.

**Diana Giese:** That didn't encourage you to repeat that experience?

**Marjorie Ho:** Keep going. Well, we did, but not sort of - it's a lot of work when you take an antique show away, because there's a lot of packing of all the porcelain and all the artefacts and time and time again it would be broken and the losses are too great - because no insurance company will insure you for that any more. They used to before, but not now. And it just got to be too much of a hassle. Paintings are easier to carry.

**Diana Giese:** But what about sourcing your antiques that you actually sell here? Do you have breakages going the other way as well?

**Marjorie Ho:** Not very much.

**Diana Giese:** Why is that, do you think?

**Marjorie Ho:** They're very, very well packed, you know, and they reveal the things that they're packing, so they use extreme care. They know that these antiques - well, they have to be over 100 years at least, but the ones we usually buy are about three or 400 hundred years old, so that it's drummed into the person, you know, that it's something you can't replace. Whereas here, I mean, I spoke to the packer myself and said to him: 'Now look, this is so fine, be careful. Never pick a bowl up with one hand, you know, on the edge of the bowl. Always use two hands and cup it in your hand.' The very next bowl he picked up with his right hand and of course he broke a piece in his hand. And then he looked at me and I said: 'There you are; we've got to claim that.' And when you claim it you only get half of it - so we don't bother, it's just really not worth it. We don't even partake in Sydney's fair, which I'm sure we could do very well - but the hassle is just not possible.

**Diana Giese:** Now, you supplement your income from the gallery by doing valuations, don't you?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, that helps a lot.

**Diana Giese:** For regional galleries and for national Australian galleries, public institutions. How did that come about and how does that work?

**Marjorie Ho:** I think you've got to be qualified as someone who has been dealing in Asian art for a long time. You also have to qualify in the sense of the fact that you are not only selling for the sake of selling, you are actually educating - and so you've got to research a lot. You've got to educate yourself, you've got to have that interest in learning which never stops, and because of that you buy books and books and books. And a lot of these things weren't written down before to be studied. But as your friends grow, the people that you mix with,

they're interested in different fields. They become writers of books [Robin Maxwell of Australian National Gallery and Australian National University], you know, they delve into their particular section and specialise in that - so that they come up with a lot of information you have no time to go into.

**Diana Giese:** Do you write articles yourself?

**Marjorie Ho:** I write a few, but I haven't got to the stage of writing too much because I haven't got time. I've been doing too many things, you know, because for the moment we're starting the Victorian Branch of TAASA, The Asian Art Society of Australia, which is very, very important and it started in Sydney six years ago. Somehow or another it didn't get off its feet in Melbourne because of that ridiculous bickering between Sydney and Melbourne; Melbourne wanted something of its own. Well, at that time I wasn't involved in the committee so we didn't know anything about it. But it's got to the stage where I attended a lot of their seminars.

And the same with valuations again - (a) you've got to be a dealer where you can sell the goods at a certain price, so you value it at the price you can sell it. But of course these things are bought a long time ahead, people who had bought them because they loved them. And they bought them very reasonably sometimes. And you cannot value a piece that is recently bought because the value is the same. You see, they're usually given on a tax incentive scheme. So that for the person who is giving it to the government - to us, the tax-payers, it's, well, a good benefit. And that way the government museums can get a lot of collections. It works both ways. It's a system that works in America as well as in England.

**Diana Giese:** And do you do any international evaluations?

**Marjorie Ho:** No, not yet. I don't think so, because they have very qualified people in all the different countries. In fact, it's Australia that calls international people to value when we haven't - we need two valuers for any art object and if we cannot find a local one then they use someone outside.

**Diana Giese:** So how many other valuers would there be who have your expertise and knowledge in this field in Australia at the moment?

**Marjorie Ho:** I can't say.

**Diana Giese:** Half a dozen?

**Marjorie Ho:** I think not that - yes, about that only. But some of them don't carry such a wide field. You see, it's just purely out of interest that I've got myself involved in antiques and in art, because I feel the two are very important - they're connected. I mean, in old Chinese history art is part of, the study of scholars, and all the equipment on a scholar's table becomes antiques, so it's related. You can't tear the two apart. So today still, you know, even though it's contemporary art, we hope that the younger people will absorb this contemporary art, and there's a few starting in Australia now that really can see it.

**Diana Giese:** Where are they absorbing it from - from people like you, from the institutions, the art institutions?

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, they're getting it from the museums who are putting on Asian shows which have the influence, right? They're also absorbing it from other galleries who are touching on specific artists. They're absorbing it from auctions where the paintings come up, and then they watch and they see: 'Oh, that person's getting -it's been bought and it's quite a lot of money and it's nothing to do with the traditional work at all.' See, this affects them. I mean, that's the investment side of it. And then of course I think we help a bit, you know, by having the gallery going all the time. I mean, there's been many times when we can't sell when we say: 'Oh, close the gallery, close the gallery.' But somehow or other I just can't.

**Diana Giese:** So what's the future for East and West Art then? What are you going to do next?

**Marjorie Ho:** I have no idea. I think I would like people to really get to looking at contemporary Asian Australian art.

**Diana Giese:** Just contemporary - or do they need to look at all the antiques? Do they need to look at the traditions as well so that they can understand where the contemporary is coming from?

**Marjorie Ho:** I think there is definitely a need for the background, the history of it, to understand the basic feeling of why those artists paint that way, you know. I mean, maybe the generations will fade as the children - the Australia Asian ones - become more incorporated, more intermarried. But I - - -

**Diana Giese:** But they're very interested in reclaiming their own past, and this is very much, as you say, part of the scholarly tradition.

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, because one out of that whole family, you know, will pick it up, and that's what you hope for, to continue it. But it will eventually change even more drastically than we've got it now, because already there's installations of art which weren't heard of before. I mean, Chinese art, they have it in China today, and you can imagine the masses, coming and looking at this installation, when we were there [1993], at the China Expo. They had a few installations there and they couldn't understand it at all.

**Diana Giese:** What kinds of installations were these?

**Marjorie Ho:** These were bricks and pieces of glass and porcelain scattered around and books I just spread out, and a whole curtain that was draped across the ceiling and down the walls of one room. The whole of this curtain was printed with calligraphy, and the whole floor was filled with calligraphy. Now, the normal man [the mass] would just say: 'What the heck- - -?'

**Diana Giese:** Well, they have problems in the West with that as well - so isn't it a matter of just looking at these new forms and trying to work out where they're coming from?



**Marjorie Ho:** Yes, it has to be explained. And I think people who are interested will gradually find out what it's about.

**Diana Giese:** Do you think there's a very vibrant, lively art scene internationally now? There seems to be.

**Marjorie Ho:** I think so - because with the help of all these museums in the East who are collecting, you know, strongly collecting - there's Malaysia and KL, there's Singapore Art Museum, there's the Hong Kong Art Museum which is a new one also. There's - I think China herself is still not really collecting as strongly as the other Southeast Asian cities - Indonesia is collecting, too. India, so-so. I don't know enough of India. We will have to go into India still.

**Diana Giese:** You sound as if you've still got lots of mountains to climb.

**Marjorie Ho:** Yes.

**Diana Giese:** Marjorie Ho, thanks very much indeed.

**INTERVIEW CONCLUDED**