



BLOOMBERG

A Place of Her Own

San Francisco's Asian American women artists are finding strength in numbers in America's most Asian city.

By May-lee Chai

What does it mean to be an Asian American woman artist today?

Apart from superstars like Maya Lin and Yoko Ono, very few Asian American women artists ever make it into the public eye.

But one San Francisco-based art group is working to change that invisibility.

"Most of this country has not talked to an Asian person," says artist Cynthia Tom.

She recalls participating in an art exhibition in Indianapolis where she stood in a room full of people, but no one came up to talk to her. At first, she felt perhaps they hadn't liked her paintings. After she approached a few people, she realized that the problem was far more basic: "They weren't sure I could speak English."

That's one of the reasons Tom has dedicated herself to increasing the public's

For this reason, for the past few years AAWAA has created an innovative series of exhibitions and workshops to connect artists with the public. Called "A Place of Her Own," after the famous Virginia Woolf essay about a woman needing her own room in order to be creative, the project asks, "If you had a place of your own, what would it be?"

Space to Create

Asian American women artists were invited to create original art installations that would answer this question and allow members of the public to participate in this "space".

For example, artist Vivian Truong made a giant bathtub filled with foam "bubbles" and surrounded it with giant papier-mâché boulders covered with her own Post-It note "To do" lists. Members of the public were encouraged to write down on Post-It notes things that they wanted to let go of and stick them onto a giant corkboard on the wall. Then they could climb into the giant tub and relax.

Also immensely popular were Irene Wibawa's miniature dioramas that fit inside baby food jars. People could walk around her mini-worlds and imagine the life of the tiny characters depicted therein.

"I wanted to make my dioramas in jars using everyday materials. I wanted to say you don't have to have a lot of money to make art. It's accessible to everyone," Indonesian-born Wibawa says.

Wibawa, who is a biological science technician with the US Department of Agriculture, says she came up with her idea because of her work.

"I work with plants and insects. I look into a microscope, looking for damage to leaves. Some of the insects are so small, you have to pick them up with an eyelash attached to a toothpick. So I thought, 'If I were this mite or this beetle, I'd want to hide. Where would I hide?'"

Besides engaging the public, the art exhibitions also allow the women to get to know each other. Because most of the women have day jobs outside the art world, it can be hard for them to meet other artists

or develop any sense of community.

Indonesian Insight

Wibawa has felt this lack since immigrating to the United States from Indonesia when she was eight.

"I'm always disappointed when I go to the Asian



JAR ESCAPE BY ARTIST IRENE WIBAWA (RIGHT)

awareness of Asian American women artists.

Tom is the current president of AAWAA, the Asian American Women Artists Association based in San Francisco, the first national organization dedicated to promoting such art.

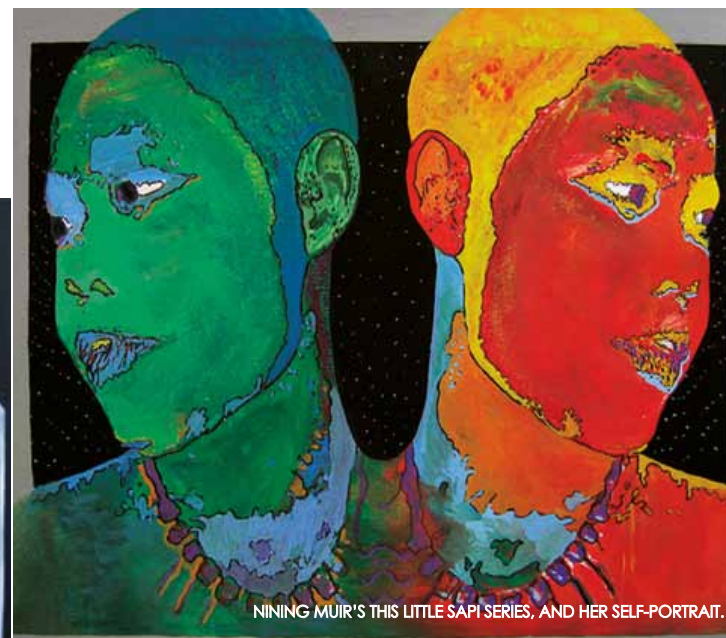
"We fight for recognition all the time," says Tom.

American section of anything and Southeast Asian women are less represented. The numbers aren't there," she says. "I wanted to join AAWAA if for no other reason than to say, 'I'm Indonesian and I'm here.'"

Through AAWAA's exhibitions, Wibawa was able to

meet San Francisco-based artist Nining Muir, who also was born in Indonesia.

"Prior to joining AAWAA, I didn't know there were other Indonesian American women artists!" Wibawa says. Muir echoed that excitement. In fact, she said her



NINING MUIR'S THIS LITTLE SAPI SERIES, AND HER SELF-PORTRAIT.

SAN FRANCISCO TREATS

Chinatown

The largest Chinatown outside Asia doesn't really look like any city in China, but that's the point. Chinatown was redesigned in 1906, complete with faux pagoda roofs on buildings and even lampposts, specifically to appeal to tourists. After the 1906 earthquake leveled much of San Francisco, city planners more or less tried to force the Chinese community to relocate far away. However, the Chinese raised millions of dollars from merchants back home and hired white American architects to rebuild the neighborhood so that it would resemble the popular Chinese Pavilion exhibit at the 1904 World's Fair.

Chinatown remains a thriving community as well as a tourist hot spot. The alleyways leading off Grant Avenue, the main shopping drag, tell a story of old and new immigration as stores full of touristy knickknacks give way to herbalists, shops selling joss sticks and ghost money, and grocery stores with fresh produce and live fish. Taking one of the many walking tours of Chinatown is a great way to learn the history behind the painted ads fading on the old brick walls and marvel at the new murals designed to tell the history of the Chinese in America.

Japanese Tea Garden

This beautiful and restful garden exists because the original owners, the Hagiwara family, were shipped off to internment camps along with the rest of the Japanese population of the West Coast in 1942, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The mix of Japanese-inspired elements can't be found anywhere in Japan – a Buddhist pagoda

is placed within a Shinto-style gate and fence, a Zen rock garden rests just down the path – but the allure is in the garden's hybrid nature. The miniature waterfalls, koi ponds and gorgeous pine trees provide a welcome respite from city life. The Japanese Tea Garden is located next to the de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park.

Japantown

Much smaller than Chinatown, this historical neighborhood has many Japanese-themed stores as well as Japanese and Korean restaurants along a compact four-block space. You can check out the latest manga and Goth-Lolita fashions, find books of Japanese contemporary art or catch a foreign film in the ultramodern New People center. The Peace Plaza is a nice place to take a stroll between the two small shopping malls, which sell everything from vintage kimonos to Hello Kitty accessories to imported *mochi* (rice cakes). The Sundance Kabuki Cinema shows an eclectic range of films, from the latest Hollywood blockbusters to independent films sponsored by Robert Redford's Sundance Institute.

Asian Art Museum

Billed as "one of the largest museums in the Western world devoted exclusively to Asian art", the Asian Art Museum displays only a small portion of its collections at a time, but it has hosted some fabulous traveling exhibitions from all over Asia. The new director is putting together more contemporary and pop-art-influenced shows in an effort

to attract younger audiences. The Asian Art Museum is located at Civic Center Plaza, 200 Larkin Street.

Asian-Inspired Food Trucks

San Franciscans are proud of their foodie culture and the latest craze among those in the know are Asian-fusion food trucks, which appeal to the young, ethnically diverse entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley who now live and work in the city. From Seoul on Wheels to Chairman Bao Truck to Little Green Cyclo, you can follow them on Twitter, like them on Facebook and Google them online to find where they'll be stationed on any given day.

In fact, you'll have to find them online because these trucks don't stay put but move from neighborhood to neighborhood. The thrill of hunting down their next location is part of their ever-growing popularity. Patrons rave about their fusion meals – like Korean tacos (think *bulgogi* beef with kimchi in a tortilla) or a *bahn mi* made from organic pâté with truffle oil and pork roll.

AsiaSF

What's a trip to San Francisco without a drag show? AsiaSF's niche is that all its performers are Asian although their musical acts are all American pop music, from Dolly Parton to Britney Spears. Between acts, the performers also work as the waitresses in this small club, which features an Asian-fusion menu and a full bar. AsiaSF is located at 201 9th Street in San Francisco's South of Market neighborhood.

primary reason for joining AAWAA was to counter the sense of not having a community in the United States since moving to San Francisco with her husband in 1996.

"I think it was a little surprise that there's such a group of Asian American women artists," Muir says. "Not that I wanted that label. But then I ran into Irene so I joined. I'm here as a foreigner, no family, so it's a comfort thing."

Muir feels their Indonesian heritage is in many ways more conducive to creating art than America's culture. "In Indonesia, we think of art as a part of life. It's a little bit exclusive here [in America]," she notes.

Muir, who liked to work with wood as a sculptor in Indonesia, now primarily paints, because wood is prohibitively expensive in the United States. Her artwork has been featured in 11 exhibitions and 10 group shows in San Francisco since 2006.

Most recently, Muir's oil paintings have been of cows. "I'm fascinated by cows because of the Hindu background, the 'holy cow' concept from Indonesia," she said.

Her latest series, entitled *This Little Sapi*, using the Indonesian word for cow, was inspired by a recent trip back to Indonesia to visit family.

When she discovered her nephew was thrilled with the English nursery rhyme "Five Little Pigs", Muir decided to make paintings of the rhyme, but substituting cows for pigs.

The result is a series of five delightfully whimsical paintings depicting life-size cow heads poking out of a red barn, each titled after one line of the re-invented nursery rhyme: "This Little Sapi Went to the Market", "This Little Sapi Went Home", "This Little Sapi Had Roast Pork", and so on.

Muir is amused by the reactions from the public. She remembers at one show, a few male patrons came up to her and expressed their surprise. "They were shocked. They didn't think a small female would paint such cows!" she says.

It is exactly this type of reversal of expectations that fuels AAWAA and its members.

"Some people question us, [asking] do you still need a women's organization?" says artist and AAWAA board member Shari Arai DeBoer. "And we say, 'Yes!'"

Visitors to San Francisco can check AAWAA's website to see which events, galleries and exhibitions are featuring members' work in any given month: www.aawaa.net. (For more of Nining Muir's work, check the artist's own website: www.niningmuir.com.)