

Ignored in Life, Bernice Bing Is Discovered as Museums Rewrite History

Scholars and curators are beginning to focus on long-overlooked Asian American artists, acknowledging their importance in the narrative of American art.

By Carol Pogash

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SAN FRANCISCO — She was an Asian American woman, a lesbian and a community activist. Bernice Bing, whose intense abstract expressionist paintings fused Eastern and Western techniques, had a lot going against her in the eyes of museum curators. For decades, she and her peers were almost invisible.

Nearly a quarter century after her death in 1998, Bing is being celebrated by the Asian Art Museum, which, like other museums in her lifetime, excluded most Asian American artists.

The exhibition “Into View: Bernice Bing” is showing her paintings, drawings and journal excerpts from the late ’50s to the mid-90s in a small, powerful exhibition signifying an ongoing major correctional shift by the institution.

“This demonstrates the museum’s investment in underrecognized Asian American artists,” said Abby Chen, who in 2018 was appointed the museum’s first head of the department for contemporary art. Chen, who is Asian American, is the curator of the Bing exhibition, which is on view through May 2023.

Not until 2014, 48 years after its founding, did the Asian Art Museum begin solo exhibitions by Asian American artists. They were sometimes included in group shows, “but not widely,” said Zac Rose, a museum spokesman.

Chen said that until about 15 years ago at the museum there was an “old-fashioned, colonial gaze” of art objects imbued with “fetishization and exotification of Asians.”

The Asian Art Museum was founded by Avery Brundage, a Caucasian sports administrator, whose collection of historical East and South Asian art was the focal point of the museum since its inception in 1966. (Asian American artists have long argued that the museum presented Asian art from a mostly white perspective, and a bust of its founding patron was removed in June 2020.)

“Very few Asian American artists have been included in the retelling of 20th century art in this country,” said Melissa Chiu, director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and formerly director of the Asia Society Museum.

In the last 30 years there have been a few important shows of Asian American art at major institutions including the de Young Museum, the Asia Society Museum, the Smithsonian American Art Museum and San Francisco State University Fine Arts Gallery but those are the exceptions, said Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander, an assistant curator at Stanford University’s Cantor Arts Center. Stanford Libraries acquired Bing’s archives in 2020, as part of the center’s major initiative to collect, preserve, exhibit and educate students about Asian American art. Last year, in an article for Panorama, the Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art, on museums and their responsibility, she wrote that “the spotlight shines infrequently on the work of Asian American artists.”

Melissa Ho, curator of 20th century art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, said that Bing and other Asian American artists suffered from “invisibility.” If an artist’s work is not “bought and sold and reproduced in magazines and books and whose estates are not represented, curators don’t know they exist,” she said. The Smithsonian aims to “complicate and

enrich the narrative of American art," she said, adding that "recognizing the contributions of Asian American artists is a critical part of that."

Scholars and curators say the Smithsonian, which has a robust Asian American art collection, stands apart from other museums.

Mainstream museums that show modern and contemporary art often "don't know how to deal with us," Chen said. "They see us as aliens. They don't see us as belonging here."

Chinese artists began arriving in California in the 1850s, along with laborers who worked in the gold mines.

For generations, "The inattention or neglect of Asian American art was connected to Asian Americans being viewed as 'perpetual foreigners,'" said Gordon H. Chang, Stanford professor of history. Their art "was rarely considered to be American," he said.

Chang, with Mark D. Johnson, emeritus professor of art at San Francisco State University, conducted a 15-year research project rediscovering 1,200 California artists, including Bing. They wrote about some of them in their 2008 book, "Asian American Art: A History, 1850-1970." Almost all the artists have been forgotten. And while many artists die and are lost to history, Johnson said that is especially so for artists of color.

The Bing exhibition marks the Asian Art Museum's first painting show from its collection by an Asian American woman. "It is the most significant exhibition by an Asian American woman at the museum," Rose, the spokesman, said.

While Bing had shows and received awards, "There were no opportunities to be recognized in major art museums," said Lenore Chinn, an artist, also a consultant on the Bing exhibition. "We always felt shut out."

Gaining recognition for her work was harder "because she was a woman," said Chiu, the Hirshhorn director. "She was also in San Francisco, far from the art center of New York," she added.

Since her death, Bing, called Bingo by her friends, was discovered by the queer arts community and others, developing a cultlike following. In 2013, she was featured in a documentary, "The Worlds of Bernice Bing." The executive producers were the Asian American Women Artists Association and Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project. Last year, Bing was the subject of a charming comic book and an issue of a children's magazine, and this year, a Stanford scholar created a beautiful zine.

Bing is better known for her traumatic story than for her gorgeous, color-blazing Northern California landscapes.

She was born in 1936 in San Francisco's Chinatown to a mother who worked at Forbidden City, a nearby nightclub. She never met her father.

She was 5 when her mother died of a heart ailment at the age of 23. She and her little sister, Lolita, were sent to the Ming Quong Home, an orphanage, where Bing instigated an escape, running away with other children to pick plums at a nearby orchard, her orphanage friend, Nona Mock Wyman recalled.

A rebellious youth, Bing was sent to 17 foster homes, suffered abuse and ran away, said Frieda Weinstein, the administrator of her estate. Sometimes she lived with her grandmother, who was strict but who also praised her artistic ability. Art would become Bing's salvation.

She studied with the lyrical abstract painter Richard Diebenkorn and the Japanese painter and calligrapher, Saburo

Hasegawa, from whom she learned about Zen Buddhism. She graduated from what is now called the San Francisco Art Institute with Caucasian classmates who would go on to have major careers. “She was distant from the moneyed class,” said Kim Anno, a professor at California College of the Arts and a consultant on the Bing exhibition.

Bing was part of San Francisco’s avant-garde scene, hanging out with beatniks smoking Shermans and drinking Cognac before noon, Weinstein said.

A lifelong seeker, Bing taught herself quantum physics, read the teachings of Carl Jung and in 1967, spent nine months immersed in the human consciousness movement at the Esalen Institute, in Big Sur, with — among others — Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy, who became a friend. She analyzed poetry from William Blake to Theodore Roethke. And she became a devout Buddhist.

Bing, a prolific journal writer, questioned where she belonged: “I, being a woman, Asian and lesbian in a white male system — Where do I start to recover my reality?”

In the 1970s, she reimagined the 15th century “Portrait of a Lady” by Rogier van der Weyden by painting a series of portraits of mostly women of color and mythological and abstract images.

In her only self-portrait she wears a masquerade mask. Friends describe her as beautiful, strong-minded, intimidating, funny, outspoken, humble and “born cool,” Weinstein said.

She did not want to be known as a lesbian artist, preferring to be known “just as an artist,” Chinn said.

While in her 20s she escaped the city, moving to the Napa Valley where she became a caretaker at Mayacamas Vineyards. There, she painted abstract landscapes, trying to capture the changing of the light.

For much of her life she was an influential community activist, designing innovative neighborhood arts programs and encouraging others to commit to art.

After five people were killed at what was called The Golden Dragon massacre in Chinatown in 1977, an upset Bing worked with Chinatown adolescents, coaxing them to brandish brushes, not guns.

On a Fulbright Fellowship in China, she studied calligraphy, incorporating it into her bold canvases, melding her two cultures.

She later retreated to the beautiful, remote hamlet of Philo, 120 miles north of San Francisco, where she worked at an organic grocery store, tended goats and painted in a dilapidated shed.

When strapped for funds, friends held a fund-raiser and bought her an old car. Sometimes she’d sell her paintings, scrawling \$35 on the back of canvases. Over her lifetime, many of her paintings were damaged, lost or stolen.

Late in life, Bing joined the nascent Asian American Women Artists Association whose members were seeking visibility. There, she found her tribe.

After her death at 62 from lupus and hemochromatosis, a dangerous buildup of iron in the body, Bing’s friends organized “Team Bingo” seeking recognition for her art (while continuing to lobby for their own). They created a robust presence for her on the Queer Cultural Center website.

Three years ago, the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art presented Bing’s first retrospective, a one-woman show.

This year the Asian Art Museum rewrote its mission statement to include Asian American artists. A show of Carlos Villa, an important Filipino American artist who died in 2013, continues through Oct . 24, and an exhibition of paintings by Japanese American Chiura Obata continues through Jan. 31, 2023. The museum has collected the works of a number of Asian American artists that Chen says have been underappreciated including Kay Sekimachi, Jade Snow Wong, TT Takemoto and Jenifer K. Wofford. Chen is planning a group show of overlooked and undercollected artists of Asian descent.

Ignoring Asian Americans is “ignoring our dignity,” Chen said. “This is about our collective dignity as Asian Americans in this country.” Into View: Bernice Bing

Through May 31, 2023, at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 200 Larkin St, San Francisco, asianart.org.