

'The Worlds Of Bernice Bing' documentary sheds light on legendary artist's life



The Worlds of Bernice Bing (AAWAA)



Ed Moy
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The **Asian American Women Artists Association** will screen the documentary short film "**The Worlds Of Bernice Bing**" on Friday, September 13 at the de Young Museum, Koret Auditorium in San Francisco.

Directed by filmmaker Madeleine Lim and co-produced by Bing scholar Jennifer Banta Yoshida, the documentary focuses on the life of Chinese American artist and lesbian activist, Bernice Bing.

Bing grew up during a period in history when discrimination based on race and gender was prevalent in America, but her talent enabled her to win a scholarship to attend the California College of Arts and Crafts (now known as California College of the Arts) where she earned her BFA.

She later earned an MFA at San Francisco Art Institute and soon established herself at the forefront of the avant garde and thrived

in the heart of the North Beach Beat scene in San Francisco with a large circle of friends including artists Joan Brown and Jay DeFeo.

Bernice Bing project director and writer Jennifer Banta Yoshida recently answered a few questions about the documentary film.

Tell us how you got involved with creating the Bernice Bing documentary?

Serendipity has played an amazing role in my personal discovery of Bernice Bing's work. I wrote about this in *The Painting in the Rafters*, because it is a fairly remarkable story and also it is emblematic of the fact that Bing's life and work had fallen through the cracks of history.

Five years ago, when I was working at APICC (Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center), located in the SOMArts Cultural Center, where she was the first Executive Director, one of her large canvases was stored above my desk in the rafters.

I started asking questions: Why was it stored up there? Could we take it down and look at it? Who knew Bernice Bing and why was virtually nothing written about her? I was doing the work of cultural activism and supporting community-based arts in the footsteps of Bernice Bing.

I wanted to learn more about her. Once I started talking to people, I realized that many of the people I had been working with and had previously studied with, had been friends with Bing; all of them had memories and stories to share.

I discovered the phenomenal archive on QCC's website, lovingly put together by artists and archivists, Rudy Lemcke and Lenore Chinn. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know about her and the shadow histories of this era.

I was awe-struck by her paintings and the Batman Gallery Poster seemed to offer a glimpse into another chapter of Beat History. I am a native of S.F. and seeing the poster really blew my mind. It was at this time that I was completing the final year of graduate work in Visual and Critical Studies at California College of Arts.

I decided that I would dedicate my thesis project to un-cover and re-frame her story. I knew

this was only a tipping point. There was still much work to be done.

Two years later, when Artist Nancy Hom and Asian American Women Artist Association approached me with the idea of applying to Cal Humanities Community Story Grant to make a documentary about Bing's life, I knew that this was a brilliant next step.

Bing's life was rich with influences from Chinatown, the Beat scene in North Beach with jazz, fellow painters and wild times, to her time painting up North in the country amongst a close circle of women friends.

Her paintings are bold and lush and fearless, from gestural abstractions to sensuous landscapes. All of these elements seemed so deeply cinematic.

Tell us about the collaborative process involved in gathering together the team to create film? What did it take to get made? How long did it take? Who were some principal contributors?

We assembled an amazing team to work on this film: Filmmaker Madeleine Lim, founder of QWOCMAP, myself, Kebo Drew, Editor Amal Kouttab, Shari Ari DeBoer and Asian American Women Artist Association, Art Historian Moira Roth of Mills College, Artists Lenore Chinn, Flo Oy Wong, Kim Anno, Carlos Villa, Nancy Hom, Art Historian Tirza Latimer of CCA, Frieda Weinstein and Bing Estate Executor, Alexa Young. This is only a partial list of an eclectic and brilliant group of people who knew Bernice, have been touched by her work, and are devoted to telling her story.

The film crew spent countless hours re-tracing Bing's steps through North Beach and up to Philo where she lived the last ten years of her life. We listened to the memories and insights of our interviewees. This process has been a challenging and important experience. Given that production began with my research and the relationships I have cultivated over the years working in the arts already in place, we were able to complete production in just over 9 months!

What do you want audiences to take away with them after viewing the film?

Bernice Bing and Joan Brown went to NYC shortly after their graduation where they met

Marcel Duchamp and attended many gallery openings and gatherings. I have been giving a great deal of thought to the choice all three of these women made, even for very different reasons, to stay in San Francisco rather than go to NYC to make art.

I think that it is important to think about who and how one defines success for an Artist. This definition usually has to do with the attainment of wealth and status that was not really an avenue open to women artists, let alone lesbians of color. I think that Bing's choice to not engage with the NYC art industry certainly may have effected her career, but I see this as a choice she made in the face of limited options and in the end, a choice to follow what she knew to be true and what was resonant with her vision and sensibilities.

The parallel with Jay DeFeo's story is poignant, considering that both of these women died way too young and struggled with similar issues toward the end of their lives. However, difficulties in surviving financially as an artist, time devoted to administrative duties (such as her role as the first Executive Director of the South of Market Cultural Center, now known as SomArts), and her failing health also impacted Bing greatly. It is a confluence of many different factors.

The specter of invisibility and accessing the space of forgotten stories became a catalyst for my research. What continues to delight me is the unfolding of details that reveal the complex and dynamic relations between Bing's life and work.

Given the hard struggles during her childhood and early in her life, the choice she made to pursue art as a medium seems remarkable. I do believe that one of the reasons she was able to garner a one-woman show at the Batman Gallery was because of her fearless large-scale canvases, similar to what her male-counterparts were producing.

Bing was a fierce painter and she could hold her own. In this bohemian milieu, the masculine world of the literati and the male subjectivity of Abstract Expressionism dominated. Women were present as business partners and artists, but their mobility was limited owing, in part, that within the avant-garde there was still a lot of sexism.

The two prominent women in this group were close friends of Bing's, Jon Brown, married to Manuel Neri and Jay De Feo, married to Wally Hedrick. A woman's success and visibility as an artist was no doubt heightened by the partnerships she formed.

Bernice Bing, as a lesbian and a woman of color, was outside of this world. Abstract Expressionism is a story that has been told as a triumph of the outsider.

This narrative, based on the trials of a privileged group of white, heterosexual bohemians and intellectuals, reflects the story of Abstract Expressionism as it has been written into the art historical canon.

Abstract Expressionism, Other Politics by Anne Gibson and Artist Carlos Villa's brilliant project, Re-Historicizing the Time Around Abstract Expressionism are two examples of significant scholarship that are beginning to fill in the missing pieces of this story as it has been told.

These are important points that need to be acknowledged and give context to understanding time and place. I also believe that Bernice Bing's paintings speak for themselves and do so powerfully. People need to see her work and hear about her story.

Any other details about the film you want to share?

On Friday, September 13th at 7:00 pm at Koret Auditorium in the de Young Museum, join the Asian American Women Artists Association (AAWAA) as they present The World's of Bernice Bing, a 34-minute documentary short film about the life and times of the late San Francisco artist Bernice Bing. Cynthia Tom of AAWAA will introduce the film.

After the screening there will be a Q&A with the Project Director, Jennifer Banta Yoshida, artists Lenore Chinn and Rudy Lemcke, moderated by Mark Dean Johnson, Professor, San Francisco State University.

Admission is free and tickets will be available beginning at 6:00 pm.

For more information please contact the de Young Museum at 415-750-3600 or 415-750-7694 for Friday Night events.

Or visit the website:

<http://deyoung.famsf.org/deyoung/calendar/film-screening-world-premiere-...>

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