

New documentary features pioneer Chinese woman and 'beat' artist

by Ed Moy

The Asian American Women Artists Association will premiere the documentary short film "The Worlds Of Bernice Bing" on Friday, Sept. 13, in the Koret Auditorium at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in Golden Gate Park.

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

The program includes an opening poem by Flo Oy Wong and introduction by Cynthia Tom from the Asian American Women Artists Association.

Following the documentary screening, there will be a Q&A session with project director Jennifer Banta Yoshida, archivist Lenore Chinn, and Rudy Lemcke. The event will be moderated by Mark Dean Johnson.

Born in San Francisco's Chinatown, 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 receive a National Scholastic Award to attend the California College of Arts and Crafts (now known as California College of the Arts).

Bing, who went by the nickname "Bingo," eventually transferred to the San Francisco Art Institute where she earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts (B.F.A.) degree with honors. She continued her studies at the San Francisco Art Institute's graduate program, and in 1961 earned a Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) degree.

Afterwards, Bing 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.

Bing also studied Zen Buddhism, through the late Shunryu Suzuki's books, which at that time were gaining interest in the West. She wrote that: "Saburo Hasegawa, a Zen painter, was my first profound influence in Eastern thought. 'To see without seeing' was a concept totally foreign to me. There began my pursuit of more knowledge of the poetry and thought of Po Chu-i, Chuang Tzu, Lao Tzu, Shakyamuni and Wan Hsi-chih, the 'calligraphic sage.'"

Described as a visionary painter, Bing was well-regarded as a community activist whose life stood for freedom and equality before passing away in 1998 at the age of 63. She had been suffering from Lupus.

Among Bing's many accomplishments was her role in establishing the South of Market (SOMAR) Cultural Center as a nonprofit organization. She pioneered the SOMAR Gallery Space, worked with neighborhood arts and the Changing Education Through The Arts (CETA) program for 15 years, including serving as a panelist on the National Endowment for the Arts Expansion Program.

According to Bing archivist Lenore Chinn, from 1982-1984 Bing also ran a gallery space in the Outer Sunset neighborhood at 1322 Noriega St., between 21st and 22nd avenues.

During the '80s, Bing traveled to Korea, Japan and China to study calligraphy and painting. She later moved from San Francisco to Philo, a small town in Mendocino, California, where she lived for 10 years.

On the Queer Cultural Center's website, Banta Yoshida states that during the '50s Bing was among the first generation of post-war women artists in California, and after her graduation, she enjoyed a one-person

exhibition at the Batman Gallery, one of several beat galleries that appeared briefly during the late '50s and early '60s in San Francisco.

Banta Yoshida also points out that: "Bing appears in the poster announcing her 1961 show, surrounded by her paintings in her studio above the Noodle Factory in North Beach, the seat of beat activity."

"I was awe-struck by her paintings and the Batman Gallery Poster seemed to offer a glimpse into another chapter of beat history," states Banta Yoshida. "I am a native of San Francisco 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 the California College of the 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, Banta Yoshida was approached by Artist Nancy Hom and the Asian American Women Artists Association, who suggested she apply for a Cal Humanities Community Story Grant to make a documentary about Bing's life.

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

Banta Yoshida assembled a large team to work on the film, which included local filmmaker Madeleine Lim; founder of Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project Kebo Drew; editor Amal Kouttab; Shari Ari DeBoer and the Asian American Women Artist Association; Art Historian Moira Roth of Mills College; artists Lenore Chinn, Flo Oy Wong, Kim Anno, Carlos Villa and Nancy Hom; art historian Tirza Latimer of CCA; Frieda Weinstein; and Bing Estate Executor Alexa Young.

"The film crew spent countless hours re-tracing Bing's steps through North Beach and up to Philo, where she lived the last 10 years of her life. We listened to the memories and insights of our interviewees," states Banta Yoshida. "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 nine months."

"The Worlds of Bernice Bing" also received support from the SF Foundation's Bay Area Documentary Fund.

Free tickets are available for the de Young Museum's Sept. 13 screening at the Koret Auditorium beginning at 6 p.m. No advance reservations are necessary. Seating begins at 6:30 p.m. For more information, call the de Young Museum's information line at (415) 750-3600.