

Local Asian-American artists display work honoring ancestry

by Ed Moy

Local Asian American women artists Shizue Seigel and Choppy Oshiro showcased artworks at the "underCurrents and the Quest for Space" arts exhibition at the SOMArts Cultural Center held in May during Asian Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

Both artists are long-time Richmond District residents whose works were on display along with pieces from many other Bay Area Asian American Women Artists Association (AAWAA) members.

The juried art exhibition was part of the 16th annual United States of Asian America Festival, co-presented by the Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center (APICC), and offered artwork intended to "subvert Asian stereotypes, discrimination and invisibility."

Founded in 1989 by Betty Kano and Flo Oy Wong, AAWAA promotes the visibility of Asian American women artists through exhibitions, publications, events and an online gallery of more than 100 member artists.

According to Oshiro, her piece in the exhibition was called "Akogare," which means "yearning" in Japanese.

"I originally created it to address the stereotypical misconception, or the assumption in many facets of American society, about sex and the API woman," Oshiro says. "It's my response to the freaky, or kinky, enjoyment of sex by women, specifically API women, despite the constraints put onto them by culture(s). At the same time, this is a celebration of: 'I do this because I like this. A lot!' Also, the BDSM flavor symbolizes 'yearning' for honesty and control in sexuality."

Originally from Hawaii, Oshiro, who works as a graphic designer and illustrator, came to San Francisco in 1984 to go to art school, but after graduating she says she "couldn't imagine leaving."

Oshiro currently does graphic design for the California Nurses Association of Oakland and is exploring cut-paper techniques based on Japanese textile stenciling.

"Living here has helped me grow as a person; it has helped show me how big and amazing the world is," Oshiro says of her home in the Richmond District. "With that realization comes the stories and histories of people I meet and become connected with - the where and how and why of those stories is fascinating and important and very much helps to inspire my art."

Seigel, a Sansei, third-generation Japanese American, moved to San Francisco with her family in 1959 and grew up as an "Army brat" in and around the Army apartments above Baker Beach, where she could see Lands End from her front window.

Born just months after the closure of the American internment camps, Seigel, whose father was in Army intelligence, spent much of her childhood shuttling between Baltimore, Maryland, and occupied Japan with long visits to her father's family, who owned a hotel in Stockton, and her mom's family, which sharecropped strawberries south of San Jose before settling into San Francisco.

"My entire family was incarcerated during WWII," Seigel says. "They lost everything except their spirit and their values. Because of them, I am deeply committed to social justice for everyone."

Seigel is not your stereotypical Asian American. During the late-'60s, she got married and lived in the Haight

Ashbury. Later, in the '70s, she was a single parent raising three children.

Seigel later worked in advertising for J. Walter Thompson in the '80s and for HIV prevention programs in Potrero Hill and Hayes Valley in the '90s.

As an author, Seigel wrote the book "In Good Conscience: Supporting Japanese Americans During the Internment," and has published poems and prose in various publications.

She has also collaborated with Richmond District-based cartographer Ben Pease on several projects, including Rebecca Solnit's book "Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas," as well as projects in Laramie, Wyoming, and New Orleans.

In Seigel's small but powerful mixed-media piece "Rui," which was on display at the AAWAA exhibition, a woman's face radiates a strong, liberated character unusual for her time.

Seigel says she created the piece as a tribute to Rui Sasaki, who was born in Japan in 1863, at the end of the feudal era.

According to Seigel, after escaping a samurai-class marriage, Rui was befriended by an American tourist who hired her as a lady's companion and took her around the world.

In 1900, Rui's friend helped her immigrate to California. She was the only Japanese woman in the San Jose area to speak English. She was asked to serve as a midwife and translator and in 1906 she went to court to force her local school to stop excluding Asian American children.

"Rui was an ordinary woman who died in obscurity," says Seigel. "She was a nobody, but she knew her rights and she made a difference. We can only change society if we all make ourselves heard."

To see more of Seigel's artwork and writings, visit her website at www.shizueseigel.com. For more information, visit the websites at www.aawaa.net or www.apiculturalcenter.org.