

S.F. artist's life, work celebrated

By Janos Gereben

From a world of pain and anger came superb art.

The late San Francisco artist Bernice Lee Bing fought through quadruple discrimination as a woman, a woman without means, an Asian-American and a lesbian, but she left behind exceptional paintings and inspiration for generations to come.

"The Worlds of Bernice Bing," a documentary about her life and work by Madeleine Lim, screens Friday in the de Young Museum's Koret Auditorium as part of a free event celebrating the artist.



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Presented by the Asian American Women Artists Association, the film will be introduced by AAWAA board President Cynthia Tom and followed by a discussion with Jen Banta Yoshida, Lenore Chinn and Rudy Lemcke moderated by San Francisco State University professor Mark Dean Johnson, whose specialty is Asian-American art.

Tom says the larger issue behind the program is preventing the neglect of Asian-American artists. She says the AAWAA's mission is "to document and showcase artists, as well as helping to heal them as we can strike out in the world together and thrive. It is a long road."

Tom calls Bing "an artist who ignored the limits of her gender in the 1950s by going to art school, not having children or getting married, [and] trying to disregard the racism and homophobia that was alive and well in San Francisco at the time. She refused to stay invisible. She started community programs that we are still using today."

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COURTESY PHOTO

Avant-garde artist Bernice Bing is the subject of a film screening at the de Young Museum on Friday in an event presented by the Asian American Women Artists Association.

The film depicts a young woman — called "Bingo" all her life — who was born in Chinatown in 1936. Her father died in jail, and her mother, a waitress at the Forbidden City nightclub, died when she was 5. She went through a series of foster homes, was frequently abused and got in trouble as a "feisty, energetic wild child."

Bing emerged from such lower depths by winning a scholarship to the California College of Arts and Crafts, where she was a student of Richard Diebenkorn. After earning her bachelor's and master's degrees from the California College of the Arts and San Francisco Art Institute, Bing took her place at the forefront of the avant-garde art and Beat scene of The City in the 1960s.

Bing's works — described by critics as "showers of color and light" — were infused with her interest in Buddhist tradition, Zen thought, existentialism and the writings of Karl Jung. Eventually, her paintings were exhibited and purchased by studios and museums. She died in 1998.

IF YOU GO

The Worlds of Bernice Bing

Presented by the Asian American Women Artists Association

Where: Koret Auditorium, de Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F.

When: 7 p.m. Friday

Admission: Free

Contact: (415) 750-7694, www.aawaa.net

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JANOS GEREBEN

janosG@Gmail.com

Bio:

Janos Gereben is a writer and columnist for SF Classical Voice; he has worked as writer and editor with the NY Herald-Tribune, TIME Inc., UPI, Honolulu Star-Bulletin, San Jose Mercury News, Post Newspaper Group, and wrote documentation for various technology companies.

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