

CULTURAL FINE ART

Distinctive creations with a double meaning

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The featured artists in this issue of *Unity* reflect the dual identities, tradition and lineage of their cultural heritage.



"Chinese Bowl" by Jessica So Ren Tang

JESSICA SO REN TANG

Jessica So Ren Tang was born and raised in San Francisco, California. She says she cannot recall exactly when she wanted to become a professional artist; however, her earliest memory of working with thread was making cross-stitched bookmarks before starting preschool. When Tang studied in Seoul, South Korea, she witnessed a student crocheting herself into a cocoon, which inspired her to explore textiles. Upon her return to the United States, Tang experimented with sewing onto a Styrofoam container of a cup of noodles and has worked with embroidery ever since.

Tang's three images featured in this publication are all hand-embroidered on fabric and wire.

"Chinese Bowl," Tang says, "is a dishware common in Asian restaurants and a familiar pattern in my childhood."

After completing "Chinese Bowl," Tang found a teapot with the same pattern. She says the shapes in



"Teapot With Lid" by Jessica So Ren Tang

"Teapot With Lid" were more complex. "It became a challenge," Tang recalls, "to create the same pattern as accurately as possible."

Creating a flat pattern to appear 3-D in fabric was an important learning process for crafting "Blue Willow Plate," she says. In her research of that pattern, Tang learned the creation of the blue-willow pattern was based on a chinoiserie (shen-wahze-re) – a style of design that reflects Chinese influence.

"With embroidery, I explore familiar Asian-American objects that take on the visual identity of the original, but reject said identity due to its material," says Tang. "Embroidery is versatile enough to mimic the original object in shape and design but still distinct enough to be recognized as something else."



"Blue Willow Plate" by Jessica So Ren Tang

MARI OGIHARA

Mari Ogihara was born in Japan, and then raised in a modest town in Michigan. Her family was among the few Japanese people residing in the area at the time, so there was little-to-no access to Asian culture and diversity. Ogihara says her mother influenced her interest in art as a result of numerous conversations about New York City's commitment and diversity to the arts.

Using plaster, wood and clay molds, Ogihara creates blank ceramic canvases of streamlined parts of the human body or actual casts of a mannequin leg.

Many times her work (like "Strip and Dismantle," a piece in her Mannequin series) explores multiple versions of the same prototype. The cut and reassembled legs enhance the interior flow of bright orange, which Ogihara says signifies the inner light of the female.



"Strip and Dismantle" by Mari Ogihara

The purple wisteria flowers that wrap around the legs and hips of "Wisteria Girl" are Ogihara's illustration of how societal norms can sometimes take over one's self-image.



"Wisteria Girl" by Mari Ogihara



"Laimah" by Mari Ogihara

"Laimah," says Ogihara, "represents the countenance and purity of Buddhist icons." This piece portrays the serenity and visual rhythm in many Buddhist temples.

Ogihara says clay is her medium of choice because of its close resemblance to skin and the Asian culture's long history with ceramics.

SHOLEH JANATI

Sholeh Janati remembers always loving to paint and draw. In grade school, she drew biology drawings for her classmates for a fee. Janati says her Iranian parents allowed her to study art with the masters in Tehran, Iran, and encouraged her to pursue art, which was rare for parents of her heritage. However, after what Janati deemed as living in an "excessively repressive culture," she made a fateful decision to journey to the United



"Fire Island" by Sholeh Janati

States, which she viewed as a beacon of freedom and liberty for her and her young daughter.

Janati says her art is spontaneous and free flowing, with no attempt to arrive at a preconceived result. This spontaneity characterizes the exhilaration of her work.

Janati's "Fire Island" indeed exudes that exhilaration through the colorful motion of brilliant colors of tall grass and a scratched light blue surface that she says depicts the urge of wanting to get to a better place. The bundles represent people trying to get to that place of happiness.



"Gold Coast II" by Sholeh Janati

"Gold Coast II" is one of a triptych (painting consisting of three panels) reflecting Janati's love for the "fluid sky" and the ocean. "The all-over blue," she says, "is peaceful; the depth of the ocean represents strength and the touches of red and yellow – power, energy and passion."

"The Optimist" serves as a clarion call to viewers to seek and reach out for the best versions of themselves.

Janati strives to create a painting that continuously reveals itself over time with repeated viewings. The strength, individuality and survivorship in her paintings are meant to convey those qualities to others in her culture.



"The Optimist" by Sholeh Janati