

Community School of Music and Arts at *Finn Center*

MOHR GALLERY

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1942: *Luggage from Home to Camp*, mixed-media installation (actual internment suitcases that belonged to Misao and Elsie, scanned photos, plastic flowers, thread); *Elsie Mayeda Honda* (left); *Misao Yamano Shiotsuke* (right); photo: Bob Hsiang. Courtesy of the Japanese American Museum of San Jose

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FLO OY WONG

Raising the Voices

October 6–November 26, 2008

"My art gives voice to those under-represented men and women whose lives were impacted by racism and exclusion. They are now Americans who have contributed and are contributing to this country."
- Flo Oy Wong



My Sister: Li Hong, 2008, approx. 10' x 7' x 5', mixed media (pinnable dress form, rice sacks, thread, English/Chinese text, safety pins, hat pins, straight pins, beads, photos, knitting needles, crochet hook, photos); photo: Bob Hsiang



Raising the Voices



For 30 years, the art of Flo Oy Wong has been giving “voice” to the lives of everyday people. Their world is her landscape; their stories are her visual reality, one that lifts their lives and individual histories to a place of honor. As an artist and an educator, Flo draws the viewer in with beautifully presented objects, embroidered and embellished, taken from their natural setting and repositioned into a formal presentation. Once the viewer is engaged, she hits hard with the message of people who have struggled against oppression.

Flo’s understanding of this struggle comes from first-hand experience. As a child growing up in Oakland’s Chinatown, she watched her parents work 17-hour days to keep their restaurant business afloat. Flo soon became aware of the people who toil endlessly, working behind the scenes. Her parents’ restaurant became home to many workers. Due to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, many people in Chinatown, including Flo’s mother, were forced to live with false identities. They became known as “paper people,” their true selves invisible to themselves and to others. Through the telling of her personal story and that of the many Chinese Americans whose dedication and work supported their families and built their communities, Flo makes these invisible heroes visible.

Flo’s experience growing up was like that of many other Chinese Americans, but it was atypical as well. Traditionally Chinese women are taught to obey fathers, husbands and sons. Women had only reflected glory. Her father, however, was a progressive thinker who believed in education for his wife and daughters. He sent his disabled daughter, Li Hong, to school in China. (Li Hong was born in China to Flo’s father’s first wife and only lived in the U.S. when Flo’s mother brought her and her two sisters to this country in 1933.) Traditionally she would have been hidden away because of the shame and stigma attached to being disabled. Watching the difficult life of her mother combined with her father’s forward thinking inspired a rebellion of thought in Flo that is reflected in her art. In the piece *My Sister: Li Hong*, Flo pays tribute to her sibling. Through the use of objects that symbolize a life lived in silence, she honors her sister’s life and lets her voice be heard.



I created a new work of art entitled *My Sister: Li Hong* for this exhibition in which I raise the issue of mental health, an issue not often discussed in the Chinese American community. This new piece focuses on my oldest sister, Li Hong Gee Lew, 84, who is developmentally challenged. Growing up with her in Oakland Chinatown years ago I was able to communicate with her because I speak the Toisanese dialect, which she understands. We had a connection during my childhood and I wanted to honor that. In recent years, she has recovered from a stroke and a mastectomy. She is currently being cared for by her oldest daughter.

During the making of *My Sister: Li Hong* (a time in which she received much attention) I took her some Chinese opera music because she used to sing Chinese opera. When we played the music for her, she laughed and cried while making guttural noises. Even though she couldn’t speak, I knew that we had touched her somehow. At a later time, she did speak for the first time in many years. Her talking was a miracle and a cause for celebration.

Flo Oy Wong



The exhibition *Raising the Voices* marks Flo Oy Wong’s celebration of her 70th year, a very special age in Chinese culture as it signifies transition into the elder group and elevation within the family. It is a time of joyous celebration.

The Community School of Music and Arts is proud to celebrate Flo Oy Wong’s 70th year with this exhibit and a performance inspired by the piece *My Sister: Li Hong* created by danceNAGANUMA. *Raising the Voices*, which follows *Flo Oy Wong, Seventy Years of Living, Thirty Years of Art* held in the spring of 2008 at the Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center, is a satellite show of the exhibit *Shifting Currents* held this fall at the de Young Museum.

Linda Covello, Curator

