

'Into View: Bernice Bing' at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco

Frances DeVuono

'Into View: Bernice Bing', Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 7 October 2022 – 1 May 2023



Bernice Bing poses in her North Beach studio in around 1961, with her painting *Las Meninas*, 1960, on the right, photo by Charles Snyder, courtesy of the Bernice Bing Estate

Although long famous for its extensive collection of traditional artefacts from Asia, San Francisco's Asian Art Museum was never high on contemporary art lovers' lists of places to visit – but this is no longer the case. Since its expansion was completed in 2020, the museum has become notable for making real changes, and one of the ways they are doing that is a conscious commitment to collect and show contemporary art. In the last year and a half they have demonstrated this with teamLab's popular immersive installations, to more difficult work by California artists such as activist and teacher Carlos Villa and Chanel Miller, the woman who dramatically upended patriarchal notions of rape on US college campuses in 2016.¹

¹ Chanel Miller was the 'Emily Doe' who became famous in the wake of Stanford student Brock Turner's attack on her, by

The current exhibition, 'Into View: Bernice Bing', is in the vein of the latter two. Since the exhibition opened, much has been made of Bing's exclusion from the highest levels of US cultural institutions since her death in 1998, nearly a quarter of a century ago. The museum's press release begins with 'Bay Area Chinese American Queer Woman Comes Into View', while *The New York Times* headlined a recent article about her with 'Ignored in Life, Bernice Bing is Discovered as Museums Rewrite History' with a leader of 'She was an Asian American woman, a lesbian and a community activist....[she] had a lot going against her in the eyes of museum curators.'²

But if the established art institutions ignored Bing after her death, this Asian Art Museum exhibition places her in the centre of mid-twentieth century California artists during her lifetime. The exhibition's twenty-one paintings and drawings are accompanied by two videos and a long table filled with reproduced ephemera from her life: letters, diary entries and photographs of her friends. Most importantly, it shows that while making art, Bing was actively engaged in creating alternative institutions, many of which still serve, welcome and exhibit work by artists today.

Bing's paintings and drawings here are strong and marked with calligraphic brush strokes, establishing her as both original and at the same time very much part of the post-World War II, Bay Area abstract art scene. Differing from the New York School, Bay Area abstract artists such as Bing's teachers, Elmer Bischoff and Richard Diebenkorn, along with her friends Jay DeFeo, Joan Brown and Manuel Neri, all moved easily between figurative and non-objective imagery, maintaining a strong expressionistic emphasis on materials. And the exhibition demonstrates that Bing was part of



Bernice Bing, *Self Portrait with a Mask*, 1960, mixed media on rag paper, collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, gift of the Estate of Bernice Bing, courtesy of the Estate of Bernice Bing and the Asian Art Museum

writing what may be the most intelligent treatise on rap; see 'Here's the Powerful Letter the Stanford Victim Read to Her Attacker' by Katie J M Baker, *Buzzfeed News*, 3 June 2016, www.buzzfeednews.com/article/katiejmbaker/heres-the-powerful-letter-the-stanford-victim-read-to-her-ra, accessed 5 January 2022

² See Carol Pogash, 'Ignored in Life, Bernice Bing Is Discovered as Museums Rewrite History', *The New York Times*, 12 October 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/10/12/arts/design/bernice-bing-asian-americans-museum.html?searchResultPosition=1, accessed 27 December 2022

that. One of the earliest pieces here, *Self-Portrait with a Mask*, is placed at the entrance and sets the stage for an exhibition that shows work from 1960–1995, a trajectory of Bing’s adult life as an artist.

Self-Portrait with a Mask was completed after Bing received her MFA from the California School of Fine Arts (which later became the San Francisco Art Institute). Its imagery obviously suggests multiple selves or roles to be played and although the colours are muted, the brushstrokes practically vibrate with energy. Collectively (and with the aid of the exhibition’s didactic materials), this relatively modest display of her work takes us through at least two of the major threads in Bing’s adult life: her love of nature and her Buddhist practice. While the artist credits her serious study of calligraphy in China during her late forties as an influence on her work, the imagery in these pieces indicates that line itself dominated from the beginning, whether it was the directional vectors created by her brushstrokes or actual lines themselves. This can be seen in the thick impasto of *Two Plus* with its slightly off-centre triangular shape of deep red, and in the vertical vectors in *Blue Mountain Two*. Bing’s obvious love of nature also shows up in *A Lady and a Road Map*, which has intimations of land and figure woven inbetween colour, form and textures that reveal process. There is a series of beautiful ink drawings done in the late 1950s, and another series influenced by the Buddhist Lotus Sutra, but the culminating piece is *Epilogue*, completed a few years before her death.

Over twenty-four feet long, *Epilogue*’s palette is both light and dark and unevenly divided into five, angled fields of pale yellow, light blues and white with a single, almost black-crimson section in the mid-right centre. Abstract, calligraphic and human forms of varying densities fill and intersect the colour fields. *Epilogue*’s very length, and the way it is broken up, creates the impression of a story, something that could almost be read, certainly on an emotional level. During the time the artist was working on *Epilogue* (and when she was already suffering from lupus), one of her journal entries evidences her delight in what she was doing at the time: ‘This may be the turning point of my career as a painter. The new images are an invention beyond anything I have ever done! I feel very excited about their possibilities.’³

The sum of the exhibition makes Bing’s story appear at once quintessentially American and unique. Born in San Francisco’s Chinatown to a third generation immigrant Chinese mother who died while she was still young, the artist grew up shuffling through seventeen different,



Bernice Bing, *Epilogue*, 1990–1995, oil on canvas, collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, courtesy of the Estate of Bernice Bing and the Asian Art Museum

³ From a diary entry reproduced in the exhibition

white foster homes before reaching maturity. In fact, she cites one of her first teachers at the California College of Arts and Crafts (now CAA), the artist Saburo Hasegawa, as formative: ‘He introduced a whole attitude that was completely foreign’, and got her thinking about ‘what it meant to be an Asian woman’.⁴

As the photos, letters and posters indicate, Bing was very much part of the Bay Area bohemian scene. ‘She became an influential presence in San Francisco’s North Beach avant-garde and queer scene, earning a spot in Batman Gallery’s [1960] *Gangbang* exhibition.’⁵ That exhibition was a well-documented celebration of the burgeoning Beat generation, including Bing’s friends DeFeo, Neri and Brown as well as sculptor/filmmaker Bruce Conner and poet Michael McClure, among others. Bing was also the first resident artist at the Esalen Institute, a place famous for its distinctly Californian meld of New Age psychology and Eastern philosophies. She alternately lived in San Francisco and the countryside, first as a caretaker at a Napa Valley winery after graduating with her MFA, and later in her forties, when she moved north of the city upon her return from a Fulbright Fellowship to China. But throughout, and up until her death, she was also pivotal to the development of a number of alternative art spaces and organisations.



Bernice Bing, *Lotus/Lotus Sutra*, 1986, mixed media on rag paper, 76 x 56 cm, collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, gift of the estate of Bernice Bing, courtesy of the estate of Bernice Bing and the Asian Art Museum

⁴ ‘About the Artist’, exhibition wall text

⁵ ‘Into View: Bernice Bing’, exhibition brochure, pp 2–3

The exhibition gives viewers a timeline. Among other activities, in the late 1960s, Bing worked with the non-profit Neighborhood Arts Program in San Francisco and was later appointed the program's District Organiser for the Chinatown/North Beach area. In the 1970s, along with the artist Ruth Asawa, she created the Scroungers Center for Reusable Art Parts (SCRAP) and worked for the California Arts Council. Early in the South of Market Cultural Center's (SOMArts) inception, Bing was also involved with a group of artists who lobbied the city of San Francisco to support neighbourhood art spaces, later becoming the first executive director of that organisation in 1980. That these alternative spaces still exist, hosting events and exhibitions, or, as in the case of SCRAP, have simply become a mainstay of support for artists in the Bay Area, is a testament to Bing's work. Less than a decade before her death, she was again integrally involved with another group, the Asian American Women's Art Association (AAWA).

On a first look at the exhibition, I wondered if Bing's engagement with alternative spaces and community arts organisations was simply a default measure, the result of largely being excluded from commercial and museum spaces. But that analysis would miss the point. Bing's life and work was acknowledged by her peers at the time and was always meaningful to the communities in which she worked. In some ways, her integration of art making and community involvement can be seen as a spontaneous form of relational aesthetics well before that term gained currency.



Bernice Bing, *A Lady and a Road Map*, 1962, oil on canvas, 172.7 x 132 cm, collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, courtesy of the estate of Bernice Bing and the Asian Art Museum

In a note-to-self written in the 1970s, Bing talks about her wish to live ‘on the land’, her desire to make art in a ‘healthy and spiritual’ way. And, like many artists (without family money or financial backing), her note ends by stating the familiar: wanting to ‘find employment that would make the above possible’. What this exhibition celebrates is how she did that. In a small video in the corner of the gallery, viewers can hear artists Carlos Villa and Lenore Chinn directly talking about this part of her life. Villa states that Bing was one of the first to ‘really understand herself as a community-based person. She started off as a mainstream artist but then instead of going with galleries she showed up at non-profit venues.’ Chinn, who met Bing in the lesbian community and in the non-profit art sectors, agrees, stating that Bing was ‘one of the few Asian American women artists who received a kind of luminary status... she was self-effacing, a mentor and role model’.

Speculating that Bing’s desire for community organising may very well have stemmed from her childhood has some kind of logic, but the exhibition curator Abby Chen adds: ‘For me, Bing’s desire for community organizing is the form of the radical care that stemmed from her Buddhism practice, whether it is about nature or creating an ecosystem for artists who are marginalized.’⁶ While press releases and reviews note Bing’s exclusion from art establishments due to ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, this exhibition does something more than right those oversights. It establishes Bing’s agency as an artist who created a place not only for herself but for others. In that sense, the relevance of ‘Into View: Bernice Bing’ is all the more timely. It reminds us artists are part of a social organism that encompasses more than individual effort and that its rewards can be better summed up by a life of many parts.

Frances DeVuono is an art writer, artist and former Associate Professor of Art at the University of Colorado Denver. She was a Contributing Editor for *Artweek*, and her reviews and articles have appeared in magazines such as *Art in America*, *Arts*, *Art Papers*, *Sculpture Magazine* and *New Art Examiner*, among others, as well as here in *Third Text Online*. She currently lives in Berkeley, California.

⁶ Email from Asian Art Museum Contemporary Art Head and Senior Associate Curator Abby Chen, 9 January 2023