

## Taking in the work of Rene Yung

Judith van Praag

Coming to California with her family at age fourteen, Rene Yung was quite surprised by the lifestyle, and mores of American teenagers. Initially she hooked up with a brother and sister from Hong Kong. Back home they wouldn't have been friends, but as immigrants they sought each other out, longing for the comfort factor that comes with what's familiar. The latter notion appears to have steered Yung toward the work she does these days: investigating trans-cultural experience, questioning assumptions about culture and community.

After receiving her degree from Stanford University, Yung worked as a designer in the applied arts, creating packaging for companies such as Levi and Strauss. Ten years ago she made a big career change. She said farewell to her "I want to make profit" clients, and stepped into the –not for profit– art world to create mixed media art installations.

As a brander –creating the imago of a product or company– Yung used market psychology in an intuitive way. As a conceptual artist she uses the knowledge she gleaned over the years in a more conscious manner.

"My experience as a designer gave me discipline, and insight in system analysis. But, working in the arts gives me a better chance to survive with my integrity intact."

Fascinated by the way a culture unfolds in a new setting, Yung's aim is to make people conscious of the same. She wants to elicit feeling, awareness and thoughts with her projects. "The viewer starts with himself," she says.

Seattle may very well have become Yung's home away from home. During the past 3 years she spent many hours capturing the

stories of elderly inhabitants of the Kawabe Memorial House. The result a three-in-one art project. There's the permanent installation, where you can sit in a living room setting, put on the headphones, and listen to a CD with recorded oral history. And there's a card tree, filled with post card size copies of the sixteen pieces of art Yung created, inspired by the inhabitants' stories (one of the cards shows a pencil drawing of a kite, by the late Koichi Aoyoma). Of Yung's original artwork, eight pieces are on permanent display in the entrance hall.

For the International District/ Chinatown Public Library, Yung created "Wellspring", art made with close to 200 teacups donated by members of the community. Inspired by the cup—a cross-cultural symbol for bringing water (coffee or tea) to our lips. Yung hopes her artwork will help the community form deeper relationships. And who knows, inspired patrons, who meet at the library, may visit the adjacent cafe to share a pot of tea.

The moment you enter the library your eyes are drawn to 120 cups, mounted—set off against the red wall—on small wooden blocks, creating lines of longitude in an oval shape, resembling a global map. Other cups are embedded in resin blocks displayed on shelves, between books. A build-in "China cabinet" shows cups on shelves, sandwiched between glass panes, sandblasted with quoted phrases.

On Friday June 17, 2005, Yung's role in developing the art installation "Portals & Pathways - VIRSA: Our History" together with Sikh American Youth, was acknowledged at the Gurdwara Singh Sabha of Washington.

In the aftermath of 9/11 leaders of The Wing Luke Asian Museum had approached the Sikh community with a question: "Would their youth be interested in a project, which could (or should) obliterate the existing misconceptions about Sikhism?"

Rene Yung, known for her experience in working with groups, was invited to develop an art installation with the help of the Sikh young adults.

Over pizza and coca cola, the group discussed the different ways of living out their faith, Sikhism. They did research and chose a physical place as a central focus (Yung suggested the shape of the Harmandir Sahib, or Golden Temple, in Amrtsar, India as the basic layout), and added elements of culture + religion + spirituality. Yung worked one-on-one and with the group as a whole. The result is a true collaborative work.

The participants drew associative images, learned how to enlarge in scale, and painted the tiles that would surround the central point of concentration; Plexiglas, representing a water surface, engraved with a bilingual text about the essence of Sikhism.

Yung calls herself a closet writer (she enjoyed a residency at Hedgebrook in 2000), in July you can hear what comes out of her pen. Poetry, layers of sound, silence and narrative recorded during a "New Media Gallery Residency" at Jack Straw Studios in 2004, form the audio component of her mixed media installation "Four Dignities". Yung hopes visitors of the installation will become aware of an active state of listening, whether taking in the sounds sitting, standing, walking or lying down.

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