

BERNICE BING (1936–1998)

The Chinese American painter Bernice Bing faced and surmounted many struggles over the course of her career. Growing up in Caucasian San Francisco foster homes and experiencing the residual effects of the Chinese Exclusion Act (established in 1882), Bing, known affectionately as Bingo, struggled to assimilate into American life while also seeking a connection to a Chinese cultural heritage from which she felt estranged.¹ In the 1960s, she was at the center of the Beat arts scene in San Francisco, absorbed the methods of her teachers, including Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff, Frank Lobdell, and Saburō Hasegawa, and was active as a community organizer. She also endeavored to attain a knowledge of Chinese and Asian practices and methods, in her studies with Hasegawa, a trip to Asia in 1984, and in a Buddhist practice late in her life. In painting, she found a language with which to explore the theme of the complexity of identity and what it means to assimilate cultures. The poet/critic John Yau titled a 2022 article on Bing, “Search for a Unified Self,” in which he stated: “Her search was not about style, being fashionable, or fitting in. It was about trying to acknowledge the multiple worlds one inhabits.”² As an independent-minded queer Chinese American woman artist, Bing fell outside the norms of the art world of her time and her due recognition has mainly occurred posthumously. In 2020, *Bingo: The Life and Art of Bernice Bing* was held at the Sonoma Valley Museum, and in 2022–23, *Into the View: Bernice Bing* was organized by the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco. Her archives belong to Stanford University, Palo Alto, California, and she is represented in several public collections, including the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; the Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University; and Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Bernice Bing was born in San Francisco’s Chinatown on April 10, 1936, to parents both with southern Chinese ancestry. Her father emigrated from China in his thirties and her mother, born in the US, was eighteen when she gave birth to Bernice. Bernice’s mother and aunt worked as dancers and hat girls in the cabaret follies in Chinatown’s “Forbidden City.” After her mother’s death from heart disease in 1941, Bernice and her sister Lolita were placed in foster homes, and at one time lived in the Ming Quong Home (a girls’ custodial residence in Oakland’s Chinatown). Occasionally they stayed with their maternal grandmother, a Chinese immigrant. For Bing she represented “the old country, bringing over her feelings of anger and subservience, but her strength, too.”³ Bing attended a middle-class white school, where she struggled to unite two cultures. At the time, she felt that drawing, in which she demonstrated an early facility, was “the thing that kept me connected.”⁴

Bing won several local and regional art contests while attending Oakland Technical High School. After graduating in 1955, she enrolled on a National Scholastic Award scholarship in the California College of the Arts. Her time at the college was brief but consequential. After beginning as an advertising major, she switched to painting. Her teachers included Nathan Oliveira, Saburō Hasegawa and Richard Diebenkorn. Fellow students were Manuel Neri and George Miyasaki. Bing was especially awed by Hasegawa (who died in March 1957). She recalled that the Japanese-born artist wore a long black robe and used Zen meditation in his art, in which he merged Japanese traditional and Western abstract methods. Bing found Hasegawa’s work “dreamy abstract and quite calligraphic and

beautiful.” She remarked that he introduced her to “a whole attitude that was completely foreign to me” and commented, “I had no idea what it meant to be an Asian woman, and he got me started thinking about that.”⁵ Hasegawa initiated her “pursuit of more knowledge of the poetry and thought of Po Chü-i, Chuang Tzu, Lao Tzu, Shakyamuni, and Wang Hsi-chih, the ‘calligraphic sage.’”⁶

Bing transferred in 1958 to the California School of Fine Arts, receiving her BFA in the following year. The school became the San Francisco Art Institute in 1960 and Bing received her MFA there in 1961 (she was in the school’s first master’s class). Her teachers at the Institute included Elmer Bischoff and Frank Lobdell. During her student years, her studio was above the Spaghetti Factory in San Francisco’s North Beach, where she worked to support herself while taking part in the lively Beat Generation art scene in the city. Among her friends were the abstract painters Joan Brown, Wally Hedrick, Jay DeFeo, Bruce Conner, and Fred Martin. She recalled that at the time her mentors, muses, and totems were, “among abstractionists, de Kooning, Kline, Motherwell, Still; in jazz, Coltrane, Coleman, Monk, Mingus; in poetry Stein, Pound, Genet, Rilke; in literature, Camus, Gide, Hesse, Mann, de Beauvoir; in the theater Beckett, Genet, Albee; and in art films, Bergman, Antonioni, Fellini.”⁷

In 1960, Bing accompanied Brown, who had become a close friend, to New York, where Brown had a show at Staempfli Gallery. There Bing met Marcel Duchamp, which she considered a “thrilling experience,” visited the mansion of Alfonso Ossorio on Long Island, and saw the work of artists such as Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning.⁸ Bing’s first solo exhibition was in October–November 1961 at the black-walled Batman Gallery in San Francisco, a short-lived alternative space.⁹ Bruce Conner wrote the introduction to the catalogue for the show. It included dynamic abstract and semi-figurative works that Bing based on Diego Velázquez’s famous *Las Meninas*, notably *Velázquez Family*. In the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Alfred Frankenstein reported that Bing “has a remarkable gift for fluid line . . . carried to the verge of abstraction in some extremely good small drawings. Her paintings are huge and are most remarkable for the majestic sternness of their blacks and reds.”¹⁰

In July 1963, the California-based painter, curator, and art critic, James Monte, published an article about Bing in *Artforum*. He observed that while the paintings in her first exhibition had fed off remembered figurative works executed earlier, she had now added “personalized non-specific references to metropolitan life, forced into the picture plane with a determination which is overpowering.” To Monte, Bing’s paintings transcended “beauty in the mundane sense. The onlooker’s appreciation begins with feeling her work as an unnamable emotional pressure that slowly subsides while the individual formal aspects of the works present themselves as the encounter lengthens.”¹¹ From 1963 to 1966, Bing served as the caretaker of Mayacamas Vineyards in the Napa Valley, seventy-five miles from San Francisco. Country life was an adjustment for her, but the time was very productive, resulting in many abstract organic canvases, in which she expressed what she described in her journals as the miraculous “birth and re-birth in nature.”¹² When she had a two-artist show (with Margot Campbell) at the Berkeley Gallery in 1964, a review by

Elizabeth M. Polley appeared in *Artforum*, commenting that Bing had begun “to see the landscape as environment, and to enjoy it as such.”¹³

Bing had been reading the writings of the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung on the unconscious and dream worlds when she joined the first residential program at Esalen Institute in Big Sur. There she absorbed herself in New Age Psychology and Philosophy, and met “all the greats,” including Abraham Maslow, Joseph Campbell, Alan Watts, R. D. Laing, and Fritz Perls. Bing developed a friendship with Perls.¹⁴ She began artworld and community involvement in 1968 when she served on a panel for the National Endowment for the Arts Expansion Program, Washington, D.C. She also worked as an assistant to the filmmaker Loni Ding, which immersed her for the first time in the Chinese American community in San Francisco. From 1980 to 1984 she served as the first executive director of the South of Market Cultural Center, (now known as SOMArts) which was committed to bringing arts into local communities. Deciding she needed to return to making art, she left the position in 1984. Subsequently she took a three-month trip to Asia, visiting Korea, Japan, and China. During her travels, she gave lectures on Abstract Expressionism to art students and spent six weeks studying Chinese calligraphy with Wang Dongling and Chinese landscape painting with Professor Yang at the Zhejiang Academy in Hangzhou.

On her return to the US in 1985, Bing moved to Philo, a small town in Mendocino. There she worked in an outdoor studio near her apartment and supported herself as a waitress and cook as well as a counselor at a youth rehabilitation center. By this time, she had become a practicing Buddhist and was proficient in Chinese calligraphy. In 1988, she was included in a two-artist show at Winona Gallery, Mendocino, and joined the newly formed Bay Area Asian American Women Artists Association. Two years later, she was one of six artists selected for *Completing the Circle*, an exhibition featuring Northern California Chinese American artists that was held at the Southern Exposure Gallery, San Francisco. The last solo show of Bing’s lifetime was in 1991 at the South of Market Cultural Center, San Francisco. Group exhibitions in her last years included *Time Echoes*, organized by the Asian American Women Artists Association and held at the University of California, Davis (1993); a three-artist exhibition at the Asian American Arts Center, New York (1993); *Women on the Silk Road*, Gallery on the Rim, San Francisco (1994); *With New Eyes: Towards an Asian American Arts History*, San Francisco State University Gallery (1995); *Art in Perpetuity*, Nuyorican Poets Café, New York (1995); and *Beats*, a show in conjunction with the M. H. De Young Memorial Museum (1996). Bing was selected by the National Women Caucus for the Arts Visual Arts Honor Award in 1996, in partnership with a group exhibition at the Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.

Bing died from cancer in Philo in 1998. She was subsequently given attention primarily by the queer arts community. In 2013, the filmmaker Madeleine Lim made the documentary “The Worlds of Bernice Bing.” It took nearly a quarter century before Bing received broader art world appreciation and the recognition that her achievement had been overlooked. She was featured with a biography in the catalogue for the exhibition, *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, organized by the Denver Art Museum. In 2020 Stanford University Libraries acquired Bing’s archive, opening new pathways for research into her life and work. In 2020,

Bingo: The Life and Art of Bernice Bing was held at the Sonoma Valley Museum and in 2022–23, the Asian Art Museum organized *Into View: Bernice Bing*, featuring her paintings, drawings, and journal excerpts. Many reviews covered the show. Bing has also been the subject of a comic book, an issue of a children’s magazine, and a [zine](#) created by a Stanford scholar, including material from the Bing archive.

Lisa N. Peters, PhD

Born, 1936, Chinatown, San Francisco, California
Died, 1998, Philo, California

BFA/MFA, San Francisco Art Institute, 1959-1961

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Batman Gallery, San Francisco, California, 1961.
California College of Arts & Crafts Gallery, Oakland, California, 1968.
South of Market Cultural Center, San Francisco, California, 1991.
Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, California, *BINGO: The Life and Art of Bernice Bing*, 2019-2020.
Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, California, *Into View: Bernice Bing*, 2022-2023.
Berry Campbell, New York, *Bernice Bing: BINGO*, 2024.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

The Cellar, San Francisco, 1959.
Batman Gallery, San Francisco, *Gangbang*, 1960.
New Mission Gallery, San Francisco, 1960.
San Francisco Museum of Art, California, *San Francisco 80th Annual Exhibition*, 1960.
Berkeley Gallery, Berkeley, California, 1964.
San Francisco Museum of Art, California, *San Francisco 85th Annual Exhibition*, 1966.
Esalen Institute Gallery, Big Sur, California, 1966.
Vorpall Gallery, San Francisco, California, 1966.
Cellini Gallery, San Francisco, California, *Rolling Renaissance*, 1968.
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California, 1976.
San Francisco Art Institute Gallery, California, *Other Sources: An American Essay*, 1976.
San Francisco Art Commission Gallery, San Francisco, California, *Bicentennial Landscape Exhibition*, 1976.
SOMAR Gallery Space, San Francisco, California, *San Francisco Art Institute Alumnae Exhibition*, 1983.
SOMAR Gallery Space, San Francisco, *Northern California Women’s Caucus for the Arts Show*, 1983.
Winona Gallery, Mendocino, California, *Two Women*, 1988.
Imagnes Vivas, Soiedad Mexicana de Arts Plasticas, Somart San Angel, Villa Obregon, Mexico City, Mexico, *Exhibition of Works by San Francisco Artists*, 1989.
Southern Exposure Gallery, San Francisco, California, *Completing the Circle*, 1990.
Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, California, *Completing the Circle*, 1992.
Asian American Arts Centre, New York, *Milieu: Part I*, 1993.
The Forman Museum, University of California, Davis, *Time Echoes*, 1993.
San Francisco Art Institute, One Market Plaza, California, *(R)evolution*, 1993.

San Francisco State University Gallery, California, *With new Eyes: Towards an Asian American Arts History*, 1995.

Nuyorican Poets Café, New York, *Art in perpetuity*, 1995.

M.F. de Young Memorial Museum, South of Market Cultural Center, San Francisco, California, *Beats*, 1996.

The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, *Asian Traditions/Modern Expressions: Asian American Artists & Abstraction, 1940-1970*, 1997-1998.

(Traveled to Chicago Cultural Center; Fisher Gallery, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California; Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles, California, 1998.

Southern Exposure Gallery, San Francisco, California, *Chinese American Artists*, 1998.

L.A. Hyder Gallery, Mendocino, California, *Women Artists Beyond Reason*, 2017.

Berry Campbell, New York, *West Coast Women of Abstract Expressionism*, 2023.

Berry Campbell, New York, *Perseverance*, 2024.

COLLECTIONS

Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, California

De Young Memorial Museum, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, California

Femmes Artistes Musée Mougins, France

¹ Sources on Bing include Linda Keaton, Susan Landauer, and Jennifer Banta, *Bingo: The Life and Art of Bernice Bing*, exh. cat. (Sonoma, Calif.: Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, 2019) and Moira Roth, “A Narrative Chronology,” Queer Cultural Center website, based on a series of taped audio and video interviews with Bernice Bing in the fall of 1990 and the summer of 1991, material in the artist’s archives (now Stanford University), and quotations from Bing’s text in the exhibition catalogue, *Completing the Circle: Six Artists*, edited by Florence Wong and George Rivera and sponsored by the Asian Heritage Council, Festival 2000, the Triton Museum of Art and Southern Exposure gallery, 1990. <https://queerculturalcenter.org/chronology-by-moira-roth/>.

² John Yau, “Bernice Bing’s Search for a Unified Self,” *Hyperallergic*, November 10, 2022. <https://hyperallergic.com/777991/bernice-bing-search-for-a-unified-self/>

³ Cited in Roth.

⁴ Cited in Roth.

⁵ Cited in Roth.

⁶ Cited in Roth.

⁷ Cited in Roth.

⁸ Noted in Roth.

⁹ On the Batman Gallery, see Jack Foley, “O Her Blackness Sparkles!” *The Life and Times of the Batman Art Gallery, San Francisco 1960–1965* (San Francisco: 3300 Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Alfred Frankenstein 1961 review in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, cited in Roth.

¹¹ James Monte, “Three San Francisco Artists,” *Artforum* 2 (July 1963): 31.

¹² Bing, entry in *Thoughts and Visual and Non-visual Forms*, 1964, Bing papers, Bernice Bing Estate. Cited in Landauer, “The Dual Worlds of Bernice Bing,” in Keaton and Landauer, p. 15.

¹³ Elizabeth M. Polley, “Bernice Bing, Margot Campbell,” *Artforum* 2 (May 1964): 46–47.

¹⁴ Cited in Roth.