

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Chinese-American artist uses video to examine identity

By Wanda Jackson
Sentinel Arts Writer

"I'm not interested in making objects, but I am interested in creating environmental installations with objects," artist Joyce Yu-Jean Lee said. "I enjoy working with images, but prefer to work with an immaterial medium, so projected video is a great fit for me. It's ephemeral and temporal, and taken out of the context of a screen or monitor, has the ability to meld sculpturally into the environment and transform spaces into installations."

Lee's latest work titled "Passages II" is being exhibited at the Montpelier Arts Center in Laurel through May 27.

"Passages II" is the third installment of her Travelogues series, where she catalogues travels in China and Western Europe. Inspired by the cultural crossovers of the Western world into China, Lee focuses on the cultural and social transformation of current day China through photographs, video projection and a documentary.

"I want viewers to contemplate how China's economic transformation is being fueled by Western nations like the U.S., and how American trade is shaping a new Chinese culture," Lee said. "As a Chinese-American, it's profound to me how China has dramatically changed in just three generations, from a Japanese-occupied nation during the Sec-

ond Sino-Japanese War to a communist state to now a socialist market economy. This rapid change results in all sorts of lost cultural histories and artifacts, gaps that I am looking to fill in as an artist."

Lee's installation includes five face-mounted archival prints and two videos. She says that her photographs show impersonal glimpses at Chinese citizens living in spaces and places that her family left behind two generations ago in China and document China's native environment.

"These citizens are not frequent travelers, but rooted and stationed there, proper residents in their home country," Lee said.

In Lee's print titled "La Da P'ien Peep Show on Hefang Street, Wushan Square, Hangzhou" a young man and woman watch a folktale unfold through a series of hand-painted screens. The central figure in the photograph manually pulls the screens and orates the scenes by singing a traditional folk song. According to Lee, peep shows are an example of fading Chinese oral and performance history.

Another work by Lee titled "Travelogues: Passages" is a triptych video. It simultaneously shows three train trips in Italy, China and Germany.

"Through this side-by-side comparison of industrialized rural landscape and towns, one can see the uncanny similarities in architecture, transportation and infrastructure that China has adopted based on

Western designs," Lee said.

The videos are edited so that it appears the viewer is actually on board the train; for the most part, train platforms, public-address system announcements and landscapes in each video are more alike, than they are different, and resemble commercial and commuter systems in the U.S.

Lee's video titled "Unfolding Nai Nai" is a joint documentary with her father, who traveled to Taiwan to interview his mother during her 96th birthday. Because her grandmother is deaf and illiterate, Lee felt that her father could better guide the filmed interview.

"I gave my father a script of questions to ask and a shot list of things to film in Taiwan," Lee said. "This collaboration was rewarding. I learned more about both my grandmother and my father in the process."

The video chronicles the family's emigration to Taiwan, then to the U.S. as refugees during the Chinese Communist Revolution.

Why would a 5,000 year-old culture replicate images of the West?

"Power," Lee said. "As the most populous country in the world, China has always had its hands full governing and providing for its own people. With the political stability established since the 1950s, China has turned its eyes on mobilizing its citizens to Italy, Germany and the U.S., featured in my videos. It fol-



PHOTO BY WANDA JACKSON

Pictured above is Joyce Yu-Jean Lee's face-mounted archival print titled "Travelogue 8.17.11: La Da P'ien Peep Show on Hefang Street, Wushan Square, Hangzhou." In this age-old tradition in China, a storyteller manually pulls hand-painted screens and orates scenes in folktales.

lows that Western cultures are upheld by the Chinese as a model for modernization and aesthetics, too."

Lee, a native of Dallas, Texas, works and teaches at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. She has a Master of Fine Arts from the Mount Royal School of Art at MICA, and a bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania. She is the recipient of the 2011-2013 C. Sylvia and Eddie Brown Studio, the 2010 Henry Walters Traveling Scholarship and a Joan Mitchell Fellowship to the Vermont Studio Cen-

ter. Her residencies include the Centre D'Art Marnay Art Centre in France, Blue Sky Project in Ohio and the Goldwell Open Air Museum in Nevada. Recently, Lee helped launch a one-month cultural exchange artist residency in Beijing, China, called AIR Projects.

To learn more about Lee's video installation, call the Montpelier Arts Center at 301-377-7800 or visit arts.pgparcs.com. The Montpelier Arts Center is located at 9652 Muirkirk Road, Laurel and it's open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.