

# May-lee Chai's Blog

## Blog about May-lee Chai's books & writing

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## Navigating the underCurrents Poetry Reading!

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Save the date! I'm curating this poetry reading:

## Poetry Reading: Navigating the underCurrents, May 15

[.\(http://www.somarts.org/wp-content/uploads/doidare.jpg\)](http://www.somarts.org/wp-content/uploads/doidare.jpg)

**What:** Poetry Reading: Navigating the underCurrents

**When:** Wednesday, May 15, 7–8:30pm

**Where:** 934 Brannan St. (between 8th & 9th)

**How Much:** Free admission.

Bay Area author and international journalist, May-lee Chai curates this poetry reading inspired and surrounded by the socio-political visual art works during the [underCurrents & the Quest for Space](http://www.somarts.org/undercurrents/) (http://www.somarts.org/undercurrents/) art exhibition at SOMArts Cultural Center, as part of Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center's (APICC's) Annual United States of Asian American Art Festival.

The activist poets read their original poems in reaction to specific art pieces, challenging the status quo and proposing new aesthetic spaces. The reading, which will take place in front of the art piece that inspired each poet, will question our concepts and assumptions of gender, race, class, nationality, and the constructed femininity used to silence Asian American women throughout history.

### POETS INCLUDE:

**Amy K. Bell** writes fiction and poetry. Her chapbook, *Book of Sibil*, is forthcoming from The Gorilla Press ([thegorillapress.com](http://thegorillapress.com)). She studies writing at San Francisco State University's MFA program and lives in Oakland. Find more of her work at [amykbell.com](http://amykbell.com).

**Susan Calvillo** is a Chinese- and Mexican-American poet whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in *West Wind Review*, *New American Writing*, *Zyzyva*, *LUMINA*, *Davis Poetry Anthology*, *Gesture Zine*, and others. An excerpt of her *Dual Duel* poetry collection received an honorable mention from The Academy of American Poets for the Harold Taylor Prize.

**Ploy Pirapokin** is a Thai born, Hong Kong native, and an MFA candidate in Fiction at San Francisco State University. Her work will be featured in the sixth anthology of the World Englishes Literature series coming late 2013, and she has been accepted to the post-MFA summer residency at the City University of Hong Kong. She is now working on a collection of short stories grounded in Asia focusing on themes such as identity development, third world culture kids, and scary Asian parents.

**Shobha Rao** is currently pursuing an MFA at San Francisco State University. Her work has been published by Gorilla Press and in the anthology *Building Bridges* and will be forthcoming in *Tincture*. She was awarded the Gita Specker First Place Award for Best Dramatic Monologue by the San Francisco Browning Society in 2013. Previously she practiced as a lawyer in the areas of domestic violence and immigration law. She lives in San Francisco.

**Shizue Seigel** is a third-generation Japanese American writer and visual artist whose paintings, mixed media and photo collage explore complex intersections of history, culture and spirituality. Her artwork has appeared in local, national and international group exhibitions. She authored [In Good Conscience](http://www.shizueseigel.com/InGoodConscience.htm) (http://www.shizueseigel.com/InGoodConscience.htm): *Supporting Japanese Americans During the Internment* and her poetry and prose have been published in numerous anthologies.

**Bory Thach** was born in Khao I Dang, a refugee camp on the Thai and Cambodian border. He is an Iraq War veteran and graduate M.F.A. student at California State University San Bernardino. He enjoys writing fiction and poetry. He currently lives in San Bernardino, CA.

**Frances Kai-Hwa Wang** is a second-generation Chinese American from California who now divides her time between Michigan and the Big Island of Hawai'i. She was the arts and culture editor of *IMDiversity.com* Asian American Village, wrote a nationally syndicated column called "Adventures in Multicultural Living," and is also a contributor for *New America Media's Ethnoblog*, *Chicago is the World*, *Pacific Citizen*, *InCultureParent.com*, and *HuffPost Live*. She is the author of *Imaginary Affairs—Postcards from an Imagined Life* and *Where the Lava Meets the Sea—Asian Pacific American Postcards from Hawaii*, available at [Blacklava.net](http://blacklava.net). Check out her blog at [franceskaihwawang.blogspot.com](http://franceskaihwawang.blogspot.com) and her website at [franceskaihwawang.com](http://franceskaihwawang.com).

#### CURATOR:

May-lee Chai is the author of seven books, including the memoir *Hapa Girl*, which was a 2008 Kiriya Prize Notable Book, and most recently the novel *Dragon Chica*. A former reporter for the Associated Press, she is a frequent contributor to *The Jakarta Post Weekender Magazine*. Her fiction and essays have appeared in numerous journals, magazines, and anthologies. She is the recipient of an NEA grant in literature.

#### PRESENTERS:

**Asian American Women Artists Association (AAWAA)** is a nonprofit arts organization dedicated to ensuring the visibility and documentation of Asian American women in the arts. Through exhibitions, publications, and educational programs, we offer thought-provoking perspectives that challenge societal assumptions and promote dialogue. [www.aawaa.net](http://www.aawaa.net) (<http://www.aawaa.net/>).

**Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center (APICC)** supports and produces multi-disciplinary art reflective of the unique experiences of Asian Pacific Islanders living in the United States. *underCurrents* is featured as part of Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center's (APICC) 16th Annual United States of Asian America Festival at SOMArts Cultural Center. [www.apiculturalcenter.org](http://www.apiculturalcenter.org) (<http://www.apiculturalcenter.org>).

*Pictured: Alexandra Lee's "Do I Dare"*

(From the SOMArts web calendar. Written by Jess in News)

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## Asian American Women Artists: A Place of Her Own in San Francisco

Posted in [Art](#), [Asian American Art](#), [Asian Pacific American](#), [Interviews](#), [pictures](#), [Weekender Articles](#), tagged [aawaa](#), [Asian American Women Artists](#), [asian american women artists association](#), [cynthia tom](#), [indonesian american artists](#), [Indonesian women](#), [irene wibawa](#), [nining muir](#), [San Francisco artists](#), [shari arai deboer](#), [vivian truong](#) on December 22, 2011 | [3 Comments »](#)

This December my article on Asian American women artists in the San Francisco Bay Area appeared in *The Jakarta Post Weekender Magazine* (<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/11/30/a-place-her-own.html>). I really enjoyed interviewing the artists and getting to see their extraordinary work. I could only scratch the surface in this article, but I hope it gives everyone a taste of the exciting work that these artists are creating. For more examples, people living in the SF Bay Area can check out the Asian American Women Artists Association website [www.aawaa.net](http://www.aawaa.net) (<http://www.aawaa.net/artists/index.php>) or individual artist's websites, such as Nining Muir's at [www.niningmuir.com](http://www.niningmuir.com) (<http://www.niningmuir.com>).

To see how the article appeared in the Weekender Magazine, you can download the pdf here: "[A Place of Her Own](https://mayleechai.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/weekender_dec_2011_may-lee.pdf)" ([https://mayleechai.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/weekender\\_dec\\_2011\\_may-lee.pdf](https://mayleechai.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/weekender_dec_2011_may-lee.pdf)).

I've also pasted the text below with the permission of *The Weekender* editor so that people who follow my blog can read about these amazing artists and the San Francisco-based Asian American Women Artists Association. (Note: the pdf shows the much nicer layout from the magazine)

A Place of Her Own:

San Francisco's Asian American Women Artists

By May-lee Chai

What does it mean to be an Asian American woman artist today?

Apart from superstars like Maya Lin and Yoko Ono, very few Asian American women artists ever make it into the public eye.

But one San Francisco-based art group is working to change that invisibility.

"Most of this country has not talked to an Asian person," said artist Cynthia Tom. She recalls participating in an art exhibit in Indianapolis where she stood in a room full of people, but no one came up to talk to her. At first she felt perhaps they hadn't liked her paintings. After she approached a few people, she realized that the problem was far more basic. "They weren't sure I could speak English."

That's one of the reasons why Tom has dedicated herself to increasing the public's awareness of Asian American women artists.

Tom is the current president of AAWAA, the Asian American Women Artists Association based in San Francisco, the first national organization dedicated to promoting such art.

"We fight for recognition all the time," said Tom.

For this reason, for the past few years AAWAA has created an innovative series of exhibits and workshops to bring artists and the public together. Called "A Place of Her Own," after the famous Virginia Woolfe essay about a woman needing a room of her own in order to be creative, the project asks, "If you had a place of your own, what would it be?"

Asian American women artists were invited to create original art installations that would answer this question and allow members of the public to participate in this “space.”

For example, artist Vivian Truong made a giant bathtub filled with foam “bubbles” and surrounded it with giant papier-mâché boulders covered with her own Post-It note “To do” lists. Members of the public were encouraged to write down on Post-It notes things that they wanted to let go of and stick them onto a giant cork board on the wall. Then they could climb into the giant tub and relax.

Another of the exhibits’ biggest hits was Irene Wibawa’s miniature dioramas that fit inside baby food jars. People could walk around her mini-worlds and imagine the life of the tiny characters depicted.



(<https://mayleechai.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/irene-wibawa-jar-escape.jpg>)

“I wanted to make my dioramas in jars using everyday materials. I wanted to say you don’t have to have a lot of money to make art. It’s accessible to everyone,” Wibawa said.

Wibawa, who is a biological science technician with the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture), says she came up with her idea because of her work. “I work with plants and insects. I look into a microscope, looking for damage to leaves. Some of the insects are so small, you have to pick them up with an eyelash attached to a toothpick. So I thought, ‘If I were this mite or this beetle, I’d want to hide. Where would I hide?’”

Besides engaging the public, the art exhibits also allowed the women to get to know each other. Because most of the women also have day jobs outside the art world, it can be hard to get to know other artists or have any sense of community.

(<https://mayleechai.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/irene-wibawa.jpg>).

Wibawa has felt this lack since immigrating to the U.S. from Indonesia when she was eight. “I’m always disappointed when I go to the Asian American section of anything and Southeast Asian women are less represented. The numbers aren’t there,” she said. “I wanted to join AAWAA if for no other reason than to say, ‘I’m Indonesian and I’m here.’”

In fact, through AAWAA’s exhibits, Wibawa was able to meet San Francisco-based artist Nining Muir, who like Wibawa was born in Indonesia.

“Prior to joining AAWAA, I didn’t know there were other Indonesian American women artists!” Wibawa said.

Muir echoed that feeling of excitement. In fact, she said her primary reason for joining AAWAA was to counter the sense of not having a community in America since she moved to San Francisco

with her husband in 1996.

“I think it was a little surprise that there’s such a group of Asian American women artists,” Muir said. “Not that I wanted that label. But then I ran into Irene so I joined. I’m here as a foreigner, no family, so it’s a comfort thing.”

Muir feels their Indonesian heritage is in many ways more conducive to creating art than America’s culture. “In Indonesia, we think of art as a part of life. It’s a little bit exclusive here [in America],” Muir noted.

([https://mayleechai.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/nining\\_muir\\_double\\_me.jpg](https://mayleechai.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/nining_muir_double_me.jpg))

Muir who liked to work in wood as a sculptor in Indonesia now primarily paints, as wood is prohibitively expensive in the U.S. Her artwork has been featured in eleven exhibits and ten group shows in San Francisco since 2006.

Most recently, Muir’s oil paintings have been of cows. “I’m fascinated by cows because of the Hindu background, the holy cows concept from Indonesia,” she said.

Her latest series, entitled “This Little Sapi,” using the Indonesian word for cow, was inspired by a recent trip back to visit family.

When she discovered her nephew was thrilled with the English nursery rhyme “Five Little Pigs,” Muir decided to make paintings of the rhyme, but substituting cows for pigs.

The result is a series of five delightfully whimsical paintings depicting life-size heads of cows poking out of a red barn, each titled after one line of the re-invented nursery rhyme: “This Little Sapi Went to the Market,” “This Little Sapi Went Home,” “This Little Sapi Had Roast Pork,” and so on.

Muir is amused by the reactions from the public. She remembers at one show, a few male patrons came up to her and expressed their surprise. “They were shocked. They didn’t think a small female would paint such cows!” she said.

It is exactly this type of reversal of expectations that fuels AAWAA and its members.

“Some people question us, [asking] do you still need a women’s organization?” said artist and AAWAA board member Shari Arai DeBoer. “And we say, ‘Yes!’”

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