

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Canvassing for young, diverse artists

By Janice Nesamani
NORTHWEST ASIAN WEEKLY

A tapestry of a skinless face, sparrows on a bullet-riddled target sheet, a burning sun and planet closing in on a bird, and contemplative self-portraits give you a peek into some things that run through the minds of youngsters we term as Gen Z. Bringing together videos, interactive 3D pieces, paper cutouts, threaded works, digital pieces, and traditional artwork under the theme “The Modern Youth Identity” were two Eastside high schoolers Alice Mao and Taylor Wang in their first exhibition at the Seattle Artists League.

Mao, 17, and Wang, 15, are both artists with Chinese roots and vividly-colored dreams most of us had as teenagers. Their dream is a more inclusive space for young artists, where students can showcase their art, a comment on the lack of artists they can relate to today.

Mao and Wang know how expensive it is to showcase art.

“Application fees, shipping fees, and printing fees are really high and as young students, it becomes difficult to come up with the money to be able to present your work,” Mao said. When she kept running into fellow artist Wang in art class, they connected and their ideas took the shape of Student Art Spaces (SAS). The girls created a website, social media platforms, and crowdfunded their first exhibition over Labor Day weekend held at Seattle Artist League, an art school that Mao attends. The exhibition was put together after a nationwide call for entries. It received over 180 submissions of which about 50 were selected.



From left: Taylor Wang, Ruthie V., and Alice Mao at The Modern Youth Identity

Ruthie V., who runs Seattle Artist League with co-founder Lendy Hensely, mentored Mao and Wang, but

admits she also learned from them.

“They came to me with a list of very good questions and asked for my advice. The best thing is that they actually took it and used it,” Ruthie V. said. She gave the girls practical advice on how to set up the gallery and use wire to display the paintings.

“I was impressed with the colors, composition, and use of text in the artwork. It’s very different from the mediums that my generation of artists use. I also learned more from them, in the way they used social media to put together the exhibition,” she said.

Ruthie V.’s reaction bears testament to another goal Mao and Wang set out to accomplish through “Modern Youth Identity”—communication.

“There’s this big generational gap. We’re all on Instagram and the older generation are out there in real galleries. There isn’t as much communication as there

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should be. This is our way of trying to bring these facets together,” Wang said. To drive this home, almost every art piece had the artist’s Instagram handle. Mao added, “We had someone in her 60s come in yesterday. She was excited about how we as artists express our political ideas and saw the topics we care about.”

“We wanted the art to reflect the experience of being a young person in today’s age and targeted our generation to try and make them see how it feels to be a young person with an outlet to represent their identity,” Wang said. “At our age, between 15 and 21, you’re in a state of life where you’re uncertain of where you’re going. You’re a kid, but also an adult,” Wang said standing before her self-portrait that seemed to mull the same uncertainties.

A few steps away, a bespectacled young Asian girl in pink cuts into a bleeding cake. The painting, “Love,” is by Angela Bi and delves into the meaning of love, especially in Asian families that often comes with high expectations. Given that most Asian parents prefer their children choose careers in medicine, law, or engineering, Mao and Wang seem to be coloring outside the lines.

“We’ve had many conversations like this,” they said.

“In the beginning, our parents said we have no clue what we’re doing with this gallery thing, but maybe we will support it. Now that they have seen it all put together, they think it’s amazing,” Wang said. Mao’s parents are supportive, too. She feels her father’s decision to quit Microsoft and risk his own startup fuels her to pursue a career in the arts.

“I’m thankful because I know a lot of my artist friends’ parents are not that supportive,” she said.

Wang plans to pursue a double major in art and business.

“I think business is very important because if we didn’t know anything about it, we wouldn’t be able to organize something this big and successful. This is something we plan to focus on in our next project.”

Many first-time artists had a chance to showcase their work in an exhibition, and Mao and Wang feel validated.

“We’re hearing things like, ‘I hope to see you at your next exhibition or at your own solo art show. It boosts our confidence,’” Mao said. “Our GPA may not be the best compared to other Asian kids in our community, where there is pressure from a very young age to have that 4.0. But how many of them would have been able to pull this off? This real-life experience is very important and it’s also important to do what you love,” Wang said. ■

Janice can be reached at editor@nwasianweekly.com.



Ruthie V. gets an impromptu lesson in using social media from Alice Mao and Taylor Wang.



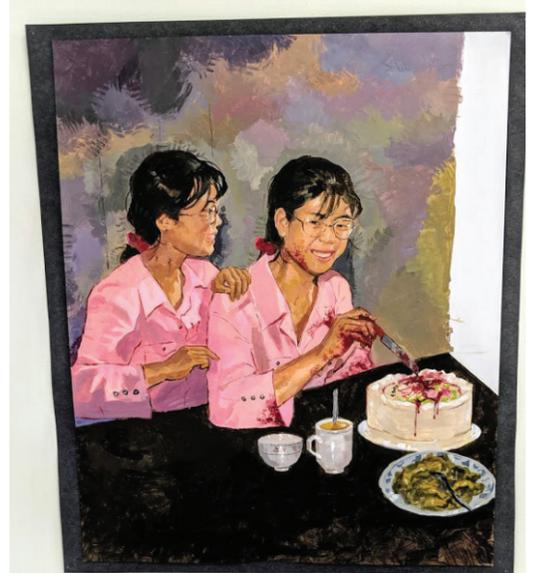
(Art on far left) Taylor Wang captures the feeling of isolation her generation feels in her self-portrait, “Introvert.”



Alice Mao’s piece “Spiral” was inspired by the colors of the sky when smoke from the forest fires settled over the Pacific Northwest.



Jessica Lin’s pieces titled Asian, Bairen challenge the representation of Asian women in mainstream media.



Angela Bi takes a look at the love and pressure of expectation in Asian families.

Photos provided by The Modern Youth Identity

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“manufactured crisis,” meant to create opposition to the way the SBT funds were always meant to be used.

“It was a false argument to say that the funding for these programs was in peril, or the City Council was cutting it, when that is absolutely not the case. In fact, if we are looking at 2020, the mayor has the opportunity to include those programs in General Funds, as was always the case,” Mosqueda said in a later phone interview.

The mixed messages from the city’s highest levels of government has created confusion amongst the city’s community partners, Mosqueda said, because the way the mayor’s office has worded the issue makes it sound as though there will be no funding, if the SBT revenue is channeled into a special fund. But this isn’t true: even if the mayor decides not to listen to the City Council’s veto, Mosqueda said the budget must pass through council for tweaks, before it becomes official.

“If the mayor doesn’t send out a budget that has those dollars included, we will advocate to amend the budget to keep these organizations whole,” Mosqueda said. “Organizations are already operating on very thin margins. ... We shouldn’t be creating unnecessary havoc when we still have the means in front of us to create a budget that keeps these

organizations whole with General Fund dollars.”

The confusion has played out within community organizations’ leadership. From what she understands, ACRS Communications Manager Liza Javier said the food bank’s funding is secure through 2020 and, as such, the ACRS does not have a plan in place, if the budget goes through as the mayor wants, and SBT funding should run out in 2021. However, because the SBT is so new, the ACRS doesn’t have any allocation history to go on.

“We definitely support having those funds support our organizations and the funds that go towards our nutrition programs. But to supplant the funds is a completely different ball game altogether,” Javier said. “That is not what we would call a stable source of funding for us.”

Frank Miranda is service organization Solid Ground’s Food System Support Program Manager, and has been an SBT organizer on behalf of the Seattle Food Committee, which includes 27 food banks and 15 city-funded food programs. He said that because the budget has not been finalized, there is no real assurance that the money will be replaced.

When asked if the food bank and senior meal funding is secure, the mayor’s office Deputy Communications Director

Kamaria Hightower said in an email to the Northwest Asian Weekly that “there is no update at this time on funding, final determinations will be outlined during the budget process.”

Hightower did not respond to further request for comment, when asked if that meant the funding’s future was up in the air.

At the July Seattle City Council meeting, the council said it would work with the mayor to find the money to fully fund existing programs, but there was still some friction between councilmembers and the mayor. During the meeting, Mosqueda condemned what she saw as the mayor’s office using threats of an austerity budget to pit vulnerable populations against each other.

The council’s legislation is meant to ensure that the communities who are most affected by the SBT receive the benefits from the revenues collected. Residents who are the most impacted by this kind of tax tend to be communities of color and low-income families, and the programs funded by the revenue aren’t meant to be solely funded this way, Mosqueda said. The SBT revenue is meant to enhance and expand these programs, but their core funding comes from the General Fund, which is stable, unlike the SBT revenue.

This instability is due to the fact that the SBT revenue isn’t meant to stay at a

consistent level, Mosqueda said. The tax itself is meant as a deterrent to people drinking high-calorie, nutrient-empty beverages. By funneling all the money gleaned from the tax back into the affected communities, residents within these communities can have more and better options via food assistance programs, like Fresh Bucks, and the Farm-to-Table initiative. Over time, the hope is that the SBT revenue will decrease, as fewer people drink sugar-sweetened beverages.

However, the council’s own staff had officially warned the council that creating this special fund would damage funding for any programs that had used the SBT revenue to supplant money from the General Fund, saying that these programs “could be reduced or eliminated as a result of this legislation, barring other budget cuts or creation of new revenue sources to backfill the removal of SBT funds.”

But this isn’t due to the creation of a special SBT fund, Mosqueda said. She said it’s the result of the mayor’s budget decision to replace the money from the General Fund with SBT revenue, without a plan to continue to use General Fund money, should the council override her veto.

Hightower did not respond to phone or email request for comment, when asked if this was the case. ■