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## Artist Cynthia Tom's journey to find her past

Stephanie Wright Hession  
 Published 4:00 am, Thursday, April 12, 2012

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Surrealist painter Cynthia Tom, poses for a photograph in her San Francisco studio on Feb. 27, 2012. Photo: Erik Verduzco, The Chronicle



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With her back toward the viewer and her right arm outstretched, a woman wearing a wheat-colored ballerina dress cups a billowy cloud edged with a crimson ribbon. Facing a desert landscape bordered with mountains, she gazes in the direction of three women, each connected to individual clouds via similar, scarlet-hued ribbons and positioned across the terrain.

This acrylic on canvas work, "Circus Series: The Cloud Walkers" (2011), is one of at least 10 in her Circus Series, including "Circus Series: Vivian and Her Synchronized Sea Plants" (2011) and "Circus Series: Cloud Walkers Rest Area" (2011), that reflects the magical realm in which surrealist painter and mixed-media artist Cynthia Tom's imagination dwells.

She will exhibit 25 larger paintings, 30 smaller works and prints, re-envisioned secondhand shoes and more in her studio during the Mission Artists United "Spring Open Studios in the Mission" this weekend.

"It all starts with a quirky, slightly sick sense of humor that runs in my family," says Tom of the beginnings of the Circus Series. "My dad is the impetus. One of the things that tied us together was watching 'Monty Python's Flying Circus' as a family way back when."

Born in San Francisco in the early 1960s, Tom still lives in the city. Her paintings depict powerful Chinese women in vibrantly hued, dreamy environs. Tom is also board president for the [Asian American Women Artists Association](#). However, she didn't grow up learning about her ancestry. Her father, [Richard Tom](#), left Chinatown in the 1950s with his wife and child and moved to the Portola neighborhood.

"We were the only Asians out there at the time. My neighborhood was Greek, Italian, Anglo, Latin and African American," she says. "I didn't identify race. Everyone looked different because that was what people with different names and different families looked like, but not because of any myth their racial stereotype may have suggested. We were definitely all working-class kids and were always outside playing."

Tom didn't befriend any Asian American children until age 13, when she met [Linda Leong](#) and began working at a day camp at the [Salvation Army](#) in Chinatown.

"There are much more underlying reasons why my grandmother and parents didn't teach too much about heritage; but the main one, I believe, is that they were all victims of trafficking one way or another. My father was sold (in China) to Chinese Americans and brought here at age 1," she says. "My mother was traded by my grandfather for opium from 9 to 12 years of age. My maternal grandmother was sold as a second wife to my grandfather and treated more like a servant. When he died - leaving his family without any funds - his family, with funds, shunned my grandmother. She had to raise seven children on her own in Chinatown."

Her artistic endeavors provoked Tom to research her family history. Maintaining a studio in Hunters Point Shipyard between 1990 and 2005, she initially based her paintings on found images from daily life and runway fashions, but her work lacked focus.

"JoeSam was a neighboring artist at Hunters Point Shipyard, an African American artist of great note. He became a mentor for my ethnic artistic path," Tom says. "JoeSam told me that I would never be at my best if I didn't explore my identity with my work; and he, of course, was right. It has led to the creation of art around my grandmother, mother and father, learning their history and in the process gaining a deep understanding of my motivations and emotional sludge, which I have since overcome."

This spurred her designs of custom fabrics utilizing photographic images, including those of slave girls in Chinatown's Bagnio District taken by Arnold Genthe in the early 1900s and of her infant father, then sewing them into pillows.

These evolved into "Discard & Variances," a visual arts series about her family and the larger issue of human trafficking. The [Yerba Buena Center for the Arts](#) displayed the first installment in 2011. The second installment, "Discards & Variances: A Look at Human Trafficking," is part of a group exhibition "Remnants: Artists Respond to the [Chinese American Experience](#)" at the [Chinese Historical Society of America Museum](#).

"I understood Chinese New Year, but not much else. I've since learned some things, but I'm third generation," she says. "Yet it is the exploration of my grandmother's journey in the creation of my art that conjured forth my staunch feminism and advocacy for women and social justice."

**Cynthia Tom:** "Spring Open Studios in the Mission." Noon-6 p.m. Sat.-Sun. 1890 Bryant Street Studios, Suite 302, S.F. [www.cynthiatom.com](http://www.cynthiatom.com), [www.1890Bryant.com](http://www.1890Bryant.com),



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[www.missionartistsunited.org](http://www.missionartistsunited.org). **"Remnants: Artists Respond to the Chinese American Experience"**: Opening Thurs. Chinese Historical Society of America Museum, 965 Clay St., S.F. [www.chsa.org](http://www.chsa.org).

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