



Women's work

by Sura Wood

To have a place of one's own is to have a refuge, somewhere safe and secure, a space to create, think, dream, to be oneself and to be free. It can be an actual physical place, either yearned for or retrieved from memory, or a state of mind. It's a compelling, often loosely construed concept that means different things to different people, and claiming one's place or retreating to it, particularly for women, can be a radical act. Last year, some Iranian women incurred the wrath of the Islamic Republic by posting photographs of themselves without headscarves on Facebook. Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay "A Room of One's Own" argued that women should have the freedom and enough financial independence to write about their own experiences, rather than being idealized by men in fiction, and "room" in the patriarchal literary tradition for their work.

Historically, it has been women's role to put the needs of others first. Even feminist avatar Gloria Steinem, speaking during a recent book tour, recalled that she didn't have a home of her own until she was well past the age of 50 because she had long believed a home was something women made for others. *A Place of Her Own*, a new show at SOMArts' spacious warehouse at 8th and Brannan Sts., ruminates on the idea in largely metaphoric artworks in a variety of mediums by 20 mostly Asian-American women artists, who range in age from their early 20s to their late 80s. Combining found objects and narrative in paintings, large-scale installations and miniatures, sound sculptures and poetry, the deeply personal works grew out of workshop programs where participants expressed their inner lives, gender and identity issues, family trauma and longings.

Sigi Arnejo, a Filipino lesbian and graphic artist, examines her origins and feelings of imperfection, doubt and rejection in "as is," a sound collage of African drums, and a poster on a fence flapping in the wind that also incorporates visual elements such as hand-written journals suspended on strings and individual pages containing her reflections on taking care of her late mother. For psychologist and teacher Nancy Arvold, who identifies as a single white lesbian, it wasn't a physical space she was seeking but a spirit of community and belonging. Using scraps of yarn and wood, her piece "Knitting Together Community" evokes a rustic communal landscape, almost primitive in nature, where animals and people toiling at various tasks live in harmony.

Queer Filipino-Japanese-American artist Marlene Iyemura taps her Japanese ancestry and the shameful internment of Japanese Americans by the U.S. government in WWII for her mixed-media assemblage "To All Persons." Simple but powerful, it consists of a cosmetics suitcase overflowing with small boxes wrapped in brightly colored papers. At first glance they look like birthday-party favors spilling out on a table, but plastered underneath and all around them are ominous notices warning Japanese Americans to report.

Manon Bogerd Wada calls on her family history of alcoholism for her affecting, genuinely spooky installation "Thirty Ghosts," in which a gray straight-backed chair with oddly shortened legs seems to be sinking under its own weight into the earth. It sits below a "chandelier" fashioned from recycled green-glass liquor bottles, dimly lit from within. The theatrical scene, shrouded in black cloth, is something one might stumble upon in a dilapidated, once-grand haunted house.

On the more playful side, artist and biologist Irene Wibawa draws on her immigrant background in the creation of a series of teeny tiny worlds inserted into baby jars. In these miniature dioramas, toy figures play their parts in intriguing albeit diminutive scenarios. In one, a man stands on top of a potato as triumphantly as if he'd just ascended Mt. Everest; in another, a figure seems to be dragging a cage behind it. Magnifying glasses are handy to aid in ferreting out the petite dramas.

But the prize for the most whimsical yet concrete vision of a cherished place belongs to Maggie Yee, who constructed "Studio Euphoria Under the Big Top," an ideal work/live space that one can actually visit, at least the life-size version of it. The project evolved from the discovery of a discarded doll house she found on the street in Oakland one drizzly evening. It was left moldering in her garage for several years until she transformed it into her dream studio, where she's free of responsibility, and organic "hassle free, no guilt" food of all kinds, from lobster and crab to cakes and fancy pastries, magically materialize with no preparation. "I can even throw out the cook pans," she writes on the walls of the place. One enters the 10' by 10' installation through heavy purple curtains – it has the feel of a carnival booth – and at the very back of the space, one can peer into the windows of a two-story miniature studio with a fully stocked kitchen and microwave. Able to snack with abandon without the complications of hiring a private chef, the miniature artist, dressed in black, makes art at a work table. We all need a hideaway like this. Where do I sign up?

Through Dec. 11.

12/03/2015