

A Twist to Asian Art.

Judith van Praag

The latest endeavor of versatile ceramic artist Beth Lo is a children's book, "Mahjong All Day Long," created in collaboration with her sister Ginnie Lo, who signs for the text. The porcelain plates (as in dishes) Lo created for the book are on view upstairs at the Francine Seders Gallery.

For those of you who have a special interest in illustrators and their art, it is rare that one has the opportunity to see the actual art work and—especially in the case of three-dimensional art—how it differs from the representation on the page.

Born to Chinese immigrant parents in West Lafayette, Ind., in 1949, Beth Lo holds an undergraduate degree from the University of Michigan and an MFA in ceramics from the University of Montana (1974). She is professor of ceramics at the University of Montana at Missoula.

The prolific artist received numerous awards and honors as well as grants for the development of her work during the 1990s. Starting with her thesis show in 1974 through today, the list of her solo and group exhibitions is impressive. Since 1980 her work has been presented at numerous invitational exhibitions, among which are the "NCECA Cup Show" at SOFA Chicago Art Exhibition, Navy Pier, Chicago (1996); "Drawing on Clay" at the Baltimore Clay Works (1998), and "Ceramic Arts Millennium Invitational..." in Beijing, China (1999).

As is the case with other women artists, Beth Lo's creative development was greatly influenced by motherhood. Something interesting is bound to happen when a vessel maker becomes a "vessel" herself.

While pregnant with her son in 1987, the master ceramist started to draw—many women artists reach out for a quicker (do it when you can), but also safer medium while expecting. Later she incorporated the drawings in her ceramic sculptures, moving from her earlier vases and vessels to more conceptual and at the

same time narrative, or literary work. Her themes often circle all issues related to children, generational relationships and parenting.

Beth Lo's territory in the upstairs gallery at Francine Seders is marked by a giant necklace, or perhaps a black and white pool divider, hung on the landing. Whatever the association, I was intrigued and the work appealed to me immediately. On closer inspection I decided the artwork existed of beads the size of soda cans. Decorative, perhaps literary imagery, etched into a black glaze -the reduction method at times reminiscent of linoleum cuts- creating an image in subtle relief.

The oval, hand shaped plates- used to illustrate "Mahjong All Day Long", are decorated with cartoonish and humorous drawings and colored with subdued glazes. In a way the imagery and composition reminded me of traditional narrative paintings on Chinese porcelain; where blush is just a touch, the sky often weeps and leaves are dripping thinnish green.

New parents, remembering their parents' lessons, delve from their cultural heritage, while adding their own touch -inherent to living in today's world- to parenting and raising a family. Lo's parents honored Chinese tradition yet embraced American life and culture. Lo in turn gives a twist to what's familiar in Asian art, chronicling the new times.

"Mahjong All Day Long", may tell the story of a Chinese immigrant family's preoccupation with the centuries old game of Mahjong, the underlying message must be: "Families that play together, stay together." Not a bad message for parents and children of all ages.

The show includes several vases and vessels adorned with scenes from daily life. In two coil built pieces, Lo added mundane comments in her own calligraphy to the necks of the vases, her mother Siahswang Shen Lo a collar of cherry blossoms.

The expertise of the master is obvious in all of the diversely shaped vessels. Perfect shape, perfect finish, yet with a different, very personal touch.

Inspired by her aunt's scrapbooks after visiting relatives in China in 2002, Beth Lo created her answer in unpainted porcelain to her aunt's mostly black and white photos. A group of "Chinese Ladies in Bombay" looks virginal and at the same time gung ho, in their prim dresses, holding smart clutches. In "The Wedding Portrait", two pristine, white porcelain busts— the expression on the faces of the man and the woman proud and secure, sport colorful "party buttons".

Opposite the plates, these porcelain figures are so realistic, it makes me wonder where Beth Lo will go next. I'll be on the look out.

"Mahjong All Day Long" (ISBN 0-8027-8941-2) won't be in the stores until March, but Beth Lo and her sister, the author Ginnie Lo, will sign copies of their book on Sunday February 13, 2-4 P.M. at Francine Seders Gallery, Greenwood Avenue N. Beth Lo's artwork is on view through February 27th, 2005.

Previously published on 2/2/2005 in the International Examiner.
copyright © 2005 Judith van Praag
www.dutchessabroad.com