



BERNICE BING BINGO

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BINGO

September 12 - October 12, 2024

BERRY ■ **CAMPBELL**

524 West 26th Street
New York, NY 10001
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As an independent-minded, queer, Chinese American woman artist, Bernice Bing (1936-1998), affectionally known as Bings, fell outside the norms of the art world of her time. As she wrote in 1965: “I, being a woman, Asian and lesbian in a white male system—Where do I start to recover my reality?” When we opened Berry Campbell in 2013, we set out to challenge the mainstream to consider why some artists are acknowledged and others like Bing are not. Central to our vision is a desire to honor these artists and continue to shine a light on their life and art.

Berry Campbell’s *Bernice Bing: BINGO* is the first solo exhibition of the work of Bernice Bing on the East Coast. Bing was not only an important part of the Abstract Expressionist movement but was also a lifelong arts advocate as well. She believed in the power of art to bring personal peace as well as a collective harmony.

We are grateful to the institutions that have come before us exhibiting Bing’s art. In 2019-2020, curated by Linda Keaton, The Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, California, organized the first exhibition on Bernice Bing in 20 years. Their exhibition catalogue was the first publication dedicated solely to Bing with essays by Jennifer Barba, Susan Landsauer, and Linda Keaton. In 2022, a large donation of paintings made by the Estate of Bernice Bing to the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, California, facilitated the first major solo exhibition on Bing organized by Abby Chen, Curator of Contemporary Art. This retrospective included paintings, drawings, and the artist’s journals and would propel Bing back on the map. It garnered much attention from historians and critics from across the globe.



Bernice Bing in her North Beach Studio, c. 1961. Photo: Charles Snyder

Our exhibition could not have been possible without the generosity of Frieda Weinstein, the Estate of Bernice Bing, Frieda’s partner, Alexa Young, tirelessly fought to keep Bing’s legacy alive during her lifetime. Recently, Frieda gifted Bing’s archive to Stanford University for future research and study, giving access to Bing’s journals and notes to students and scholars alike. Frieda’s donation of 24 art works to the Asian Art Museum is among the most important museum donations and was the catalyst for the solo exhibition as previously mentioned.

We are tremendously grateful to John Yau for writing the essay for our catalogue. Having recently penned a lengthy article on Bernice Bing for *Hyperallergic*, he was the natural choice to continue his examination and exploration of her work. We are also most grateful to Flo Oy Wong for giving her personal perspective on Bing and the Asian American Women Artists Association (AAWAA). Additionally, we are grateful to Lenore Chinn for her introduction explaining how Bing’s various communities came together to support her legacy.

We also would like to give credit to our colleagues who have worked with us as part of a team to make this show a reality. We are most thankful to Nancy Chaffin whose passion for Bing is contagious. Her knowledge and dedication is unparalleled, and we are forever grateful. David and Jeanne Carlson of Carlson Art Projects have been champions of Bing for many decades and their participation was integral to this show. Our sincerest thanks to David Carlson for his unwavering dedication to this project. We would also like to single out David Keaton, Modern Art West, who at every turn has helped make this show a reality.

We would also like to acknowledge our gallery staff for their efforts in organizing this exhibition and catalogue. Thank you to Roz Akin, Photographer and Mark Robinson, Graphic Designer for creating such an important book. Thank you to April Marque and Chris Blyth, Registrars, for coordinating all logistics with steadfast care. We would like to single out Elisabeth McKee, Archivist, for taking a personal initiative on this project. Elisabeth’s research and insight propelled this show forward.

Our hope is that *Bernice Bing: BINGO* and the accompanying catalogue will spur more shows, more investigation, more research, and more scholarship on this important painter Bernice Bing.

Christine Berry
Martha Campbell

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Bernice Bing in her North
Beach Studio c. 1991.
Photo: Charles Snyder

Introduction

By Lenore Chinn

Bernice Bing was a pioneer well ahead of her time, involved in many aspects of the Bay Area's cultural landscape, laying the foundation for many local non-profits which exist to this day, including Asian American Women Artists Association, Kearny Street Workshop, and SCRAP, to name a few.

As a young person facing many formidable personal life challenges most would find daunting, Bing managed to find her voice through art, carving out space for her life's path on her own terms.

Whether engaging in Esalen's humanistic experimental explorations, leaning into Buddhist spiritual teachings, or navigating between the demands of arts administration and her pursuing her own art practice, she was an incubator of innovative ideas and created an environment that nurtured and encouraged creativity. And much like two other icons in our Asian American arts world, Ruth Asawa and Hung Liu, she led by example and maintained a strong commitment to building community while redefining the definition of fine art and what it is to be an artist.

But her story was more complex than that and much of it was unknown to her own friends, until she died on August 18, 1998. Her passing sent ripples through her communities from Anderson Valley to the San Francisco Bay Area and down the peninsula.

The big question on everyone's minds was, "Was there a will? And if one existed, where was it?" No one knew.

But one day, while with her Aunt Lonnie in her basement where much of Bernice's rolled up canvases and boxes of ephemera had been stored, I came across a spiral bound notebook.

Turning the pages I saw the names of notable artists like Manuel Neri and other luminaries with prices for their works. Examining further I discovered an entry in which Bernice had dated and handwritten a holographic will naming Alexa Young as her estate executor.

I contacted Flo Oy Wong and we began to notify our friends to begin the search to locate Alexa and figure out what to do next. Two memorials were organized, one at Bernice's home in Philo and another at the San Francisco Art Institute, her alma mater when it was the California School of Fine Arts.

Jack Davis, Executive Director of the South of Market Cultural Center, who knew Bernice from their early days there, wanted to honor her in some way and came up with the title of an exhibition to be installed his cavernous space. That would be the umbrella for two shows, *Bernice Lee Bing 1926-1998: A Memorial Tribute and Retrospective* and *Of Our Own Voice, Asian American Women Artists Association*. Multiple organizations and individuals were involved in the project.

Asian American Women Artists Association was celebrating its 10th anniversary and QCC (Queer Cultural Center) lent its support through Rudy Lemcke, its web designer, and Jeff Jones, who wrote a grant to support the exhibition. Alexa Young and her partner, Frieda Weinstein, Moira Roth, Trefethen Professor of Art History at Mills College, Flo Oy Wong, Kimi Arita, and I enlisted our many friends to plan and organize the event with related programming.

Perhaps it was synchronicity that initially brought us together but over the years her cadre of friends, named "Team Binga," helped to get her posthumously into shows and publications, and have a documentary film produced by filmmaker Madeleine Lim, *The Worlds of Bernice Bing*, to raise her profile and get her the recognition she deserved.

"Team Binga" has expanded in the past twenty-five years. In addition to those who appeared in the documentary, Frieda Weinstein, Nancy Hom, Carlos Villa, Tirza True Latimer, Jennifer Banta and Ginny Stripp, there were many individuals and institutions too numerous to name. However, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge Timothy Anglin Burgard, Elisabeth Cornu, Mark Dean Johnson, Irene Poon, Valerie Matsumoto, Bob Hsiang, Lydia Matthews, Linda Wilson, Jeff Gunderson, Susan Landauer, Linda Lima Keaton, Scott A. Shields, Aleesa P. Alexander, Abby Chen, Jenny Leung, and Hoi Leung, all who came together in an organic way, each assuming a role in establishing and preserving Bernice Bing's legacy.

With this exhibition and catalogue we are excited to welcome Berry Campbell to the Team.



Lenore Chinn,
Photo: Mia Nakano



BIOGRAPHY

BERNICE BING (1936-1998)

The Chinese American painter Bernice Bing faced and surmounted many struggles over the course of her career. Growing up in Caucasian San Francisco foster homes and experiencing the residual effects of the Chinese Exclusion Act (established in 1882), Bing—known affectionately as Bingo—struggled to assimilate into American life while also seeking a connection to a Chinese cultural heritage from which she felt estranged.¹ In the 1960s, she was at the center of the Beat arts scene in San Francisco, absorbed the methods of her teachers, including Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff, Frank Lobdell, and Saburó Hasegawa, and was active as a community organizer. She also endeavored to attain a knowledge of Chinese and Asian practices and methods, in her studies with Hasegawa, a trip to Asia in 1984, and in a Buddhist practice late in her life.

In painting, Bing found a language with which to explore the complexity of identity and what it means to assimilate cultures. The poet/critic John Yau titled a 2022 article on Bing, "Search for a Unified Self," in which he stated: "Her search was not about style, being fashionable, or fitting in. It was about trying to acknowledge

the multiple worlds one inhabits."² As an independent-minded, queer Chinese American woman artist, Bing fell outside the norms of the art world of her time and her due recognition has mainly occurred posthumously. In 2020, *Bingo: The Life and Art of Bernice Bing* was held at the Sonoma Valley Museum, and in 2022-23, *Into the View: Bernice Bing* was organized by the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco. Her archives belong to Stanford University, Palo Alto, California, and she is represented in several public collections, including the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; the Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University; and Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Bernice Bing was born in San Francisco's Chinatown on April 10, 1936, to parents both with southern Chinese ancestry. Her father emigrated from China in his thirties and her mother (born in the United States) was eighteen when she gave birth to Bernice. Bernice's mother and aunt worked as dancers and hat girls in the cabaret follies in Chinatown's "Forbidden City." After her mother's death from heart disease in 1941, Bernice and her sister Lolita were placed in foster homes, and at one time lived in the Ming Quong Home (a girls' custodial residence in



Bernice Bing. Photos courtesy the Estate of Bernice Bing.

Oakland's Chinatown). Occasionally they stayed with their maternal grandmother, a Chinese immigrant. For Bing she represented "the old country, bringing over her feelings of anger and subservience, but her strength, too."⁵ Bing attended a middle-class white school, where she struggled to unite two cultures. At the time, she felt that drawing, in which she demonstrated an early facility, was "the thing that kept me connected."⁶

Bing won several local and regional art contests while attending Oakland Technical High School. After graduating in 1955, she enrolled on a National Scholastic Award scholarship in the California College of the Arts. Her time at the college was brief but consequential. After beginning as an advertising major, she switched to painting. Her teachers included Nathan Oliveira,

Saburō Hasegawa and Richard Diebenkorn. Fellow students were Manuel Neri and George Miyasaki. Bing was especially awed by Hasegawa (who died in March 1957). She recalled that the Japanese-born artist wore a long black robe and used Zen meditation in his art, in which he merged Japanese traditional and Western abstract methods. Bing found Hasegawa's work "dreamy abstract and quite calligraphic and beautiful." She remarked that he introduced her to "a whole attitude that was completely foreign to me." She commented, "I had no idea what it meant to be an Asian woman, and he got me started thinking about that."⁷ Hasegawa initiated her "pursuit of more knowledge of the poetry and thought of Po Chū-i, Chuang Tzu, Lao Tzu, Shakyamuni, and Wang Hsi-chih, the 'calligraphic sage.'"⁸

Bing transferred in 1958 to the California School of Fine Arts, receiving her BFA in the following year. The school became the San Francisco Art Institute in 1960 and Bing received her MFA there in 1961 (she was in the school's first master's class). Her teachers at the Institute included Elmer Bischoff and Frank Lobdell. During her student years, her studio was above the Spaghetti Factory in San Francisco's North Beach, where she worked to support herself while taking part in the lively Beat Generation art scene in the city. Among her friends were the abstract painters Joan Brown, Wally Hedrick, Jay DeFeo, Bruce Conner, and Fred Martin. She recalled that at the time her mentors, muses, and totems were, "among abstractionists, de Kooning, Kline, Motherwell, Still; in jazz, Coltrane, Coleman, Monk, Mingus; in poetry Stein, Pound, Genet, Rilke; in literature, Camus, Gide, Hesse, Mann, de Beauvoir; in the theater Beckett, Genet, Albee; and in art films, Bergman, Antonioni, Fellini."⁹

In 1960, Bing accompanied Brown, who had become a close friend, to New York, where Brown had a show at Staempfli Gallery. There Bing met Marcel Duchamp, which she considered a "thrilling experience," visited the mansion of Alfonso Ossorio on Long Island, and saw the work of artists such as Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning.¹⁰ Bing's first solo exhibition was in October–November 1961 at the black-walled Batman Gallery in San Francisco, a short-lived alternative space.¹¹ Bruce Conner wrote the introduction to the catalogue for the show. It included dynamic abstract and semi-figurative works that Bing based on Diego Velázquez's famous *Los Meninos*, notably *Velázquez Family*. In the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Alfred Frankenstein reported that Bing "has a remarkable gift for fluid line . . . carried to the verge of abstraction in some extremely good small drawings. Her paintings are huge and are most remarkable for the majestic sternness of their blacks and reds."¹²

In July 1963, the California-based painter, curator, and art critic, James Monte, published an article about Bing in *Artforum*. He observed that while the paintings in her first exhibition had fed off remembered figurative works executed earlier, she had now added "personalized non-specific references to metropolitan life, forced into the picture plane with a determination which is overpowering." To Monte, Bing's paintings transcended "beauty in the mundane sense. The onlooker's appreciation begins with feeling her work as an unnamable emotional pressure that slowly subsides while the individual

formal aspects of the works present themselves as the encounter lengthens."¹³ From 1963 to 1966, Bing served as the caretaker of Mayacamas Vineyards in the Napa Valley, seventy-five miles from San Francisco. Country life was an adjustment for her, but the time was very productive, resulting in many abstract organic canvases, in which she expressed what she described in her journals as the miraculous "birth and re-birth in nature."¹⁴ When she had a two-artist show (with Margot Campbell) at the Berkeley Gallery in 1964, a review by Elizabeth M. Polley appeared in *Artforum*, commenting that Bing had begun "to see the landscape as environment, and to enjoy it as such."¹⁵

Bing had been reading the writings of the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung on the unconscious and dream worlds when she joined the first residential program at Esalen Institute in Big Sur. There she absorbed herself in New Age Psychology and Philosophy, and met "all the greats," including Abraham Maslow, Joseph Campbell, Alan Watts, R. D. Laing, and Fritz Perls. Bing developed a friendship with Perls.¹⁶ She began artworld and community involvement in 1968 when she served on a panel for the National Endowment for the Arts Expansion Program, Washington, D.C. She also worked as an assistant to the filmmaker Loni Ding, which immersed her for the first time in the Chinese American community in San Francisco. From 1980 to 1984 she served as the first executive director of the South of Market Cultural Center, (now known as SOMArts) which was committed to bringing arts into local communities. Deciding she needed to return to making art, she left the position in 1984. Subsequently she took a three-month trip to Asia, visiting Korea, Japan, and China. During her travels, she gave lectures on Abstract Expressionism to art students and spent six weeks studying Chinese calligraphy with Wang Dongling and Chinese landscape painting with Professor Yang at the Zhejiang Academy in Hangzhou.

On her return to the US in 1985, Bing moved to Philo, a small town in Mendocino. There she worked in an outdoor studio near her apartment and supported herself as a waitress and cook as well as a counselor at a youth rehabilitation center. By this time, she had become a practicing Buddhist and was proficient in Chinese calligraphy. In 1988, she was included in a two-artist show at Winona Gallery, Mendocino, and joined the newly formed Bay Area Asian American Women Artists Association. Two years later, she was one of six artists

selected for *Completing the Circle*, an exhibition featuring Northern California Chinese American artists that was held at the Southern Exposure Gallery, San Francisco. The last solo show of Bing's lifetime was in 1991 at the South of Market Cultural Center, San Francisco. Group exhibitions in her last years included *Time Echoes*, organized by the Asian American Women Artists Association and held at the University of California, Davis (1993); a three-artist exhibition at the Asian American Arts Center, New York (1993); *Women on the Silk Road*, Gallery on the Rim, San Francisco (1994); *With New Eyes: Towards an Asian American Arts History*, San Francisco State University Gallery (1995); *Art in Perpetuity*, Nuyorican Poets Café, New York (1995); and *Beats*, a show in conjunction with the M. H. De Young Memorial Museum (1996). Bing was selected by the National Women Caucus for the Arts Visual Arts Honor Award in 1996, in partnership with a group exhibition at the Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.

Bing died from cancer in Philo in 1998. She was subsequently given attention primarily by the queer arts community. In 2013, the filmmaker Madeleine Lim made the documentary "The Worlds of Bernice Bing." It took nearly a quarter century before Bing received broader

art world appreciation and the recognition that her achievement had been overlooked. She was featured with a biography in the catalogue for the exhibition, *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, organized by the Denver Art Museum. In 2020 Stanford University Libraries acquired Bing's archive, opening new pathways for research into her life and work. In 2020, *Bingo: The Life and Art of Bernice Bing* was held at the Sonoma Valley Museum and in 2022–23, the Asian Art Museum organized *Into View: Bernice Bing*, featuring her paintings, drawings, and journal excerpts. Many reviews covered the show. Bing was featured in the prominent traveling exhibition *Action, Gesture, Paint*, which showcased the work of 81 international women artists. The exhibition debuted at Whitechapel Gallery, London, and traveled to Fondation Vincent Van Gogh, Arles, France, and Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany. Bing has also been the subject of a comic book, an issue of a children's magazine, and a zine created by a Stanford scholar, including material from the Bing archive.

—Lisa N. Peters, PhD



Bernice Bing, China, 1984.

¹ Sources on Bing include Linda Keaton, Susan Landauer, and Jennifer Banta, *Bingo: The Life and Art of Bernice Bing*, exh. cat. (Sonoma, CA: Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, 2018) and Kiva Roth, "A Narrative Chronology," *Queer Cultural Center website*, based on a series of taped audio and video interviews with Bernice Bing in the fall of 1990 and the summer of 1991, material in the artist's archives (now Stanford University), and quotations from Bing's text in the exhibition catalogue, *Completing the Circle: Six Artists*, edited by Florence Wong and George Rivera and sponsored by the Asian Heritage Council, Festival 2020, the Asian Museum of Art and Southern Exposure gallery, 1991. <https://queerculturalcenter.org/chronology-by-motor-mouth/>.

² John Yau, "Bernice Bing's Search for a Unified Self," *Hyperallergic*, November 10, 2022. <https://hyperallergic.com/777991/bernice-bing-search-for-a-unified-self/>.

³ Cited in Roth.

⁴ Cited in Roth.

⁵ Cited in Roth.

⁶ Cited in Roth.

⁷ Cited in Roth.

⁸ Noted in Roth.

⁹ On the Batman Gallery, see Jack Foley, "O'Her Blackness Sparkles!" *The Life and Times of the Batman Art Gallery, San Francisco 1960–1965* (San Francisco: 300 Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Alfred Frankenstein, "1981 review in the San Francisco Chronicle," cited in Roth.

¹¹ James Monte, "Three San Francisco Artists," *Artforum* 2 (July 1968): 31.

¹² Bing entry in "Thoughts and Visual and Non-visual Forms" 1964, Bing papers, Bernice Bing Estate, cited in Landauer, "The Dual Worlds of Bernice Bing," in Keaton and Landauer, p. 15.

¹³ Elizabeth M. Paley, "Bernice Bing, Margot Campbell," *Artforum* 2 (May 1964): 46–47.

¹⁴ Cited in Roth.

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View the entire exhibition online at www.berrycampbell.com

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Cover: Bernice Bing, 1958. Photo: Jerry Burchard
Right: Bernice Bing in her North Beach Studio, c. 1961.
Photo: Charles Snyder

