

## 'UnderCurrents and the Quest for Space'

Kimberly Chun

Published 2:33 pm, Wednesday, May 1, 2013

There's power in numbers - and in an uncommon story, common among its tellers and told as one. Such is the case with "She Has No Master," a striking video triptych by three half-Vietnamese, half-white women, Julie Thi Underhill, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud and Dao Strom, one of several video works on display in "UnderCurrents and the Quest for Space," a juried exhibition of Asian American female artists.

Underhill's segment, "Spoils," makes connections between the Vietnam War and how its violence came home to her family. Pelaud's "Letgo" turns on poetry and snapshots to pose tough questions about the power dynamics between her Vietnamese mother and French father. Strom's "self-mythology" looks at dislocation via watery black-and-white imagery and her own music.

Together, the three found the courage to put out these personal pieces, San Francisco State University professor Pelaud, 47, says. Underhill's video, for example, simply remained hidden on her computer for 15 years. "It's about finding a language to say who we are and validating some of that experience and mixed identity, which is not a bad thing," says Pelaud, "though there are power issues there and also common pain, waste and melancholy."

Another "UnderCurrents" video, "Que Sera, Sera" by L.A. artist Yoshie Sakai puts a more lighthearted spin on identity issues, as she impersonates everyday SoCal denizens ranging from an infant to a 93-year-old to articulate their fears, regrets and thoughts about death. Serious matters are made strangely humorous by Sakai's Cindy Sherman-like impersonations, shown in a Yasujiro Ozu-inspired style against kitschy, cluttered suburban backdrops. The female body comes into focus among her interviewees' anxieties: "I've been doing the same thing since I first started making art - body image," Sakai, 42, says.

Also showing is "The Chinese Gardens," a short, evocative documentary by Valerie Soe, 51, on the sizable Chinese community that once lived in Port Townsend, Wash., until the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and violent acts led to their disappearance.

"We think a lot of folks have narrow perceptions of what Chinese Americans are about, like they're lawyers, doctors or 'tiger moms,'" says the S.F. video maker and S.F. State professor. "So I'm always interested in looking for other stories about Asian Americans, and moviemaking is the best way to communicate. People just want to go on YouTube and watch stuff - I'm fine with that."

### **If you go**

**UnderCurrents and the Quest for Space:** Noon-7 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, noon-5 p.m. Saturday. Through May 25. SOMArts Cultural Center, 934 Brannan St., S.F. (415) 863-1414. [www.aawaa.net](http://www.aawaa.net).

*Kimberly Chun is a Berkeley writer. E-mail: [96hours@sfchronicle.com](mailto:96hours@sfchronicle.com) Twitter: [@kimberlychun](https://twitter.com/kimberlychun)*

© 2013 Hearst Communications Inc.

**HEARST** newspapers