

Visual arts

'Zero-Viewpoint': By exploring immigration and sexuality, mixed-media installation challenges notions of Chinese art

Stella Zhang felt like a volcano about to erupt.

It was a few hours before she would construct the largest piece in her new exhibition of sculptural, mixed-media installations. She planned to work from the heart, going only by a vision in her mind's eye — no blueprint, design or photograph would be necessary.

On that rainy morning, the anticipation was high enough to make both Zhang and the center's curator, Abby Chen, a little nervous.

"The piece is the most intriguing, provocative, subjective one. I really need it to be strong," Chen said.

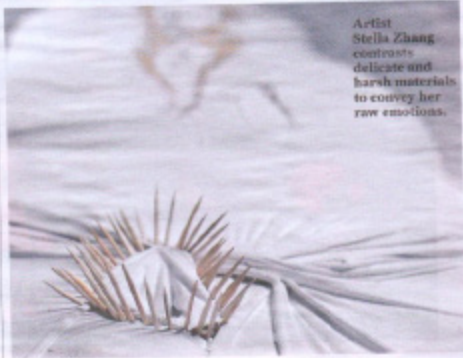
The result is a huge installation about 94 feet long — or the length of a professional basketball court — and almost 30 inches wide. It's constructed from more than 1,300 square feet of cotton fabric.

"This is what I envisioned and expected. I'm very happy with it," Zhang said.

"Zero-Viewpoint" is Zhang's first major exhibition in the Bay Area and is part of the Chinese Cultural Center's "Xian Rui" (Fresh and Sharp) exhibition series showcasing emerging Chinese American contemporary artists. Zhang's show will feature six untitled installations constructed from mixed media, from a stretchy cotton fabric to nails to sand.

Each piece is a result of the raw emotions Zhang was experiencing at the time of construction. They are complex and simple at the same time: Zhang contrasts delicate and harsh materials to explore issues such as immigration, womanhood and sexuality, yet she uses only one color — white — to evoke simplicity and to encourage introspection from the viewer.

BY JILL ESCOFF, PHOTOS BY HEAVY



Artist Stella Zhang contrasts delicate and harsh materials to convey her raw emotions.

Darwin Wong

Reception 6 tonight. Through Sept. 5, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tues.-Sat., noon-4 p.m. Sun. Chinese Culture Center, 750 Kearny St., 3rd floor (inside Hilton Hotel), S.F. (415) 986-1822, www.c-c-c.org.

beautiful,' but I want to go directly to the core," Zhang said, explaining the use of the color white. "Life is a contradiction. I use a simple element to do something very complex. It looks quiet, but inside is power."

While Zhang was dealing with specific issues during the creative process, she wants viewers to find their own meaning in her art. "It depends on your own experience. Everybody, from different angles, will have a different answer. I just give a little clue," said Zhang, who grew up in China before moving to Japan and then the United States seven years ago.

Like other pieces in the "Xian Rui" series, "Zero-Viewpoint" is meant to challenge the perceptions of art in the Chinese community. Chen said Zhang's work spotlights an artist and woman acutely in touch with her feelings — which in itself might be considered provocative.

"For a culture that is on the conservative side, even to this day, what Stella is facing in her private life, she brings that to the public, and I don't know how comfortable the public is going to feel about it," Chen said.

Zhang also hopes to take viewers out of their comfort zones. The Chinese community, she said, thinks art should be of flowers and mountains, as in traditional Chinese paintings. Zhang said that's simply not honest — and she is trained in classic Chinese arts.

"This new is true, too," she said.

— Alexandra Roglio,
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