

Print artist works with elders to create books of memories

By Toni Tabora-Roberts

The Asian Reporter

Portland artist Shu-Ju Wang's American mom was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's. (Shu-Ju came to the U.S. as a student in the '70s and has maintained very close ties with her host family.) It was this news that inspired her latest project and exhibit, "Relay/Replay: Artist's Books that Illuminate the Creative Lives of the Elderly," currently on view in the John Wilson Special Collections room at Multnomah County's Central Library in downtown Portland.

Initially, Shu-Ju thought of this as a project she would do with her mom, but she quickly recognized it could be done with other community elders. She envisioned using "photographs, old family documents, maybe old letters, passport pages ... anything we could dig up." The idea was to work with seniors who are experiencing various stages of memory loss to create "a book of mementos." She intended to use Print Gocco (a small self-contained printer) to create the limited editions of books that could be distributed to the families. Other than those ideas, Shu-Ju wanted to keep the process very open to collaboration and interpretation.

On a lucky break, Rose Schnitzer Manor, the first resident facility she approached, was receptive to the idea. Shu-Ju first had to interview with the facility and then train as an official volunteer. The manor's activity director identified four residents who would work one-on-one with Shu-Ju. Each artist's project took on a different process and scope. (The names of the artists are not included to protect their privacy.)

In working with the first senior, it took some time to figure out the direction of her book. In one eureka moment, however, Shu-Ju and her collaborator agreed to do a book of watercolors. Though it was a departure from the original idea, Shu-Ju was happy to work with her in a medium she was comfortable with. The book includes soft watercolors of trees and text inspired by Shu-Ju's conversations with the elder.

As the "Relay/Replay" project unfolded, Shu-Ju realized her idea of using old family papers and photographs was not necessarily possible. Residents who enter facilities such as Rose Schnitzer Manor often have to give away or purge many of their belongings. Such situations make a project such as this even more precious and compelling.

The second project included one of the elders who no



longer had any documents of her past. Her project became a process of creating images from her life and memories. Shu-Ju marvelled at her creativity and her use of imagery in relation to her life. "She would find an image, like a dishtowel, and then she would write a little thing that relates to the image. They also really read like words of wisdom." Feeling that the prints read like notes to her family, Shu-Ju helped the resident design a book with colorful pages resembling envelopes.

The third book became a group project that included the elder's adult daughter. In many ways, it was exactly the type of book Shu-Ju had first envisioned going into the project. "[The daughter] coming to see her mom, going through the photographs and documents, the family time, the remembering — the first time I walked in and saw them looking through the album, I thought, 'this is exactly what I pictured in my head!'" A lifelong *mahjong* player, the third book was inspired by the game's tiles, spread out in a chronological series of images.

The final project was with a senior who had a career as a



REPLAYING THE PAST. Artist Shu-Ju Wang collaborated with four seniors at Rose Schnitzer Manor resident facility to create unique, beautiful books of mementos. "Relay/Replay: Artist's Books that Illuminate the Creative Lives of the Elderly" is on view in the John Wilson Special Collections room at Multnomah County's Central Library through December 31. (Book images courtesy of the artist)

professional artist. Though suffering from great memory loss, the senior was in her element when creating art. Her book included images that are more abstract and some prints of found objects with accompanying words inspired by their conversations.

The books are visually stunning and a delightful representation of the different elders who collaborated with Shu-Ju. The exhibit is just another great reason to visit the beautiful Central Library.

"Relay/Replay" is on view through December 31 at the Multnomah County Central Library in the John Wilson Special Collections room, located at 801 S.W. 10th Avenue in Portland. Hours are 2:30 to 5:30pm on Tuesday, 3:30 to 7:00pm on Wednesday, 10:00am to 2:00pm on Friday, and 2:30 to 6:00pm on Saturday. To learn more, call (503) 988-5123, or visit <www.multcolib.org/about/mcl-wilson-exhibit.html> or <www.fingerstothethebone.com>.

The Asian Reporter's special two-week Holiday Issue will be published on Tuesday, December 23, 2008. Deadlines for this issue are:

News page display space reservations due: Wednesday, December 17, 1:00pm

News page display electronic artwork due: Thursday, December 18, 1:00pm

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