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**Flo Oy Wong Interview**

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Interviewer: Angelika Piwowarczyk
Artist: Flo Oy Wong
Phone interview Chicago, IL/ Sunnyvale, CA
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Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring Quarter 2009 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.

Angelika Piwowarczyk: My first question is, could you tell me a little bit about yourself and your personal and family history? I read a little bit about it and found it very interesting.

Flo Oy Wong: Yes, I grew up in Oakland Chinatown. I was born in 1938, so I grew up in Oakland Chinatown in the 40s and the 50s and at that time it was still a very small Cantonese-flavored Chinatown. There were not a lot of newer immigrants. And when I say newer immigrants, I’m talking about post-‘65, ‘75 immigrants from Asia. It was mainly Cantonese people from China that had come to settle in the Oakland Chinatown. Oakland Chinatown was started in about 1850 when the Chinese began to congregate and to live there.

Flo Oy Wong: Then after the 1906 fire and earthquake in San Francisco, the Chinatown population increased because the people of San Francisco had to move to find a new place to live. And so, my father settled into Oakland Chinatown when he came from China in 1912. In 1912, he was 17 years old and my grandmother sent him from China to live there and he stayed with two village uncles. These were two men from the same village that my father was from but they were not directly related. So my dad stayed in the US and then he would return to China every so often to visit his mother, my grandmother. She eventually picked out two wives for my dad to marry. My mother was the second wife, who married my father after his first wife died. At that time when his first wife died, my older sister Li Hong was born and so my grandmother could not take care of a young infant by herself so she arranged for my father to marry my
mother who was a Yee from a village nearby. Then he returned to the United States to keep working and earn money and he sent money back to my mother and he would go to visit her and whenever he did, my mother became pregnant so that my sisters Li Keng and Lai Wah were born. I think Li Keng was born in 1926 and I think Lai Wah may have been born in either 19...— She’s 77 now, so I haven’t done the math. Then in 1933, he went to China to bring my mother and my sisters to the United States of America and because of the 1882 Exclusion Law, which forbade the entry of laborer’s wives and their families, he could not bring my mother in as his wife. He had to lie and say that she was his sister because US immigration laws at that time allowed sisters but not wives to come to the US. The whole idea was that the US was not interested to see Chinese families get settled in this country but what the immigration authorities did not consider was that sisters could get married and start families so the logic was not there. It was a racist effect. That law was not repealed until 1943. My father brought my sisters and my mom in 1933 and when they returned from China that trip, my father could return to Oakland, where he was living, but my mother and my three sisters had to be interrogated at the Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay. They stayed there for about a week and they were released and then my mom and my sisters returned to Oakland to settle with my dad. But because the INS, and I think there’s another name for the INS now, I don’t know what the acronym is, they—there was worry that there would be suspicion that they thought that my mother and father were truly husband and wife and so they didn’t live together for a short time. My father went to live with a couple of sisters in the storefront that eventually became our restaurant years later and another sister went to live with a relative nearby Oakland Chinatown. But fairly soon they were reunited and when they were reunited my mother became pregnant and that caused a problem because my mother and father were legal brother and sister. So their child would have been the incestuous child of legally a brother and sister, but in reality husband and wife. And so my dad found another man to marry my mom in name only. And so now my mother’s identity has been altered because she’s no longer who she really is, she becomes my father’s sister and then she becomes another man’s wife. And as a result, the three older siblings took on my father’s surname Gee because they were his declared authentic children, and then the four American born children, myself included, called our mother-mother but we had to call our father uncle so while we were growing up, we kept that secret in Oakland Chinatown but beyond Oakland Chinatown, we identified each other according to our legal papers. So growing up in Oakland Chinatown, my sisters were my cousins and my cousins were my sisters. Secrecy was our currency, we were very afraid throughout our childhood. Although, having said that, we lived, what I consider to be a very normal childhood. We were poor, didn’t know it. Another thing happened a few years after my parents settled in Oakland Chinatown. I was born in 1938 and in April of 1940, my father was shot by a relative and he survived that shooting. He was shot by a man who was his paper brother and my mother happened to baby-sit that man’s child, so it was like, we hear of attempted murders being committed by strangers, but here they were relatives. It was my mother who ran out of the house and chased the assailant and he was eventually caught when she was shouting at the top of her lungs and two people from a nearby coffee shop came out and they jumped the assailant and held him until the police came. What was strange is that my parents didn’t talk a lot but at the same time, somehow we managed to get some of the stories of our lives out of them and we grew up with the story that my mother was telling us that she was the hero, she was the man who caught the man that shot our dad. She never told us that it was two other men and I discovered that when I made the piece Eye of the Rice: Yu Mai Gee Fon. I was doing research for that and my older sister, Li Keng, who is now 83
and she is the author of Good Fortune: My Journey to Gold Mountain, an autobiographical book that she wrote for 12 year olds and up, that as a memory of our history. I would call her and my other sister because I had questions when I was making this piece that talked about my father’s shooting. And so, something like 59 years after I had last talked to this man that had helped my mom after the assailant, he called me on Chinese New Year’s Day and, you know, he said “Oh Flo, this is, you know, Li Ming, Willy Lee,” and my mouth just dropped open and I just said “Holy smokes!” and he said, “I want to tell you about your papa’s shooting and it was Chinese New Year, and we’re traditional and traditional Chinese are very superstitious. You know, you don’t use knives or scissors on the first day of the New Year and you don’t talk about evil, or anything like this and so I said to him, “You can call me, or I can call you tomorrow” and I said to him in Chinese “Are you superstitious? Because if you are and you think you are breaking the good karma, I’ll call you tomorrow.” He said, “Oh, let that stuff go, who cares. Let me tell you the story.” And so he eventually told me the story and the reason he knew that I wanted to know is that in questioning Li Keng, she ran into him one day and said, “Hey, Flo wants to know about our father’s shooting.” He said, “Oh, I’ll call her.” So she gave him the phone number and he called me. I started that piece about my father in 1986 and I worked on that until the year 2000. It’s all hand-sewed. It’s composed of beads and sequins and lace and all kinds of things. I hand-sewed every little bit of it. I had to, first of all, save the rice sacks that people would eat rice and give me the empty rice sacks. Family members gave them to me, you know, relatives, friends and then whatnot. So, I would work—that was my mother project, you, know I would go back to it, but I would work on other projects in between. And so what I’ve done was to make more than one installation about our family’s history because no one could have scripted a story as strange as mine.

Piwowarczyk: You mentioned a couple things that I was going to ask you about, so let’s start with the rice sacks, I know they’re very recurring in your artwork. How has the significance of the rice sack changed for you over the years? Has it changed? And are you using it in different contexts now than you had when you first started?

Wong: I have been using rice sacks ever since 1978. And the context is still the same, although my newest work, I’m about to open a show in San Francisco tomorrow and I made dolls for this installation and I’m still using rice-sacks on them. The rice sacks are an iconic material that I use and I use the rice-sacks for several reasons—One, when my father was shot, we were very poor and we didn’t have any rice to eat and relatives and friends brought us sacks of rice. There were six of us in the family and I was the infant at that time. And so, we survived because of those sacks of rice. And the other reason I use the rice sacks is because rice is the physical and spiritual food for me. It is not just something that I feed to my body, it is very symbolic because without that rice that relatives and friends brought to us, we would not have survived. Very symbolic to my personal history. Also culturally, rice is the staple that Asians eat.

Piwowarczyk: How do you identify yourself culturally? And how do you think this affects the way your work is viewed? Do you think the context within which its view limits it in any way?

Wong: I am an American of Chinese decent. I am an American, I’m very western. My feet are firmly planted here in our country. Having said that, I also feel as if one of my feet is planted in China and the other is in US and the Pacific Ocean runs in between. Why is that? And that is
because my parents were the original immigrants. So I’m a direct descendant of immigrants of the first generation tier in the US. Now, my older sisters, who were born in China are also immigrants. However, that’s the way the Chinese identify the generation levels. If you talk to Koreans, or if you talk to Japanese, or other Asian groups, they identify in a different way. I would be called second generation. They would call my parents 1.5 because they were born in a different country and they immigrated here. Does that identification impact my art making and my identity? Yes, it does. In an ideal world, I would be an artist. However, the reality is, we don’t have an ideal world. And the canon in the American art world sort of ran along the lines of society in general in that our society was and is, somewhat still racist. While I would identify myself as an American, when people look at me, partly to the color of my skin, partly due to the fact that I can speak Chinese, you know, I don’t look entirely American to them although I am 70 years old and I was born in this country. And if I go to China, and I’ve been to China several times, I’m not Chinese enough at all, I’m very western. I don’t walk the way people in China walk, I’m very verbal and articulate and expressive and loquacious and that’s not how modern Chinese women are, maybe the younger generation, but certainly not the people in my age category and above. So, I’m neither, I’m not complete in any place. And so that has affected my art making because I feel as though I’ve always been marginal in so many ways. And I feel marginal also because of the cultural inference that I absorb from my traditional Chinese culture which favors males. Chinese parents didn’t count unless they had their sons and I was their last daughter, the sixth daughter in my family. And it was very painful for me to be the sixth daughter because I became aware, my older sisters told me that my mother cried for a month after I was born and I’ve made a piece about that too. And that one that talks about my pain of being an unwanted daughter is called My Mother’s Baggage: Lucky Daughter. In that, I tell of the circumstances of my birth. And the reason I was called the lucky daughter was because I preceded the birth of a wanted boy. So in Chinese families, any girl who precedes the birth of a male heir is the lucky daughter. For my parents, that was a wonderful thing that they thought of very positively. I, being the sensitive person that I was, and still am, didn’t understand that and blamed myself that I wasn’t born a boy. And I have now come to terms with that and I can talk about it without crying or without being emotionally upset because I know that I’m valued and I contribute. If it weren’t for me, we wouldn’t have more grandchildren in the family. So I’m understanding it now, but I didn’t understand it when I was growing up. For many years, I didn’t even deal with the issue, and when I did the tears just flooded and the angst was released but it was very healing to confront that issue and to make work about it and to cry and to begin to understand what my role in my life was. So, you know, I had issues from my own culture, I had issues from my culture as an American and then there was the layer of issues of sexism, in both the western and the eastern philosophies and traditions. So there are multiple layers, just multiple layers. I’m really grateful that I’m an artist because being an artist, I have been able to search for the order out of the chaos that I found myself in. And it wasn’t something that my parents could necessarily understand because my mother suffered under the same condition because she was a strong, intelligent, really beautiful woman but she has no choice of a husband. She had some privileges in China in that my father sent her money from the United States when he was here and that allowed her to buy a girl, a slave girl for our family. Can you imagine a poverty stricken family, poor family, having a servant because that family that sold their daughter to my mother could not afford to keep her? So when you examine a society and a culture and look through the lens of the socio-economic challenges and the issues and the traditions, it’s really complicated.
Piwowarczyk: Could you tell me a little bit about your decision to become an artist? I know on your website it says that you didn’t actually make that decision until you were 40. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

Wong: In the late thirties, my son was in, I think middle school by then. I think it was middle school, or I think he was eleven. Just remember—I’m a credential elementary school teacher—and I taught school for several years before I stayed home to have my children, and I decided not to return to work because I really wanted to get them started in their early years. But by the time Brad was eleven, I began to show signs of restlessness of being home but by that time I was already an aide at a middle school helping in at-risk class. And there were a lot of challenges in that at-risk class. It was very exhausting work. And I asked myself, I said, “I’m educated, I’m credentialed. What am I doing here serving as an aide in this challenging class?” And so I knew that I had inklings of some talent that could be discovered or uncovered. And so I said, “Alright, I’ll just go to the local community college, De Anza College in Cupertino and I will take art classes and see if anything is revealed.” But before that, when the children were young, I did take community art classes. I went to art school to take painting classes and I took classes from an artist during the daytime when I could find babysitters and I would go out then. So my really formal art education started at the age of forty but I was already beginning to explore. And it was really a struggle, because I knew I had something to say, and I’m articulate now, but at that time I didn’t have the maturity or courage to verbally say what I wanted to say and I was so confused—I didn’t know what it was that I wanted to say! And so by going in to taking the art classes at the community school level, I ran into instructors who knew how to take my non-verbal quest for knowledge and push me in an area so that I could develop it. And little by little, as the instructors gave me direction for my art knowledge and my art skills, I began to apply that, those aphorisms to my life, and as I did, I found my life moving forward. I found my life not being so stuck. Some of the anger that was being released, the resentment was lessening, my feeling of being marginal was still there but it lessened. So I went, “Hey, there’s something to this,” and it’s really working. Plus, I really loved working with color and design and texture. I could just spend hours playing with pencils or painting. You know, I forgot to look at the clock when I was in art classes and I forgot to look at the clock when I was doing homework. I was totally engaged. So, I knew then that perhaps I could finally figure out what I would make. And I also found that being a traditional housewife, while I did stay home with my children, was not a dress that I wanted to wear. I just had too much curiosity and too much desire to grow to just stay within the physical confines of a house. It was a wonderful decision that I made, I mean, I am so grateful that I had enough of this disquiet that I went in search and I found, of course, the art world.

Piwowarczyk: When you first started making art, did you find that the exhibition opportunities you had then were different than the ones you have now?

Wong: Right now, I can tell you that after being an artist for 30 years, I’ve been really blessed and I’ve had opportunities open up to me and they’ve come rather organically and sometimes just being the right person at the right place at the right time. When I first started, I had my first solo show—it was my first show, which happened to be a solo show at a social service agency in Oakland Chinatown where I grew up. So I’ve been back to the source of my artistic energy, and
the site of my artistic energy because the works that I showed were drawings of my family in our Oakland Chinatown restaurant so I wanted it to go back to where the inspiration came from. And at that time there were not many opportunities for women artists and artists of color to show. And I’m also an activist and I became very political because I began to realize that there were these feelings and the people that ran the museums were not enlightened and were not ready to share any kind of power. And so I became very active in the northern California art world, knocking on doors, asking tough questions as to why somebody like me didn’t have an opportunity to submit. I wasn’t saying, you know, “Let me submit because I am female. Let me submit because I am Chinese American.” I was saying that I deserve a place in a museum or a gallery or a traditional space because I make art that talks to people. I wasn’t ready to accept that fact that the limitations were there and that I should be yoked by them. I could tell you that after thirty years of being out there, I’m grateful for the changes that have come about because of the hard work that activists have put in. In northern California, there were several activists out there that were working on exhibition issues for Asian Americans and I joined them and so we did not have a coalition, we worked independently but as a result of that, opportunities began to open up. And opportunities also started to open up because I began to join the boards of several organizations. I joined the board for the National Women’s Caucus for Art in 1991 and I was there until 1997 and the then-president Helen Klebesadel, she lives in Madison, Wisconsin now, understood what it was like to invite non-whites onto the board. And already there were a few African-Americans, but I was the first Asian-Pacific American woman appointed in the board of the National WCA. The WCA was founded in 1970 and during the time that Walter Mondale was Vice-President and his wife Joan Mondale was very active in advocating for women’s art. And so its been a huge battle, because when I went on the board, while Helen, as President of the WCA welcomed me, I ran into all kinds of opposition from other people. One of the board members was so surprised that I had any interest at all because, first of all, they didn’t even consider or see me. They saw black women, but they didn’t see—I’m not sure that they saw Hispanic or Palestinian women, you know. They understood the black-white paradox but they didn’t understand the total diversity of America. And yet at the same time, they struggled to form an organization because of the oppression that they felt because of men artists and male focused art organizations. So once again I was facing—you know I faced that in my own culture and here I am facing it in a subset of the American culture, the art world. I felt as if someone had wrapped a rope around me and I couldn’t stand being tied up anymore and I just had to struggle and kick and scream to undo the rope. I’ve also felt that I was wrapped with gauze and I was completely invisible and I was silent.

Piwowarczyk: I read a little about the Asian American Women Artist Association which you co-founded. Could you tell me a little about that?

Wong: Sure. In 1989, in February, I went to my first National Conference for the Women Caucus for Arts in San Francisco. It was like putting a kid in a candy store—I was so excited, you know, I was mixing with artists, I was... you know, I was a grown up now, I was playing with the people that I wanted to play with. Only to discover that Asian-American women were attending at the conference, but we weren’t represented on the panels and we weren’t represented in slide reviews or anything. A few, you know, a token few, it’s not a whole lot. So I ran into one of the activists that was already active from the Asian-American group, and she was there and when she saw me there, she said, “Oh, you need to introduce yourself to Moira Roth.” And
Moira Roth is the Trefethen Professor of Art History at Mills College in Oakland. So I found the panel where Moira was presenting and I went to her and I said, “So and so said I should meet you,” and she says, “Oh, how come you’re not in our slide wheel? Why isn’t your work there?” And I didn’t know anything about it, I didn’t know there was a call for slides to show at the conference. And so I had my slides with me and I pulled them out and I said, “Well, here they are.” And she said, “Oh my God.” And I’m not sure if she said, “You should be included in this” but she realized that I was not represented. Then I went to another panel, which was a wonderful discussion of how women of color looked at the nude, or the male, I can’t remember exactly which, so I appreciated that panel, Elizabeth Catlett, who is a very famous African-American sculptor living in Mexico, she’s married to a Mexican man. She was the head of the sculpture department I think in the University of Mexico for a long time. And I went and I was just in awe and starstruck. I didn’t know about her before but after I heard her present and whatnot and hearing that she was a big star in the art world, I—during the question and answer period—said, “This is all good and fun, but how come you don’t have somebody like me on the panel? How come I’m here to support you but you don’t support me?” And so it turns out that the organizer of the panel was very honest, she said, “Well, I didn’t know any Asian American artists to invite.” And since that moment in 1999, I have become very good friends with that woman who organized the panel. And she realized that, you know, in her world, that the diversity could be expanded as well. So then, the conference finished, I think, on Tuesday, and I was teaching art at an elementary school in Sunnydale where I lived, and by Thursday I was attending the post-conference meeting of women artists of color because Moira Roth had proposed to the WCA that they collect the slides of the women artists of color and create a national slide bank for distribution. And so Moira said, “Would you come to this meeting?” And so I hopped in my car immediately, got to San Francisco around 4 o’clock or 4:30 and joined the meeting. And at that meeting there were some prominent women artists of color, there was Gail Tremblay who’s Native American and Amalia Mesa-Bains who is Hispanic, and I can’t remember some of the others but I remember those two. And there I was again, playing with the big girls. I was thinking, gosh, how did I get here? Because I’ve always carried a sense of unworthiness about myself. It’s not that I’m unworthy, it’s just something I absorbed from my culture and the surrounding culture. And so I heard Moira say to me at that meeting, “Would you take the responsibility of organizing Asian American women artists? Gather their slides and have them ready to submit to the National WCA to see if they can compile a packet on a national level.” Well, you know, I was much younger, I had tons of energy. I came back and I said—I heard myself saying, “Yes!” And I ran back to Sunnydale with such enthusiasm and I knew that Betty Kano, the woman that told me I should meet Moira and she was at the conference that she had a database and so I called her up and I told her what Moira wanted to do and what the WCA wanted to do and Betty — I was to meet with Betty, and she let me use her database and we wrote letters to twenty-five Asian-American women artists that we knew in the Bay area and many of them responded and the slides started to pour in. Betty said “We’re getting a lot of slides, how about having a meeting at my house?” That was March of 1989, so we organized that meeting two weeks later and that’s how AAWA starteed. We had no intention of starting an organization, we were just hungry to know each other, we were hungry to see the work of people who look like us. We wanted to know what kinds of issues were talked about in their work, what kind of work they did, and from that moment on, we just began as an organization. And one of the founding members was the late Bernice Bing, who in 1996 received the Lifetime Achievement award from the WCA, and another founding member was
Kyenum Kum, a Korean artist who returned to Korea to work and then some of our earlier members were Hung Liu, who is very, very famous and she is a professor of art at Mills College. And the late Hisako Hibi was a member. She was interned in the internment camps, and as an older person, years later, she joined us and added, you know, really a luster to our membership. And we’re celebrating our twentieth anniversary this year and it’s really amazing how the organization has grown because of our leadership and involved membership. We have had slide packets that we presented to organizations. We presented one of our first slide packet presentations at Mills College in Oakland and another one was presented to the de Young Museum in San Francisco. We were privileged to meet with curators and there was a team of us from AAWAA that went to do the presentation and that brought us to the attention then of the museum. And then Moira Roth constantly told curators and directors of museums about us and little by little we’ve been able to show in these communities, galleries and art spaces and some of us individually have been showing in museums and other galleries. And at this time I’m represented by a gallery in New York. And so it’s been an amazing journey. Amazing. If somebody told me thirty years ago when I, out of unhappiness and disquiet, decided to enter the art world, that I would be sitting here, talking to you and telling you this, I just would have said, “Ok, yeah, that’s never going to happen.” So it was a great leap of faith, you know? Just a great leap of faith.

Piwowarczyk: Could you tell a little bit about “made in usa: Angel Island –Shhh”?  

Wong: Yes, what happened was that I was obsessed with the stories of paper people, like my mother and my father and my brother-in-law, my uncle-in-law. There’s a lot of us that have paper people in our families. And I wanted to find a creative way of telling their stories and so I, first of all, I started this project to tell my mother-in-law’s story, she was not a paper person because she could come in legally with her identity as a merchant’s wife. So she didn’t have to alter her identity but eventually her identity was altered because she used the papers of her deceased son born in China to bring her brother into this country as her son. And so my husband’s uncle Robert, who is still alive, he’s in his nineties now, entered this country as my mother-in-laws son. And so I wanted to talk about her so I started this project out with the original title of An American Story because it is an American story. And I was working on a prototype, and this was 1997, using the rice sacks again. You know, I was still working on Eye of the Rice, so I was very into the rice sacks and I decided to use the rice sacks as a vehicle to tell my mother-in-law’s story. And so I did a prototype, and at that time my daughter was dating her husband and I had the prototype sitting in the living room and I asked them for feedback. My daughter and son-in-law are very art-educated and he is currently a film-maker for National Geographic and he himself was a very precocious artist when he was young so I trusted their judgment and they critiqued the piece and after they critiqued the piece, I suddenly had an epiphany that I needed to go to the flag store to buy a flag to act as a frame for the rice sacks that I had developed and altered and personalized for my mother-in-law. So I did that and kept some of the suggestions that they gave me and put it in on the first piece and after looking at it when I finished I realized that it was highly effective. So then the next piece I started was that for my mother. And the reason I focused on women was that a lot of times, in ethnic communities, the stories that are told, are told from a male’s point of view—the women’s stories are not heard. However, I’m also influenced and indebted to Judy Yung, a professor emeritus at UC Santa Cruz and late Him Mark Lai, a historian that taught at San Francisco State College, and Phil Choy and
the Chinese Historical Society because these three—Genny Lim—these four people were the original researchers to go in and begin to research the history of Chinese Americans in this country. But their findings were published in a book, they first published a book called Island based on the poetry on the walls of the Angel Island immigration station. And then they started researching the people and telling their stories. And then Judy branched off and began to research Chinese American women and their stories but they were always books. I did not want to do a book, I knew that I wanted to do a visual arts project. And so after I made about five or six of them, a friend of mine called me and she was crying and I said, “What’s going on?” and she said “My father died and he really felt like he was never an American.” And I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “Well, he was given away when he was an infant to a departing couple who was leaving for the United States by his biological parents and so he came in not knowing his actual parents and grew up knowing the people that actually raised him but when he died, he felt like he was not a true American, he felt very ashamed of his personal past and just having been this American that he felt was inauthentic.” And so my friend was crying really hard and I said, “Look, I’m doing this project, why don’t I make a flag to honor him?” And she agreed. And that was the first flag I did for a non-family member. I did flags for my sisters, who were the alleged nieces of my mother, I did flags for my mother-in-law, my uncle-in-law and my brother-in-law and I didn’t do one for my father until much later because I didn’t want to believe that he was a paper son. But my family and I talked about it and we all agreed although we didn’t have all the paperwork to prove that my father was probably a paper son, we had enough evidence that he probably was one. And so it all started because I wanted to tell my mother-in-law’s and mother’s stories about them coming to Angel Island under the unusual circumstances. And then once I started Cynthia Tom’s father’s flag, people discovered that I was doing these and told me “My mother, my father, was paper person. Would you make a flag in honor of my mother or whoever.” And there was one family that I found out about from a descendent in a conference. And this individual’s family had a strong Angel Island history and when he began to tell me of his family—he had all the records there—and I just was fascinated. I sat there for hours pouring over the records. So just because I was artist and I was researching, I became a historian, and then I became an oral historian. And so I came back to California where the mother of this person lived and I went to interview her and then she told me about her whole family and I have about maybe four or five flags from their family. And then I went to an Asian-American studies conference in San Diego and put up my prototype flag and asked people to tell me if they had any paper people in their family and a woman came to me and said, “My older sister.” And so I did the story of Lee Suk Wan, who was later featured in Becoming America, the Bill Moyers program about the Chinese. So, you know, it just ballooned and blossomed. And it turns out that I was a good friend of the late Bernice Bing and we were in Los Angeles because I accompanied her to do one of her group shows there at either USC or UCLA and she wanted to know what was my latest project and I told her and she said, “Oh, you’re doing that? You want to go to Kearny Street Workshop and work with Nancy Hom. She’s really busy, but when you get back, call her and make an appointment.” And I did, and Nancy had just finished a huge show with, I think a Filipino photographer and she was looking to start her new show and when I walked in and showed her my work she said, “This is exactly what I want to do next.” And so she was shocked that I walked in and the project fell on her lap, and I was shocked that she wanted to do it. And she worked with her board and they decided that they would work with me and we applied for a National Endowment for the Arts Grant. And so I got my first NEA doing made in usa. So Nancy was clever, she said, “This is bigger than the two of us, why don’t we
look into having the show at the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation in San Francisco Bay?” She belonged to a group called Kearny Street Workshop and they had done the first show of art about Angel Island. And so all of the t’s were crossed and the i’s were dotted and in that moment I was the right person in the right place at the right time. And so we went to work with several non-profits, we worked with the Angel Island Association, we worked with the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, we worked with California State Park and then we worked with the superintendent of the state park. And the superintendent was really pleased to have this show. And so we received the NEA and we got other grants and so at that time, there was money for the arts and so it took me three years to make twenty-five flags—to find the people, to chase them down, to do oral history with them, to talk to them. And when I do these kinds of oral history based work, I’m like a detective. I call the people on the phone, and I still can speak the original dialect, and so when I walk into the homes of these older people if I felt they needed their hand held, I asked their children to be present while I interviewed them and then there were times when I spoke to them alone but I always prepped the visit with a phone call and I would speak in our native language and I always started off with telling them my mother’s story. Once they heard my mother’s story—that was the opener. They realized that our family had gone through trauma very similar to theirs and they began to tell me their stories. However, none of them would allow me to use images of them because they were still psychologically or emotionally scarred from the experience of having to lie to come into this country and they were worried that if any kind of image of them appeared on my work, they would be deported. They were so frightened, and one person said, “If I tell you my husband’s story, what’s going to happen to him?” And Cynthia Tom’s mother was very uncomfortable, she did not want her husband’s story told. She said, “We don’t share these stories with anybody.” And so what I did was I called an immigration lawyer, told him what I was doing and he did some research for me and he found the statutes that protected these people. And he also told me that the interrogators and investigators at the INS that handled the Angel Island detainees were all getting old and they had so many cases to handle that they would not necessarily go back and try to deal with these people that came under these circumstances. And so I told that to the one person that was very concerned and when she heard that then she agreed that her husband could be interviewed and that was actually my husband’s uncle’s wife. They were really frightened. So in June of 2000 I had finished my work and over 200 people came to Angel Island, we had a big opening. A local florist had donated carnations for whoever was featured in my work, whoever was a detainee had a red carnation. I encouraged the people who had come to support me to go to them and start talking to them and ask them about their history. We had a catalogue produced. And I made something like an Excel spreadsheet that I had printed out, so for researchers they could go there and look at the people who came in and what year, what their secret was, and what their false identity was and everything. And so, you know, what I did was bring together the intersection of art and history. And in 2003, I presented my work at the Ellis Island Museum and I collaborated with the Angel Island Immigration Station—they had a straight historical exhibition and mine was an art exhibition.

Piwowarczyk: Could you tell me a little bit about the show you’re in right now? It’s called “New World Order: Humanity.”

Wong: Yes, I was invited by the San Francisco Museum Modern Art gallery to be part of this exhibition. And I make work and if people buy that’s wonderful. I don’t make work to sell.
And when I received the invitation from the curator, she said, “If you accept this invitation, you have to be willing to sell your work.” And that was a challenge, because I do installations. I am in a lot of collections, but that’s because people are just pleased by what I make. And so I said, “Oh, ok.” And I spoke to my gallerist in New York and she said, “Could you make something small? Your works are all so big.” And so I said, “ok, what could I do that’s small that people might want to buy and take away?” And so I had an epiphany one day, it came to me at one in the morning—dolls. And that’s really interesting because as I told you, I had an impoverished childhood and I never had a doll in my life. I may have had one—I seem to recall that somebody from the Salvation Army, which was one or two blocks away from our restaurant, might have brought me a doll one day, but I have a faint recall of that. But I don’t remember dolls as part of my life. And so there I was, at the age of 70, playing with dolls. And so, I have been a seeker and a searcher my entire life and so last year, I took a class in meditation and I found that the meditation techniques and practices really grounded and centered me and I was amazed at what it was like to just take deep breaths and be quiet and have things revealed to me. I began to go into a real blank space and time I went to go the studio and finally began to work with these 19-inch dolls. And the materials that I used on these dolls were influenced by a piece that I made last year in honor of my 86-year old developmentally disabled sister. I created a mannequin, and I don’t have an image of that on my website, but I do have some images, I just haven’t put them up on my website. And so I was just so influenced by using a lot of non-traditional materials, on this mannequin, I made an outfit out of rice sacks. The skirt is out of rice sacks, and the arms are out of rice sacks and I put on twigs, and I put on all kinds of different things and I wove Chinese opera masks on all of this and that’s because when my sister was young, she was developmentally disabled, but she was able to sing Chinese opera, which I found really interesting. And so that memory was still in my art making muscle and I said, “ok, I’ll just go ahead and use some of the objects and materials that I used in that piece on these dolls.” And another reason I chose to make these dolls was that doing my sister’s piece…

[At this point the recording was not good enough to understand, so the following information is not a quote but a summary of what the artist stated.]

Flo Oy Wong talks about how doing the piece about her sister was almost like meditation. She mentions that those of the Chinese culture do not usually reveal things like their family member’s disabilities. She talks about the dolls having a similar link with history and culture. She includes bottle caps in the dolls, which are significant of her personal history. As she explains, during her childhood, her family was very poor and therefore she had no way to go but up. The dolls are decorated with sequins, lace and beads. She talks about applying these individual pieces as she would apply paint. The dolls turned out to be very addictive, she says, along with her studio assistant, they would pass the dolls back and forth, each making different changes. The dolls, as they were being developed, took on very different personalities and in that sense, came to life. Each of the dolls has his or her own name and distinct features. One of the dolls, M’O Bama Mama, is an African-American doll that only developed after the artist noticed that the doll seemed to appear African American. It was named after Michelle Obama after the artist heard about her planting the White House vegetable garden. As part of the installation, this doll is suspended and appears to be flying along with two other dolls, one representing Wong herself, and one of a woman warrior, based on a character from the movie Mulan as well as on the artist’s 64-year old sister who has a black belt. There is one male figure among the dolls of
tough women, and as the artists says, he “exists beautifully” among the other dolls. One of the female dolls was modeled after Wong’s teenage grand niece, who comes from a traditional background but is a very contemporary female at the same time. Among the other dolls, Eleanor Roosevelt is represented as well as the Don’t Waste It doll, an environmental doll that got her name from the shoe lace she is adorned with. Wong talks about the dolls being physically exhausting and needy. Constantly vying for her attention and in a sense pointing out the additions needed. She became obsessed with the dolls and their development. The gallery in which the installation was to be placed was challenging, as it was a hallway, almost like a catwalk. It was between offices and rows of paintings. She faced the challenge of transforming this exhibition space. She consulted Matt McKinley, an installer, and after three meetings they decided to include mirrors, which would allow the viewers to see the elaborate dolls from both the front and the back. Because of the limited funding, Wong went to Goodwill to find the mirrors she needed. The installation developed into three out of the ten dolls hanging and the round mirrors behind them opening the space up.

[The following is a continuation of the interview, directly quoted.]

Wong: …And that was a big surprise and that wasn’t my original idea, that came from the graphic designer who was critiquing my work and I took it over to him one day and he said, “Wow, this is wonderful, how about putting in a mirror and letting the viewers see their reflections in the mirror?” And that worked, and again now the mirrors are really working. And so what I’m doing now is that my materials are mostly matte and I like to play with light and so the light is reflected by the sequins and by the ribbons. And so I’m playing with reflecting light. And the mirrors are the third element that reflect the light. And that comes back to my own practice of meditation because what I’m hoping is that my light inside of me is radiant and that it reflects all [could not understand recording here of the end of sentence]. And so this whole installation is symbolic of where I am today.

Piwowarczyk: Are you working on anything new right now?

Wong: I’m currently working on a rice-sack flag for the assemblyman Paul Fong who was elected from our district in California. And I had to take a break from that to finish up the dolls but I’m going to return to that. I am working with an art historian Melanie Herzog, of Edgewood Collage, on a book, and originally we were going to have her write a book about me and my career but the concept of the book is now evolving, and we’re in the process of researching residencies and applying for them to start writing. I invited her yesterday, to not just be the author, because she is an artist herself, she’s a potter and she’s an art historian and she’s an activist, and so we’re going to do something about two women artists working together. And I don’t know what shape that’ll take, it’s very abstract at this point.

END
Images of selected works by Flo Oy Wong:

Installation views from *Out of the Box* featuring “Cocooning: The Third Eye Dolls”
Detail views from the *Out of the Box* installation featuring “Cocooning: The Third Eye Dolls”

Left - *M'O Bama Mama* doll
made in usa: Angel Island Shhh is part of Flo Oy Wong’s Asian Rica Sack Series. The works explore the identity secrets of Chinese immigrants detained and interrogated in the United States.

made in the usa: Angel Island Shhh (flag for Wong’s mother) 2000
mixed media - U. S. flags, rice sacks, sequins, thread

made in the usa: Angel Island Shhh (flag for Wong’s sister), 2000
mixed media - U. S. flags, rice sacks, sequins, thread
My Sister: Li Hong