

DYNAMIC DUO Yida Wang and Ji Jiang at Ycenter for Visual Arts, which opened in April in Honolulu.



Y Marks the Spot

Power couple Yida Wang and Ji Jiang transform an old factory into a buzzy creation station, shaking up the Honolulu art scene | *By Lesa Griffith* |

The entry hall to the new Ycenter for Visual Arts is textured with century-old iron-gray bricks from dismantled houses in China. The door is an antique gate, bearing the Chinese character for “good fortune.” Then you enter a soaring space, with light flooding through windows that start at the floor and rise 20 feet to the ceiling and think, “We’re not in Honolulu anymore, Toto.”

Ji Jiang and Yida Wang, two of Honolulu’s most accomplished artists, have brought a slice of New York’s Chelsea gallery district and Shanghai’s 50 Moganshan Road to an unlikely location—the refurbished Weyerhaeuser Building, adjacent to such glamour spots as Home Depot and Costco in Iwilei. The 50-year-old former cardboard box factory is now the headquarters for the Vietnamese fast-food chain Ba-Le and its offshoot La Tour Bakehouse—and what could be a game changer for Honolulu’s art scene.

When the couple learned of the opportunity to buy into the Weyerhaeuser Building last year, their first reaction was: We can finally have our own proper studios! They had been working at home, Wang in the house and Jiang in the garage—which is too small for him to develop an oeuvre.

But they realized the cavernous, raw space could be something more. “We thought, besides having the studios, maybe we could accommodate the local art community,” says Wang. “We have well-established formal exhibition venues like the Honolulu Academy of Arts and The Contemporary Museum. Then we have galleries in Chinatown, which have a more commercial basis. I think we’re missing something here.”

The result is a 10,000-square-foot multiuse nonprofit center with three exhibition areas, a conference room, a living area for an artist in residence, a dark room, a drawing room (featuring a 20-foot-long table, made from a CONTINUED...

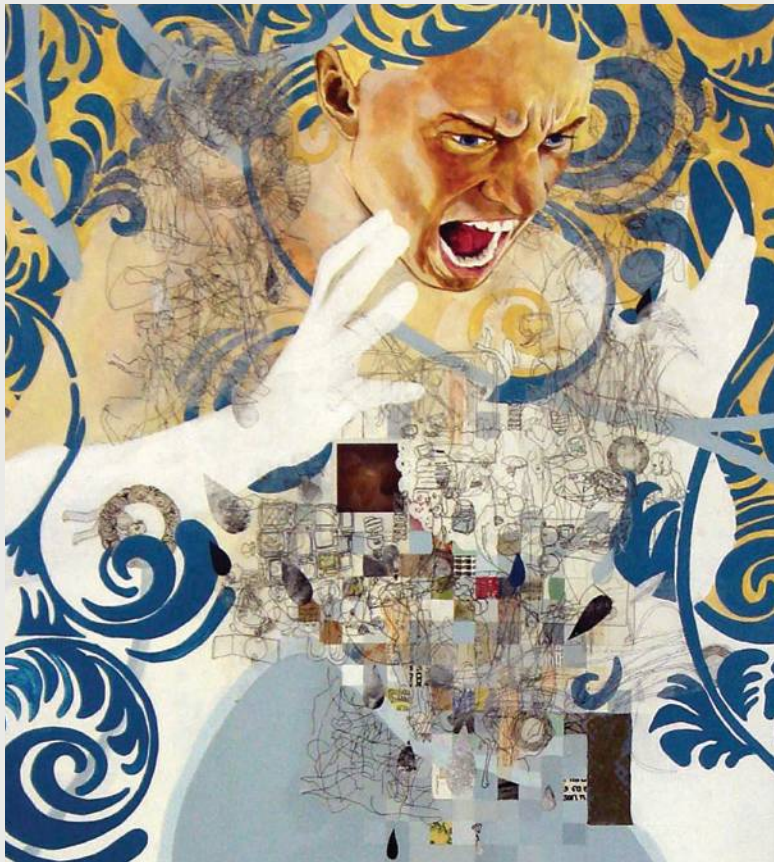


EXHIBIT A Artwork from Ycenter's opening show. Far left: A piece from *A Strange Communication (Four Seasons of the Mind)* by Boz Schurr, 77" x 36" (per piece, four pieces total), made from acrylic, paper, Polaroids, acrylic transfers and pen and ink on canvas. Top right: *Untitled* by Katie Small, made from torn tar paper. Bottom right: *Iron Maiden Series: Memory* by J. Robert Reed, an interactive sculpture, made from found objects such as a rusted old crib and dolls.

...CONTINUED single tree, on which to work on scrolls) with three skylights cut into the roof to let in natural light, a kitchen—and the couple's studios. The name is multifaceted—referring at once to the question "Why?" plus the fact that the Chinese word for art is *yi shu* and, of course, the first letter of Wang's first name.

While the main exhibition area is a soaring hall (with the old Weyerhaeuser markings on the floor indicating "trash can" and "ruler" preserved under sealant), Jiang created intimate, human spaces, blending the old and the new. He shipped in containers from China filled with recycled materials, such as old bricks, wood and even elevator tracks that serve as railings. Besides being an artist, Jiang is also an engineer and designer, creating a second floor with two areas connected by a suspended walkway. The conference room can double as a tearoom, and Jiang and Wang hope artists will use it as a sort of salon. "We have a lot of great artists here and really great ideas, but it's hard to share," says Wang. "In China, every studio has a tea table. The artists talk to other artists, curators and visitors, and they exchange ideas. I hope this space will work well as a place for artists to gather."

The two Shanghai natives came to Honolulu in 1987 to attend graduate school at the University of Hawai'i. "In China the graduate program is limited," explains Jiang. "After 25, you can't go back to school. We were too old already." Although they were accepted to prestigious programs in places such as New York, North Carolina and Ohio, they chose Hawai'i because a relative lived here. "And six months after we arrived, she left!" says Wang. They couldn't afford to relocate, and 23 years later

they are still here. They tag-teamed their way through school—she earned her MFA while Jiang supported her, then she became a teaching assistant so that he could return to school. Currently, Wang is an associate professor of art at the University of Hawai'i's Department of Art and Art History and Jiang is a successful independent contractor.

In the last few years, Wang and Jiang have reconnected with the China art scene—ironically through an exhibition at the Honolulu Academy of Arts in 2001. A curator from the Shanghai Art Museum, making a stop en route to the mainland, was impressed with their work in the show. Since then, both artists have had solo exhibitions at the Shanghai Art Museum, and last year they showed work at a gallery in Shanghai's red-hot 50 Moganshan Road art complex. Through these experiences they've developed relationships with international curators and artists that they want to share with the Hawai'i art community. "Now we just have to learn how to run a nonprofit!" says Wang.

The center opened in April with an exhibition featuring work by UH graduate students, who were in raptures seeing their paintings, sculpture, drawings and photographs in such a grand space. The reaction was gratifying to Jiang and Wang—two artists who have turned down overtures from galleries wanting to represent them, preferring to maintain their independence. "We do art for art," says Wang. "With Ycenter, we want to generate energy, not revenue." ■

Ycenter for Visual Arts, 900 N. Nimitz Hwy., 956.7647.

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