Unfolding the Richness of Origami

'Origami Heaven' illustrates how a deceptively simple craft can be elevated into high art.

By Aileen Jacobson

At first, Ranki Yamashita's work 'Origami' looks like nothing more than brightly colored squares of paper, each tightly crumpled along one edge, arranged on a white wall. And then you notice something from each pole that each paper casts — the profile of a face, each face sharing a single nose.

Hiroshi Hiyokawa 'Hope in a New Day' (1969) is also eye-catching. Across two canvases, a boy is depicted flying a kite or gliding a glider. Water is below; a kite or a glider is in flight, holding a string. On closer inspection, the work is more complicated, both in its symbolism, which refers to the hopelessness of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and in its construction. Most of the elements, including the kite, the boy and small bombs falling in the background, are made of folded paper.

'Origami Heaven' an exhibition at the Charles B. Wang Center at Stony Brook University, is not the collection of small folded cranes that one might expect.

"I wanted to expand into many different kinds of expression, to show a variety of designs," said Jingjing Jin, the center's associate director for cultural programs and the curator of the exhibition.

"Origami started as children's craft," she said. "Now it includes science, fashion, and fine art." For the show, Ms. Jin selected nine contemporary artists who use origami, in cranes in kingpins (in which paper is cut out) or other variations of the craft to create works that show how advanced the paper folding art has become.

One artist — Madeline del Socco Chermayeff, a lecturer in the university's anthropology department — made a series of colorful bowls of Q Hi, a flower design based on a Peranakan, a folded-paper headress in Singapore culture. Another company photograph shows the silhouette of a man wearing the fierce-looking head dress.

On a larger scale, Weng Sun, a Korean-American student at Stony Brook, made a folded paper parachute, which was assembled using a folded fan. The wingspan is of Korean craft called pyeong. The cloth, made from scraps of fabric, are usually used to cover tables or carry small objects. The name, it was added, designating she hoped to keep the piece, "White Wonder" in the location permanently. A video running nearby shows its installation, which took three days and required a crane. The video also demonstrates how shifting sunlight changes the look of the piece.

Another video in the exhibit, a short film, shows Taku Watanabe, a German engineer based in London and Stuttgart, folding her piece. A paper dress and a wall hanging are on display; she also makes folded-felt suits, similar to kimono or haori.

In another room there is a screening of "Between the Folds," a 90-minute documentary written and directed by Vanessa Gould. The film traces the evolution of origami into works of art, similar to the pieces in this show, as well as into science projects, including the work of Erik D. Demaine, a professor of computer science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who uses origami to solve science problems and make computer science.

Stony Brook University has its own origami-making center. George W. Hart, a research professor of applied engineering, is the only workshop in the world to provide a complete workshop in the art of origami. His students and other origami enthusiasts have created sculptures, such as "Swan," a 20-foot origami sculpture made of paper strips that hangs in the Wang Center's lobby.

"Paper is a simple medium, and not everyone appreciates just how creative it can be," she said.

Ms. Hayakawa, who made the Hiroshima-Nagasaki work at the request of Ms. Jin, and used a hybrid of origami and animation, along with a little glass, an author of several books about origami craft, lives in Columbia, Ohio, and teaches at Columbus College of Art and Design. She's done animal, alien, and monster, this is the first time I've read anything like this," Ms. Hayakawa, who visited the show, said. "It's wonderful to see so many different possibilities. You can really see the depth of this craft.

Ms. Yamashita, a Japanese-American artist who lives in Queens, said she had made collections of origami models but the work in the exhibition was new. "Each one is different," she said. "It's a one-time, temporary installation. At the end, it's discarded."