Seeing Asian Cultures, Through an Indigo Lens

BY AILEEN JACOBSON

A 9-foot-tall blank wall under a skylight became a face-painting backdrop in Jin-young Jin’s last talk, when she became associate director of cultural programs at the Charles B. Wang Center at Stony Brook University. “I felt I had to show something on it,” said Ms. Jin, who had a similar impetus about other visual expansions in the Wang Center, the 120,000-square-foot center for Asian and Asian-American arts and culture that she now oversees. “My purpose is to fill up the whole space,” she said recently as she stood on a second-floor bridge that offers a panoramic view of the sunlit white wall, which is no longer empty.

It now displays an array of woven textiles, a centerpiece for “Seas of Blue: Asian Indigo Dye,” one of three new exhibitions that opened last month in the center. The two others — “Boundless Fantasy: Multimedia Art From East Asia” and “Marvels and Monsters: Unmasking Asian Images in U.S. Comics, 1940-60” — have been more popular with students, she said. The site-specific indigo show is aimed more at a “mature” audience. “You have to read a lot,” she said, because wall texts explain the history and traditions surrounding the exhibition’s 44 artworks.

Ms. Jin, who had spent years as a gallery director in the Arts Department of the Korea Society in Manhattan, said that using indigo as a theme allowed her to explore the cultures of four nations — India, Indonesia, China, Korea and Japan — where the dye plays a central role. Extracted from a plant through a painstaking process, which one can watch in a documentary that plays on a screen in a corner of the exhibition, the dye has been used for several thousand years, probably first in India. In the late 1800s, it was largely replaced by a synthetic dye for mass-produced fabrics.

Students like to take pictures in front of a whimsical map of the United States made up of pieces of blue jeans. Ms. Jin said she collected old pants in many shades of blue from colleagues, she said, and hired a professional tailor to cut them into different shades of blue and pin them to a wall to create a display titled “The Biography of Jeans.” It is intended to show that a pair of jeans, though now in most cases synthetically dyed, “embodies American culture and character all around the world,” as she wrote in a text. The indigo blue, she wrote, “remains a central element of international visual culture.”

Contemporary artists continue the indigo tradition, too. Wang Center, who was born and raised in Seoul, South Korea, and now lives in Englewood Cliffs, N.J., was asked by Ms. Jin to create two pieces. She made a much larger piece, using the same kind of design and hand stitching, that now hangs from the bridge under the skylight. The bridge spans a shallow pool with two spouting fountains.

“I was so impressed by the big open space, which I love,” Ms. Seo said in a telephone interview. “I got a lot of inspiration from it. The fountain water made me relax, like meditation. It’s a beautiful combination of light and water.”

On June 13, Ms. Seo will teach a workshop in which participants can make their own small projects, she said, and she will discuss their similarities to American quilts and abstract painting.

For the opening in March, Merdi Shimbbing, an Indonesian artist and fashion designer, demonstrated how he makes ulos, hand woven cloths used as garments, and left behind the loom he brought with him, which now sits under five of his works on the skylight wall. On May 8, Judy Foe- nas, a New York artist, will lead a workshop focusing on Japanese katazome printing. Each featured country has its own fiber. The one for Indonesia explains that batik textiles, often identified with the Indonesian island of Java, are dyed using a wax resistance technique and are believed to bring luck to infants wrapped in them.

Clockwise from top left: Jin-young Jin, associate director of cultural programs at Stony Brook University’s Charles B. Wang Center; a fusion of coral and indigo-dyed cotton, from the late 19th to early 20th century, in the “Seas of Blue” show; “Homage to the Horse” by Leonie Castellein, of cotton, and Indigo dye; a part of the exhibition space with a jacket by Merdi Shimbbing, woven from banana fiber and indigo dyed and adorned with glitter.

Ulos, on the other hand, were first woven by the Batak people of the province of North Sumatra. A jacket designed by Mr. Shimbbing, woven from banana fiber and indigo dyed and given a fashion update with glitter, is on display. In China, a coat, a pleated indigo-dyed skirt made by Miaoy people (an ethnic minority) from the Guangdong Province is spread out in a large circle that shows off its textual details.

Three Japanese fusion covers dating from the late 18th to the early 20th century are the oldest pieces in the exhibition. They are patchworks of leftover material that has been used over and over by people of modest means, reinforced by running stitches. Ms. Jin said they are made of cotton because only members of the upper classes were permitted to wear silk. In Asia, the skyscraper is represented by nine textiles on the skylight wall and three more, including a hand-painted fabric and a tie-dyed one, in the above, where visitors learn of the dye’s “painful historical association with colonialism and slavery.” Indigo was produced on slave plantations in the American South and later under oppressive British rule in India.

The exhibit points out that Mahatma Gandhi staged his first act of Indian civil disobedience in 1917 on behalf of local indigo growers.

Ms. Jin curated the exhibition with two other people, who sent works but have not seen the show. They are Laurence T. Adams, an architect and associate professor at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and the late Ramin Jahanbegloo, a South Indian textile expert.

The multimedia exhibition in another section of the center includes several interactive works that respond to movement and sound, and a pair of credit card machines that appear to be gently breathing. Ms. Jin said that with Doo Eun Choi, an independent curator who teaches at Parsons the New School for Design in Manhattan, the colorful look at Asian stereotypes in American comics, a traveling exhibition, was curated by Jeff Yang, a Wall Street Journal columnist, and Asian/Pacific American Institute at New York University.

“I still see many empty walls,” Ms. Jin said as she walked through the center. “I want to make people excited just to be in the Wang Center.”

Photos by Christopher Morris for The New York Times

“Seas of Blue: Asian Indigo Dye” through July 27 at the Charles B. Wang Center, Stony Brook University, information: stonybrook.edu/wang or (631) 632-4400.