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ARTS | STONY BROOK

Seeing Asian Cultures, Through an Indigo Lens



Traditional woven textiles, dyes and blue jeans in 'Seas of Blue' at the Wang Center.

By AILEEN JACOBSON

A 57-foot-tall blank wall under a skylight beckoned to Jinyoung Jin last fall, 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 impulse about other vast expanses 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, 1942-86"—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 41 artworks.

Ms. Jin, who had spent 10 years as 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 five 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 bluejeans, Ms. Jin said. She collected old pants in many shades of blue from colleagues, she said, and hired a professional installer to cut them into the shapes of states and pin them to a wall to create a display titled "The Ubiquity 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 hue, she wrote, "remains a central element of international visual culture."



Contemporary artists continue the indigo tradition, too. Wonju Seo, 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. One is a small example of a traditional Korean pojagi, a diaphanous patchwork cloth usually made of small pieces of silk left over from other projects and used for tasks like wrapping gifts, covering food or carrying objects. After visiting the center, Ms. Seo 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 pojagis, she said, and she will discuss their similarities to American quilts and to abstract painting.

For the opening in March, Merdi Sihombing, 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 9, Judy Doenias, a New York artist, will lead a workshop featuring Japanese Sashiko stitching.

Each featured country has its own alcove. 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: Jinyoung Jin, associate director of cultural programs at Stony Brook University's Charles B. Wang Center; a futon cover of indigo-dyed cotton, from the late 19th to early 20th century, in the "Seas of Blue" show; "Homage to the Hmong" by Leone Castelino, of cotton, batik and indigo dye; part of the exhibition space; a jacket by Merdi Sihombing, woven from banana fiber, 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. Sihombing, woven from banana fiber, dyed with indigo and given a fashion update with glitter, is on display. In the China alcove, a pleated indigo-dyed skirt made by Miao people (an ethnic minority) from the Guizhou Province is spread out in a large circle that shows off its textural details.

Three Japanese futon covers dating from the late 19th 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-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHY KMONICEK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

dia is represented by nine textiles on the skylight wall and three more, including a hand-painted fabric and a tie-dyed one, in its alcove, 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 text 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 Laretta T. Adishakti, an architect and associate professor at the Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta, Indonesia; and Annapurna Mamidipudi, a South Indian textile expert.

The multimedia exhibition in another section of the center includes several large interactive works that respond to movement and sound, and a pair of credit card machines that appear to be gently breathing. Ms. Jin curated it with Doo Eun Chŏi, 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 the 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."

"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.