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ART & EXHIBITS

Stephanie H. Shih's ceramics imbue simple objects with meaning, beauty

Letha Ch'ien | March 9, 2023 Updated: March 9, 2023, 4:10 am



Artist Stephanie H. Shih created more than 40 ceramic sculptures representing objects linked to San Francisco's Chinatown and objects that are found throughout the Asian diaspora for her latest exhibition, "Greetings From Gold Mountain."

Photo: James T. Bee

Artist Stephanie H. Shih's work is seemingly everywhere these days, but her latest show, "Greetings From Gold Mountain" at the Berggruen Gallery, wants to talk about San Francisco.

"The founding of San Francisco's Chinatown is the founding of Chinese America," said Shih.

More than 40 ceramic sculptures representing objects linked to San Francisco's Chinatown (fortune cookies, a map of Angel Island) join ordinary objects (Tsingtao beer, a teapot) that are found throughout the Asian diaspora. The fun of a bright-yellow Bruce Lee movie poster exists in the same

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space as a ceramic rat and used condom referencing the bubonic plague of 1900 and the history of Chinese sex work — both “actual and imagined by white moral panic,” said Shih.

Born outside of Philadelphia in 1986 to Taiwanese immigrant parents, Shih was encouraged to choose a “pragmatic” major in college, even though she wanted to study visual art or creative writing. A journalism degree from Boston University led to a career as a copywriter, and Shih only reconnected with art to deal with a chronic pain condition. After posting her work for friends on Instagram in July 2018, she was improbably discovered and gained widespread gallery attention in less than a year.



Stephanie H. Shih's "Enter the Dragon, 1973," 2023, ceramic.

Photo: Robert Bredvad

The power of Shih's ceramics comes from their loving and laborious exactitude. You may have seen a jug of Lee Kum Kee light soy sauce before, but not through the mediation of Shih's hands shaping the clay that takes on its familiar plastic half-gallon form.

Initially Shih's attentive fidelity to replication (she'll buy vintage food packages from eBay to study them) can seem at odds with her pieces' obvious craftedness. The hand of the artist is evident in each blip and bump. As Berggruen Gallery director Morgann Trumbull said, "The handmadeness of the work is so beautiful and really one of the great pleasures in her work."

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Shaky, hand-painted lettering on a container of Yang Jiang preserved beans blurs crisp manufactured forms into the haziness of personal memory. The details are there, but slightly skewed. Where Andy Warhol celebrated interchangeable, endlessly cloned Campbell's soup cans, Shih renders objects as individualized, laying bare their complexity.



Works by ceramicist Stephanie H. Shih from her show "Greetings From Gold Mountain," at the Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco, on exhibit through March 25.

Photo: Robert Bredvad

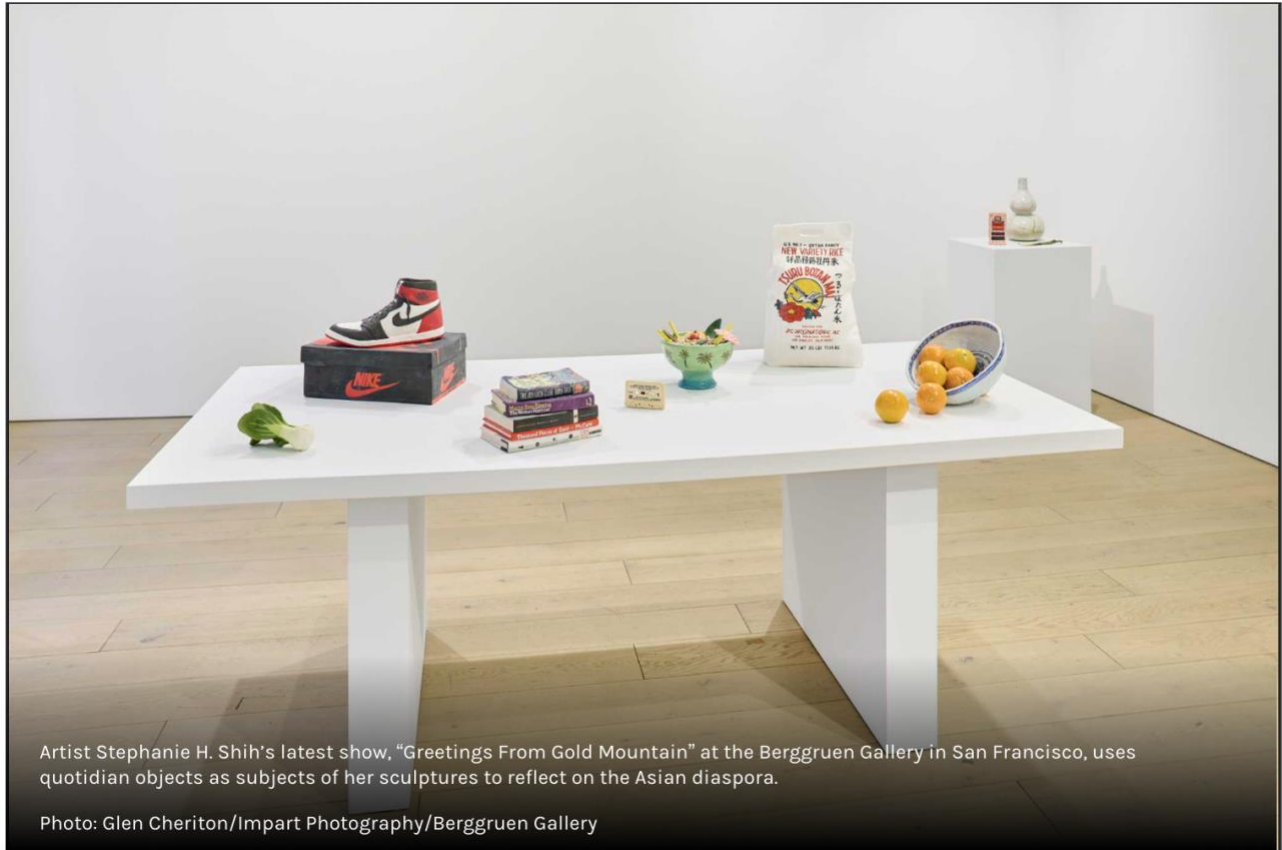
Shih's work allows Asian American identity to be multifaceted without trying to belabor the point. "Art focused on that point is boring," she said. Shih views complexity as "just a fact of migration and cultural interchange."

The fortune cookie so associated with Chinese American cuisine was invented in San Francisco and was likely the product of Japanese American Makoto Hagiwara. And could "Knicks Cap (Linsanity 2012)" have happened without the YMCA bringing basketball to China in the late 19th century, future star Jeremy Lin's parents immigrating to California in the 1970s, and Lin's father teaching him basketball at a local YMCA?

"Culture is fluid," stated Shih. "People move and culture moves."

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Artist Stephanie H. Shih's latest show, "Greetings From Gold Mountain" at the Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco, uses quotidian objects as subjects of her sculptures to reflect on the Asian diaspora.

Photo: Glen Cheriton/Impart Photography/Berggruen Gallery

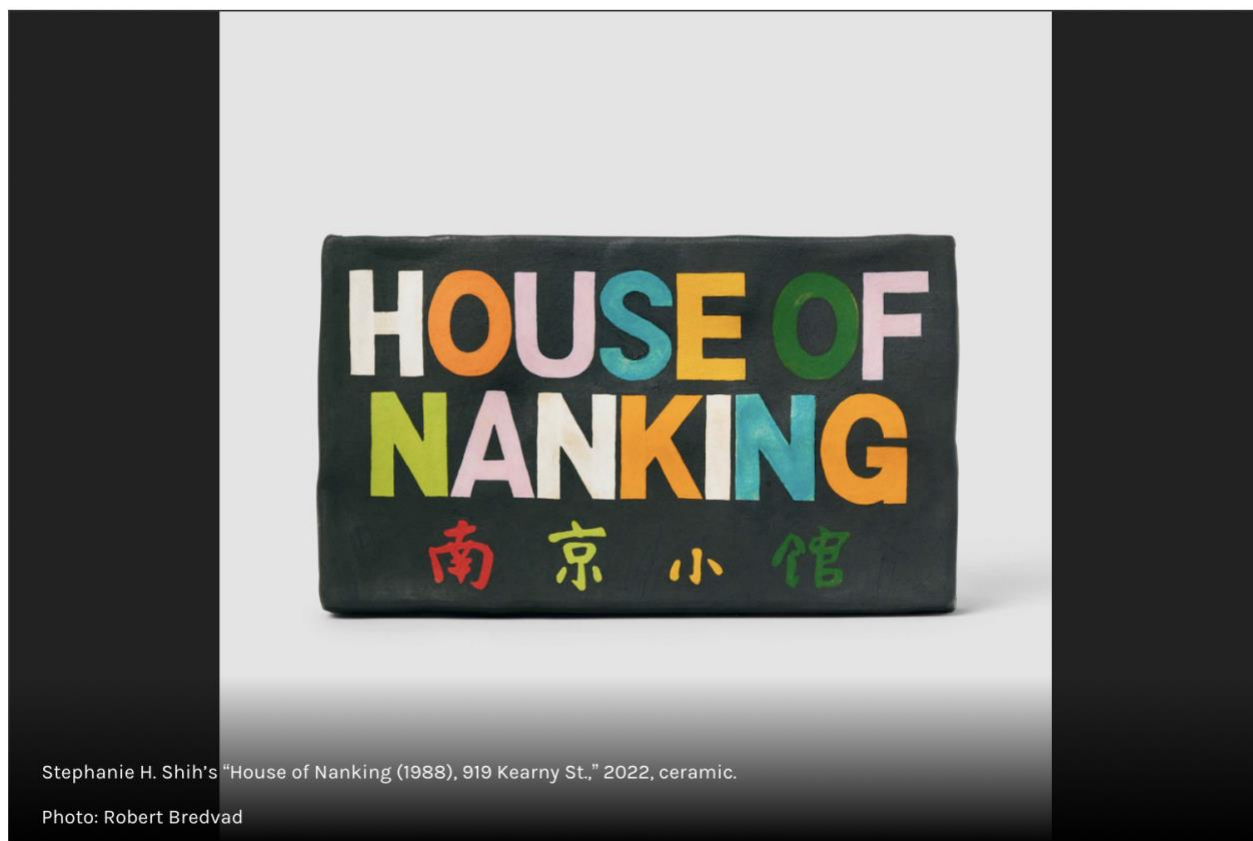
A table at the entrance of the show lets this great cultural jumble coexist. A single green bok choy rests near a scorpion bowl cocktail, outfitted with requisite pink drink umbrella, and a lumpy bag of Kokusai premium calrose rice. A red-and-black Nike Air Jordan attesting to Asian enthusiasm for basketball sits across from a Ling Long blue-and-white porcelain bowl spilling oranges. A stack of books with stories all set in San Francisco's Chinatown and a cassette tape invite curiosity.

The cassette tape, labeled "Neil Young, After the Gold Rush," gives insight into Shih's expansive thinking on Asian American identity. The song itself isn't about Chinese Americans, but as Shih told *The Chronicle*, "We obviously know how intertwined Chinese American labor was with that history. Even saying that phrase has a meaning to our history."

"When I came up with the concept of the show, I liked the idea that the work might look unrelated to each other," said Shih. "You wouldn't know why the stack of VHS is next to the raw fish. I like that playful juxtaposition."

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Stephanie H. Shih's "House of Nanking (1988), 919 Kearny St.," 2022, ceramic.

Photo: Robert Bredvad

Shih's father has at times scoffed at his daughter making art of ordinary objects, saying, "Oh, you American children are so obsessed with (things) that we don't care about." But Shih understands her artistic practice as one of self-discovery, finding many children of immigrants share a fascination for their cultures of origin.

Trumbull sees themes of diaspora, assimilation and identity as resonating with a new generation of collectors. "They want to be engaged in the work that's made by their contemporaries and addressing issues they're living through themselves," she said.

"I think we are trying to figure out who we are through research, but that's not how you figure out who you are," mused Shih. "Maybe ... we think by exploring (our cultural heritage) we can understand ourselves better. Whether or not it's true remains to be seen."

Letha Ch'ien is a freelance writer.