

By Chris Bergeron/Daily News Staff

Print Page

June 21, 2015 10:00AM

Korean sculptor, Jewish painter explore ancient roots at Framingham's Fountain Street Fine Art

FRAMINGHAM - Like archaeologists, Jaeok Lee and Joel Moskowitz have dug deeply into the ancient cultures of Korea and Israel to create original works of art.

Drawing from the separate "spiritual legacies," the Sudbury artists are showing their sculptures and paintings together at Fountain Street Fine Art in an engaging exhibit that transcends national origins to reach toward a shared humanity.

While offering striking art, their show, "Traditions in Translation: two artists explore their legacies," also reveals how Lee and Moskowitz synthesize traditional influences with contemporary approaches to make something fresh and deeply personal. Most all their works are for sale.

Lee, who came to the United States as a teenager in 1974, is showing 24 ceramic sculptures she calls "buksoo," or "guardians," that were venerated in Korea's folk religions for their power to bring prosperity, fertility and good harvests.

Raised in the South Korean capital city of Seoul, she said similar "guardian" statues were found in the countryside where villagers practiced shamanistic religions that predated Buddhism.

Lee has studied art and made ceramics for more than 30 years. She initially studied ceramics at Framingham State College in 1980 and continued her studies at UMass Boston, Massachusetts College of Art, the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and the Harvard Radcliffe ceramics studio.

Fired in a kiln in her home studio, Lee's guardians look ancient with pocked, stony-appearing surfaces and the folded hands and flat faces often found on the giant stone heads of Easter Island.

Yet, she transforms her ancient "guardians" into personal talismans with more contemporary powers to soothe, heal and bring peace.

Some, like her "Guardians of Yin and Yang," were made as a pair while others, like the "Guardian of Prosperity," were conceived as a single piece.

Observing the 30-inch tall sculpture, Lee pointed out a pumpkin and three doves nesting on his head that she said represents the successive generations of her family.

Adding a touch of whimsy, she sometimes gives her "guardians" colorful hats that lighten up their somber faces.

"I love making them," Lee said. "I feel a deep connection to my culture and ancestors. Working on them makes me feel very Korean."

Gallery co-owner Marie Craig said she and partner Cheri Clinton "totally agreed" that showing Lee's and Moskowitz's sculptures and paintings together was "a perfect fit artistically and conceptually" because visitors could enjoy different art forms while learning about different cultures.

"We like to show sculptures and paintings together because we have such a wide open space," she said.

A painter and poet, Moskowitz is showing elegant paintings of letters of the ancient Hebrew alphabet but, in an interesting twist, he juxtaposes them with their Arabic counterparts to create an artistic synergy rarely found in the real world.

The former owner of a local shop, The Frame Loft, Moskowitz approached Lee, who he knew through her art, and suggested, "We mine the treasures of our legacies, each in our own way, and transform them to make them personal."

As they mulled ideas for a joint exhibit, he suggested they focus on "spiritual" elements in their cultural legacies.

A Reform Jew, Moskowitz began painting the 22 letters of the ancient Hebrew alphabet in acrylic paint that he sometimes embellishes by adding buttons or small elements of collage.

"I wanted to go back to my roots and find a subject that was truly 'me,'" he said.

Hoping to deepen his understanding of age-old conflicts dividing Jews and Muslims, Moskowitz began Arabic lessons with Soheir El Ebiary at the Islamic Center of Boston in Wayland.

Troubled by continuing political tensions in Gaza in Israel, he began juxtaposing the Hebrew letters with their 28 counterparts of the Arabic alphabet as if offering hope for reconciliation.

Painted against a white background, the juxtaposed letters possess a soothing beauty. Moskowitz generally paints the Hebrew letters yellow and uses several hues to paint the Arabic letters.



Sudbury artists Jaeok Lee, left, and Joel Moskowitz have a joint show at Fountain Street Fine Art in Framingham titled "Traditions in Translation." Courtesy Photo/Marie Craig

The additional contrast of the more angular Hebrew letters with the flowing cursive of the Arabic element adds a complementary dimension, as if they are bridging a wide chasm.

"I think when visitors see it, they might imagine different cultures coming together," said Moskowitz.

Sometimes, like for the letters "hey" and "hay," the resulting design resembles Chinese characters. Other times, for "nun" and "nuun," the overlapping symbols resemble hieroglyphs from a lost culture or another planet.

"The conversation between the shapes and colors is beautiful," said Moskowitz. "In the real world, there hasn't been much productive dialogue. At least in this art, we have coexistence."

Chris Bergeron is a Daily News staff writer. Contact him at cbergeron@wickedlocal.com or 508-626-4448. Follow us on Twitter @WickedLocalArts and on Facebook.

"Traditions in Translation: two artists explore their legacies"

WHEN: Through July 11

WHERE: Fountain Street Fine Art, 59 Fountain St., Framingham

INFO: 508-879-4200; www.fsfaboston.com