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## From out of nothing

### 'Book of Zero' provides unexpectedly deep images

By Victoria Dalkey -- Bee Art Correspondent



An image from "Book of Zero" by Brenda Louie, **Nelson Gallery**

Sacramento artist Brenda Louie was browsing in a bookstore one day when she came upon a book about the history of zero.

"There was a line in the book that opened my mind," she recalls. "It said, 'Looking at the zero you see nothing; looking through it you see the world.'"

"For me, the zero, which is represented as a circle, is a lens which allows me to see my own history and life experiences," she explains.

An installation of Louie's works, nearly 100 in all, in the Nelson Gallery on the campus of the University of California, Davis, documents her research into the concept of zero.

Zero is a mathematical symbol signifying nothing, an absence of quantification. Its discovery marks a significant advance in abstract thinking, and without the concept, Louie says, we would not have higher mathematics or the binary code on which computer language is based.

The central section of her elegant and evocative installation is 80 1-foot-square paintings based on circular motifs that spell out "non-action" in binary code. The expressively wrought paintings have a visceral visual impact, heightened by Louie's use of encaustic (a paint made from pigment mixed with melted beeswax and resin fixed by heat after application), which gives them an interior luminosity. Visions both celestial and hellish emerge from the singed black and hot red tones of the works, which contain layers of collage, calligraphy, chiseled markings and partially obscured photographic imagery.

Louie's central motif, the image of an empty circle, is familiar to us through Zen Buddhist and Taoist painting, in which the circle represents nothingness but also the primary energy, or chi, that fills the universe. For Louie, it is a portal to memory, flowing from past to present, and a way to see the contemporary world, moving "from order to chaos and from chaos to order."

Many of the circles contain partially obscured faces, both horrifying and serene. A Buddha-like head with an inward gaze, says Louie, symbolizes the oppression of Tibetan monks by the Chinese government, an oppression that reminds her of her own childhood in China during the Cultural Revolution. The serenity of the image, Louie says, reminds us that in times of travail we must look inward and achieve a state of non-action.

Other images that recur in the series represent what Louie calls "zero people," the voiceless people who have been silenced by repressive regimes, the victims of Sept. 11 and the uncounted dead civilians in Iraq. Using a computer to distort the image of a group of people, Louie transforms them into skeletal figures whose bodies drip down the canvases, at times reducing their heads to mere dots or dashes breaking dark passages of pigment.

Some of the images remind one of planets with rings floating through dark space or interior cellular structures in bodies wracked by pain. Spirals float throughout the works, signifying growth and hope for a more fortunate future. Louie's use of red, the vermilion of Chinese chop marks, hovers between cultures, calling up Western association with fire, blood and pain and Eastern allusions to life and fertility.

Each painting, Louie says, is a reminder that when something is destroyed, you must go back to zero so that something new can come.

Facing the wall of small mixed-media paintings is a huge oil painting of a gold circle on black, which provides an island of relief in the installation. The glowing circle encloses a richly textured field of tones that, while dark, seem full of desire.

Shiny, satiny brush strokes enliven the surface of the painting, which is remarkably sensual. Near the bottom floats a small nucleus of blue with gold overtones, a symbol of the self, surviving at the heart of darkness.

Moving into new media, Louie, with the help of lighting designer Kyle Lemoi, has cast a light on the gallery's west wall. Elliptical rather than circular, it suggests a comet speeding through space. It forms a third component in the main installation that is intriguing but essentially mysterious in the context of the whole.

An alcove in the main gallery is hung with several works in oil and silk-screen on paper that relate to earlier works by Louie. Most involve the image of a rice bowl and calligraphy from her 83-year-old father's writings. They are complex and texturally rich works that offer an interesting sidelight to the show.

The gallery's small side room has been painted black, and in it Louie has placed a huge urn covered inside and out with distorted Chinese pictographs. Over it hangs a three-dimensional zero echoing the main theme of the installation. The urn, built up from coils of clay, is meant, Louie says, to be filled with the news clippings she obsessively collects so that it forms a kind of time capsule for future archaeologists to discover. By the time that happens, of course, the clippings will have disintegrated into dust, a fitting comment on the evanescence of life.

### **Brenda Louie: The Book of Zero Series**

**WHEN** : 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, 2-5 p.m. Sundays, through May 21

**WHERE** : Richard L. Nelson Gallery, Art Building Room 124, University of California, Davis

**INFORMATION** : (530) 752-8500