

Diaspora diaries

US-based artist Bovey Lee takes the traditional Chinese craft of paper-cutting and makes it her own, writes **Yvonne Lai**.



A watery vortex swirls within a giant drum, sucking animals and objects into oblivion as dark clouds discharge spears of lighting. A lone rabbit has escaped the deadly current and tries valiantly to pull other creatures clear. All this is depicted in a painstakingly detailed paper cutout, part of a Lunar New Year exhibition.

"I wanted to take the traditional character of this zodiac animal – symbolising creativity, vitality and kindness – and remake it as a modern-day hero that saves the world," says paper artist Bovey Lee of her hand-cut work, *Rescue Mission*, which she created in 2009. It is "something you wouldn't expect a rabbit to do".

Raised in Hong Kong and now living in Pittsburgh, in the United States, Lee is on a rescue mission of her own – trying to bring this dying Chinese art form into the 21st century with her own techniques and subjects.

Born in 1969 to a middle-class family, Lee was encouraged to pursue her interest in art by her father, an interior designer who has since

retired. But even he was surprised when, in 1993 and after completing a fine arts degree at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, she upped sticks and moved to the US to enrol in a masters programme at the University of California, Berkeley.

"At that point, he didn't think I was actually going to try to make a career out of it," she says. "Plus, there weren't any masters of fine art offered in Hong Kong. But I just wouldn't give up."

After getting a degree in traditional Western art media and a short teaching stint at UC Santa Barbara, Lee pursued a master's in digital arts at New York's Pratt Institute, then headed back to university to teach.

"I was teaching art for 10 years after I graduated," she says. "In the beginning, I thought I could have an art career and teach at the same time, which a lot of people do. Teaching is a very honourable career. I had the fortune to have great teachers in my life. It wasn't until I started doing paper-cutting, which is so time consuming, that I needed total focus to make it happen."

Lee found her medium on a visit to Hong Kong in 2004, when her father gave her a small collection of traditional cut-paper art.

"I asked myself if I could create anything so beautiful and intricate. There was a sense of freshness and intimacy that struck me."

Back in Pittsburgh, Lee began researching the folk art's origins and history, its evolution and variations. She then created her own.

She taught herself the basics and travelled to the mainland and Switzerland to seek out the ageing masters of the craft. Her most recent visit to Beijing, in October, yielded a fruitful conversation with Lu Shengzhong, a paper-cut artist and chair of the department of experimental art at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

"We had a three-hour conversation in front of his students about paper-cutting – in Putonghua, no less, which was really a stretch for me," Lee says. "But what I got out of it was that Lu made it 'official' that we shared a non-traditional approach to the work and that I was quite ambitious with what I wanted to do – which is to extend and promote Chinese paper-cutting as a global art form."

Her work has been exhibited around the world, including at the Hong Kong Museum of Art and Grotto Fine Arts Gallery.

"I would never say never to coming back to Hong Kong but it would have to be the right opportunity and the right time," Lee says. "Artists in Hong Kong now seem to have more opportunities than when I was a student here."

A large selection of Bovey Lee's work, including the Rescue Mission paper-cut, can be seen at Park Court in Pacific Place, Admiralty, until February 13.



the not-yet-old banger.

To be exact, those window stickers should read: "Ever-so-slightly more environment friendly private car – arguably." But I don't suppose that will catch on. *Mark Footer*

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