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Victoria Dalkey: Three sisters' works exhibited at CSUS Library Gallery

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Water, wood and earth are the three elements the Zhang sisters explore in their joint show at CSU Sacramento's Library Gallery. The sisters – Ling, Bo and Hong – were born and raised in the northeast China in the city of Shenyang, often referred to as the Detroit of China. Each has found a new home: Ling in Atlanta, Bo in Beijing and Hong in Lawrence, Kan.

Hong and Bo, 42, are twins, while Ling, their elder sister, is 50. They were born into an artistic family. At the age of 15 Hong and Bo won a national competition to attend the prestigious high school of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

Both twins received bachelor of fine arts degrees in China and each earned master's degrees – in the United States, where they immigrated in 1996.

Ling received a master's degree from Beijing Central Institute of Nationalities in 1988 and after graduation was invited to exhibit her work in the United States by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the governor of the state of Illinois and Signet Fine Art. After the show, she decided to remain in America.

United by their cultural heritage, the sisters, who have exhibited internationally, stay in touch with each other through technology and have had two previous shows together, one in Sacramento at b. sakata garo in 2004 and one in Atlanta in 2010. Though they are bound by birth, their artworks vary in style and subject matter.

Yet the themes of the works are interconnected. Water, earth and wood are three of the five natural elements. The relationship is symbiotic. Wood grows in the earth and needs water to grow. The water is



CSUS Library Gallery

"Spirit of Rock III" by Ling Zhang

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absorbed by the earth, thus the three elements are bound together.

While each sister deals with a different element of nature, there is a cohesion in the exhibit as the colors they use are similar, running to black, white and shades of gray and brown.

Bo, who studied printmaking, focuses on wood in a series of mixed-media works on rice paper that are layered like prints. Elegant, recessive and abstract, they mimic tree bark, peeling and stained by the passage of time. Subtle tones of gray and green predominate in "Tree Bark #6," in which the paper that mimics the bark peels and curls, giving a three-dimensional aspect to the work. "Tree Bark #5" resembles a non-objective painting with subdued tones of ochre, gray-blue, red, lavender and gray-green.

Of these works, Bo writes, "The bark is the essence of skin and its layers keep the tree alive. The tree is also the major material for Chinese paper-making including rice paper," which is the primary medium of her works.

Ling explores the souls of rocks in figurative works that are imaginative. "Spirit of Rock III, A Relic in the Desert – In Memory of My Father" depicts a rock painted with the face of Kwan Yin, the Chinese goddess of mercy, fallen amid the rubble of a desert floor. "Spirit of Rock, Misty Morning" combines stone and water, with a rock in the midst of what might be heavy fog. "Spirit of Rock, Dusk" is a sombre scene of rocks piled up like a cairn to mark the way for travelers.

A series of smaller works subtitled "Dream of Butterfly" illustrate the parable of the man who falls asleep and dreams of a butterfly, but when he wakes he is not sure if he was a man dreaming a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming a man.

Ling, who has made many trips to Tibet and the rocky deserts of the American West, writes "In Tibet, the stacking of stones/rocks can symbolize a temporary dwelling for a soul. Rock is calm, sheltering and has great strength. ... I believe in the soul of rocks, their timeless strength and the connection that binds them to our lives."

Hong, who earned her master's degree at UC Davis, examines the element of water in large-scale charcoal drawings and Chinese-style ink paintings that depict what appear to be river currents and ocean waves from a distance, but up close become strands of hair.

"Waves" is a 12-foot-long charcoal drawing that draws inspiration from Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai's woodblock print "The Great Wave." "Drop" depicts a long tendril of hair dipping into a whirlpool. "Currents" gives us the interwoven undulations of a stream of water. These massive works, presented on scrolls like traditional Chinese artworks, are rigorously rendered and have great presence.

"Water," Hong writes, "can be smooth like long hair to calm the mind. Water can be roaring like tangled hair to disturb the body. ... Water can be anything or nothing. I quote Bruce Lee's words on water, 'Empty your mind, be formless and shapeless like water. You put water in a cup, it becomes a cup. You put water in a bottle, it becomes a bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes a teapot.' "

"Three Sisters: Bound to the Elements" is a strong show rich in imagery and metaphor that relates to nature and the interconnectedness of things.