

## He calls it a 'connection'; others see art

By Dixie Reid  
BEE STAFF WRITER

Steve Yee no longer burns his original artwork to honor his Chinese ancestors, but he had to be convinced that offering up a facsimile was just as appropriate.

"He never thought of it as art," says Jack Van Hiele, who has seven of Yee's pieces on display in his Triangle Gallery in San Francisco. He has known Yee as an artist for 30 years. "We had to convince him that it was. Steve considered them to be artifacts."

Meanwhile, in the midtown Sacramento loft where he lives and works, Yee shrugs.

"To me, it's a personal ritual," he says of ceremonies that take place at his private altar in a Sacramento warehouse. "I don't know what it means. I'm not Taoist. I'm very much Christian. I do get a feeling of making some connection. It's no different than setting flowers at the tombstone of a loved one."

Yee, 55, fashions his art from plywood in the shape of characters he picks from the headlines of Chinese-language newspapers. He spackles the wood surface with fine clay to represent the



Sacramento Bee/Paul Kragaki Jr.

Steve Yee's art is on display at the Triangle Gallery in San Francisco.

Earth and covers it with a thin layer of pure beeswax, symbolic of the candles found burning in temples. He embeds in the wax powdered rust imported from China, rice tea, ashes, bones, gunpowder, seashells, sand and various immortal elixirs. Over that, he carefully letters original verse.

"What's unique," says Van Hiele, "is that he uses Chinese shapes from newspapers, and he doesn't read Chinese. He puts

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Sacramento Bee/Paul Kragaki Jr.

Seven of Steve Yee's memorial artworks are on display at the Triangle Gallery in San Francisco. He has burned his artwork as "a sacramental offering" to the Chinese who came before him in Sacramento.

## Yee: Father never told his real name

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calligraphy on them, but it has no meaning because he cannot do calligraphy. It's interesting what his art is and is not."

Spend any time with Yee and you'll soon discover a man haunted by his past who translates that into his artwork.

It has to do with his late father, Joe Yee, the "paper son" who died an enigma to his family, and with early Chinese immigrants in Sacramento who worked on the transcontinental railroad and the levee system — and are now all but forgotten.

With his artwork, he tries to find meaning on both fronts.

He desperately wants to know the true identity of his father, an illegal immigrant who used entry papers of someone named Joe Yee to get into the United States from China in the 1940s. The elder Yee, who ran a small market in south Sacramento, died before divulging his real name or anything about his past.

As for the Chinese laborers, Yee is leading a one-man campaign to get a museum built as part of the downtown railyard development. The area was once a flourishing Chinese community called Yee Fow until the residents were driven out by a fire in the 1850s.

"I want to venerate my ancestors who gave so much to this country," he says, "and they, like my father, are nameless in the sense that we don't know who they are."

Yee, who works for the state Department of Education developing technology to help chil-



"Altar Offerings" is one of Steve Yee's paintings on wood.

Steve Yee

### STEVE YEE

**WHAT:** An exhibit of the Sacramento artist's "sacramental offerings"

**WHEN:** 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, through April 28

**WHERE:** Triangle Gallery, 47 Kearny St., San Francisco

**INFORMATION:** (415) 392-1686, www.triangle-sf.com

dren with disabilities gain access to curriculum, was born in Sacramento and grew up in the Land Park neighborhood in the 1950s. His father insisted that he assimilate, leaving the boy ostracized by both his white and Chinese peers. He remembers being pelted with rocks and called names as he walked home from school.

"I'm what the Chinese call 'jook sing,'" Yee says. "I'm like a hollow piece of bamboo. If you look at the outside, it looks like something Chinese, but inside, it's hollow. I'm the hyphen in Chinese-American. Americans say I'm Chinese. Chinese say I'm American, so I'm caught in that hyphen. My art has a lot to do with that."

"I may never find out who my father is, but through this journey, I've gotten closer to my culture. I've become a bridge instead of a hyphen, and I'm reaching out to protect my ancestors who contributed so much to Sacramento, and sacrificed so much."

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