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Art at local museum inspires teen to write book

A visit to the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport three years ago prompted the teen to publish 'between the lines.'

By Laura Damon
Staff writer

NEWPORT — Claire Ma turned her growing pains into a work of art.

Fresh off a flight from her home in Shanghai, China, the 17-year-old on Friday showed her new book — a collection of coming-of-age poems that she wrote and illustrated — to Judy and Laurence Cutler, co-founders of the National Museum of American Illustration.

Born in Canada, Ma moved with her family to China when she was in fifth grade. Her family travels often, and three years ago they visited Newport, Ma's first time to the City-by-the-Sea, specifically to

soak in the art at the National Museum of American Illustration.

Ma was struck by the artwork in the museum that seemed to fuse fantasy and reality, she said.

She recalled one painting of an American president riding a whale, or something of the like. Such



Ma

exposure to this type of art sparked within her a desire to recreate "this kind of unbelievable, fantastical art," she said. "There was this kind of freedom in art."

Fast forward three years later, Ma is sitting in the same museum holding her newly published book, with illustrations that Judy Cutler said reminds her of an early Andy Warhol.

"It strikes a chord," Judy Cutler said of Ma's writing style. Laurence Cutler reminisced about the 1960s and said Ma's poems

"are very much like a lot of the poetry that was written back then."

The small book, titled "between the lines," is a collection of poems lifted from her personal journal entries, as well as paintings. She never intended to publish the material until a few months ago, Ma said; the book was published in Hong Kong in October and will soon be available for purchase at the National Museum of American Illustration gift shop.

"It was kind of scary but I think it was a good choice," to publish the book, Ma said. "I just want them (readers) to feel something intensely."

The book's main themes are character development and acceptance of other people regardless of differences, Ma said.

Divided into three chapters: "yesterdays," "todays" and "tomorrows," Ma documents bittersweet memories in the

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"yesterdays" chapter. In "todays," she speaks on issues that are important to her in the present. "Tomorrows" features "things I want people to remember," she said.

"The whole thing is about change and how change is a good thing," Ma said. "I wanted to kind of document change."

Her poems touch on topics

like body image, love and death. She draws from personal experiences but also from the experiences of her friends or people in general. Controversial issues are important to talk about, Ma said.

Ma said she doesn't draw inspiration from particular artists but instead "just from everyday life."

She is near-sighted, and Ma said she chooses to relinquish her glasses sometimes to garner inspiration from her blurred surroundings.

"If I can't really see the tree well, I can see the really nice image inside of it," she said. Then she'll transcribe that image onto paper.

All proceeds from the sale of her book will fund the creation of a children's library in Ma Wang Xiang, a rural, impoverished county in Hunan, China. Knowing that children will benefit from the sale of her book is the "most rewarding part of this process," Ma said.

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