

## **About the Artwork - “Abalone Journey”**

*Provided by artists Janelle Louie and Thao Huynh French*

This mural tells a lesser-known story of San Diego’s early Chinese immigrants—fishermen who arrived in the 1800s, built sailing ships (junks), and established fishing villages along the bay, including one where the Convention Center now stands. They pioneered San Diego’s commercial abalone fishery and helped shape the region’s fishing industry we see today. An anchorage for the junks was just south of 3rd and J, which was part of San Diego’s Chinatown. At its peak, 18 junks sailed out of San Diego Bay. By 1893, only one junk sailing out of San Diego remained in Chinese hands.

What happened to these Chinese fishermen? How have others from across the Pacific Ocean contributed to fishing, fisheries and related cuisine in San Diego? Their story we hope to preserve and tell is about a dangerous journey across the Pacific Ocean to escape poverty and war, as an act of defiance to find prosperity and to persevere through many hardships including legal discrimination from The Chinese Exclusion Act Laws that ultimately led to their diminishing industry. We hope this art pays homage to some of the many past Chinese fishermen, San Diego’s history as a fishing town, and inspires curiosity and connectivity across communities.

Reference: "In Search of Gold Mountain: A History of the Chinese in San Diego, California" by Murray Lee

### **More About the Mural:**

This artwork features the Sun Yun Lee, a 52’ sea-going fishing junk built in 1884 at Roseville, San Diego, near the present day San Diego Yacht Club. These vessels once sailed as far north as Santa Barbara and hundreds of miles down the Baja coast harvesting black abalone, the shallowest dwelling species, and the only species to have up to nine open respiratory holes, a symbolically lucky number.

The piece also depicts other meaningful imagery:

- Rockfish, which can be found in the waters off San Diego. Fish, like abalone, are important in Chinese cuisine, and are often served whole.
- Chrysanthemums, to show the harvest in the journey to find opportunities and gold. Gold Chrysanthemums are often seen during celebrations like the Chinese New Year, Tet (Vietnamese New Year), and the commonly celebrated, Lunar New Year. Flowers here represent abundance and harvest as the journey of the ship unfolds.
- Abstract ink markings, to highlight the art of Chinese Ink dated back to 3000 years. The paint markings are supposed to be ambiguous but still capture the essence of the ink brush strokes often used in beautiful paintings and letters written to loved ones back home.

## Artist Bio 2025 for DTSD Intersection Mural “Abalone Journey”

Thao Huynh French is a multidisciplinary artist, muralist, and photographer known for her vibrant and expressive work. Born in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, she now lives and works in San Diego, California. As the co-founder of Mindful Murals™, a creative social enterprise with the mission of bringing communities together through the power of art. Since launching it in 2018, she and her husband, and business partner, have painted over 400 interactive murals in schools and public spaces reaching as far as New York, Mexico, Vietnam and the Philippines.

French’s artistic practice is deeply influenced by her Asian American heritage and an appreciation for nature, particularly flowers which she sees as symbols of resilience and transformation. Her art is an eclectic mixture of abstract and figurative concepts using acrylic and spray paint as primary mediums with no limitation of color. Her work continues to evolve, using years of practice to experiment with more modern ways to create art styles that are uniquely hers.

French remains committed to innovation and storytelling, using art as a bridge to connect people, cultures, and ideas. As the world grows uncertain, French remains vigilant to use her art as a force for good and to be a catalyst to humanize refugees and immigrants of the world.

## Artist Bio 2025 for DTSD Intersection Mural “Abalone Journey”

Janelle Louie is a local artist and commercial fisherman based out of San Diego. Her academic background is in mathematics, but she decided to pursue a career in art and fishing after working in the data science industry for several years. Most of her works focus on life near, on, or under the ocean, whether it's close to home where she began freedive spearfishing during her UCSD days, out sailing, or fishing on a small boat up and down the West Coast.

Her painting and photography have been featured in The Flower Pot Cafe and Bakery, an upcoming cookbook “San Diego Seafood: Then and Now” by California Sea Grant, projects by local seafood resource Fishful Future, Casa Familiar’s 14th annual Dia de la Mujer Exhibition at The FRONT, The Great Outdoors group photography show at La Bodega Gallery, and the UC Box Art Project at UCSD.

In particular for this project, as a Chinese-American fisherman herself, her interest is to pay tribute to the early Chinese fishermen who lived and worked out of San Diego and who ultimately were among the founders of what once was of the Chinatown community here.

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