



Vicki Myhren Gallery

January 11 - March 24, 2024

HUNG LIU: CONTROL AND FREEDOM

Gallery Guide



Hung Liu, *Travelogue*, 2004.

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Who is Hung Liu?

Hung Liu (1948 - 2021) was born in Changchun, China, and grew up during the communist regime of Mao Zedong. As a student, she was trained in the Socialist Realist style at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing. In 1984, she immigrated to the United States to attend the University of California's art school, where she developed her signature vibrant style. Liu's subjects are drawn from historical photographs of those that she felt "had no name, no bio, and no story" including; former slaves, prostitutes, refugees, soldiers, and laborers. Through her empathetic approach, she imbues these subjects with dignity and reverses their historical eraser.

In 2011, Liu received a Lifetime Achievement Award in Printmaking from the Southern Graphics Council International. She is a two-time recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Painting. Her artwork has been exhibited in solo shows at the Oakland Museum of California, and the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Her art has been collected and exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art, and the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, among others. Hung Liu: Portraits of Promised Lands, a major exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, opened shortly before Liu's untimely passing in August 2021.



Understanding the Cultural Revolution

Shortly after Liu's birth in 1948, the Communist Party defeated the Nationalists, ending the civil war and solidifying the People's Republic of China as a communist nation. The ensuing decades under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong were marked by tumult and violence. The Great Leap Forward (1958-60), an initiative to spur rapid industrialization, resulted in famine and intellectuals, including Liu's father, being sent away to labor camps. Liu and other students were forced to the countryside for "re-education." Beginning in the 1960s, Chairman Mao inaugurated the Cultural Revolution, reinvigorating communist beliefs and attacking anything deemed traditional or bourgeois.

The Art of the Cultural Revolution

From the 1950s to 1970s, when China was led by Mao, a new visual culture emerged that was part of a broader national program of modernization. Artists were encouraged to create art that reflected the revolutionary spirit of the time to create in Mao's words, "art for the people." Oil painting in a socialist realist style replaced ink painting, which had previously been one of the most revered art forms in China, as the preferred style. Idealized revolutionary heroes- workers, soldiers, and peasants- replaced traditional subjects such as landscapes, birds, and flowers.

State influence over artists and art production reached a height during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. During this time, art was often used as propaganda to deliver a political message to a mass audience. Well-respected older artists, whose ink paintings had been revered, found their work not only out of fashion but scorned as examples of bourgeois decadence. These older artists sometimes modified their works to accommodate revolutionary themes.



Village Portrait: Broken Bridge

2013

Mixed Media (duo-tone) on panel

Courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe

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Early in Hung Liu's life, her mother burned their family photographs to protect the family from persecution by the anti-proletarian regime. Due to the rarity of photographs, the idea of memory and image-making captivated Liu from a young age. In 1968, Hung Liu was sent for proletariat re-education in the countryside, where she worked in rice and wheat fields for four years. During this time, she drew portraits of the villagers, capturing their thin bodies and individual personalities which contrasted the images in circulating propaganda posters. She began experimenting with photography when a friend, Karl Zeiss, left a camera with her for safekeeping during his military service. *Village Portrait: Broken Bridge* is a self-portrait of Liu during her time in the countryside which she later processed in a gold duotone and gilded in resin, preserving the photograph and encasing, facetiously, golden memory.



Relic VIII

2004

Oil on canvas with wooden box

Courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe

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During a trip to China in 1991, Liu found a box of photographs of Chinese prostitutes from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries. *Relic VIII* is part of a series that captures how the women in these photographs were posed as if they were objects in an advertisement. The title *Relic*, meaning a sacred object or an object surviving from the past, emphasizes the enduring presence of these women in history as she attempts to revive their spirits which had previously been forgotten. The red lacquer box at the center of the painting holds the Chinese character for “wife” and “broom”. In this painting, Liu critiques the commodification of women and their erasure from history.



Golden Lotus

1990

Oil and silk on canvas (diptych)

Courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe

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This artwork juxtaposes the new and the old. With a strong, dynamic pose, defiant gaze, and bold, red accessories the figure at left stands for the “modern,” active, revolutionary Chinese woman. She is contrasted with the demure, passive, colorless figure at right, representative of the traditional, bourgeois woman of pre-Revolution China, limited by her bound “Lotus” feet. Though seeming opposites, Liu’s critique of women’s roles is more nuanced. She represents a “modern” woman performing in a propagandistic Revolutionary ballet, her restrictive pointe shoes a subtle symbol of social limitations on women in Communist society that are perhaps not so different from the gendered restrictions imposed on traditional women with bound feet.



Travelogue
2004
Oil on canvas

Courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe
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A “travelogue” is a story of a traveler’s journey. Through many layers of meaning, his work considers how different travel stories are received. Liu presents a resilient migrant family on donkeys. They are held in the hand and under the protective eye of Tara, a goddess-like figure in Buddhism, who ensures their safe passage. Liu’s signature style of thinned, dripping paint, known as “weeping realism,” combined with the cheeky title critiques audiences’ hypocritical consumption of travelogues, while many ignore and devalue stories of immigrants and refugees.



Modern Time

2005

Oil on canvas with lacquered wood, Cultural Revolution
clocks

Courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe

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The right panel shows a cafeteria worker with the portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin above her. The left panel features the same woman with portraits painted by Vincent Van Gogh, including a self-portrait. On the wall are three clocks from the Cultural Revolution, with portraits of Mao Zedong. *Modern Time* provokes more questions than answers. What and who is “modern”? Liu brings together a range of diverse sources and her colorful, energetic, dripping circles of paint connect the two panels, and remind us that life and history are complex, layered, and rarely as straightforward as they may initially seem.



Dustbowl Portrait II
2019
Oil on canvas

Courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe
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Liu's portrait of a young boy during the Dust Bowl (1930-36) is intense and sorrowful. While children are often considered a symbol of hope for the future, this painting offers a window into the devastating effects of the Great Depression (1929-39). Liu saw similarities between this American moment and her own experience of the Great Leap Forward (1958-60) in China. Both periods were marked by tragedy, economic and environmental devastation, and human displacement. Liu was inspired by Dorothea Lange's poignant photographs like *Migrant Mother* (1936), which emphasized the hardships of the Depression and human dignity and resilience.



Mountain Ghost
2012
Mixed media on Canvas

The Madden Collections at the University of Denver (2016.1.34).
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This painting is an interpretation of the poem *Mountain Ghost* or *Mountain Spirit* by the Chinese poet Qu Yuan (338-278 BC) about a Mountain Spirit who is longing for her lover. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution at the end of the 1970s, Qu Yuan became a symbol of intellectual freedom and individual integrity. By integrating traditional-style painting into this piece, Hung Liu creates an impactful fusion of symbols, tradition, and her contemporary perspective on his poem.

Mountain Spirit by Qu Yuan

There seems to be someone in the mountain hollow
Draped in creeping fig with pine-gauze sash,
Peering through narrowed eyes, and sweetly smiling too.
“You desire me, for you love my lithe beauty.”

Drawn by red panthers, followed by striped wild cats,
Her magnolia wagon flies a flag of woven cinnamon bark.
Cloaked in orchids, asarum sash around her waist,
She picks the sweetest flowers and herbs to give to her love.

“I live deep in a bamboo grove and never see the sky.
The road was hard and dangerous – I was the late one.

“I stand on the mountain exposed and alone,
The clouds are a land of shifting shapes beneath my feet.
Vast is the darkness, yes, daylight benighted –
A breeze from the east, the spirits bring rain.
Stay with me, Spirit Adorned, and find such ease you'll forget your home.
Once I am late in years, who will make me flower again?”

“I pick the spirit mushrooms in the mountains
Amid rock piles and spreading kudzu.
I am angry, Lord's son, so hurt I forget I have a home.
You long for me, but find no time.

“We in the mountains love the fragrance of galangal,
We find drink in the stone springs and shade beneath cypress and pine.
Afraid to act you long for me.

“Thunder rolls through rain's dark veils,
Hear the grey gibbon weep and the black gibbon's night cry
Against the sougning wind and the whistling trees.
Longing for you, Lord's son, I suffer in vain.”

Translated by Gopal Sukhu and the Asian Classics Editorial Board
in *Songs of Chu: An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poetry by Qu
Yuan and Others* (2017)



Musicians
1992
Oil on canvas with inclusions

Courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe and Rena Bransten Gallery.
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The work *Musicians* represents significant developments in Liu's style after moving to the United States. At the University of California San Diego, Liu studied with Allan Kaprow and began to expand her practice. Her careful training in socialist realist precision is visible in the figures, and yet the naturalism is disrupted by dripping paint at the bottom of the composition. This dripping paint, called "weeping realism," became a signature component of Liu's art. Further, the wood box and added elements, including the wooden percussion instrument depicted in the painting, push into the viewer's three-dimensional space, a practice Liu would continue throughout her career.



*Official Portraits:
Immigrant*
2006
Color lithograph with collage

Courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery,
Santa Fe
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Official Portraits: Citizen
2006
Color lithograph with collage

Courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery,
Santa Fe
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Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Hung Liu created a series of self-portraits, in which she captures herself as a proletarian, immigrant, and citizen. Liu incorporated her official documents into each work. The identification card in *Official Portraits: Immigrant* is stamped with the date 1981, which is the first year she applied for a passport to the United States to attend art school. In *Official Portraits: Citizen*, she contrasts her painted image as a U.S. citizen with her Chinese identification card from her youth, showing how she embodies both her past and her present in her status as an American citizen.



Sisters in Arms I
2003
Color Lithograph

Private Collection, courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe
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Adapted from the oil painting *Comrades in Arms* (2000), this piece reimagines a historical photograph of three women left behind by the Chinese Communist Party to later become prisoners of the Nationalist Party during the Chinese Civil War (1927-1949). The bright colors of their clothes contrast their sorrowful black and grey faces. The circles surrounding the women represent their unity as both sisters of the military, “in arms”, and the support they give to one another physically in each other’s arms.