

Washington Blues





Between Two Worlds

BY MARK SLOAN

Charleston has long been known as one of the most historic cities in America, yet its diverse ethnic heritage is only now surfacing. As a partial antidote to the incomplete historical interpretations of Charleston's past, California artist Hung Liu was commissioned by the Halsey Gallery to create an installation specifically related to the Chinese immigrant experience in the South Carolina Lowcountry. As she has done in other cities where she has shown, the artist researched the China connection throughout the region and created a response based on that history. Fortuitously, she was aided by research conducted by Dr. Jian Li, an Anthropologist, and former professor at the College of Charleston, who recently published the first history of the Chinese in Charleston (a condensed version of her research appears in this catalogue). This history indicates that most of the Chinese immigrants in Charleston from the 1880's through the 1940's earned their living in the laundry business. These businesses reached their peak in 1900, with seventeen Chinese laundries listed in the City Directory.

As a Chinese immigrant herself, Hung Liu understands that the transition from East to West is as much a struggle to maintain one's cultural identity as it is a shift in geography and customs. Using the Chinese laundry as a point of reference, the artist follows the trail of these immigrants into this new place and creates a space in which their stories can be told.

Chinese immigrants arriving in Charleston at or before the turn of this century must have been extraordinarily resilient to have successfully navigated the complex social matrix of this troubled Southern city. Because these individuals worked in a service economy, little is actually known of their daily lives and few newspaper accounts appeared regarding their experiences here. Through the physical artifacts left behind and the rich memories of Chinese descendants Hung Liu was able to piece together a few fragments from which to extrapolate an imaginary whole — WashingTown Blues.

For the laundry workers, Hung Liu designed red, white, and blue garments and commissioned them to be made in China specifically for this installation. The fact that the garments are all misshapen, and not suited for any living human body, creates the sense that these hanging figures are "ghosts." The ironing board has no legs and sits directly on the floor, thus eliciting the sensation that we, as viewers, are hovering between two worlds. The polarities of here/there, then/now, us/them, and East/West are everywhere evident in the installation and are reinforced by the imprints of the scorched ironmarks on the linen screens that form the backdrop to the workstation.

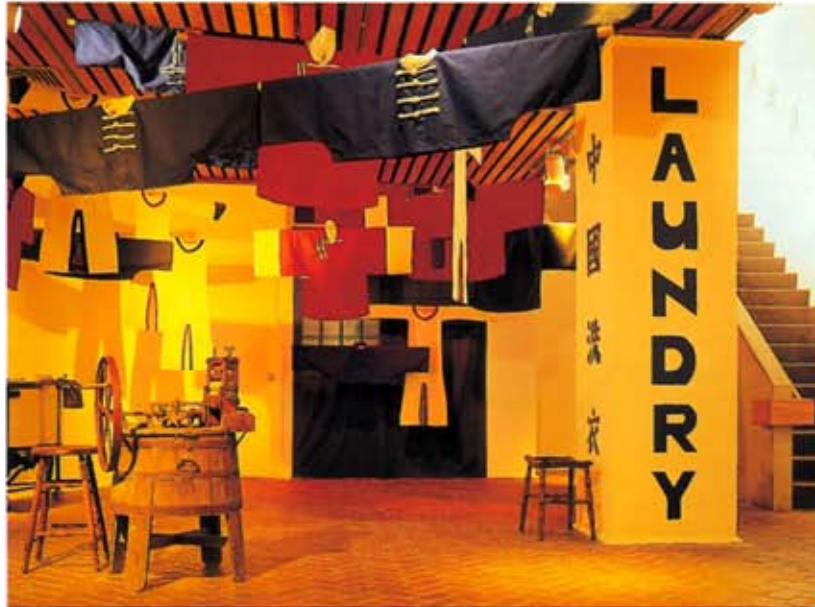
Through this "ghost" laundry operation Hung Liu has created an homage to the Chinese immigrants of Charleston, while simultaneously pointing to the incomplete history we have inherited. It is through the artist's thoughtful transformation of the concept of a Chinese Laundry that we are able to preserve a poetic glimpse of a past that was almost lost.

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After the Facts: Hung Liu's Art/History

BY LUCY R. LIPPARD

Many people think of history as a luxury. I think of it as a necessity. — Jack Tchen



One of the greatest (mostly unacknowledged) challenges to contemporary artists is to interpret history not only imaginatively and provocatively, but evocatively, so we can relearn its lessons out of school. Evocation is the turf of the artist in words and images, and it is the way history is made accessible after and beyond the facts. Yet even more difficult is the task of communicating histories that are unfamiliar to the majority of audiences, making them as real as our own.

Hung Liu is the rare artist who has taken up this challenge, aided, no doubt, by her own history. Until age 36, she lived in the People's Republic of China, emerging from the hardships of an interrupted education and work in the countryside under the Cultural Revolution to become a professor at the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Art. In 1984, she arrived in the U.S. to become a graduate student at the University of California at San Diego, studying with Allan Kaprow. Few artists have made the leap between such very different societies so skilfully and impressively, or with such undiminished ebullience. Liu's experiences have taught her the significance of understanding history — not only as an intellectual pursuit, but in acknowledgement of its crucial impact on individual lives.

In *WashingTown Blues*, and in previous works with similar goals, Liu takes her subjects seriously. They are not just vehicles for art with an edge, but the substance of art with an edge that will make a difference. When she addresses the lives of immigrants making the difficult transition from Chinese to Charleston society in the 1880s through the 1940s, she is obliquely telling the story of her own life and voluntary exile. The installation's punning title refers to the capital of this country but perhaps also to the process of assimilation, accepted by some and rejected by others whom historian Jian Li has documented in Charleston.



The installation is rich with metaphor. A "fleet" of old cast irons suggests the ships in which the Chinese left their homelands. The burden, the very weight of the tools (as much as eight pounds, according to New York's Chinatown History Project, which curated a show on laundries called *Eight-Pound Livelihood* in 1984) reflects the weight of responsibility, the need to work ceaselessly and earn enough money to support families in China, new families in America, and, eventually, to return home. The hanging white sheets branded by hot irons subtly imply not only this backbreaking work, but perhaps also the bigotry, slavery and lynchings that formed the history of African Americans, with whom the Chinese in southern states were often associated, grouped, and intermarried. In addition, white is the color of the dead, of funeral garments, in China. Perhaps, as in Ireland, those who emigrated were mourned as dead.

The brilliantly colored red, white, and blue garments hanging from the rafters might be seen as ghosts dressed ironically for patriotism. These are not real clothes, but were made in unreal proportions by a neighbor of the artist's mother in China. These airborne fantasy garments, metaphors for exoticism — Chinese in style and American in color — are countered, or brought down to earth, by juxtaposition with the actual clothing, other people's clothing, that the laundry workers would have dealt with. Another reference here is to contemporary American (and usually feminist) artists' frequent fascination with fashion and the constructions of clothing, such as Mimi Smith's steel wool peignoir from the 1960s or Beverly Semmes's grotesquely elongated dresses from the 1980s. These "art" elements are anchored here by historical artifacts from the laundry business in which Charleston's small Chinese community made its living. (Though there are no such "Chinese laundries" in China any more than there is French Toast in France).

Hung Liu has also made a large body of paintings using older historical imagery — notably the photographs taken of Chinese families and women in particular (often prostitutes) during the early years of western contact. A 1992 print of a sad-faced young woman with "lotus hooks" (bound feet), paired with an anatomical acupuncture chart, suggests the evils of constructing humanity and manipulating nature, as well as the possibility of healing cultural wounds. It is titled *Bonsai*.

Liu's paintings skilfully combine China and the west. They subvert their socialist realist subjects and borrowed western styles with a painterly drip technique that makes them



appear to be melting, or disappearing behind a veil, a technique of western abstraction influenced by ancient Chinese painting, now come full circle. With this technique Liu also subverts her own art education in a China that ironically borrowed western dependence on photographic realism as a political weapon against western capitalism. (At the same time, there was official disapproval of painting directly from photographs; the respected artist was supposed to achieve photographic detail while working from life.) "I shifted my artwork," says Liu, "from socialist realism...to social realism; and it transformed my personal identity crisis to a crisis of cultural collision."¹

6 Liu's training in "people's art" stood her in good stead even after she left China. Her early training as a muralist in Beijing has allowed her to work comfortably on a grand scale without surrendering intimate detail, and to segue into public art when she so chooses (or is chosen). In 1985 she made a mural at the University of Nevada, Reno, in which she attempted to synthesize modern gallery space with the ancient Buddhist imagery of the Dunhuang Caves — a personally iconic site where she had spent time alone studying its thousands of traditional Buddhist images. The Nevada commission was a breakthrough into installation work, when Liu realized that in the U.S., "the reproduction of traditional work is seen as academic and unimaginative — unless one selects iconography from the past and inserts it, collage-like, into the present. Unexpectedly, I found that certain aspects of ancient Chinese art — its sitedness and its public theatricality — have parallels in American art." Thus she began to "reprocess" the images of her youth, to invent ways in which she could "practice as a Chinese artist outside of Chinese culture."²

In 1995 Liu researched the Chinese community of Baltimore (in that case focusing on the 18th and 19th-century China Trade), where she was touched by the remains of a Chinatown abandoned for the suburbs. In 1992 she was commissioned to make a public artwork for the Moscone Center, in which she departed from an early map of San Francisco and incorporated artifacts from 19th-century archaeological digs (including a Chinese bowl) to commemorate the everyday lives of workers and their families. This current interest in the histories of Chinese immigrants in American cities reflects Liu's growing acclimatization, and identification with those who, like her, became Chinese Americans even as they stubbornly maintained their Chinese identity. She has been compared to Komar and Melamid, the former Soviet realists reborn as postmodernist

parodists. But her work is not satirical. (And China's communism is more or less intact.) She doesn't aim at easy targets, knowing all too well the tragedies of hope and social optimism turned to despair and oppression. Her art critiques both Chinese art and American art. Lisa Corrin has written of Liu's uses of "cultural inversion — how the 'Orientalized' and the 'Occidentalized' exoticize one another."³ Liu uses image quotations, or "appropriations" not as a postmodern strategy for distancing the personal, but as a mode of hybridization, of cross-cultural stylistic fertilization. Cultural overlapping is still part of Liu's life. She is married to the art critic Jeff Kelley. She returns to China to see her mother, who also visits California. Her son Ling Chen is majoring in Asian Studies at Bard College.

Although she may have eschewed the extremes of the ideology with which she was raised, Hung Liu remains concerned with the lives of working people. The unseen laundry worker protagonists of the Charleston installation have a strong presence. Compassion is one of the highest Buddhist virtues and a major element in all of her work. Unlike sympathy or pity, compassion demands affinity and empathy rather than charitable distance. Liu's own lived experiences lie beneath the surfaces of her artworks, which endows them with a power not accessible to those who superficially adopt a subject. Her paintings and installations are not only visually striking, but deeply felt evocations of the immigrant's dilemmas, and of women living in both old societies and new. Like the hanging sheets, the veils of paint can be seen as allegorical veils of memory between her present and her past, not unlike tears... which would probably make Hung laugh.

¹ Hung Liu, quoted by Moira Roth in brochure for Liu exhibition at Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, New York, 1992.

² "Artist's Statement, 1989" unpublished.

³ Lisa Corrin, *In Search of Miss Sallie Chu*. Baltimore: The Contemporary, 1995, p. 1.

LUCY LIPPARD IS A CULTURAL CRITIC WHO DIVIDES HER TIME BETWEEN MAINE AND NEW MEXICO. SHE IS THE AUTHOR OF NUMEROUS ARTICLES, ESSAYS, AND BOOKS. HER BOOKS INCLUDE *OVERLAY*, *PARTIAL RECALL*, AND *LURE OF THE LOCAL*.



Charleston's major business street. By 1895 the general heading of "Laundries" was changed to "Chinese Laundries" in the Charleston City Directory since all of the nine laundries listed had Chinese names. The Chinese laundry business reached its peak in 1900 when seventeen appeared in the directory, of which twelve were located on King Street. The number of the Chinese laundries simultaneously in operation remained rather constant, about fifteen, from 1900 to the Great Depression in 1930. However, after 1932, Chinese laundries started to decline. By the 1940s, although the laundries still carried their Chinese names, three out of six traditional Chinese laundries were owned by the descendants of mixed marriages of Chinese men and non-Chinese women. Consequently, the Charleston City Directory changed its category from "Chinese Laundry" to "Hand Laundry" between 1942 to 1961. By 1962, laundries identifiable by their Chinese names disappeared totally from the directory, as did the category of "Hand Laundry".

Although they were always associated with "hand laundries," the Chinese laundries did not do all the washings by hand. Interviews with the children of Chinese descent who owned these laundries indicate that so called "hand laundries" had been equipped with washing machines as early as in the late 1920s. "Hand laundry" referred to the manner of ironing instead of washing. Washing was done by machines except for delicate items such as silk dresses and particularly stubborn stains. Drying was done in a "drying room." This room was heated by a large coal stove and the room was filled with wet items hanging on the walls and from wire clothes lines. After being dried, everything was ironed including clothes, table cloth, bedding, sheets, handkerchiefs, etc. The irons were solid "cast irons" which were heated by being kept against the coal stove. When the iron being used cooled down, it was exchanged for a "fresh hot one" from the iron rack. The drying room was equipped with an electric spin dryer replacing the hand roller wringer by the 1940s.

Like many Chinese emigrants to the United States before the Second World War, the early Chinese emigrants in Charleston were also sojourners who had left their families in China and worked hard to save money. Many of them yearned to return to their families and live in comfort in China one day. Reporting how the Chinese laundrymen celebrated their 1903 Chinese New Year, a reporter from the Charleston News and Courier wrote sympathetically: "The poor Chinamen do not get much of the sunshine of ordinary life. They are slaves of work. They make money and sink in it, and all of them had one ambition- to return to their native land".

As a result, only a few early Chinese laundrymen had families, and even fewer had Chinese women as their wives in Charleston. Among forty two adult Chinese men found in the census between 1880 and 1920, only ten had families. And among the ten families, five wives were listed as white, three as mulatto, and two as Chinese. From the late 1920s to the early 1940s, three families of Chinese descent who were still living in Charleston were quite well-off: they owned cars, lived in comfortable houses, and sent their children to private schools, that is, the Avery Institute or the Catholic Immaculate Conception (IMC)- private schools for Afro-Americans with a middle class aspiration.

The Chinese were regarded neither as white nor black in a racially segregated Charleston of the early twentieth century. Although they were always listed in the white section of the Charleston City Directory, the Chinese children of those laundry families were probably not always accepted by the white schools during the segregation period. Commenting on the Chinese influence on Charleston, Jack Leland, a long time columnist for the Charleston Evening Post and the News and Courier wrote: "The laundry families appear to have been rather gentle people and, while Charleston's old and sometimes aristocratic community didn't accept them as social equals, they were friendly enough."

The rise and fall of the Chinese laundry in Charleston reflects the tremendous social and economic changes of the city in the last century. The demand for professional laundry service and the occupational vacuum in this field provided a profitable economic niche for the Chinese men to explore their economic opportunities in the turn of this century. By the late 1930s, the rise of automatic washing machines and fashion changes gradually drove the Chinese laundries out of the business. Over the years, the descendants of Chinese fathers and non-Chinese mothers merged into the local community by inter-racial marriage. Thus, Charleston's "oriental look" started to fade away about sixty years after the early Chinese first arrived there. It was not until the 1970s that a second wave of Chinese immigrants started to arrive in Charleston as students, professionals and entrepreneurs.

JIAN LI IS CURRENTLY A RESEARCH ASSOCIATE AT SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY, DALLAS, TEXAS. SHE WAS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ANTHROPOLOGY AT THE COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON WHEN SHE CONDUCTED THIS RESEARCH.



Hung Liu is a two-time recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Painting Fellowship, in 1989 and 1991, as well as a Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art (SECA) Award in 1992 and a Eureka Fellowship in 1993. She has exhibited widely throughout the United States and abroad.

Notable recent exhibitions include "American Stories," organized by the Setagaya Museum in Tokyo, and travelling to five other museums in Japan; "American Kaleidoscope," at the National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.; "Gender Beyond Memory," at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Japan; the Corcoran Gallery of Art's "43rd Biennial of Contemporary American Painting" in Washington, D.C.; and "Jiu Jium Shan," (Old Gold Mountain) an installation of over 200,000 fortune cookies commenting on the history of Chinese immigration to California, at the De Young Museum in San Francisco.

Presently, a ten year survey exhibition of Hung Liu's work, organized by the College of Wooster Art Museum, is travelling to six venues throughout the country until the end of 1999. Hung Liu is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Art Department at Mills College, in Oakland, California.

