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Hung Liu @ Oakland Museum of California

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Chinese Profile III, 1998, oil on canvas, 80 x 80"

Hung Liu was the first artist of her generation to leave China for the U.S. She did so in 1984, eight years after Mao Zedong's death when many Chinese were wondering what would come next. In the absence of a leader whose dictates ruled every waking moment of Chinese life, many artists felt adrift, unsure, even, of what thoughts were permissible. Liu was among them. Defying Mao's order to look forward, Liu, 65, has always insisted on looking backward, and that proclivity, on view in this tightly focused career retrospective (*Summoning Ghosts: the Art of Hung Liu)* shows her to be one of the world's great history painters.

Her iconic drip-stained paintings describe the toll exacted by some of the last century's most momentous events: the Communist revolution, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution – all of which the young artist witnessed. But she also extends her gaze further back in time, to the prior century. Working from vintage photographs, she rehabilitates China's dispossessed (peasants, prostitutes, orphans, laborers, prisoners), transforming the Socialist Realism she learned as a "daughter of the revolution" into her own brand of *social realism* using an array of modernist techniques to give voice and visceral presence to mostly female subjects.

Right off, the show makes clear that Liu was a virtuoso and a risk taker, determined to transcend political and cultural taboos. A vitrine at the entrance to the main gallery containing early drawings demonstrates her youthful precocity, while an adjoining room, filled with postcard-sized paintings (*My Secret Freedom*), made on the sly from 1972 to 1975, when she was in her 20s, reveals Liu to be an accomplished painter of landscapes – an act for which she would have been punished had she been caught. Earlier, during her conscription in a "re-education" program, Liu engaged in another banned activity: photography. A half dozen B/W images from the *Village Photograph* series (1968-74) show her to be a fine photographer and keen observer of rural people and their surroundings, themes that occupy her to this day.

September 2001, 2001, oil on canvas, 66 x 66"

A key turning point in the Oakland artist's evolution was her decision, upon emigrating to the U.S., to study with Alan Kaprow, the father of Happenings, at U.C. San Diego, where she also met her future husband, the critic Jeff Kelley, now a leading authority on contemporary Chinese art. Kaprow, a radical thinker, opened Liu's eyes to the possibilities of process, performance and installation, and how ideas can be conveyed by means other than conventional objects. A companion exhibit at Mills College Art Museum, which preceded this one and recreated two major installations that debuted years earlier in San Francisco and Beijing, proved that Liu had fully absorbed Kaprow's lessons into her own aesthetic sensibility. She also, henceforth, incorporated into her already substantial vocabulary, select bits of the post-WWII canon, most notably shaped canvases and found objects. Her trademark drips, which cleave almost every painting, are a defining feature. They integrate representational and abstract elements and evoke, in visceral terms, the impact of time, memory and loss by, in essence, substituting thinned paint for tears. These cascades of dissolving pigment have a bifurcating effect. They simultaneously obscure and intensify our view of her subjects by forcing us to look *through* time. The route the eye travels is laced with pleasures. Faces, bodies and clothes are, for the most part, rendered realistically, whereas the grounds on which they appear oscillate between thin washes and layered globs, splotches, scrapes, mottles and bold gestures executed in varying thicknesses. Oftentimes subject and grounds intertwine. Which means that deciphering the pictures' structure mirrors the effort of projecting oneself backward and forward in time. Thus, in Liu's art, ends and means align.

Mu Nu (Mother and Daughter), 1997, oil on canvas, 80 x140"

There are more great paintings in this show than can possibly be processed in a single viewing. Thus, a workable approach to it is to start in the middle and move out so that you can zoom in quickly on the strongest works. They fall into roughly two categories: portraits of individuals and historical epics. Among the latter, *Band of Brothers* (2011) and *Hua Gang (2005)* are two of the most riveting and, two of the most atypical, in that they portray males. The first shows eight boys in swimming trunks standing happily before a river, like Huck Finns of the Yangtze. The second has eight men posed similarly – as prisoners of war, emaciated and naked. The adjacent placement of the two pictures is, no doubt, intended to show how youthful idealism can give way to something darker, which, in turn, brings to the fore a question that has long hovered over Liu's oeuvre: Why must ideologically driven notions of progress crush the lives of so many people? Liu provides no answers, only evidence.

Corn Carrier, 1999, oil on canvas, 80 x 70"

During the so-called Great Leap Forward, for example, when Mao attempted to revamp Chinese agriculture by placing urban technocrats in positions of power, millions starved. That may well be the backstory to *Mu Nu (Mother and Daughter)* from 1997. In it, two women attached by ropes, strain on hands and knees to pull a heavy load or a plow. The point of this searing image, which calls to mind slavery and extreme poverty, is that they're performing the labor of oxen or machines. In a series based on *Daughters of China* (1949), a film in which female soldiers are shown drowning themselves rather than surrendering to Japanese invaders, Liu paints the scenes, based on real events, pretty much as they were filmed. Mixing pathos and heroism in equal measure, they convey, through anguished faces and drip-riven grounds, the emotional impact the film must have had on Liu when she saw it as a child. *Arise Ye Wretched of the Earth* (2007), with its tapestry-like foreground, is a particularly affecting work from this series; its blurred faces, atypical of Liu, call to mind another history painter who leans heavily on obfuscation to evoke faded memories, Luc Tuymans.

Liu's portraits, many of which are based on the 19th century photos of John Thomson, will likely burn themselves into memory on contact. *Chinese Profile III* (1998), of a woman wearing a gold earring and her hair in a bun, is one such picture. It has what Bill Berkson called the tonal quality of "liquefied ash," and by itself is reason enough to visit. *Corn Carrier* (1999) and *September 2001* (2001), both of women, integrate gestural abstract marks and images of birds to fantastical, almost visionary effect. They are prime examples of what Berkson termed, with complimentary intent, "painterly excess." To this short list I'd also add *The Ocean is the Dragon's World* (1995), wherein an opulent, quilted dress signals the wearer's status in the style of a court painting. At the other end of the social spectrum, several equally voluptuous pictures — *Madonna*, *Mona Lisa* and *Odalisque* (all 1992) – place prostitutes in lush settings of a sort they probably never enjoyed in real life.

The Heroines, 2012, oil on canvas, 96 x 160"

Throughout, Liu casts a compassionate, critical eye, and she doesn't exclude herself. The show, in fact, opens with a self-portrait in which we see the artist as a young soldier, indicating that she, too, was once part of the system she abandoned. Bookending the show are works that deal directly with that system's architect, Mao Zedong. Liu first dealt with Mao in 1988 with pencil drawings called *Where is Mao?* in which the former Communist Party chairman's erased face appears next to those of other state leaders. These works read less like engagements of his legacy than as attempts to flat-out obliterate it. Liu revisited the subject in 2012 with the ironic *Happy and Gay* series, turning propaganda posters into comic parodies simply by reproducing them. Literalizing through flat paint handling the notion of the happy state servant, these works push that laughable concept even deeper into the realm of absurdity.

It's easy to marvel at how Liu's mix of abstraction and realism draw us into the past. Yet virtuosity alone doesn't explain the emotional pull of her painting. So I'll venture a theory: Since Liu works from photos, her painting process is analogous to the photochemical act of "fixing" an image in the darkroom from which pictures seemingly emerge out of nowhere. Liu performs a kind of psychic translation of that act, supplementing it with lived experience and an extraordinary level of empathy. Result: she can paint from photos and literally "summon ghosts."