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Hung Liu, *The Ocean is the Dragon's World*, 1995. Oil on canvas, painted wood panel, metal support rod, and metal birdcage with wood and ceramic appendages, 97 x 82 1/2 x 17 3/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase in part through the Lichtenberg Family Foundation

Interview

A Conversation with Hung Liu

Joann Moser

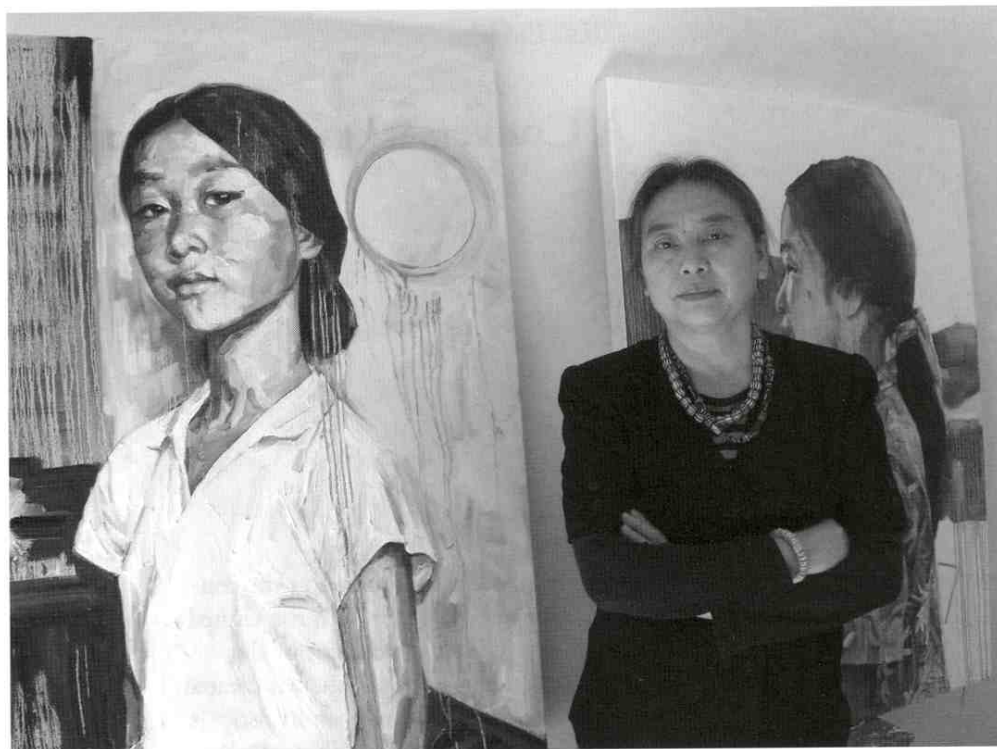
Hung Liu is a leading figure in the contemporary art world, in both the United States and China. A resident of the United States since 1984, she has created imagery that often draws on historic photographs, traditional Chinese painting, and her memories and experiences as an artist growing up in China during the era of Mao and the Cultural Revolution. In her work, Liu continues to consider Chinese traditions and symbolism as well as the lives of immigrants to this country. Her training in the socialist realist style of painting is apparent, but the drips, circles, and symbols that overlay her figures introduce counterpoint and complexity to the images. Her handling of space and dramatic juxtapositions of scale and form invigorate her paintings, drawings, and prints with the vitality and immediacy of contemporary expression.

Because of the prevalence of female figures in her work, both historic and contemporary, Hung Liu has sometimes been claimed as a feminist artist. She has expressed some affinity with this movement, but a lack of comfort with its limitations. Instead, she talks most often about her work as a reaction against and a transformation of the socialist realist tradition. She seeks both to preserve and to destroy the image, to find meaning in the past for the present.

Hung Liu was born in 1948 in Changchun, China, which was the capital city for the Japanese puppet dynasty of the exiled Emperor Pu Yi. Her father was a captain in the Nationalist Army (the Kuomintang) of Chiang Kai-shek and was arrested, when Liu was an infant, by Communist forces as the family fled the city looking for food. After Changchun fell to the Communists, she returned with her remaining family. At age eleven, she impulsively accompanied her aunt to Beijing, where they survived the mass famine resulting from Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward. Liu was sent to the countryside when she was twenty years old for proletarian "reeducation" during the Cultural Revolution. She completed school and began to teach art at an elite school in Beijing. After several years, she attended the Central Academy of Fine Arts, the leading art graduate school in China, majoring in mural painting; she began teaching there in 1981.

In 1984, after waiting for four years, Hung Liu received permission to leave China for the United States and has lived here ever since. After studying at the Visual Arts Department at the University of California, San Diego, she began teaching art at the University of North Texas, Denton, in 1989, and the following year at Mills College in Oakland, California,

1 Hung Liu in her Oakland, California, studio with paintings, 2010. Photo, Joann Moser



where she remains on the faculty. In 1991 she became an American citizen and returned to China for the first time. She has maintained close ties to China through visits, friends, fellow artists, and daily telephone calls to her mother until her mother's death in September 2010.

She has exhibited actively both in China and the United States, from San Francisco to Miami, Los Angeles to New York, Santa Fe to Ketchum, Idaho; Kansas City; and Baltimore. In a recent article in the *New York Times* (January 20, 2011) on contemporary Chinese women artists, the author cites Hung Liu as an outstanding Chinese American artist whose work is now in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., among many other notable institutions.

I met with Hung Liu, a vibrant and welcoming woman who has just turned

sixty-three, for two and a half days in 2010 to conduct an oral history interview for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, in her Oakland, California, studio (fig. 1). Surrounded by her current work and personal memorabilia, we discussed a broad range of topics. The following transcript represents a selective and edited version of that expansive interview.

JM: Do you remember when you became interested in art for the first time? You were just a small child in Manchuria.

HL: I was always interested in art, maybe because my grandfather had a collection of painting and calligraphy, and a collection of postage stamps. Whenever he had time, he opened his treasure cabinet and started carefully, sometimes with little tweezers, to handle the stamps. I always watched. And when I had a piece of chalk or something, I drew things on the floor, on the wall, and if some friends visited, I made their portraits. They said I was

really good, that I could capture their special features (fig. 2).

Later your grandparents and mother joined you in Beijing. You all lived with your aunt and uncle, and you had to adapt at school.

When I first got to Beijing, I was like a stranger from another part of the country; even my accent from Manchuria was different. I needed to relearn, to catch up. Eventually I was a very good, top student in everything. When we reached graduation, we had to take a civil exam and fill out our wish list for schools. My first choice was a girls' middle school attached to Beijing Normal University. It was the best school in the country, a boarding school. Mao Zedong's daughter went there, Deng Xiaoping's daughters. When I got an acceptance letter, I couldn't believe it. The myth is, the moment you walk into that school it's guaranteed that when you graduate you will go to the best university. My best friend, who now lives in New Jersey, went with me to that same school.

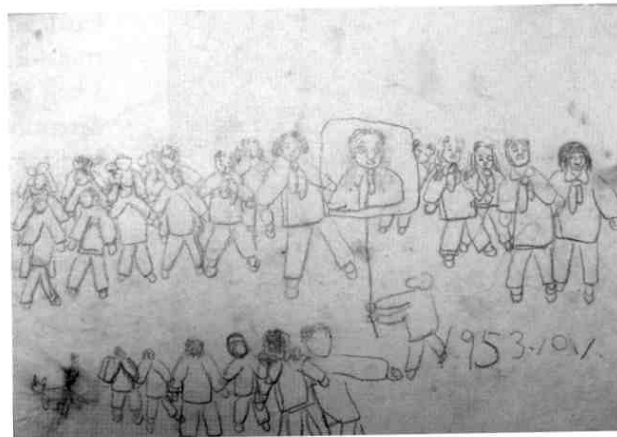
Did you have any exposure to art in school at this point, or did that come later?

When I got to this girls' school, we had an art club taught by our art class teacher. He always wore a scarf, with

long hair, like those little melancholy artists—very clichéd. I joined that club and we did whatever—still life, portraiture, landscape, anything. By the time I graduated, I said, “I really love art.” But my mom, my family, everybody, said, “Art? It's not a serious career. You can always do art in your spare time. The serious jobs are like doctors, engineers—for a girl, it's very good to study medicine.” I thought, fine. I want to save people's lives; I can be a surgeon. During that time, the majority of students studied Russian because of the relationship with the Soviet Union—we called it our “big brother.” But my mom encouraged me to study English. She said English was more universal. I was working on a big exam to enter medical school in 1966 when the Cultural Revolution happened. Two years later, my generation, even younger and older people, we were all sent to the countryside or military farms. I worked in the fields for almost four years.

How did events unfold?

When the Cultural Revolution started, nobody realized the magnitude of it. Then one day, in the *People's Daily*, which is the party's paper, there was an article criticizing so-and-so—a Peking opera play, you know. We didn't take it seriously. But this opera was about an official in the Ming dynasty who dared to speak out on behalf of the people to the emperor: “People are suffering. It is not right.” Mao Zedong got angry at this. He was always paranoid that the people, especially the intellectuals—writers, musicians, artists—would use metaphors, ancient fables, and folklore to attack the party. That is how it started. We were preparing to enter college, and then school was interrupted, classes



2 Hung Liu, childhood drawing, 1953. Photo, courtesy of the artist

were canceled. And the *Dazibao*—the big-character posters that were everywhere—targeted all the leaders [of the school], like the school principal, superintendent, and the dean, criticizing them for promoting nonproletarian education. We learned that what we had learned was all wrong—that it was Feng, Zi, Xiu, or feudalism, capitalist, or Zionist garbage (fig. 3).

There were attacks on teachers and principals?

I remember that all the Red Guards—the mostly higher-ranking officials' daughters—got permission to attack the school leaders. The girls all suddenly put on faded soldier uniforms [which they acquired] because a lot of their fathers were older military officials, like People's Liberation Army (PLA) generals. And the girls' hair was cut very short or tied up in the air with two rubber bands.



3 Hung Liu poses with brushes in hand in front of a portrait of Chairman Mao created by older students at the Beijing Film Academy, ca. 1966. Photo, courtesy of the artist

And they were all tough on the stage: “So-and-so used to be the teacher, you respected the teacher, the teacher had the podium,” but now it was, “So-and-so, come over here!” We watched this verbal and physical criticism of the teachers. One summer day—I was not there but a dear friend told me about it—there was an incident involving our principal, who was in her late forties maybe. There was a giant coal pile—every winter we used coal to heat the school. A small group of girls—they were Red Guards from our school—forced her to climb to the top and come down. And they threw ink over her and trash cans and then forced her to climb the stairs of the building many stories high, up and down. At some point, she collapsed and had a hard time breathing. The next morning, the loudspeaker in every classroom announced that the principal had died. We heard a sanitized story, but years later I learned the horrible details. The young girls just tried anything to humiliate her, to torture her. Because it was summer, she wore a white shirt, so the coal dust made her look like a ghost. Finally, after a long, senseless humiliation, she died.

Terrible.

Suddenly, overnight, the revolution had started. I saw these Red Guards, who had been very modest, even shy girls, friendly and sensitive, who studied hard, and who respected their teachers, transformed into demons. They used a belt to beat people and even set up a detention center at school. If somebody said someone was a bad guy, they had the right just to drag you and beat you to death. It happened in many schools. In one school, I heard, a principal was forced to lie in the public toilet with all the flies, the smell. It's easy for a dictator to persuade—you don't have to do too much to get young people excited. Suddenly, all the landlords and the

teachers, the intellectuals, were enemies because they didn't teach you the right thing. And then young people become monsters.

You were from an educated family. You were among those not considered good party members?

I never met my father. He was a captain in the Kuomintang. I was six months old when he was taken prisoner by the PLA. But during the Cultural Revolution people said, "Your mom was married to him. She must have been influenced by him, and you live with your mom. So you were influenced by this enemy."

Were you allowed to stay in Beijing, or were you sent out to the country?

For several years, all the schools were closed. The revolution started from the schools, then went to factories, to other workplaces, and then to private homes. And whenever anybody said this family might have some counterrevolutionary materials, and that family has problems, the Red Guards could just break the door down and beat people and turn your house upside down. Everybody was afraid. Finally, the factories closed. They made nothing but revolutionary pins, buttons; I have some in my collection. The whole country was chaotic. Nobody produced anything. Eventually, Mao Zedong wondered how he could end this. Who is going to teach at schools, if the teachers are enemies? What are we going to do with the students, with all those people? Then he found the solution: send them to the countryside because the countryside is so broad and so vast that it can absorb them all. There you won't make money; you just become one of the laborers. And the peasants will oversee your reeducation, seeing if you love the party, seeing if you love Mao Zedong, using physical labor to reeducate and brainwash you. So in '68,

toward the end of the year, Mao said that educated youth should go to the countryside to get reeducated.

Where were you sent?

First I was assigned to go to Inner Mongolia. But I was an only child, the only young person in the family with my grandmother, mother, aunt, and uncle. There was a policy; we needed young people at home to take care of elders. And we said Mongolia is a little too far. Finally I was sent to a distant suburb of Beijing, maybe fifty miles away.

What was your day-to-day life like when you were in the countryside?

You didn't have anything like a city schedule. In the morning, you listened to the big loudspeaker. During harvest season, you got up at around 2:00. You walked to the field half-asleep, with three people as a team. Instead of using sickles, we used our bare hands to pull the wheat from the soil because we wanted to save the bottom part of the wheat to use as fuel for cooking. Morning dew was very muddy—when the sun rose and shone on us, the dew and soil mixture on our clothes and faces made us look like clay figures. In the winter, we would dig trenches in the frozen soil.

Did you have any time to do any sketching, or anything that resembled art?

We loved political meetings. Whenever the party had a new policy, or when Mao Zedong said something new, the whole village got together for the announcement. The best thing was it still counted as a working day, but we didn't have to bend over and sweat in the fields. So everybody came out, sitting outside in this gathering area. Really, nobody listened. And I started to sketch—an old woman sitting there, maybe making



shoes, or breastfeeding a baby, or people just napping. That was my chance (figs. 4, 5, 6). I loved it—nobody cared, you know. In the city everybody knows what you are doing. But in the village they cut me some slack.

You mentioned that you did some sketches there after Käthe Kollwitz. Were there other Western artists whose work you had access to?

My early art knowledge was mainly from Russia, and then there was some European influence, of course, like Michelangelo's work, especially his drawings. We heard of big names like Picasso or Matisse. But in general, there was no systematic learning through school. I saw more Russian art than anything else for political reasons since the '50s. I remember reading from [Anton] Chekhov, [Nikolay] Nekrasov, [Nikolay] Chernyshevsky, and, of course, [Leo] Tolstoy and [Aleksandr] Pushkin's poems. I remember I saw paintings of [Vasily] Surikov, a history painter. It was pre-Soviet Union and [Ilya] Repin painting Tolstoy plowing the soil as a peasant. There were a lot of that kind of history painters who put one family, one person's life, against a big historical backdrop. I saw a movie about Surikov when he was doing a big historical painting of—I think, one of the princesses [*The Boyarinya Morozova*; fig. 7]. She had a different religious belief or philosophy and was martyred. She was on a plow in the snow, passing through this neighborhood street. And the movie showed how Surikov tried to find the right model for the figure of a beggar who was included in the painting, because these Russians painted from live models. They had to have the real person. So finally he found a man whose job was digging graves, who drank a lot and was kind of messy, and he got him into the studio. To me, the Russian painters, especially history painters, they were almost like today's filmmakers. They

- 4 Hung Liu, sketches of villagers in Liang He, 1968–71. Charcoal and/or pencil on paper. Photo, courtesy of the artist
- 5 Hung Liu, sketch of buildings in countryside, 1968–71. Charcoal and/or pencil on paper. Photo, courtesy of the artist
- 6 Hung Liu, *Self-Portrait*, 1968–72. Charcoal and/or pencil on paper. Photo, courtesy of the artist

went out to look for the best character to play roles. I respect that a lot.

Did you have access to a camera in the countryside?

I did have a camera, not mine. I was a poor student in the countryside. But I had a few friends I met during the Cultural Revolution who were already in college. They went to a film academy, where they studied things like stage-set design. They were sent to a military farm, which was a harsher situation than the countryside. One of them had a little German box camera. And before they were sent away, he was so afraid it would be confiscated that he asked if I could keep it for him. I said sure. One day I said [to myself], I have a camera, I can use it. I bought a roll of 120 film. I can't remember how I learned to load the film or take the photos, but it was scary, exciting. One older person was worried and said, "The only time in my life I had my picture taken was when the Japanese occupied [northeast China] I had to put it on my ID card." I said, "Hey, that's for the enemies; I'm your friend." So I took pictures. And when I had a chance to go back to the city, I asked my mom to help me with some money then—I didn't make a penny. I went to a secondhand store, bought a primitive enlarger—a piece of wood with a rod and a lens you can adjust. And I learned how to do

that. I stayed up all night developing photos. And then I carried my pictures like my harvest back to the village. They were all amazed. So my camera became kind of popular, and I took quite a few photographs. The majority of the negatives I never had time to develop. I had negatives from the late '60s wrapped in an old handkerchief. Just last year [2009], a graduate student scanned the negatives and made some prints for me, and I probably have sixty or seventy of those.

How did you finally wind up going to art school in China?

I worked in the field for almost four years, and then school reopened. But they only would take students from *Gong Nong Bin*—workers, peasants, and soldiers, considered the leading classes in China. I was in the countryside, so even though I was not from a peasant family, I was a peasant myself then. It just so happened that Beijing Teachers College had a professor looking for new worker, peasant, and soldier students in our area, and I met him. I think he was a Chinese literature teacher. I said, "Do you have anything in art? I would really love art," and I even probably showed him some sketches. He said, "Let me go back and ask." It was like a miracle. For the whole county, a really big county, they added one position to accept an art student. I went through some hoops, but I got in. And I remember on a very dusty country road before he got on the bus, he said to me, "I hope you study hard and you get in. Also, make sure"—I was already twenty-four—"make sure, during your time at college, you are not allowed to have a relationship," meaning don't get involved with boyfriends and only concentrate on your work. I said, "I can guarantee you this; this is so precious, such a unique opportunity. I will work hard and follow the rules." I never saw him again. And then I went to this—it was not an art department,

7 Vasily Surikov, *The Boyarinya Morozova*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 9 ft. 11 ¹/₁₆ in. x 19 ft. 3 ¹/₁₆ in. The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



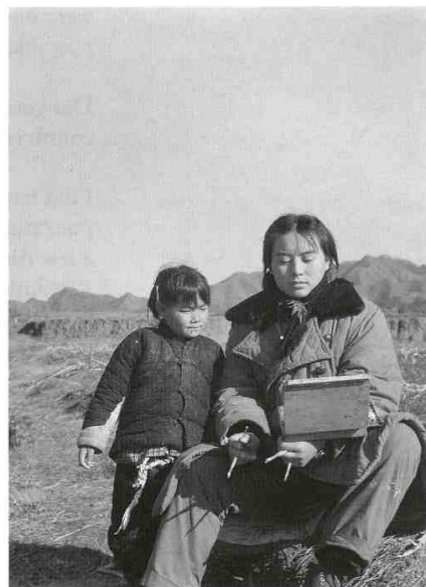
8 Hung Liu with rifle when she was a student in the Revolutionary Entertainment Department at Beijing Teachers College, 1973. Photo, courtesy of the artist

9 Hung Liu painting a landscape while at Beijing Teachers College, ca. 1973–74. Photo, courtesy of the artist



but a Revolutionary Entertainment Department—for three and a half years. A lot of times, we were taken to the countryside, the factories, and the army, the military camps to serve them. For example, once we went to an asylum run by the state, and we stayed there for weeks doing an exhibition that showed the comparisons between the old society, meaning before the Communist Party, when people suffered and were homeless and handicapped, and how happily they lived now under the socialist system. In some of my sketchbooks, I have soldiers in their military camp. We went over there. We learned how to shoot rifles, every day lying on the dirty ground to learn how to aim at the target (fig. 8). We were not taught either Eastern or Western art history because all those art histories were considered tainted and not revolutionary, not proletarian enough. I remember one teacher gave a lecture and said colors have a very clear class mark. Politics was the guidance for every profession, and art and literature were just part of the revolutionary machine (fig. 9).

This was a teachers' college?



Beijing Teachers College. And then we graduated. We were all assigned by the government to different schools to teach art—not college classes, but elementary or middle schools. Because I was the only child in my family, they could not send me too far away. They sent me to one of the city districts to teach art.

How many years did you teach then?

From '75 to '79, about four years. During that time, CCTV, China Central TV station, contacted me because it was a very famous Soviet-style school. They asked if I could teach children art on television. I felt it would be very hard. But they said, you can write everything yourself and then do it. So I did that for a few years until I had my son. I was the only Chinese artist teaching art on TV.

In 1977 you got married, and the next year you had your son. Was your husband in art school, too?

No, no. He was in his first year in college when the Cultural Revolution interrupted, and then he ended up working

at an observatory because of his interest in astronomy, which he had started in college. We were married for a short time, a year. After my son was born in '78, we had a lot of differences. In '79, I decided to go to grad school. I applied to the Central Academy of Fine Art, where the focus is mural art, and the Central Academy of Arts and Design, where the focus was training drawing professors, and I was accepted by both. Murals were more interesting to me because at that time China was barely at the end of the Cultural Revolution, and at that time a new airport was just finished. My teachers did the mural there, and it was a big thing. One of them was later criticized because what he did was a Dai water festival, where everybody pours water on each other and the clothing was transparent—some women looked nude.

Wet drapery [laughs]. So you learned mural painting. I assume you worked on a very large scale.

I worked on giant pieces of butcher paper, using a ladder. At that time, I did see some Mexican murals because they were so famous and political, really close to socialist. And I got a chance to go to a Buddhist cave—actually, it is a grotto—along the old Silk Road, called the Dunhuang Grotto, in the middle of the Gobi Desert [where she traveled twice].

After this, you wanted to go to art school in the United States?

Yes. When I was graduating, maybe a year before, my best friend—Bing Chen—from middle school got a chance to study at UC San Diego. She lives in New Jersey now and is still my best friend. In the past, only a few people, government officials' children, went to the Soviet Union. The United States was our enemy. But then the policy changed, and China's doors opened. Bing's status

was set by the government, a special passport. You had to go there, study, and come back. And she said, "I am going to this place, San Diego. And it is in California." "Oh," I said, "See if there is an art program." Then I gave her very few, less than ten, slides. She went to the visual art department at UC San Diego and met Manny Farber. He said, "I don't think she has a chance." But then I got accepted.

Manny Farber became one of your professors?

Manny Farber, his wife, Patricia Patterson, and then David and Eleanor Antin, and Allan Kaprow. I didn't know any of them. I got a letter from Mary Anne Cooper that said I was accepted. They sent me forms for a visa and admission, all this paperwork to go to the U.S. and study for a master's degree. So that is when I started my long journey to get a passport. I applied to my art department in school, to the cultural ministry. At every level, they tried to stop me. The school finally forwarded it to the cultural minister. The man was really rigid. He said, "Why do you want to go there?" It was very hard to copy documents then, but I got the paperwork, and they said, "Well, we have to wait." You know, wait and wait, and then at some point, maybe in the second or third year, the paperwork got lost. They said, "We don't know where it is."

So it was several years before you were able to leave.

Almost four years waiting for a passport.

During that time, you studied calligraphy, stamp making, and painting on ceramics.

Yes, from an old scholar, a private tutor whose name was Niu Jun. I said I could not waste time waiting. My file, everything, was still at the Central Academy

of Fine Arts, but I was neither assigned a job nor allowed to go to the U.S. So I used the time to study. Every week I went to see him. I still have my notes, like flashcards. I didn't pay anything. He always gave me gifts—old paper, books, a good brush—and sometimes I did calligraphy for hours and then showed him. The Chinese use red ink to circle the good parts. And meanwhile, because I still belonged to the Central Academy of Fine Arts, I went to places like a ceramic factory because ceramic tiles are one of the possible materials for murals. Finally, a friend said, "See if you can leave from Hong Kong." That didn't work, and when I was in Hong Kong I wrote an angry letter to the cultural minister. And then the guy, a very nasty man, the cultural minister, on a hot summer's day went to my mom's apartment, knocked on the door, and said, "Can you ask your daughter to come back? We will allow her to go to the U.S. for graduate school." I went back to Beijing, got the passport finally—it took almost four years to get a Chinese passport—and then it took just a few minutes to get a visa at the American Embassy.

Who was taking care of your son at this point?

My mom and her elder sister, my aunt. He was six when I left China. First time flying, never got on an airplane. I was thirty-six years old, I had several big suitcases. I had four years of toothpaste. Everybody said you needed to be prepared. At the last minute, my son grabbed me and said, "Mom, don't go." And that broke my heart. I had to go. [Hung Liu's son joined her in the United States when he was eight.]

What happened when you arrived and went to the art department?

I landed in L.A. in late 1984. The first person I saw [at the university] was

David Antin. Then I met Mary Anne Cooper, the graduate student coordinator. All those years I had seen her name; I didn't know what coordinator meant. And then Allan Kaprow, always in his uniform: blue jeans, a blue jean jacket, a brown leather briefcase, and his famous beard. Moira Roth, the feminist art historian, was the first one to visit my studio. She invited me to speak to her class on the feminist art movement. I remember this was the first time I saw the famous installation *Womanhouse*—the kitchen, all the stuff was really eye-opening. She asked me to talk about the situation for women in China. She left the next semester for Mills. Now we have been colleagues at Mills for the past twenty-one years. At UCSD, I sat in on one of Allan Kaprow's classes. I remember he showed a Cézanne still life and talked about how it has the wrong perspective; I understood some because there was a visual image. He talked for a long time. At the end of the course I wrote a paper about Matisse's *Dance*. There are people holding hands. There is one gap and I compared that gap with Michelangelo's *Creation*. And then I took one of his classes on happenings. I didn't know he was famous. We had never heard anything about him in China. What is a happening, I wondered? Other words like "performance" and "installation" I looked up in the dictionary.

This is where you met your husband, Jeff Kelley.

He studied art criticism and theory, and he had a studio pretty close to mine. I asked him, "So what does it mean, installation?" He said, "Meaning you take over the whole space. You can do anything you want." The point I remember very clearly was that you could use the ceiling, the floor, anything. Jeff was originally from Nevada. He worked at the Nevada Arts Council. He said,

"There is a university gallery in Reno about to be torn down. If you want to do a show there, you can do anything you want." So in '85, I did. I painted on the walls and I painted on the floor, the first time I experienced the so-called installation. I painted images inspired by the Dunhuang Caves, Taoist iconography. It was cartoonish, graphic. And then the gallery was torn down. Another time, I did a painting inside a stairwell at the UCSD campus; I think it's still there. Outside in the grass, Nam June Paik did a Buddha-and-TV sculpture, maybe not so permanent, but I did a permanent mural in the two-story building, the whole way up and down. I did it probably during spring break, in less than a week by myself, so I hurt my elbow. I got a cortisone shot like a wounded soldier. The doctor said, "Do you have tennis elbow?" I said, "It is mural elbow." I experienced that kind of freedom for the first time in my life. And also I learned that art is not just a thing, an object. In one of Allan's classes he took us to a waste dump near the school, and from his truck he unloaded an old sofa and then buckets of paint. I think also he moved something from inside the dump, like an old door from a house. And about five, six of us—probably I was the only graduate student—were there. He said, Okay, you can do it. Do what? Do whatever you want. I was shocked. You know, in China, you have a concept, you do a drawing, you do all the preparation before the painting, all this academic stuff. I thought, What am I going to do? A young man opened the paint, the can, and then he just poured it onto the door, the sofa. I was confused. I looked at the professor, waiting for instructions. He didn't say a thing. He didn't say, no, you cannot do it or this is that way. So very reluctantly I said to myself, I can make a mess too. What color? I have no clue. I grabbed a brush, I started to think . . . what am I going to do? That was really

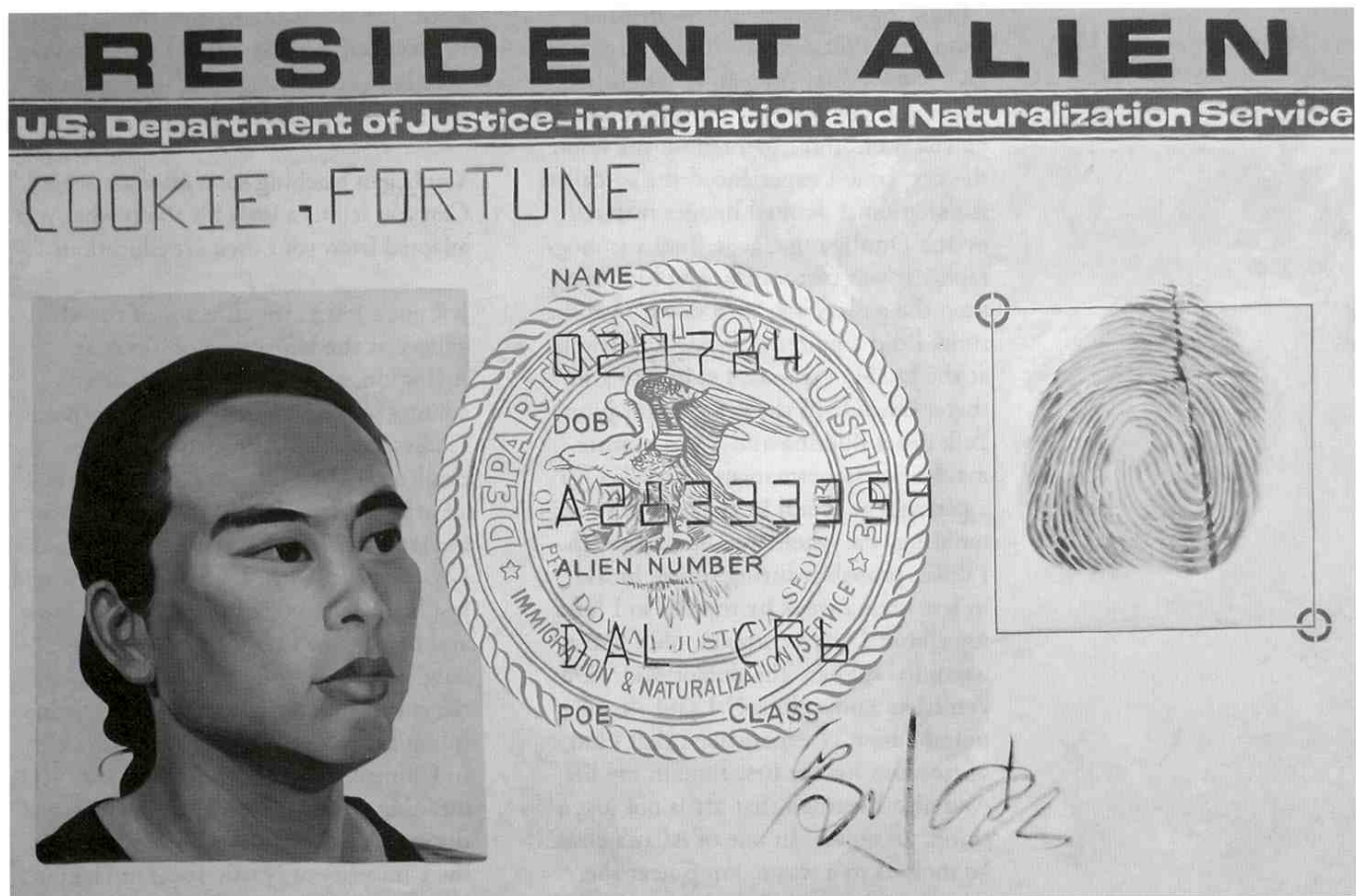
liberating. Probably when I think back, the way I improvise while I paint today goes back to that moment in the dump with Allan Kaprow at UCSD.

You began teaching soon after art school. Can you tell us a little bit about what you adapted from your own art education?

Jeff got a job as the director of the art gallery at the University of Texas at Arlington, and I taught a class as an adjunct professor. They asked me to teach Chinese art history, which was really challenging because I am an artist, not an art historian. Plus I had to teach in a foreign language. But it went well because I decided that when I am teaching I would just be myself and tell them I am an artist and this is how I see art history. So I taught the basic things, but I also asked the students to do calligraphy, some stone rubbings, and even some brushstrokes. In Chinese, we say *shao shusheng jiao*, meaning when you teach you also learn at the same time. After that, I was hired by the University of North Texas in Denton as a painting teacher, an assistant professor, tenure track. And then a new job was open at Mills College because Jay DeFeo passed away. Moira Roth, who was chair, called one day to ask if I would be interested. It was a great chance to go back to California, which I feel is really my home.

Then you made the move.

Yes, that summer. My mom happened to be visiting us. Jeff towed his Chevy Nova on the back of a big truck, and I drove a van with my mom, my son, and our cat. Jeff went back to Texas to finish his last semester, and I started teaching. I learned that teaching art is unpredictable, especially when you have graduate students. Somebody's work could be about 1950s memory in America—Americana—and others can do something about abortion; the subject matter varies. With time I learned to trust my intuition, my



10 Hung Liu, *Resident Alien*, 1988. Oil on canvas, 60 x 90 in. San Jose Museum of Art, Gift of the Lipman Family Foundation

experience. As a teacher, I am careful with the so-called demonstration because your demo in China is the teachers showing you how to do things—as if it is the only way. Now, the main thing I show students is how to loosen up, how to get themselves into the work, to concentrate, but not as if my way is the only way. I have to emphasize that over and over again. The best students have their work, and nothing looks like my work at all. I also sometimes give them homework, like one painting a day, one drawing a day, and then I show them I do it myself. It is doable; you have got to do it. There is a Chinese and an American way. The American way involves a lot of freedom, individuality. But on the other hand, I want them, especially younger people, to respect art making as very hard work. There are no shortcuts.

Let's focus on your artistic practice now. Perhaps we could start with some generalities about how you begin a new work or a series.

As an artist I would like to be a witness of my time, but I also feel that subject matter and objectivity, like the way I paint, the physicality of my work, is just as important. It has to be a good marriage. In 1988 I had a residency at the Capp Street Project [visual artist residency in San Francisco]. I stayed in a studio designed by David Ireland, the original Capp Street building. Within a three-month period, I could develop an idea and execute it there. I didn't have a precise plan, but I was thinking, as a new Chinese immigrant, that San Francisco has one of the biggest Chinatowns. It might be interesting

"There is a university gallery in Reno about to be torn down. If you want to do a show there, you can do anything you want." So in '85, I did. I painted on the walls and I painted on the floor, the first time I experienced the so-called installation. I painted images inspired by the Dunhuang Caves, Taoist iconography. It was cartoonish, graphic. And then the gallery was torn down. Another time, I did a painting inside a stairwell at the UCSD campus; I think it's still there. Outside in the grass, Nam June Paik did a Buddha-and-TV sculpture, maybe not so permanent, but I did a permanent mural in the two-story building, the whole way up and down. I did it probably during spring break, in less than a week by myself, so I hurt my elbow. I got a cortisone shot like a wounded soldier. The doctor said, "Do you have tennis elbow?" I said, "It is mural elbow." I experienced that kind of freedom for the first time in my life. And also I learned that art is not just a thing, an object. In one of Allan's classes he took us to a waste dump near the school, and from his truck he unloaded an old sofa and then buckets of paint. I think also he moved something from inside the dump, like an old door from a house. And about five, six of us—probably I was the only graduate student—were there. He said, Okay, you can do it. Do what? Do whatever you want. I was shocked. You know, in China, you have a concept, you do a drawing, you do all the preparation before the painting, all this academic stuff. I thought, What am I going to do? A young man opened the paint, the can, and then he just poured it onto the door, the sofa. I was confused. I looked at the professor, waiting for instructions. He didn't say a thing. He didn't say, no, you cannot do it or this is that way. So very reluctantly I said to myself, I can make a mess too. What color? I have no clue. I grabbed a brush, I started to think . . . what am I going to do? That was really

liberating. Probably when I think back, the way I improvise while I paint today goes back to that moment in the dump with Allan Kaprow at UCSD.

You began teaching soon after art school. Can you tell us a little bit about what you adapted from your own art education?

Jeff got a job as the director of the art gallery at the University of Texas at Arlington, and I taught a class as an adjunct professor. They asked me to teach Chinese art history, which was really challenging because I am an artist, not an art historian. Plus I had to teach in a foreign language. But it went well because I decided that when I am teaching I would just be myself and tell them I am an artist and this is how I see art history. So I taught the basic things, but I also asked the students to do calligraphy, some stone rubbings, and even some brushstrokes. In Chinese, we say *shao shusheng jiao*, meaning when you teach you also learn at the same time. After that, I was hired by the University of North Texas in Denton as a painting teacher, an assistant professor, tenure track. And then a new job was open at Mills College because Jay DeFeo passed away. Moira Roth, who was chair, called one day to ask if I would be interested. It was a great chance to go back to California, which I feel is really my home.

Then you made the move.

Yes, that summer. My mom happened to be visiting us. Jeff towed his Chevy Nova on the back of a big truck, and I drove a van with my mom, my son, and our cat. Jeff went back to Texas to finish his last semester, and I started teaching. I learned that teaching art is unpredictable, especially when you have graduate students. Somebody's work could be about 1950s memory in America—Americana—and others can do something about abortion; the subject matter varies. With time I learned to trust my intuition, my

to look into it. That is where I did the painting *Resident Alien*, which was also the name of the Capp Street installation. It was off-site—in a downtown office building that still had some raw, open spaces. A lot of what I did was on the wall. And then the paintings were saved. My green card (fig. 10) was one of the thirteen paintings I did during my residency at the Capp Street Project.

It was quite large—about 60 by 90 inches.

Yes. And the painting is oxymoronic. You are supposed to carry your ID card in your wallet. My painting made the image large, like a billboard. Instead of my real name I used “Cookie, Fortune” because the fortune cookie is something I was fascinated with. The first time I went to a Chinese restaurant in the U.S., they served fortune cookies. Everybody said, “You should know what that is.” But it was invented by a Japanese man near Golden Gate Park; it has nothing to do with the Chinese at all. And the term “resident alien” is also interesting. What is alien? How is an alien also a resident? When I got to the U.S., it happened to be the beginning of Sigourney Weaver’s *Alien* movies. An alien is from outer space. So that term is also an oxymoron.

Oh, really?

I looked at many old photographs of Chinatown while I was working at Capp Street. I did paintings based on old photographs of Chinese railroad workers, a Chinese family, and immigrants to the U.S. I borrowed photographs from the Wong family in San Francisco. These old black-and-white historic photographs provide information, they are witness to a particular moment in society. You know, we burned a lot of family photo albums during the Cultural Revolution because, for example, our family had grandparents who got married and had a photo taken,

dressed up in suit, tie, and wedding gown. These could have been rentals, but people still said, “That is not proletarian. You must be a capitalist landlord.” And official photographs were published only after censorship. But I remember the big urban fire in the Oakland Hills, in 1991, where people rescued the family photo album first. So I felt almost an urgent need to look at a lot of historic photographs. This has always been the way I work. A year after the Capp Street Project, the violence in Tiananmen Square happened, in 1989, and I did a painting based on a photograph of a bound-foot woman from 1900.

This is *Goddess of Love, Goddess of Liberty* (fig. 11) from 1989?

Right. That was right after Tiananmen Square, where a statue called the *Goddess of Democracy* was made and displayed in the square by the sculpture department at the academy where I went to school. This reminded me of all those beautiful, strong goddesses, female figures, like the Statue of Liberty and Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People*. In the past, be it liberty or freedom, however, a goddess in China was really crippled and had bound feet, not really able to do anything or hardly walk. So that was the true condition of liberty after June 4, 1989. I had a photograph that a friend, the artist Jim Pomeroy, bought in Chinatown, and I decided to use that image to represent the goddess of liberty. When I was young, I remember this relatively old lady who had tiny bound feet—we asked about it, and she unwrapped her bandage. It was horrible. This photograph reminded me of those. The standard size of these disfigured feet was three inches—men called them the three-inch golden lotus. I thought it was horrible, like mutilation, a constant reminder of women’s hobbled condition. A blank blackboard slate hangs on the wall next to the canvas and below it a straw broom: these symbolize the

- 11 Hung Liu, *Goddess of Love, Goddess of Liberty*, 1989. Oil on canvas with wooden bowls, slate, and a broom, 72 x 96 x 12 in. Dallas Museum of Art, Museum League Purchase Fund

erasure of memory and the subordinate status of women (because the Chinese character for "woman" involves a kneeling figure and a broom). Also, the soldiers cleaned up Tiananmen Square with brooms, to clean up the bloodstains. Finally, the broom functions symbolically like a big paintbrush.

How did you come to make the painting *Odalisque* in 1992 (fig. 12)?

As I mentioned, I started being more interested in historic photographs. In 1990, the first year I got the job at Mills College and the seventh year of living in the U.S., I returned to China for the





12 Hung Liu, *Odalisque*, 1992. Antique architectural panel, lacquered and painted wood, ceramics, 52 x 95 x 8 in. Private collection

first time. I got a faculty research grant and went to Beijing to try to find more historic photographs that survived the Cultural Revolution. I went to a Beijing film archive and asked for “anything old.” They brought out cardboard boxes with loose photos and some that were mounted and captioned in Japanese. I looked at the titles of the photographs and one said it was a famous prostitute in China. The first time I saw those kind of photographs, they were so bizarre, with the prostitutes placed against a photo studio backdrop—even the Eiffel Tower—with various props or European accoutrements, like bicycles, organs, telephones, and there were even two prostitutes sitting in an airplane. I took photographs of every page I came across. It seemed like a very exclusive, elite list of young women, some kind of small group for clients. I turned the pages

almost like a mail-order catalogue—all the prostitutes had made-up names like Little Lily and Lotus or Pearl. I was fascinated by the images, but also curious about what kind of life they had lived. We all know that the majority of girls were sold by poor families. Girls were not as precious as boys; they could not carry on the family name. After I returned to the U.S., I looked at them over and over again after I made the prints. Of course, photography was invented in 1839, introduced to China, and photographs were immediately used by the imperial court to make royal portraits, but also by the sex trade. It’s really interesting, not just the new device introduced to China, the camera, but also the concept, the whole aesthetics of commercialism imported into China through photography, which copied Western and classical portraiture traditions, like women reclining on a

- 13 Hung Liu, *Old Gold Mountain*, 1994. 200,000 fortune cookies, train tracks, oil on shaped canvas, dimensions variable. Installation at the de Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. Photo courtesy of the artist

daybed, most of them looking into the camera, returning the gaze of the client. So I decided to refer each piece back to some Western origin, like *Olympia*, *Odalisque*, and other famous paintings like *Raft of the Medusa* and *Mona Lisa*.

I wanted to make associations with Western portraiture. I also wanted to intensify the theatrical component, so I made them big and incorporated shelves and architectural fragments onto the canvases, as well as props, like wooden



flowers, paper temple money, and sculptures of some sort on the shelf, both to make them into altars but also like offerings, like a stage. This is a whole body of work I did from the early '90s to the mid-90s.

These canvases are shaped at the top. Does that relate to the shape of the photograph?

Yes, absolutely, the templates of the photos at that time often had little rounded corners, like arches or shoulders. Maybe because I have lived through so many different movements in China, witnessing a lot myself, I feel like history is not just in the textbook; history is more like a verb. It can be re-reviewed, and someday it will be changed when you have new evidence, and it depends on who writes it. So I have been very interested in historic reference in my work. I have also been interested in historic objects of culture—like fortune cookies—that were new to me. In 1994 I was given a whole gallery in the de Young Museum in San Francisco for an installation. As I mentioned, fortune cookies were not made in China. But they also took the shape of funny little gold nuggets. And the Chinese name for San Francisco is Jiùjīnshān—Old Gold Mountain.

So that explains the title of your installation.

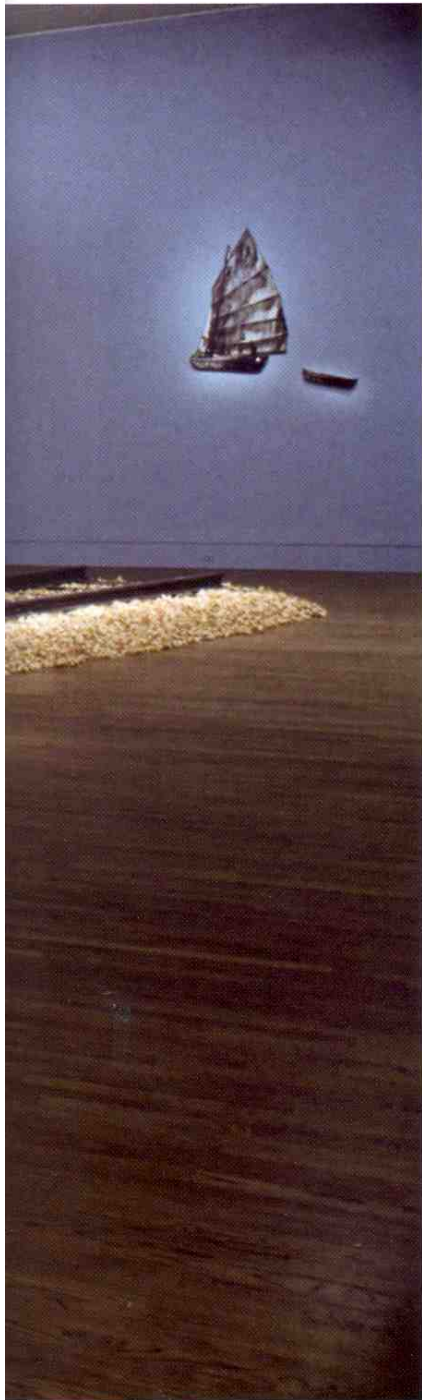
Exactly, *Old Gold Mountain* (fig. 13)—and that's why even the football team is called the 49ers. It all goes back to the history of the Bay Area, how people came to the U.S. during the Gold Rush to capture the American dream, to make money, to find gold. Some of them only found fortune cookies! So I used over two hundred thousand fortune cookies to make a symbolic gold mountain with a crossroads of railroad tracks running beneath the big golden pile.

The installation was fun to do, and the curator, Steve Nash, said at the opening that it was “the biggest order of fortune cookies in history and the smallest order of railroad track and ties.” I ordered the track and ties because so many Chinese laborers had worked for the railroad.

In a way, the railroad made a cross, like a crossroad, and in the middle of the cross was the old gold mountain. In my hometown in Manchuria, my great-grandparents and some relatives are buried in the middle of a cornfield. Each one is a mound like this. So this was both a memorial for dead Chinese laborers but also a glowing gold mountain. That was a good project, fun to do, and everybody could relate to the fortune cookie. But also it was part of history, the memory and the loss of memory of the Pacific West.

Your painting *The Ocean is the Dragon's World* (frontispiece) from 1995 is in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It has an intriguing title.

In China we have a tradition, especially for the new year, where we always balance two pieces of writing—pairs of words on each side of the door, like “heaven to earth,” “black to white.” You read from right to left, the traditional Chinese way. This title comes from one of two couplets: “Ocean is the dragon's world” and “Heaven is the crane's home.” The emperor is always considered the son of heaven, and he has the dragon: it represents young, male, imperial power. Here ironically we have the Dowager Empress Cixi, who was in power for decades in the Qing dynasty. She was the phoenix, representing imperial female power. So when she was in power, she reversed some carvings, like the dragon and phoenix, and put a phoenix on top. She was hated by a lot of people, who said she was cruel. But on the other hand she was a pretty powerful woman. In a photograph I saw of her, she wore





14 Hung Liu, *Mu Nu (Mother and Daughter)*, 1997. Oil on canvas, 80 x 140 in. Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri, Museum Purchase

an opulent gown. Against the backdrop of a peacock and a lot of decorative components surrounding her, her face almost disappeared. I emphasized her robe, her jewelry, her backdrop, even her jade fingernails. But her face I did very lightly, very pale, and it feels overall like her face is less important than the symbolism of her power. And I attached the two couplets on the side panel. When this painting was bought by the National Museum of American Art [now the Smithsonian American Art Museum], I realized that they had another portrait of the Dowager Cixi in the same collection, done by Katharine Carl, an American woman painter, in 1903. Katharine Carl had to change her painting according to the empress's taste, so she made a painting almost like a puppet. I saw the photograph of this painting. Her face is smooth, like a little porcelain doll—young and spotless and everything tightly painted. In my much

looser painting, I attached a birdcage to the canvas right in front of the empress's robe. This symbol might express her position in a patriarchal, feudal society: still in the cage, no matter how powerful a woman she was.

Let's move on to a painting you did two years later called *Mu Nu (Mother and Daughter)* (fig. 14).

After I did a whole series of paintings, like *Last Dynasty*, using a lot of photographs, of the emperor, the empress and even the nanny, the eunuchs, I wanted to move on—I looked at more candid photographs—not people posing in the studio, but in ordinary life. They're going about their business but they're also struggling in what I call the mythical poses of, in this case, extreme manual labor. *Mu Nu* is one of those. A mother and daughter, they're pulling a boat upstream with ropes. The boat



15 Hung Liu, *By the Rivers of Babylon*, 2000. Oil on canvas, 78 x 114 in. Private collection

is not in the picture. They're walking in the shallow water on the rocks and the mother is leading the way. It's a big painting, almost life-size. When I was painting it, I realized the gap between the generations, but also the ties that bind them. The riverbank, the water, are very abstract actually. I used more and more washes, and the paint just drips over. It's like when you return to photographs and memory, sometimes you try so hard to focus that it's impossible to focus sharply. So this painting opened up the space for me, and a lot of the space I deal with actually rather abstractly. I like the simplicity and the symbolism of it. When I was painting this in the old studio in Oakland, my mom visited me. I said, "Mom, it's like us."

When you start making a painting, do you begin with sketches, or do you work directly on the canvas and then make changes?

I shuffle my photographs, just look at them over and over again. I take them on trips, especially long flights, from California to New York, from San Francisco to Beijing. A lot of time I also have a sketchbook. I just quickly sketch, thinking, What if I were to do this painting eight feet tall?

Is it too much of a simplification to say that you work so large because your early experience was on murals? I'm thinking of a painting like *By the Rivers of Babylon* (fig. 15).

16 Hung Liu, *Dangling*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 80 x 80 in. Private collection



That's one part of it, a very important part. But deeper down I have also been influenced by revolutionary billboards: if you want get your message across, you have to make an image big and bold. On a physical level, I like to do bigger paintings. The painting you're asking about is obviously a reference to the story of Babylon in the Bible. I felt like Babylon's river is not just on this side of the world. I always remember Byron's poem, "By the Rivers of Babylon, We Sat Down and Wept." I read that poem in Chinese, and it's such a beautiful and melancholy lament about histories we share throughout the world. In this one, it's a refugee who sits by the river. The woman is feeding a little kid some

food. They have their basket. They're tired from their travel, and standing on their right side is a boy holding a bowl trying to help himself. What I did differently, of course, was to make up all the colors and switched their shabby bowls with the most expensive antique bowls with the most expensive antique bowls from the imperial palace, invaluable antique bowls and Neolithic period pottery pieces. Even though they're poor and homeless, they have a rich heritage.

Between 2004 and 2005 you did quite a few paintings of Chinese immigrants.

Mainly they're of two women, Chinese women, who came to America. At that

time I was asked to do a project for Sun Valley Center for the Arts in Ketchum, Idaho. They sent me a lot of literature and visual materials. The photographs of one particular woman named Polly Bemis caught my attention. As a young adult, she was sold [as a slave] in the U.S. in the early nineteenth century. A writer from San Francisco named Ruthanne Lum McCunn wrote a novel [about her] called *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, and PBS made a TV movie many years ago. I wasn't aware of that, though, I just saw her picture. In most of the pictures she was an older woman, always wearing her apron, in her garden and with chickens, with a dog, and with a horse. She entered the U.S. through Portland, Oregon, and then ended up in Idaho, and, according to McCunn's book, one day she arrived in the small town of Warren and dismounted her horse. "Here comes Polly," somebody said. So that became her name; nobody knew her real name. She was less than five feet tall, but pretty strong. She spoke broken English, and cooked for miners, including some rough people. One day a miner complained about the coffee, and she jumped out with a butcher knife and said, "Who no like my coffee?" and from that time on they all shut up. So I liked this woman who stood up for herself, and I did a series of paintings of her. This picture is of her sitting in front of her cabin wearing boots and a hat. You can't tell if she's black or Native American, she's just one of the early American pioneers in the West. I painted it more like an abstract painting and added a Chinese traditional butterfly. It's called *Dangling* (fig. 16). I think for immigrants, it's probably life that is dangling there. This is one of my favorite paintings.

There is also *Modern Time* from 2005 (fig. 17). Could you tell us about that work?

I saw a photograph of a Chinese woman idling away her time between conferences in a conference hall. She was a worker, probably serving tea or something. You can see a bunch of the teacups on the table, and that's really a typical image of China in the 1950s, with her just daydreaming, waiting to do her job. The cups are all lined up in a row waiting for the conference-goers, and on the wall there were four portraits—Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. In China, we make it shorter: Ma-En-Lie-Si-Mao. They were our great leaders. Ironically, we grew up with a bunch of white men we never really knew, but we read Marx and Engels' books and we saw movies about Lenin made in the Soviet Union, and Stalin leading the revolution. We were supposed to worship them along with Mao Zedong, and their pictures were all over China, in conference rooms and classrooms, all possible public spaces. The woman there daydreaming reminded me of when I was in the teachers' college in the Revolutionary Entertainment Department. Besides the official painting we were supposed to do, I had my secret activities, which involved putting a little painting box in my bag and pretending to walk in the countryside outside the campus. At that time I did at least one landscape per day, just to get away from all the socialist realist assignments, out to the beauty of light and the colors and the landscape at different times of the day, the sky, the earth. So I have a bunch of so-called *My Secret Freedom* landscape paintings. Like the woman worker in *Modern Time*, you can be there physically while your mind is somewhere else. So I added to the images of the four men in the original photograph other images, also white men, but portraits by Vincent van Gogh, and I tried to match Marx's big beard and Lenin's skinny face and Stalin's mustache, and I gave the whole thing a red background, always



associated with Red October, the revolution. I added three alarm clocks made during the Cultural Revolution—they're revolutionary relics. On the face of these clocks, they have Red Guards with Little Red Books. When the clocks' arms tick, their figures start to move, waving the books. And if you set an alarm, an alarm can go off at a certain time. When I show it, I always set the clocks so they tick almost like a time bomb, and I added a little image and character that Picasso designed for a play called *Parade*, a Chinese magician. That's how the West (or at least Picasso) thought the Chinese might look, as if in a costume. The painting has a lot of interesting dualities, where we are all connected to history, culture, politics, to time overall.

You mentioned the *My Secret Freedom* paintings from your student years. How did you manage to make those?

Well, those paintings are very small. They're on paper, because as a student I was poor. Also I had to really hide what I was doing because . . .

They were contraband.

Well, there was a term the government always used, "apolitical," meaning you're not a revolutionary. But not being a revolutionary could equate to being counterrevolutionary. It's easy to suddenly find yourself on the other side, or at least be criticized. So I was very careful when I was doing those



17 Hung Liu, *Modern Time*, 2005. Oil on canvas, lacquered wood, Cultural Revolution clocks, 66 x 168 in. Photo, courtesy of the artist

18 Hung Liu, *Tis the Final Conflict*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 66 x 66 in. Private collection



landscapes. First of all, I had to hide my paint box, which was small. I had to cut my paintbrushes very short to fit into the box, and I attached the gessoed paper on a little board in the box, getting everything ready, tiny paint tubes, pretending to be taking a walk. Sometimes the walks could be twenty minutes, sometimes thirty, and in winter I was all wrapped up in warm clothes and scarves, to sit in the snow. But that was one of my most memorable times, enjoyable, because I was alone and quiet, and there was nothing else but me and nature and nobody telling me what I should and shouldn't do. I just selected whatever was in front of me to paint, facing sometimes just a tree, or an open field, and I started to work. That

was necessary to survive as an artist in Maoist China, to keep a little piece of myself. Of course, the finished oil paintings took time to dry, so I put them under my bed, and when they dried I put them away and never felt like they were treasures or anything. I just valued the practice itself to keep me alive, reminding me of the importance of the personal pleasure of being an artist, why in the first place I wanted to paint or to draw. They were not about the final result; it was the process that was so lifesaving.

A number of your images around 2007 include figures with rifles (fig. 18). Was there some reason you suddenly became interested in this theme?

In college, I went to military camp. I was a top marksman. We used a semi-automatic rifle from World War II. After I painted women, from prostitutes to laborers to immigrants, I felt like women were not just vulnerable victims, only receiving abuse, but some of them were also strong and tough. They grab a rifle, join the war. There's not just a band of brothers; there's a sisterhood of soldiers as well. Every single painting title [for these] is a line from a famous proletarian song, [such as] "The Internationale." I found this movie made in 1949—actually the historic event it describes happened in 1938 in Manchuria—in which eight women fought a line of advancing Japanese soldiers. They covered their Chinese comrades' retreat. At their backs, though, was a river—there was no escape. Rather than being taken prisoner by the Japanese, the women decided to fight to the last minute, so they either had to surrender or drown. In the end, they destroyed all their weapons, carried their wounded comrades, eight of them holding hands, together walking into the river, where they drowned. This movie, *Daughters of China*, was made as propaganda just one year after I was born. The first time I watched it I was a little kid. But after more than half a

century, I watched it again and I was rather moved. We were taught to sacrifice ourselves for revolutionary goals and never fear death, so I feel I could have been one of those women. I did a whole series called *Daughters of China* after the movie. I even made a video about it.

Coming up to the present, you recently had an exhibition at the Rena Bransten Gallery in San Francisco, which included a monumental horizontal painting, twenty feet long, titled *Holy Saturday* (fig. 19).

Lately I've been working from things I have observed firsthand instead of from historic photographs. For example, a woman who was teaching an anatomy class invited me to visit a lab where medical students study cadavers. I visited, observing the dead, and took some pictures during my visit. So in a sense these paintings still come from photographs, but the difference now is that these are my own photographs of dead things that came into my life. For example, my husband and I took a walk near our house in Oakland and came upon a dead deer hit by a car. It was a doe, and I took pictures with my phone. Several months later, I came upon a dead fawn at almost the same

19 Hung Liu, *Holy Saturday*, 2010.
Oil on canvas, 60 x 240 in.
Photo, courtesy of the artist



20 Hung Liu, *Crossing the River—Leaping*, 2003. Color lithograph, 30 x 44 1/2 in. Photo, courtesy of the artist



spot. But this time, I put it in the trunk of my car and took it to my studio, photographed it, and then took the little body to an animal shelter to get cremated. In China, I drew and painted “from life” for so many years, meaning still life, or from a live model, or live landscapes like the *Secret Freedom* pictures we discussed—meaning I looked at something directly firsthand. So now I have had firsthand encounters with all these dead things, except in the context of everyday life. The show that emerged from these works was based on my photographs of dead things from life. In one of my visits to the lab, I photographed a cadaver lying there, and it very much reminded me of Jesus Christ after his Crucifixion, or of some Christian saint who has sacrificed his life for others. I happened to go to that clinic, the medical center, on a Saturday, and I was asked by my gallery on Good Friday to title the painting that I made. That was when I said, “Between Good Friday and Easter, what do you call this Saturday?” They said, “Holy Saturday.” So that’s the how painting was named.

You did a collaboration at Magnolia Editions with poet Michael McClure based on a deer you found. You’ve also worked at other printmaking workshops. What do you like about printmaking (fig. 20) and its challenges?

At your studio, you’re the queen. You work at your own pace, your own rhythm. You’re in charge. When you go to Bud Shark in the Rocky Mountains, Tamarind in Albuquerque, and when I work with Pyramid Atlantic in Maryland, you have to physically leave your studio. You can’t work alone because you work with master printers. Even though I’ve been working with some of them for years, I need to refresh my memory each time, relearning what etching, what lithographs, are about. What’s the limitation? But I also try to do things I have not done before, including new subject matter and techniques, and being influenced by the uniqueness of a new medium. One of the things I like best about working with printers is that I can put myself in a learning position. I can be silly, stupid. I have no



knowledge. All of the master printers over the years, they've been very patient. They're respectful and they politely sometimes tell you, "No, it's impossible to do that." But sometimes they encourage me, like to attach a 3D object to the prints or otherwise go wild. A limitation is a part of the beauty, how you can be creative within certain boundaries while still breaking the rules. I cannot erase myself, but I try to use existing imagery created by me and also try to do it differently, to have another chance. You're editing your own things. It's like being haunted by your own ghost and then figuring out how to reinvent something because you are in a different place.

Most of your exhibitions have been in the U.S., but you do exhibit around the world, particularly in China. A recent project in Beijing took place in an imperial granary (fig. 21).

That was 2008. I was offered an opportunity to show at the great granary, the imperial granary. It so happened that in 1981, before I graduated from the mural program in the Central Academy of Fine Arts, I finished a mural called *Music of the Great Earth* [for the Foreign Students' Dining Hall of the academy], but that property was sold and the building was torn down about 2000 along with the murals. So although my original mural was dead, when I had a chance to reinvent it, I felt, since it had been painted in a dining hall, that the sixteenth-century imperial granary would be a good place to do it. Maybe I could redo the mural without having the original mural as a reference. I do have black-and-white preparatory drawings. So I talked to Magnolia master printer Don Farnsworth who used the drawings, scanned them, and loaded them in the computer, used Photoshop, and double-printed the image. One is backward. One is right side up. Then we made a color print, like a negative. It's

very dark with all of this very confusing imagery, like a lost memory. There is a group of men dancing around a drum. Exotic women playing musical instruments. Adding to all of this stuff, I painted some important images from my career, like going back to China, and it's like my green card pending and my passport image, like maybe a refugee, a lot of images, pieces of images from my existing paintings, and some images of Buddhist hands as well, just randomly everywhere. This mural is done on ten 4-by-8 panels [8 feet in height], so the total is nearly forty feet long. So this is like the memory of the last building, of the last dining hall. And I invited quite a few of the top contemporary artists, including Xu Bing who got a MacArthur in the U.S. and Sui Jianguo, Liu Xiaodong, Li Songsong, and Yu Hong, to write something about their own memories of the mural, since they all had been students at CAFA after I left. Personally I felt that this was a very important piece because it made a connection. In the twenty-four years since I had left China, a whole generation of artists grew up. Of the people who remember that mural, the youngest are in their mid-thirties. So it's not nostalgia about my own mural. It's about memory, which is different from nostalgia because, like those times, it is broken and mostly gone.

Do you go to China regularly?

I've been back to China regularly since 1990. My mom lived in Beijing, and visiting her became my semiannual event. Later on we started to contact artists, and Jeff was consulting on contemporary art for the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. He was showing contemporary Chinese artists, so from the late 90s on every time we went to China we visited artists, visited their studios, talked to them at length and in depth, and I was the interpreter. There



- 21 Hung Liu, *Music of the Great Earth*, 2008, Imperial Granary, Beijing. Ten oil-on-wood panels, grains, antique grain baskets, ink on paper, oil on shaped canvas, each wood panel: 8 x 4 ft.; overall: 8 x 40 ft. Photo, courtesy of the artist

was a great connection for me because as an immigrant in the United States, even though I have a home and studio here, and even though I have a career here, I felt that because I came here as an adult—I was already thirty-six—with so-so English, I was constantly learning more. Even now, every day there's a new word, like "anthrax." I'm curious about this and it constantly keeps me energetic, but on the other hand I feel I can never be a blue-blooded American because

I'm, again, talking about history as a verb. My status is "becoming American," like all the first-generation immigrants. Becoming American is learning everything new—and then meanwhile I sometimes feel I want to go back to China, at least emotionally and in spirit. I realize the difference, though, because I live here. I miss a lot of details not being there. So I catch up when I go back, but also I can never be the same, as though I had never left China.