

Reknowned performance artist **Marina Abramovic** says her next project is a movie about actor **James Franco**.

This year's **Oscars** didn't have too many surprises, with **Argo** taking home Best Picture and **Daniel Day-Lewis** and **Jennifer Lawrence** winning the top acting awards.



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Profile: Hung Liu

by **Matthew Harrison Tedford**



Village Photograph IV, c.1969–1975; photograph; 24 x 18 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

This article is part of the *Visiting Artist Profile* series, which highlights some of the artists, curators, and scholars who intersect with the Bay Area visual arts community through the various lecture programs produced by local institutions. **Hung Liu** will speak with **Bill Berkson** on **February 27, 2013, at 7:00 p.m. at Danforth Lecture Hall, Mills College Art Center** and with **Gordon Chang** on **February 28 at 6:00 p.m. at the Asian Art Museum**.

In February 1948, the artist **Hung Liu** was born in Changchun, in the far north of China. Only months later, the city was the site of a major siege by the People's Liberation Army. More than one-hundred-sixty thousand civilians starved to death in what was one of several battles marking the end of the decades-long Chinese civil war. The newly established People's Republic would play a profound role in the development of Liu's art practice. After completing high school, she was forced to defer her art career to participate in the Cultural Revolution's agrarian re-education curriculum. During the four years she toiled in the fields, she often photographed the villagers she worked among. "I was like a journalist who went to their door, took their pictures, and gave the photos to them," she says of the experience.¹ But photography was not always a safe pastime, as many families,

The exhibition, *Resident Alien*, included a frieze painted using tai-chi movements, columns painted with Chinese surnames, a pile of fortune cookies (anticipating Félix González-Torres's candy pieces), and a large-scale painting of Liu's identification card. Although she had only been in the United States for four years, Liu's work focused on the complexities that she had already faced in navigating multiple cultural identities, which were often accompanied by false expectations of her.

In one painting, also titled *Resident Alien*, the date of birth of Liu's alias, Fortune Cookie, is listed as "020784," as if suggesting that Liu had become a new person at the same time that she became a resident of the United States. In a sense, it's as if the siege of Changchun, years of forced labor, and time spent in college and graduate school had not been as transformational for Liu as moving to the United States. And yet, the class on her identification card in *Resident Alien* is "CR6," which meant that her residency was conditional. Even with an American husband, Liu was in a constant state of uncertainty as an immigrant; any day, she could be forced to revert to her old life.

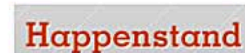
The painting *Resident Alien* also conjures the role of Chinese women in San Francisco's early history, as the term "fortune cookie" is sexual slang for a Chinese woman.³ Between 1852 and 1873, a San Francisco operation shipped six thousand Chinese girls to work as prostitutes in San Francisco—a whopping 87 percent of the Chinese females who arrived in the United States during that time.⁴ The city of San Francisco flourished with the help of these immigrants, female workers whose names and life stories were less important than the sexual services they supplied to miners, merchants, financiers, and sailors. Any history of the city or Chinatown would be remiss to neglect this story.

During her Capp Street residency, Liu also painted photographs of Chinese families and railroad workers, borrowing photographs from a local San Francisco family. In the wake of the 1991 Oakland hills fire, she witnessed families searching for photographs and reconsidered the photographs she took during the Cultural Revolution. Liu also returned to China for the first time in 1991, where she discovered archived turn-of-the-century photographs of prostitutes and began using them as source material for paintings. It was during this time that she began to advance the painting style she is most well-known for: large-scale paintings that pull not only from historical or personal photographs but also from Liu's training in Socialist Realism, traditional Chinese painting, and modern European-American painting.

Liu's 1999 piece *Loom* evinces her work from this period. The brilliantly colored wall-size painting re-imagines a sepia-tone photograph of a single woman stoically working at a loom. Liu says she was drawn to the dignity she found in the subject, who is not returning the photographer's gaze. Colorful strokes cascade down the painting in a way that is reminiscent of both Chinese ink painting and American Action Painting.



ALTERNATIVE EXPOSURE



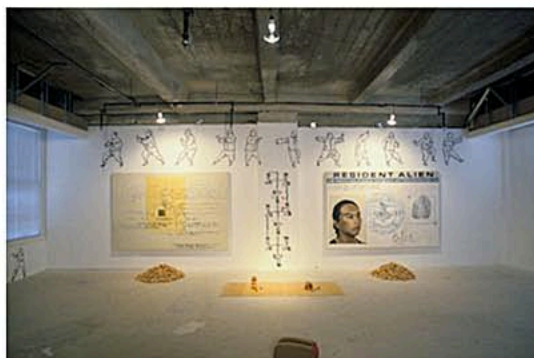
including Liu's, burned photographs to hide their bourgeois origins.

Following her labor detail in Changchun, Liu continued her education at the Beijing Teaching College, where she was allowed to pursue her art career because, in a twist of fate, she had worked as a peasant; later, she enrolled at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Though she studied Soviet Socialist Realism, she secretly sketched in a more Western style. She applied for and was accepted to the University of California, San Diego, but her enrollment was delayed while she sought permission from the Chinese government to leave the country. During this time, Liu studied calligraphy, stamp making, and ceramic painting in an effort to augment her art education with traditional Chinese practices. After nearly four years, Liu was allowed to leave for the United States in 1984. In San Diego, she was introduced to Allan Kaprow, David Antin, and Moira Roth (who was the first person to visit her studio).

In 1988, Liu had a three-month residency at San Francisco's Capp Street Project, and the resulting work was exhibited in a downtown office building. In her proposal, she expressed interest in the relationship of Chinatown's "myth of a better life to its reality," and researched families who owned businesses in Chinatown.²

Liu added a flock of birds to the original image, an element she attributes to traditional Chinese painting. Liu says *Loom*, like many of her works, is "a very busy painting," favoring the collision and coexistence of Eastern and Western cultures that are manifested on the canvas.

Liu has taught at Mills College since 1990, and her work continues to explore the terrain that exists between her Chinese and American identities, as well as the Russian, Chinese, and American traditions in which she was trained. Like her alias Fortune Cookie, Liu's work is neither entirely American nor Chinese. Art history doesn't have a neat category for Liu, and that is likely what she prefers.



Resident Alien, 1988; installation view; Capp Street Project, San Francisco. Courtesy of the Artist and Capp Street Project.

HUNG LIU: OFFERINGS IS ON VIEW AT THE MILLS COLLEGE ART MUSEUM THROUGH MARCH 17, 2013; SUMMONING GHOSTS: THE ART OF HUNG LIU IS ON VIEW AT THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA FROM MARCH 16 TO JUNE 30, 2013; AND QUESTIONS FROM THE SKY: NEW WORK BY HUNG LIU IS ON VIEW AT THE SAN JOSE MUSEUM OF ART FROM JUNE 6 TO SEPTEMBER 29, 2013.

NOTES:

1. "A World of Art; Biographical Sketch: Hung Liu," Annenberg Learner, accessed February 20, 2013.

2. Hung Liu, *Resident Alien*, "Capp Street Project Archive, accessed February 14, 2013, http://libraries.cca.edu/capp/hung_liu.html.

Throughout the process for creating *Resident Alien*, Liu expressed a desire to not "misrepresent or esthetically displace the families involved."

3. As quoted in: Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, eds., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 269.

4. Jeffrey Scott McIlwain, *Organizing Crime in Chinatown: Race and Racketeering in New York City, 1890-1910* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2004), 53.

5. Hung Liu on *Loom*, YouTube video, 2:46, posted by San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, May 5, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZjNZm27Nc4>.