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ARTS

A must-see: Hung Liu's 'Women Warriors: Daughters of China' at Kala



By Marcia Tanner
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Wushihun River, 2007, by Hung Liu. Oil on canvas, 60 x 240 inches. Photo: Courtesy of Kala Art Institute

It would be hard to imagine an art exhibition more relevant to current events, or one more visually and emotionally stirring, than *Daughters of China*, the stunning show of monumental oil paintings by East Bay-based artist Hung Liu, now at Kala Art Institute in Berkeley through Jan. 20, 2018. Organized by guest curators Peter Selz and Sue Kubly, it was originally presented in 2016 at the American University Museum in Washington, DC.

Hung Liu: Daughters of China is on view at [Kala Art Institute Gallery](#), 2990 San Pablo Ave., Berkeley through Jan. 20, 2018. Gallery hours: Tuesday – Friday, 12-5 p.m.; Saturday, 12-4 p.m. –

One of the most prominent Chinese-American painters working in the United States today, Hung Liu was born in Changchun, China in 1948, a year before The People's Republic of China was established in 1949. Trained as a socialist realist painter and muralist, she lived

LEUNG PAU through Maoist China and personally experienced the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, she worked in the fields for four years, while clandestinely making photographs and drawings of what she saw there.

In 1984, already established as a professor in China's most prestigious art school, Liu came to the United States to attend UC San Diego, where she received her MFA and met her future husband: art critic, writer, curator and former UC Berkeley professor of art theory and criticism Jeff Kelley. The couple moved to the East Bay, and Liu has lived and worked here ever since. In 1990 she joined the art faculty as a tenured professor at Mills College, becoming Professor Emeritus in 2016. While making paintings, she has also produced limited edition prints at Paulson Fontaine Press in Berkeley, some of which are on view at the Kala show.

In 2013, the Oakland Museum of California presented *Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu*, a comprehensive survey of Liu's work that traveled to museums in Kansas City and Palm Springs. In that same year, she had major solo exhibitions at the San Jose Museum of Art and at Mills College. Her significance is more than local, though. Liu's works have been exhibited nationally and internationally, and are in the collections of SFMOMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, and the Los Angeles County Museum, among others.

Liu's art has always focused on the condition of women under male-dominated regimes. At a time when women in the US are finally beginning to speak out against patriarchal intimidation and male sexual and psychological assaults in the workplace and elsewhere, the paintings in *Daughters of China* carry additional freight beyond the already layered meanings they conveyed when Liu made them in 2007. (The original series was shown at Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, but others were made later and not publicly exhibited until the 2016 show.)

The series is inspired by *Daughters of China*, a black-and-white propaganda film made in 1949, the year of the Chinese Communist revolution. Liu, a daughter of China herself, saw this melodramatic, gut-wrenching movie as a child; it made an indelible impression on her. It dramatizes an actual event in 1938, when Chinese nationalists and Communists were united in fighting the invading Japanese army during the second Sino-Japanese War. Eight Chinese female soldiers, ranging in age from 13 to 28, fought a rear-guard action, enabling the main Chinese forces to escape. Finding themselves cornered with their backs to a river, they chose to carry their wounded and dying into the icy torrent and drown rather than surrender to Japanese troops.



Arise Ye Wretched of the Earth, 2007, by Hung Liu. Oil on canvas, 80 x 80 inches. Photo: Courtesy of Kala Art Institute

This vision of female heroism and solidarity — women banding together to evade capture by male enemy combatants, choosing instead to confront death in service to a shared, altruistic goal — suffuses the paintings on view. (Liu has compared this scenario, slightly tongue-in-cheek, to the ending of the film *Thelma and Louise*.) A video showing grainy, blurred excerpts from the original movie, punctuated by Liu's interventions of dripping pigment and overlays of paint, offers a telling reference.

Liu typically works from old black-and-white photographs, and all the paintings in the show, with two exceptions, are based on stills from the film. Several of their titles — *Arise Ye Wretched of the Earth*, for instance — are English translations of lyrics from *The Internationale*.^[1] They mostly depict giant closeups of the actors' faces, expressing intense emotions: anguish, anger, defiance, determination, pain.

Liu has transformed that raw material into dramatic large-scale compositions, combining while subverting the representational techniques of Soviet Socialist realism she mastered as an art student in China with vibrant, nuanced and unexpected color combinations, lavish abstract expressionist brushstrokes, symbolic floating circles (Japanese *ensō*),^[2] animal imagery drawn from traditional Chinese art, bands of solid pigment, blurred outlines, and opportunistic drips made by pouring linseed oil on the painted surface of the canvas.

No Saviour From on High Delivers II, 2007, shows the head and shoulder of an armed female soldier, apparently carrying a fallen comrade, whose arm is draped diagonally across the soldiers's chest. Delineated in bold black, gray and white brushstrokes against a blood red background, her expression is both desperate and resolute. The floating red and gray circles (*ensō*) surrounding her imply enlightenment, or at least awareness and acceptance of the void she faces. Her presence is vivid in this striking composition, but the drips at the base of the canvas suggest that she's dissolving before our eyes.



No Saviour From on High Delivers II, 2007, by Hung Liu. Oil on canvas, 80 x 96 inches. Photo: Courtesy of Kala Art Institute

Alluding to Liu's characteristic drips, her style has been described poetically as "weeping realism." But it's more complex than that. Socialist realism was a vehicle for Communist propaganda, intended to glorify Communist values, such as the emancipation of the proletariat, using realistic if exaggeratedly heroic imagery. It put a tight straitjacket on individual expression and invention as well as subject matter.

But even as an art student, followed by years working in the fields during the Cultural Revolution, and after, as a professor at a prestigious Chinese art school, Liu found ingenious ways to circumvent and challenge those restrictions. Wanting to explore memory and history, both personal and collective, and to covertly embed social and political critique in her work, she incorporated imagery, themes and techniques from traditional Chinese art and culture into her practice with such

subtlety that she eluded censorship and even won acclaim for her public murals.

Liu's emigration to the US in 1984, at the age of 39, added another dimension to her artistic inquiries. As an adult immigrant who'd already lived half a lifetime in another country, how would she integrate into her art and consciousness her past life in her homeland with her new life in her adopted, vastly different new home?

Like all of her work, *Daughters of China* reveals Liu's ongoing investigations into these complicated, rich, often contradictory influences on her personal, artistic and political sensibility and practice. She appropriates both Eastern and Western idioms and makes them uniquely her own. And, as her 1993 self-portrait *Avant-Garde* (*avant garde* in both military and artistic senses of that term) implies, she still sees herself as a woman warrior on the front lines of art and life.



Avant-Garde, 1993 by Hung Liu. Oil on shaped canvas, oil on wood, 116 x 43 inches. Photo: Courtesy of Kala Art Institute

The exhibition is a must-see, but it would benefit from more explanatory wall texts, including biographical information on the artist, to help viewers interpret what they're looking at. Also, the object labels don't reveal the lenders of these works to the show: an odd omission. A nicely produced catalog from Liu's American University Museum exhibition, with useful essays and excellent

illustrations, is available for sale in the gallery.

^[1] *'The Internationale' is a 19th C. French left-wing anthem that, with varying lyrics, has been a standard of the socialist movement in many nations ever since. In China, one version served as the de facto anthem of the Communist Party, the national anthem of the Chinese Soviet Republic, and the rallying song of the students and workers at the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.*

^[2] *According to Wikipedia, in Zen Buddhist calligraphy, ensō is a circle that is hand-drawn in one or two uninhibited brushstrokes to express a moment when the mind is free to let the body create. The ensō symbolizes absolute enlightenment, strength, elegance, the universe, and mu (the void). It is characterized by a minimalism born of Japanese aesthetics.*
