COLORLINES
NEWS FOR ACTION

The Weeping Veil

by Philip Huang
Monday, January 7 2008, 12:00 PM EST

Midway through our interview for this article, two beefy firefighters, on a routine inspection of commercially zoned sites in the neighborhood, knock on the door of Hung Liu's Oakland studio.

"But this is not a commercial site!" Liu cries. "It's just me and all my paintings!" After the confusion is sorted out, she invites the firemen into the studio. "Come in, come see my paintings! They're quite beautiful!"

The firemen enter shyly. Soon they are full of awe. This is an understandable reaction to Liu's work. The canvases are large, each running 6 to 10 feet long, and the faces they depict are almost unbearably vivid in the sunlit studio.

Liu, an Arts professor at Mills College in Oakland, California, who immigrated to the United States from China in 1984, often works from archival photographs of Chinese peasants and young prostitutes. Her main interest is the human figure, painted with the realistic technique of a trained muralist. She is also heavily interested in symbolism, and the figures in her paintings are often surrounded by lively foxes, butterflies and cranes. She has said that her secret collaborator is gravity. She dilutes her paints with linseed oil, and the colors weep down, as if the men and women in her paintings lived such sorrowful lives that their souls resist any more containment.

Her new series of paintings is based on stills from Daughters of China, a 1949 film produced by the Chinese government to commemorate the heroism of eight female soldiers who fought a flank of Japanese soldiers during the occupation of Northeast China in 1938.

"At the last minute, one of the women was killed," Liu says, "and the Japanese were pushing over. Behind the women was the river. They decided to destroy all their weapons and carry their dead comrade across the river."

She shows me three large paintings of the women in the churning river, their arms clasped around each other's shoulders.

"I like the images of the women. I also like to see their beauty—their Chinese beauty. They're supposed to be very demure, right? But here they're rugged because they're soldiers, and I love their femininity. Their hands are these beautiful female hands. The youngest soldier is only 13. So really, to our standards, they're kids—they're so young, but they're fighting a war."

"I think," Liu continues, "a lot of Chinese movies are overlooked in the history of motion pictures. In these early movies, the actors aren't wearing makeup. Their look is very natural. There's probably only one camera. Some parts really look like a documentary—they're really carrying the body across the river. There are no special effects—just very matter-of-fact. This is what happened. This is what these women went through."

One painting is particularly haunting. The women are waist-deep in the water now, soon the water will separate and drown them, and their faces are blurry and out of focus, as if the water has blanched their specific identities to prepare them for the abstraction of history.

"It is like the mystery of history itself, the pending water," Liu says. "What is buried there? We'll never know. What hangs on these walls is a fragment. We can try, but we can only recover pieces. But I like the symbolism of water. It is like Confucius saying, 'Time is like water flowing.'"

She adds, "There is a Chinese phrase we use to describe heroes: shi si ru gui—facing death is like going home. It means that heroes are at ease with death. These eight women drowned, but their heroism is timeless. Regardless of which side [they're on], when people fight for their beliefs, I really admire that kind of human spirit."

Liu has a broad, smooth face that only hints at her age. She was born in 1948, the Year of the Rat, and she has a charming sense of humor. She recently read a review of Pixar's animated film Ratatouille, which voiced disgust at the idea of rats producing food. "But why?" she asks. "We are all rats." When she was 18, during the Cultural Revolution of 1966, Liu was sent to a re-education camp in the Chinese countryside, where she labored and learned a sanctioned version of Chinese history and performed in operas extolling the virtues of Chairman Mao. After the Cultural
Revolution, Liu trained in the Socialist Realist style of painting so that the state might call upon her to produce beatific murals of Mao.

In the 1970s, Liu achieved "an unexpected fame" teaching painting and drawing on the Central China Television station. In 1984, after a brief stay in Hong Kong, her request for a passport was granted by the Chinese Cultural Ministry. By the end of that year, she began her studies in the Visual Arts Department at the University of California San Diego.

Her career in the U.S. took off rapidly. In 1989, she received a National Endowment for the Arts Painting Fellowship and had a debut exhibition of her work in New York.

Last year, Liu completed a highly visible and celebrated commission for the new Terminal 2 wing at Oakland Airport: 80 massive cranes take flight across giant panels of tempered glass.

When we met, Liu was preparing for a new show at the Rena Bransten Gallery in San Francisco. After talking about her experiences in the labor camps, I ask how she can take a state-produced film like Daughters of China at face value.

She says quickly, "I think it's different: 1949 compared with the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. In the late '40s, the actors and actresses, they believed in those heroes. Somehow there's a kind of innocence and sincerity. And it was low-tech. Everything was real—no special effects, nothing to glorify. It was all very down-to-earth, very earthy, very matter-of-fact. But by the mid-'60s the government was so highly controlled, and the heroes were so fake. They were caricatures; they were statues. That's
the difference. I have lived in China for long enough that
I can look back and see when it was all polluted by a
super-political agenda."

I point out that in 1938, China was fighting for its history. By contrast, the Cultural Revolution was about purging China of its past. Liu agrees, adding, "Although of course, by 1949, China was already in a civil war. The Communists and the Kuomintang were already fighting. But the movie still referenced a common enemy. There's no mention of the KMT."

She mentions that she recently watched the first installment of Ken Burn's documentary on World War II. "Maybe today, the situation makes you want to look back, to look at other wars. What does it mean to go through a war, even a good war like WWII, where the good guys win? The current war in Iraq is not as sincere. It's not for a good cause, and there are no real heroes in the traditional
sense. We're invaders. It's all so unclear. But there was a clarity for WWII."

When I ask how she feels about China now, she says, “I have mixed feelings. I go back every year, but the change is dramatic. Even though it’s a socialist party, it’s really a socialist-capitalist state—maybe even super-capitalist. The whole country is gearing up for the 2008 Olympics, and the polarization between the rich and poor is still very dramatic. But nobody can stop the change. No one can stop the progress of China into the contemporary world.”

This brings her to reflect on her own reasons for painting. “I think there are lots of things about China, even the most recent history, since WWII or after the Communists took over—a lot of history is misrepresented or forgotten or distorted or overlooked. I accept now that all one can really do is to bring some part of history forgotten or overlooked to people’s attention, to say, ‘You forgot. In the Far East, we fought very hard. Not just in Europe, not just in Normandy. Not just the Jews were killed, but the Chinese and the Rape of Nanking, and these eight women.’”

She turns to me. “But how much truth will come out? How long will it take? Maybe some truth will never come out. I just feel a part of me—because of who I am, because I’m old enough to have lived long enough—I can use my canvas to depict some things I feel, that really captured me, one way or another, like the prostitutes, or these soldiers.”

We consider the triptych of images with their weeping paint. “I think history is more like a verb than a noun. What really happened? And you can never get so accurate, because some witnesses have very subjective memories. And a lot of witnesses, they’re all gone, so we can only imagine, we can try to put ourselves in their shoes. But again, one would never have a lot of details. So the paint that drips and weeps is like a visual veil, almost like an interruption, so you have to get close, to focus on some detail, and get into high resolution. But never—” She pauses.

“With history, you can never get high resolution.”