Arts & Culture EAST BAY EXPRESS April 10-16 2013

MUSEUMS&GALLERIES

Hung Liu's "Mu Nu (Mother and Daughter)."

Hung Liu's Humbling Paintings

The artist's paintings reveal a deep compassion for the victims of history and stand as her greatest works.

Offerings, a recent exhibition at Mills College Art Museum, presented a number of huge installations by the college's ex-faculty member, Hung Liu, one of the first artists granted passage out of Communist China to pursue a career abroad. They conveyed the cultural in-betweenness that has characterized the artist's practice since she arrived in California in the mid 1980s.

In terms of sheer scale, Liu's 1994 "Jiu Jin Shan (Old Gold Mountain)," which consists of 200,000 fortune cookies piled atop crossing railroad lines, is certainly one of the artist's grandest gestures. When divorced from her broader practice, however, it appeared disappointingly null in *Offerings* — like a moderately interesting statement overblown to spectacular proportions.

Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu, a retrospective of Liu's work now showing at the Oakland Museum of California, provides the context needed to appreciate the artist's aforementioned installations. Moreover, it is the better exhibition for the simple reason that Liu's paintings stand superior to her installation work. Indeed, they are truly humbling.

With the exception of a few preliminary galleries devoted to Liu's early work, the exhibition consists almost entirely of one type of piece: a figurative painting on a large, shaped canvas, paired with a physical object or two that adds a complementary dimension to the painted scene. A steel cylinder evocative of artillery accompanies a painting of the Tiananmen Square catastrophe; a tea set rests on platforms jutting out from a painting of a Chinese family in a domestic setting.

Liu typically sources her scenes from found photographs, which she then transposes onto canvas through a distinctive process of drippy brush strokes and washes, giving them a worn quality. Rendered thus, her subjects take on a materiality beyond paint smears on a flat surface: They become like ancient specimens petrified in amber.

Liu gravitates toward images of the downtrodden and exploited: prostitutes working for the Chinese upper class, field laborers, a row of emaciated men sold into slave labor in Japan. Her paintings read as attempts to rescue these sufferers from the oblivion of history, exalting them without at all diminishing the hardness that characterized their lives.

As Liu's mother neared the end of her days, the artist took to making daily one small painting depicting one of her mother's belongings or intimate objects. The day her mother died, Liu smeared a canvas with all colors, merging them into a thickly encrusted black. The day after was black, too, but with a faint ring of light appearing, and a procession of flickering mourning candles followed (the whole indelible series is on display in the exhibition). One gets the feeling that if Liu had more to go off of than found photographs, she would treat each of her subjects with just this degree of intense intimacy. Few artists convey such seemingly endless depth of compassion. Nothing could be further from null.

Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu runs through June 30 at the Oakland Museum of California (1000 Oak St., Oakland). 510-318-8400 or MuseumCa.org

— *Alex Bigman*

ART GALLERIES

ABCO ArtSpace. "Useless Body Language" "Useless Body Language" is an all woman group show comprised of emerging artist practicing at California College of the Arts. Artist reception Friday, April 12th, 6-8pm. Apr. 11-16. free. 3135 Filbert St., Oakland, ABCO-ArtSpace.com.

Bedford Gallery. "Peaceable Kingdom: Animals Real and Imagined" This exhibition will explore the ways in which animals have been a presence in the visual arts as metaphors, totems, objects of fear, and sources of emotional attachment and affection through painting, photography, sculpture, and video. Through May 19. free. 1601 Civic Dr., Walnut Creek, 925-295-1417, Bedford-Gallery.org.

Berkeley Art Center. "ORIGINS" Co-curated by Suzanne Tan and Ann Weber, this exhibition explores the primal and evolutionary impulses of shape, form, and figure. Through June 9. free. 1275 Walnut St. (in Live Oak Park), Berkeley, 510-644-6893, BerkeleyArtCenter.org.

Berkeley Central Arts Passage. "Supra Natural" Presenting works relating to the "immeasurable character of nature" from five visual artists and one writer. Through May 10. free. 2055 Center St., Berkeley.

Berkeley Public Library, Central Branch. "Oakland Renaissance Jazz Series" A collection of Oakland-based photographers celebrate the artistry of jazz musicians in the Bay Area. Through May 11. free. 2090 Kittredge St., Berkeley, 510-981-6100, BerkeleyPublicLibrary.org.

Betti Ono Gallery and Shop. "The Storytellers" A new solo show by internationally-renowned artist and animator Wendell McShine. Through May 18. free. 1427 Broadway, Oakland, 510-473-5919, BettiOno.com.

Blackball Universe Gallery. "Audible Colors" This showcase will feature an array of colors, stories, and perspectives from artists David Polka, Stella Kisstiger, and Chaves Smith. Artists' reception on Friday, Apr. 19, 7pm. Through Apr. 27. free. 230 Madison, 2H, Oakland, BlackballUniverse.com.

Chandra Cerrito Contemporary. "Generating Gravity" Presenting works by Mari Andrews, known for her delicate, haiku-like sculptures. Artists' talk on Saturday, Apr. 13, 2–3:30pm. Through May 30. free. **"Original Source"** Presenting abstract photography by Penny Olson. Artist talk on Saturday, April 13, 2–3:30pm. Through May 30. free. 480 23rd St., Oakland, 510-260-7494, ChandraCerrito.com.

Classic Cars West. "At the End of Time, Where We Began" A group show featuring photographer Christopher Fuzi, painter Lethea Warren, and multimedia artist Treat U Nice. Daily. free. 411 26th St., Oakland, 415-626-1135, ClassicCarsWest.com.

David Brower Center. "Promise and Peril: A Study in Biodiversity" Featured artists Isabella Kirkland and Jeffrey Long employ different techniques, but converge in their commitment to capturing elements of nature in order to shed light on the ecological challenges we face. Through May 8. free. 2150 Allston Way, Berkeley, 510-809-0900, BrowerCenter.org.

Doug Adams Gallery. "Twin Bandits" This solo exhibition features the intricate ink drawings of Bay Area artist Pamela Lanza. Through May 24. free. 1798 Scenic Ave., Berkeley, 510-849-8935, Care-GTU.org/Doug_Adams_Gallery.php.

Expressions Gallery. "All in Bloom" A group show about the "freshness of Spring and the beauty of flowers." Through May 17. free. 2035 Ashby Ave., Berkeley, 510-644-4930, Expressions-Gallery.org.

Firehouse North. "Tom Franco CoLab 2013" New work made in Tom Franco's West Oakland art studio. Opening night Friday April 12, 7-9pm. Apr. 12-30. free. 1790 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, Firehouse-ArtCollective.blogspot.com.

FLOAT: Flotation Center and Art Gallery. "Positive Identifications" Two Oakland artists create work that "speaks to our human experience of time, space and identity." Through Apr. 13. free. 1091 Calcot Pl., Oakland, 510-535-1702, TheFloatCenter.com.

FM. "Small Works" Recent sculpture and drawing by Benjamin Fedosky. Through