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Rotation and revolution: Hung Liu at Turner Carroll Gallery

Adele Oliveira Aug 1, 2014 (0)



Hung Liu: *Equus III*, mixed media on panel, 2014; courtesy Turner Carroll Gallery

The woman in Hung Liu's painting *Equus III* isn't looking at the viewer. Under thick black bangs, her gaze lifts off to the side. One corner of her mouth is pulled back, as though she's unnerved, if barely. The woman is surrounded and overlaid by loosely sketched soldiers on horseback, a silver fish, a waterlily, and Liu's characteristic incessant circles and paint drips, achieved by thinning the pigment with linseed oil. With its beautiful young woman and with flowing brushwork that looks, from a few feet back, like a gold-woven tapestry, *Equus III* could easily be misconstrued — and dismissed — as decorative, pretty. But Liu's aesthetic is in the service of narrative: her work is deeply rooted in cultural history and personal experience.

New paintings by Liu are included in a show at Turner Carroll Gallery called *Survival*, which opens Friday, Aug. 1. *Survival* features five other artists and is described by the gallery as “artwork by well-known artists who lived under regimes not appreciative of their efforts.”

Liu was born in China in 1948, on the eve of Mao's communist revolution. Her father was imprisoned when she was a baby, and she was raised by her mother. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Liu was in her 20s, she spent four years working in agriculture alongside peasants in rural provinces as part of Cultural Revolution mandates. Villagers from the countryside, late-19th-century prostitutes, and soldiers are frequent subjects of her work.

Despite the content of her art, Liu resists categorization as a political artist. "I'm a witness and a storyteller just because of my age, what I experienced and saw and heard," she said. "Years ago I was on a panel in China, and we talked about the Cultural Revolution — it's starting to become an ancient story. A colleague on the panel said she saw blank faces, students who didn't know what we were talking about."

This October marks 30 years since Hung Liu first came to the United States. Though Liu studied art as an undergraduate and graduate student in China, her training was in the Socialist Realism style: rigid and straightforward, with a heavy dose of art-as-propaganda. When she arrived at the University of California at San Diego, she discovered the wider applications of art for the first time. "Art was much bigger than I thought it was."

At UCSD, Liu studied under artist Allan Kaprow, who was instrumental in developing "happenings," essentially spontaneous performance art. "When I came back to Beijing from the countryside to study art in grad school, nobody taught anything but a revolutionary theme," Liu said. "Allan did everything when he was young. He blurred boundaries between performers and audiences. I had no idea; I assumed every artist was a painter or a sculptor. When I first learned about installations, I said, What do you mean you can do anything you want? It was really challenging, but it was a liberating way to think about art."

Liu returned to China for the first time in 1991. Findings on that trip formed the basis of her work for years to come. She had received a grant from Mills College in Oakland, California (where she's been a professor of art for more than 20 years), to obtain historic photos. "My mom asked around to see if anyone had any photos," Liu said. "Very few people did. Most families burned their photographs, especially ones of Western-style weddings or anything that indicated you were not a proletariat or had some money. I went to libraries and found some magazines. I came out with all the dust all over my face. Nobody had touched these things forever."

At an old film studio in Beijing, Liu came upon a major find: a cardboard box filled with books of photographs of high-class Shanghai prostitutes from the late 19th century until 1911, the end of the Qing Dynasty. The books functioned as a sort of catalog for high-ranking officials and wealthy merchants. Liu photographed every page, and the women in the book appear in many of her paintings. "I asked my mom, who was in her early 70s then, if she'd ever seen anything like this, and she said never. The women were doing the most hilarious things, like holding a book in hand, even though women were not allowed to learn to read and write, or driving a car, an old Ford model. The purpose was to sell themselves, pretend they were upper class. [The photos] were shocking and exotic but also familiar."

Liu is a photographer herself. When she was studying in Beijing, a friend gave her an old camera that used medium-format 120 film. Liu thought, "Oh my God. I can make pictures! But how?" She learned which chemicals to buy to develop the film and painted an ordinary light bulb red for her makeshift darkroom. Liu returned to the village where she lived in her 20s to take photographs of the people there. The villagers, who might have been otherwise uncomfortable around cameras, trusted Liu because of her years of work in the fields.

"Once I took a portrait of a beautiful country girl, around 10 years old," Liu said. "She must be over 50 now. There was something about her, the way she looked at you, stared at you, with such self-confidence. She was a little country princess."

As her paintings of prostitutes are empathetic, Liu's portraits of peasants, whether photographed or painted, are humanizing and individuated. Even if the people in her work are anonymous, there is an essentialness about their presence, as though they could not possibly be anyone else. "Even if you did a lot of research, you would probably not find out who they are," Liu acknowledged. "But

somehow they represent the real people, their famine and suffering, trying to raise their babies. Even in a mass of people, you see a clear face.” ◀

details

▼ *Survival: Hung Liu, Traian Filip, Nele Zirnite, Igor Melnikov, Georges Mazilu, and Wanxin Zhang*

▼ Opening reception 5 p.m. Friday, Aug. 1; exhibit through Aug. 25

▼ Turner Carroll Gallery, 725 Canyon Road, 505-986-9800