

Painting perseverance

By Megan Bennett / Journal North Reporter

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“Winter Blossom” by Hung Liu. The artist is famous for taking photos of Chinese women, including prostitutes, and presenting the images in a new light. (Source Courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery)

SANTA FE, N.M. — Several years ago, a doctor began bringing her mentees to Turner Carroll Gallery on Canyon Road. During the visits, the training physician directed the younger doctors to sit for long periods in front of the works of Hung Liu.

After a while, gallery owner Tonya Turner Carroll asked the trainer why the group was observing Liu’s paintings, and she said it was because she was mentoring others who would travel overseas to work in clinics with cancer patients.

Liu, the trainer told Turner Carroll, knows how to transform “pain into beauty,” a skill she wanted her doctors to learn in order to teach patients to do the same.

The physician said she hoped the message to patients would be: “Look, you have cancer, but let’s harness everything in your soul to create a positive mental state so you can get through this. It may not look beautiful, but no matter what happens you can see the beauty in every experience.”

When the training doctor first began bringing her students to the gallery, it was to observe an image of Chinese refugees that Liu had painted with an angel watching over them from above.



Hung Liu’s work has transitioned into prints and paintings of American migrant workers photographed by Depression-era artist Dorothea Lange. She says their struggles and perseverance remind her of the same struggles she went through in China during the Cultural Revolution. (Source Courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery)

Over the past 40 years, 70-year-old Liu has been known for poignant portraits of Chinese – and, more recently, American – women and children.

Almost all of her subjects know hardship, including Chinese laborers, soldiers and prostitutes or Great Depression-era migrant workers in the United States. Her work has been shown in museums across the country, and Stanford University recently named her among the American West’s most influential women artists of the 20th century alongside Georgia O’Keeffe and Frida Kahlo.

She has been showing her art, based on found historical photographs, in Santa Fe for 16 years, first at LewAllen Galleries’s old Palace Avenue location and at Turner Carroll Gallery for the past decade.

In conjunction with Liu’s current show at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., Turner Carroll will be displaying a collection of prints and tapestries in “Hung Liu: Women Who Work.” The exhibition opened last week and will stay up until April 4.

In a telephone interview from her home in Oakland, Liu said she is drawn to her subjects because, for a period of her life, she was just like many of them. At 18, she was living in China at the beginning of Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution. She was sent away from her all-girls school in Beijing to spend four years working in wheat and rice fields.

“I was sent to the countryside, in the field, to work with the peasants,” said Liu. “Day-to-day, there was no wage, there was no weekend. It was a big shift from city person to peasant day in day out.”

When she left the fields, she studied art education and mural painting in Beijing before moving to the U.S. in 1984 to study visual arts at the University of San Diego.

Throughout the years, she has continued to draw inspiration from the anonymous women of the Cultural Revolution, whom she called the “real heroes” of the era, despite suffering the most.

Liu’s paintings represent perseverance and “female resilience” amid struggles that seem impossible to overcome, said Turner Carroll.

“She transformed her 265 days a year working in the wheat fields into something beautiful,” said the gallery owner. The artist also went through hardships when she first came to the U.S., arriving with just \$20 and two suitcases.

“She has an appreciation for the struggle all humans have had to go through to transform their lives from one of hardship through their own hard work to one of beauty,” Turner Carroll said.

Around 2016, Liu shifted her focus from Chinese subjects to those from the archives of Depression-area photographer Dorothea Lange, best known for her 1936 “Migrant Mother” picture.

Liu said she’s come across thousands of Lange’s other, non-famous images whose subjects, whether they are living in work camps or out in cotton fields, remind her of photos from China’s past. She said the experience of American migrants is not much different from what she and many others went through during the Cultural Revolution, and she feels as connected to them as the subjects she has painted from her home country.

“Even if most of them, we don’t know their names, it almost doesn’t matter,” she said. “Their faces, what they are going through, needs to be remembered.”

It’s Liu’s hope that by showing her women and children subjects in gallery or museum settings, they are no longer anonymous. And she hopes it will bring comfort to their spirits.

In China, she says, there is a tradition to call the spirits of loved ones home a few days after they die. That allows the spirits to move on knowing they still have a place to call home. Liu is trying to do something similar for her subjects.

“I try to collect their homeless spirit ... the picture is their burial ground. They need a proper burial, and maybe even my painting process is ceremonial. It’s a memorial to give them a place.”

If you go

WHAT: “Hung Liu: Women Who Work”

WHERE: Turner Carroll Gallery, 725 Canyon Road **WHEN:** On display until April 4

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