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Hung Liu: Ghost World

Hung Liu's paintings call a lost China back to life.

The American artist Hung Liu was born in China in 1948, a year and a half before Mao Zedong's Communist forces defeated the Nationalists and declared the country a People's Republic. The forces that for decades had been threatening to sweep away what was left of China's elites and traditional culture were about to reach their crescendo. Most of Liu's paintings are built around images of that older China, as well as of the turbulent newer one she grew up in, and though she's lived in the U.S. since 1984, China's complex, difficult past continues to be central to her work.

Photography, the modern world's medium for memory par excellence, is the starting point for Liu's painting. Images painstakingly rendered from archival photos seem to float over backgrounds of abstract color fields and drips of paint. Hovering nearby are small images of flowers or other symbolic objects, as well as Liu's trademark colored circles, which she says refer to vortices of energy. The main figurative subjects of the paintings range from traditional ones such as Confucian scholars and Qing Dynasty courtesans to more modern ones including peasants and workers of the Maoist era, as well as some of Liu's own relatives. The artist dilutes her paints with linseed oil so that the colors drip downward, making the faces of these long-gone people seem to dissolve and mutate. "My secret collaborator," she said in a 2005 TV documentary, "is gravity."

Liu's other, just as inexorable, collaborator is time, which takes things and people away from us and creates yearning for them. A recent show of

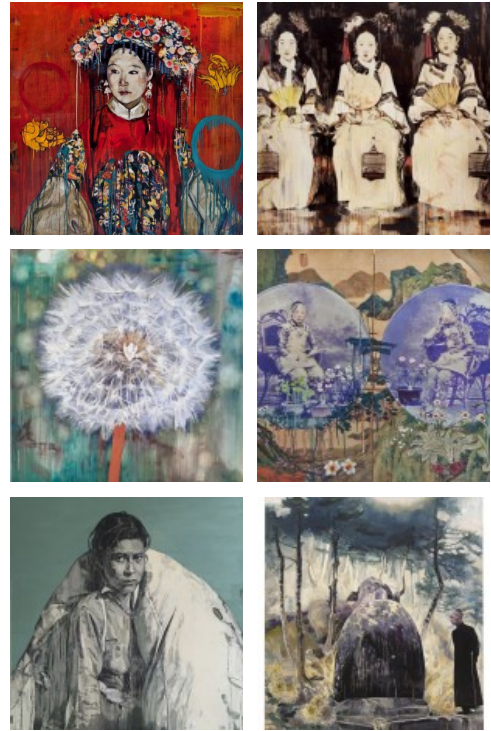


Hung Liu, Manchu Bride, 2015, mixed media, 81 x 81 inches.

Featured Images: *(Click to Enlarge)*

her work, at the Oakland Museum of California, was titled “Summoning Ghosts,” which is very apt. The phrase comes from a classical Chinese poem by Qu Yuan. “It’s a poem about sorrow or longing,” says Liu. “It’s hard to translate; it means to call the ghosts or souls. In China there is a tradition that when a loved one dies, a few days later you call their name and ask them to come home. Their spirit won’t be homeless, because you remember them. In general, the subjects in my work are lost, long gone, and the canvas, the picture plane, becomes a memorial site. It’s a place to recall, to collect their ghost or spirit, to honor them and finally say, here, you can rest. You’re not a homeless being wandering around.”

The upheaval and violence of 20th-century China ensured that there would be many restless, homeless spirits—and living people. When Liu was still a baby, her father was separated from the family by Communist troops and forced to live in another part of the country. She didn’t see him again until 1994. In 1966, the Cultural Revolution began, and Liu, a talented student at a top boarding school for girls in Beijing, was exiled to the countryside to work in the fields; this was done as part of a general campaign against intellectuals intended to return China to a concept of virtue based on manual labor. For four years, Liu worked in rice and wheat fields seven days a week. Finally, in 1972, she began studying art at the Revolutionary Entertainment School in Beijing, where she learned to create huge propaganda images on murals. To this day, she works on a large scale and freely acknowledges the influence of the socialist-realist mural-painting techniques she was imbued with.



In 1975, after graduation, Liu became an art teacher, even appearing on TV to teach children how to draw and paint. (In the U.S., she continued to teach studio practice, up until last year, when she retired from Mills College in Oakland, Calif.) In 1979, pursuing her interest in murals for graduate study, she traveled to the remote site of Dunhuang in the Gobi Desert, to study and copy its ancient Buddhist cave paintings. While there, she met and befriended the future global art star and free-speech advocate Ai Weiwei. The next year she began applying to art programs in the U.S., eventually being accepted by the University of California at San Diego.

It took a few years for her travel permission to be granted by the Chinese government, but in 1984 she flew to the States. At UCSD she met Allan Kaprow, who was teaching there, and participated with him in several Happening-style events and helped construct a “dumpster environment” installation. While Happenings and installation art may seem a far cry from the type of work she is known for, she bridged the gap between these concerns at her first solo show, in Reno, Nev., in 1985, when she used the whole space for a mural installation based on the Dunhuang caves.

In 1991, secure in her new American life (and having married fellow UCSD art student Jeff Kelley), Liu returned to China for a visit. During that trip, she began collecting old photographs, asking families to look through their archives to contribute to her memory project. It was hard going. “Back then a lot of people burned the family album, to destroy any

evidence that the family used to have some money,” she recalls. “But I just kept asking friends and relatives. Some would bring out a cardboard box, not organized. Sometimes I found photos taken by the Japanese when they occupied China.” She also found a book, published in the late 19th century, on Chinese prostitutes, illustrated with photographs. “It blew my mind,” she says. “I asked my mom if she had ever heard of this and she said no.” Liu decided to do a series of paintings based on the images of these long-forgotten women.

In the U.S., Liu has discovered other source material that feed her concerns. Lately, she has been especially interested in the Depression-era photographs of Dorothea Lange. “She was always one of my heroes,” says Liu. “People told me her archives are housed at the Oakland Museum, so I became their regular visitor.” She has used many of Lange’s images of Dust Bowl refugee children and black and Latino workers in recent paintings. The creation of the Lange paintings coincides with the 50th anniversary of the photographer’s death.

Another recent body of work turns away from the human figure in favor of botanicals. These very detailed, 80-by-80-inch paintings concentrate their gaze on the humble dandelion, found throughout the U.S. as well as in China. “The reason I was so drawn to them was that I used to see them as little girl, with my grandfather,” Liu explains. “Sixty-some years later, in a different space, I saw them again. Their fluffy seeds are the end of the plant’s life, but they also contain new life, potentially. It depends where they land. They take their chance, just like migration or immigration. The dandelion is not a pretty flower. Everybody tries to kill them. It’s a survivor story.”

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By John Dorfman

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