

## Hung Liu's color only adds to starkness of Dorothea Lange images

By Sam Whiting

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Hung Liu, *Fetching Water I*, Oil on canvas, 2016

It's an artistic risk to take a famous Dorothea Lange picture from the Great Depression and turn it into an oil on canvas. But in the translation, Hung Liu is able to bring unique empathy to Lange's Dust Bowl images, having spent four years working the fields during the Cultural Revolution in the People's Republic of China.

# RENA BRANSTEN

## GALLERY

Liu's eastward migration meets Lange's westward migration in the exhibition "Promised Land," which opens Saturday, April 29, at Rena Bransten Gallery in San Francisco's Minnesota Street Project.

"She's not simply re-creating Dorothea Lange's images. She's Hung Liu, with a national reputation for blending social realism with expressionism," says gallery director Trish Bransten. "These images aren't just an American story. They're a global story of migration, immigration and refugees."

To render 12 of Lange's photographs into paintings took two years and enough emotional energy that Liu did not even attempt to start it until she had retired from the faculty at Mills College in Oakland, where she taught studio arts for 24 years.

Liu has been transfixed by Lange's black-and-whites since the moment "I learned that there was a Dorothea Lange," Liu says. "She went to the poorest places and took photographs. The equipment was incredibly heavy and she had polio when she was little. Today, she would be considered handicapped. But she was so strong."

At 69, Liu has lived in California longer than she lived in China, but she still speaks with a Mandarin accent, and it doesn't take too much prodding to get her back to the day that the soldiers came and took her away.

She was 20 years old and had graduated from high school in Beijing with plans to attend college. But after her father, who had been an officer in the national army, was arrested and sent off to prison as part of the purge, Liu — the only child — was sent for proletarian re-education in a country village.

"You work all year in the field and at the end you get corn," she recalls, speaking in the present tense as if she is still living it. "You pay for the food with commune money. Our labor is not enough to buy our food."

When Liu was released back to Beijing, she enrolled in China's Central Academy of Fine Art, and from there she went to UC San Diego for her master of fine arts degree, though it took her four more years to get a passport out of China.

Given all she has been through, one would expect Liu to be quiet and reflective when meeting her at her studio, which is a converted body shop on a ragged street in East Oakland. But she is surprisingly effervescent and greets a stranger with a '70s-style "soul brothers" handshake.

A table is papered with catalogs from her exhibitions nationwide, mostly portraits of "Chinese refugees and laborers," she says. "I didn't think I would switch to American subjects."

She has already painted a portrait of the mightiest of Americans, Babe Ruth, and Meryl Streep, who has been to her studio to sit for a painting that will hang in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

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## GALLERY

To approach the Lange portfolio, Liu went to the Oakland Museum of California, which holds the Dorothea Lange Archive of 6,000 prints and 25,000 negatives. The archive's 50th anniversary will be celebrated when "Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing" opens May 13.

Liu had her own career retrospective at OMCA in 2013, but she did not know that the archive of her hero Lange was here until the project was under way. Once Liu discovered the archive, she came back a dozen times or more to go through 78 chronological volumes of proof sheets, says Drew Johnson, OMCA's Curator of Photography and Visual Culture. She'd see an image she liked and take a picture of it with her cell phone.

Her studio reproductions are not exact. She would often change the background. For instance, a photograph of a girl sitting in a tire in front of a depressing shack might have the shack replaced with ribbons of color. But the foreground is always true to Lange's original intent.

The largest painting is "White Angel Breadline," of men waiting for a handout in San Francisco. But that is the rare urban scene; most of her works are set in migrant camps, out in the bleak landscape.

"In this body of work, you can see the colorful lines," she says, pointing out details like the barbed wire on a fence or women stooping over laundry, or the way hunger looks on all the gaunt faces. "The color adds warmth and hope, but the situation is still dire."

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**Hung Lui: "Promised Land":** 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday, April 29. Tuesday-Saturday through June 3. Rena Bransten Gallery, 1275 Minnesota St., S.F. (415) 982-3292.

[www.renabranstengallery.com](http://www.renabranstengallery.com).