

## Summoning Ghosts: 'Retrospective career' of Hung Liu a must-see at OMCA (Review)

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The arc of Hung Liu's artistic career first intersected with that of the history of China in 1953, when Liu, at age 5, drew a picture of a Chinese political rally - complete with a figure holding a poster of Mao Zedong.

That drawing, the oldest piece of artwork in the current exhibit "Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu" at the Oakland Museum of California, is firstly remarkable simply in the fact of its existence; it was carefully saved by Liu's mother and then carefully curated by the OMCA. The drawing is secondly remarkable in that it perfectly reflects Liu's intense lifelong cognizance of historical and political moments, even at such a young age.

It's a political cognizance that is apparent throughout the exhibit, which is the first-ever comprehensive retrospective of Liu's career. Featuring more than 80 works, including paintings, photographs and drawings, the exhibit spans some of the most turbulent moments of Liu's young life in modern China, as well as watershed moments of Liu's adulthood in California. In this way, the exhibit "follows on an OMCA tradition of major retrospectives of California artists," said OMCA Senior Curator of Art Rene de Guzman, the organizer of the exhibit.

Born in 1948 in Changchun, in northeast China, Liu came of age during the height of Zedong's political influence. She was a child when Zedong initiated the "Great Leap Forward" in an effort to catch up with Western industrialized production and she lived through the subsequent famine that gripped the nation for years afterward.

Liu was in high school when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. A socio-political movement to purge all capitalist, traditional and "counter-revolutionary" elements from Chinese society in order to pave the way for communism, Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution brought 10 years of upheaval to daily life in the People's Republic of China. Instead of graduating with a high school diploma, in 1968, Liu was dispatched to the Chinese countryside for proletarian re-education. There, she spent four years working in rice and wheat fields for seven days a week.

During that time, Liu drew portraits of local peasants and photographed her surroundings using her first camera, a medium format 120mm camera. Liu did not have the resources to print her photographs when she took them. It was only after she became an instructor at Mills College in Oakland in the 1990s that she hired a graduate student in photography to help her print her photographs, some 70-odd images that she herself had never before seen.

"It uncovered 40 years," Liu said.

The photographs are historically unprecedented, documenting as they do the daily life of proletariat re-education in the Chinese countryside from the inside.

"No journalist, from TIME or wherever, would have gone to the countryside like that to document how people lived," Liu said.

A selection of these starkly compelling images are on display in the exhibit, along with Liu's notebooks and sketchpads containing some of her drawn portraits of the peasants and farmers whom she met. These early drawings show Liu's remarkably developed artistic ability, which she said she learned throughout her early schooling.

After returning to Beijing, Liu attended the Central Academy of Fine Arts, majoring in mural painting. During her studies, Liu produced a series of small paintings that she made surreptitiously, now exhibited as a body of work called "My Secret Freedom" - so called because her quick studies of landscapes and light would have been considered a form of rebellion for their lack of propagandist pro-state content.

"Everything had to be 'long live Mao,' and it was so loud I needed to get away outside of campus, which was just farmland," Liu said. "I needed to get away just to study color, to get away from the loudspeakers. That was my secret rebellion."

Liu began the United States chapter of her life in 1984, when she emigrated to the U.S. to pursue an MFA at the University of California, San Diego. Liu thus became one of the first Chinese artists to pursue arts education and to establish an art career in the West; she is now considered to be a "big sister" to emerging and established modern Chinese artists like her younger contemporary Ai Wei Wei and a trailblazer for contemporary and avant-garde Chinese art. At UCSD, Liu studied with and was highly influenced by "un-artist" Allan Kaprow, who was famous for establishing performance art concepts through a series of interactive events called "Happenings."

"Upon arriving in the United States, she was drawn to the most cutting-edge art of her time," de Guzman said. "This highlights how she was - and continues to be - an independent pioneer, always way ahead of the game."

As a reflection of Liu's life experiences, "Summoning Ghosts" is breathtaking in its very personal take on an epic scope of history. Drawing on her education in mural painting, Liu uses large-scale canvases to depict political themes intertwined with traditional Chinese artifacts and iconography.

"September" (2001, oil on canvas), for example, was Liu's response to 9/11. A 66"x66" painting of a Chinese bride with a duck flying through her head, the piece is gripping both in its imagery and in its expression of emotion - an elegy to a complicated, tragic watershed moment. Other paintings in the exhibit speak to the Beijing Olympics, Nixon's visit to China, Tiananmen Square and even history that happened not in Liu's lifetime, but that exists in her historical consciousness, sourced from old photographs of young Chinese prostitutes and prisoners in Japanese work camps.

Perhaps the most emotionally riveting pieces in the exhibit, however, are Liu's most recent paintings. "To Live" is Liu's homage to her late mother and is comprised of small paintings that Liu completed immediately after her mother's death. The work is enormously personal, so much so that Liu was initially reticent about exhibiting it.

Throughout the exhibit, the most recurring technique is Liu's usage of paint runs and drips - a technique that Liu called a form of "sweet revenge" against the Chinese Communist Party's ideal of "socialist realism" in painting. But the drips also represent the mutability of memory; though Liu's paintings are dry, they appear to still be in process.

"We once truly believed in Communism, in a socialist utopian dream and in heroism," Liu said. "Of course, utopia never arrived, but a kind of hard-won humanism stayed with me ... . History is not a static image or a frozen story. It is not a noun. Even if its images and stories are very old, it is always flowing forward. History is a verb."