

Challenging, revealing images of China by Hung Liu

By: Lauren Gallagher | 03/31/13 4:00 AM
SF Examiner Staff Writer



“Dangling” is a fantastic example of Hung Liu’s ability to capture interesting faces.

Oakland-based artist Hung Liu is a quiet pioneer.

The 65-year-old painter and installation artist has gone from hiding paintings in her pockets to establishing herself firmly in the West, creating an artistic legacy of more than 40 years and remaining relevant and revered in China, her home country.

“Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu,” a comprehensive retrospective at the Oakland Museum of California through June, includes Liu’s rarely seen early work; the large, drippy, photographic paintings for which she is most famous; and recent, razor-sharp paintings inspired by Chinese children’s comics from her childhood.

Liu, who came to the U.S. in 1984, frequently uses old photographs for source material, painting on vast, custom-shaped canvases that make images pop. Her subject material is often unsettling: sex workers, orphans, victims of natural disasters, child and slave laborers.

The Maoist regime is a prominent influence, and propaganda-related images pepper her work. Her runny canvases distance the figures, blurring context, depth and the imagery itself — the opposite of the social realism aesthetic made popular by the Soviet Union and mandatory under Mao Zedong.

“I give myself liberty. I give myself the freedom to wash away realism,” Liu said at the exhibit’s media preview. “The image eroding is like our memory, and out of focus like our history.”

Liu’s own history sounds like a novel. She hopped on a train with her aunt to Beijing when she was 11, temporarily leaving her immediate family (they would join her later).

In her early 20s, she was forced to go to a “re-education” camp, and she labored in rice and wheat fields for four years.

In the next decade, she studied, taught, and created art in China, including the landscape series “My Secret Freedom” on view in Oakland. She made impressionistic pictures lacking propagandist traits, small enough to put in her pocket and remain unnoticed by the government.

After being delayed by Chinese authorities, she finally made it to graduate school at UC San Diego in 1984 with \$20 in her pocket.

Called “big sister” by Ai Weiwei (whom she met in 1979) among other contemporary Chinese artists, Liu is considered a visionary in her home country. She forged her own path before the recent boom in the Chinese art scene, and was stylistically ahead of her time.

The most vivid revelation across the works in the show is Liu’s deft, versatile hand. From the early charcoal portraits to the pop art sensibilities of her recent, drip-free paintings, her line trembles with life.

In “Mu Nu (Mother Daughter)” the figures look about to trudge off the canvas. Her talent for faces — whether smoothly shadowed as in “Daughter of the Revolution” or thickly painted, like the grandma in “Dangling” — are equally commanding. Liu’s humanity is uncanny, emotive and palpable.