

## LEISURE &amp; ARTS

ART

## The Evils That Men Do

**Inspiration Points:  
Masterpieces  
Of California Landscape**  
Through Aug. 11

**Summoning Ghosts:  
The Art of Hung Liu**  
Through June 30

Both shows at the  
Oakland Museum of California

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Oakland, Calif.

Partly to celebrate the opening of its transformed Natural Science wing, the Oakland Museum of California decided to install 58 painted and photographed California landscapes from its own collection in eight topical three-walled galleries just across from the new installations, rather than on the Art Museum floor two levels up.

There is some spillover, at least thematically. As in the Oakland Museum's big "Gold Rush" exhibition of 1998, human beings are singled out in both the new Natural Science wing and the current landscape show for wasting and polluting water, enslaving and nearly exterminating Indian populations, destroying plants and wildlife. (The Natural Science people drove in a van to indicate that building roads across their habitats encourages vehicles to run over animals.) Out of greed, intolerance and environmental insensitivity, we are told, Californians chopped down trees, dammed and diverted rivers, blasted away mountains and poisoned rivers in search of minerals.

The titles of some of the "themes" of the landscape show might give one pause: "Exploitation," "Dystopia," "Urban/Wild Intersection." If few of the works here (perhaps 10 out of 58) deserve the title "masterpiece," it is not only because Oakland's holdings cannot compete with those of better-endowed art museums in San Francisco and Los Angeles. In fact, I was able to find at least 20 landscapes in Oakland's online inventory superior to 20 losers here. Why, I wondered, was there no Richard Diebenkorn? Why not a major Thomas Hill or Albert Bierstadt? Why not a good, genuine Arthur Mathews landscape, instead of maidens dancing in a ring? There is almost nothing of the *plein-air* Impressionists of 1910-30, and nobody from the Society of Six (the museum owns at least 35 of their works), who introduced Paul Cézanne's composition and Henri Matisse's color to Northern California.

Considered geographically, there is almost nothing from the 840-mile California coastline (no northern fishing ports, no Monterey Peninsula, no Big Sur, no Point Lobos, nothing of the Southern California beaches);



'Interregnum' (2002) by Hung Liu.

virtually nothing of the 450-mile-long Central Valley or of the tawny hills divided by dark oaks north of the Golden Gate.

I can't help but think that tententious pedantry had something to do with the choices of the curator, Drew Heath Johnson. With limited wall space on which to display his "masterpieces of California landscape," he selects an Indian posed on a rock, a romanticized "vision of a vanishing

**One show is  
tententious; the other,  
astonishingly moving.**

race"; a banal painting of a 1941 dam, plus a close-up view of a drainpipe, both of which helped dry up the Los Angeles River; an ugly Robert Dawson image of the San Luis Drain, "with its horrible history of toxic poisoning"; a photo of a man watering his lawn in postwar suburbia (there are far better photos of the expanding California suburbs); a David Hockney snapshot-collage of a Los Angeles telephone pole; and two early commercial images of giant redwoods—one fallen, the other pulled apart by tourists.

In the wall text for Ansel Adams's flawless, famous field of sunlit boulders looking toward Mount Williamson (1945), we are informed that Adams turned his back on the Japanese-American internment camp at Manzanar in order to photograph it. (Manzanar is mentioned as the childhood home of three other artists.) Of an 1858 Sunday painter's

vista of a Gold Country village, we are asked to "note the group of Indians in the foreground, outsiders observing the town from behind a fence." A 1902 Henry Breuer painting of the Santa Barbara Mission is here to remind us that "by the time Breuer painted this view, the California missions had become symbols of a charming, romantic past, their exploitive colonial origins obscured by nostalgia." The greatest early photographer of California, Carleton E. Watkins, is pulled into service for an unimpressive 1863 photograph of the New Almaden Quicksilver Mines near San Jose, so that the text writer can inform us it was "one of the biggest sources of pollution in San Francisco Bay."

The early master William Hahn is trivialized by an 1880 "scene by Lake Merritt" of cows, geese and chickens. There is not a single Bob Walker, who skillfully photographed the East Bay hills and waters for more than 20 years.

So what would be my top 10? Eadweard Muybridge, "Yosemite Falls From Glacier Rock" (1872); William Keith, "Headwaters of the San Joaquin" (1878); Henry Gremke, "Camp Teller" (1892); Lorenzo Palmer Latimer, "Pathway Through the Redwoods" (1894); Edward Weston, "The Eel River" (1932); Adams's "Before the [Golden Gate] Bridge" (1932) and his "Mount Williamson"; Wynn Bullock, "Erosion" (1959); Vija Celmins, "Untitled (or Desert)" (1971); and Richard Misrach, a 5-by-6-foot photo from his Oakland Hills Fire series (1991) first shown in 2011. Twenty others, if not masterpieces, help to fill out

an image of the California landscape over 140 years.

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If you want to look at serious art, devote an hour upstairs to "Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu." Ms. Liu, who came to the U.S. in 1984 after 36 troubling and adventurous years in Maoist and post-Maoist China, has in many ways never left home.

The greatest Chinese painter in the U.S., she makes use of her own Chinese past and the past and present of China generally to conjure up astonishingly moving, basically realistic images of Chinese slave-laborers, Korean "comfort women" and old-fashioned prostitute-beauties, members of the last Emperor's court, Maoist soldiers (male and female), pitiable refugees, lone orphans, earthquake victims, larking boys, poor villagers (during the Cultural Revolution, she was taken out of art school at age 20 and sent for four years to work on a village farm). There are also symbolic renderings of Tiananmen Square and 9/11.

Many of these works—images as large as 6 feet by 12 feet and painted in vivid colors—are derived from old photographs, then dribbled down with linseed oil in a kind of bloody rain, and superimposed with idyllic images out of old Chinese paintings: blossoms, birds, butterflies, fans. Ms. Liu may now live in California, but all China is here, in the hands of a true master of her brush and her culture.

Mr. Littlejohn writes about West Coast cultural events for the Journal.