

HUNG LIU, “SUMMONING GHOSTS”

Robbie Orme, April 2015

Wearing a new dress on her birthday, Hung Liu's mother had her portrait taken by a professional photographer every year. When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, her mother destroyed all their family photographs, so they would not cause them harm. Later while toiling long hours in four years of forced labor on a Cultural Revolutionary farm, the gift of a box camera allowed her to take pictures of her surroundings. More than forty years thereafter, the long-stored cartridges of images taken between 1970-74 were developed, resulting in rare and unique images of the reality of her generation's life.

Six months after her birth on February 17, 1948 in Changchun, China, the Communists (partially led by Mao Zedong) took over the country, imprisoning her father, a captain in the opposition army. In order to protect her from harm, her mother (in a rare move for a Chinese woman) immediately divorced her father. Hung Liu saw him next in 1994, presuming him dead for most of her life.

An excellent student, she moved to Beijing and attended an elite school with Communist party officials' offspring. In 1966 all educational facilities were closed, preventing her graduating from high school. In 1968 she was sent to the countryside to be “reeducated” alongside farming peasants. She remained there for four years, working every day from dawn to night, having only three-days off each year during the Chinese New Year's celebration.

In 1972 freed from the farm, she was admitted to Beijing's Teachers' College to study art and art education. While there she began her “My Secret Freedom Series.” Creating a small box to hold oil paint and paper, with an air hole in the top to allow the works to dry, she hid her box under a coat and created plein air, very small exquisitely painted works of art. This box was hidden under her bed; discovery of which would have resulted in public humiliation. The only art allowed during this period was that which celebrated the Chinese state, its' workers and its' leader, Mao.

Upon graduation in 1975, she began to teach art at an elite Beijing school, the Jingshan School. Later she taught children's art on national television (the first Chinese artist to do so), becoming famous throughout her country.

In 1979 she was accepted into the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, majoring in mural painting. As part of her studies, she spent forty days studying the famous Buddhist cave murals at Dunhuang, Gobi Desert, on the Silk Road in 1980. The ancient Chinese art she discovered had a lasting impact on the embellishments she will later add to her large-scale oil canvases.

Granted a scholarship to UC San Diego in 1980, she spent four years obtaining a passport to leave China. During this time she studied traditional calligraphy and continued teaching. In the fall of 1984, finally receiving an official Chinese passport, she began her new life in the U.S.

Her UC, San Diego graduate art studies transformed her and her art permanently. Studying with Allan Kaprow, she learned to create installations from dumpster materials and to create art from her feelings - not political propaganda. Installations remained an integral part of her creative endeavors throughout her career.

Hung Liu began her creative use of 19th/20th century photographs in 1988 with “Tang People's Street,” contrasting an image of a San Francisco prostitute with an early century rendering of a courtesan. Borrowing a friend's photograph to create the haunting image on the right side of the canvas in “Goddess of Love, Goddess of Liberty” 1989, she continued her life-long quest to “Summon Ghosts” and honor those (primarily women) not honored in their lives.

Transforming her large-scale canvases with the use of creative shapes, adding canvas pieces in various places around the primary canvas, placing altar-type extrusions on or below the canvas, she added complexity to her work. The size of her work is probably the result of her training and the creation of large mural works throughout her career. The viewer needs to look once, then again to absorb her message. Even her titles provide insight into her work. Rarely are they pedestrian, but rather ironic or thoughtful; each title adding a specific meaning to your understanding of her underlying message of criticism or hope. Initially using a sepia tone reminiscent of the photographic image from which her concept was formed, over time she begins using luscious colors and strong brush strokes to create movement within her pieces.

She considers “gravity her collaborator” as demonstrated by her beginning to use drips carefully rendered within her pieces. Informed by the traditional use of Chinese “ink splash” technique, they transform a static work into continuous movement, often suggesting the sweat or tears of laborers that serve as the subjects of her honorary work. The drips also serve as a metaphor for how memory is blurred over time. Further complexity is provided by the use of “O’s”, enlarged periods of traditional Chinese punctuation, or the Zen Buddhism circle that is meant to convey “no beginning, no end.” For Hung Liu the circle (created in one fluid motion) allows her a resting period while she contemplates how she wishes to continue.

After receiving her U.S. citizenship in 1991, she returned to China searching for more 19th century photographs. At the Beijing Film Institute, she discovered 19th century portraits of upper-class prostitutes. Hidden and forgotten by the Institute when they were rescued from destruction during the Cultural Revolution, they form the basis for a new “honorific” series, of which “Madonna” 1992 is one.

Several of her canvases honor historic events, “Peeking Opera” 1989 (Tiananmen Square), “September” 2001 (September 11), “Strange Fruit: Comfort Women” 2001 (WW II Korean sex slaves), “Tis the Final Conflict” 2007 (female soldiers, Sino-Japanese War), “Rat King 08.08.08” 2008 (Beijing 2008 Olympics). Several honor laborers, immigrants, even royalty as in “Ocean is the Dragon’s World” 1995 (Empress Cixi), “Cricket,” 1996 (The Last Emperor). Each is a complex canvas with early Chinese artistic embellishments, drips, circles, painted with passion and purpose.

“Strange Fruit: Comfort Women” 2001 was inspired by media photographs of “comfort women” under the protection of U.S. and Chinese soldiers at the Korean-Sino border, 1944. The large-scale canvas depicts eight Korean women released from sexual slavery at the end of WW II. Their faces clearly depict the suffering they endured and their resignation to their fate. Since their forced labor “tainted” them, they are probably not welcome to return to Korea, nor wanted to remind the Japanese of their shame. The title alludes to the 1939 Billie Holiday ballad decrying the pervasive lynching of black men. Within the lushly painting orange-red portion of the canvas are butterflies, a Chinese symbol of long life. In the upper left corner is a bitter persimmon blossom and leaf. The carefully rendered drips allude to these women’s sadness and despair.

In addition to her prolific artistic creation, Hung Liu taught at the Art Department of Mills College, Oakland from 1990-2012, retiring as Professor Emerita of Painting. Her work, both solo and group exhibitions, has been seen throughout the U.S and in several other countries. In 2005 she exhibited in Shanghai for the first time since she left China in 1984.

Her distinctive technique utilizes sumptuous oil colors, applied with dense lush strokes, punctuated with circles, enhanced by drips that suggest movement. A large Hung Liu canvas can be recognized from across the room. Drawing near the story unfolds, the title giving you a clue to the ghost that she is summoning in each piece. She challenges the viewer to learn more, feel strongly and most of all, to remember and honor those not honored in their lives.