

The Art of Hung Liu: Summoning Ghosts

Edited by Amy Teschner, essays by Wu Hung, Karen Smith, et al.
University of California Press, 2013

Reviewed by Midori Yamamura

Hung Liu is known for her provocative paintings based on Chinese archival and recent photographs, with subjects ranging from prostitutes and exploited laborers, to children of the Revolution and intimate family snapshots, and *The Art of Hung Liu: Summoning Ghosts* is the catalogue for the artist's much-anticipated second major U.S. retrospective at the Oakland Museum of California. "By turning old photographs into new paintings, Liu brings her subjects out of the shadows of history into contemporary consciousness" (199), is how Jeff Kelley, Liu's husband and collaborator for the past thirty years, explains her practice in the book's chronology. In the spirit of the literati tradition, Liu references images from the past, of sufferings, hardship, and chaotic turmoil, while commenting on the "universal themes of repression and gender based power."¹ Given how her artworks made after her immigration to the United States in 1984 could be perceived as controversial by the Chinese Communist government, the chronology reveals her surprisingly illustrious career in that country.

Hung Liu was born in 1948 in Changchun, China, to a family that sided with the Kuomintang, the Chinese Nationalist Party. Still, in 1961, Liu was accepted into the government's special boarding school for girls in Beijing, where she maintained top grades until the Cultural Revolution erupted in 1966. As a student of an elite school, Liu was forced to undergo "re-education," which, based on Liu's photographs and paintings from the period (61–64, 78–79), did not seem to have impacted her. After completing her "re-education," she enrolled at the Beijing Teacher's College, and became an art teacher at the Jingshan School, an elite Beijing school modeled after the Russian system. The government also assigned her to teach a

children's art program on national television, and as a result, she became a TV personality. In the meantime, Deng Xiaoping had taken over the reins of government on the death of Mao Zedong and instituted more moderate economic and social policies. Liu entered the graduate program at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts—the apex of the Chinese art world—and was retained as a faculty member there to teach mural painting.

What the book does not make clear is that, despite her family's background (her father, Xia Peng, a captain in the Kuomintang army, was sent to a labor camp by the Communist government the year Liu was born, and her mother, Liu Zong Guang, was forced to divorce him), Liu's family was relatively untouched by the anti-bourgeois purge during the Cultural Revolution. This was likely due to Liu's impeccable academic performance. Nevertheless, her fear of authoritarianism was quite deep, and only after she emigrated to the United States and after she located her father and had him released in 1995 did she fully realize how the Chinese government had programmed her like a puppet.² The repercussions of this event led Liu to paint a series of happy-looking children from Mao Zedong's propaganda photographs of the 1950s and early 1960s, triggered by her memories of growing up under the Communist government.³ This group of artworks is largely absent from the current catalogue. Moreover, despite Liu's unique background, noticeably absent from the book is a biography (excepting Kelley's chronology), nor is there an interview that might give readers added insight into her thinking. Instead, such features are oddly replaced by the novelist Yiyun Li's memoir of growing up under Communist China, which reduces Liu's unique experience into a universal type. As Gayatri Spivak insightfully points out in her 1988 subaltern study, not all subjects of the Other are the same.⁴ Although Liu's work is more conceptual



Fig. 1. Hung Liu, *Western Pass* (1990), oil on canvas, silver leaf on wood, ceramics, 60" x 60" x 10". Collection of Hung Liu and Jeff Kelley.

than biographical, learning about her unique worldview derived from her singular socio-cultural experience in her own words would deepen our understanding of her work.

Nevertheless, this is a handsomely illustrated book, with 140 photographs, and editor Amy Teschner has assembled several informative texts. Among them, Wu Hung's essay, "Four Moments in Hung Liu's Art," is especially helpful in contextualizing Liu's work. The foremost authority on Chinese contemporary art, Wu focuses on four critical works/exhibitions in Liu's career, marked by social events. The first section explains how Liu's largest and most important government-commissioned mural painting, *Music for the Great Earth* (1980–81), inspired by the Warring States bells called *bianzhong*, was her response to the Cultural Revolution and an attempt to restore human sensibility to those bereft of all hope. The second section focuses on Liu's new artistic identity after graduating from the University of California, San Diego, in 1986. Reflecting the 1980s multicultural environment of the Bay Area, three interconnected changes occurred that could be observed in Liu's threshold exhibition, entitled "Resident Alien" (1988), as part of the artist-in-residence program at the Capp Street Project. These changes were: the emergence of the

immigrant as a central theme; Liu's interest in modern and contemporary Chinese politics; and the use of old photographs and other historical artifacts. Concerning the latter, she was interested in images relating to Chinese people, particularly those who were excluded from the mainstream history. Rather than assimilating into U.S. culture, Liu explained that she wanted to contribute to her "new home" by expressing her "Cheesiness" (24).

It was during this period that she began conducting social surveys and archival research into modern and contemporary history that became pivotal to her practice. It was also during this time that Liu's "paintings and installations began to show historical traces in an increasingly complex manner; different temporalities negotiated, interwove, and collided in ever more puzzling ways" (24). Central to this exhibition were three 5' x 7'6" *Green Card* paintings, representing three immigrant generations of the Wong family of San Francisco. Other works in the show were paintings of prostitutes of old Chinatown and of Chinese laborers in the West who built the transcontinental railroad. Such subjects would reappear in her later works. Overall, this exhibition connected her experience in the United States with that of other Chinese immigrants within a changing historical context.⁵

The third section of Wu's text focuses on *Trauma*, Liu's response to the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. Two sections in this work render a map of Beijing centered on Tiananmen Square (left) and a furious officer from the People's Liberation Army (right). The officer's pistol is aimed at Liu's self-portrait painted directly below. Like many other Chinese expatriate artists, the June Fourth incident reconnected Liu with China, spurring her use of Chinese archival photographs—evoking memories of herself and her native country. The first of this series, *Western Pass* (1990; Fig. 1), is based on the British plant collector E. H. Wilson's gruesome images of criminals waiting for execution, taken between 1899 and 1910. To a faithful depiction of two such tortured criminals, Liu added two three-

dimensional wooden square pedestals, placing a porcelain bowl on each, and added lines of poetry. Wu notes that, "Many of the visual elements in *Western Pass*," such as the juxtaposition of two- and three-dimensional images and the past and present, would "continued to be extended in Liu's later works" (32).

More changes occurred in Liu's technique, especially, during the mid-1990s. She added "ink splash" (*po mo*) to her images and symbolically blurred them, as if to signify a process of memory permeating her art. Bill Berkson's essay, originally written for Liu's 1998 Rena Bransten Gallery exhibition catalogue, elaborates on her new drip technique as creating an anticlimactic disillusion, marking Liu's shift away from the rigid social realism that she studied in China.

The last section of Wu's essay focuses on Liu's first solo exhibition in China, which coincided with the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Situated in the Nanxincang granary, the imperial storehouse erected in Beijing during the Ming dynasty, the show included Liu's installation made especially for this venue, titled *The Great Granary*. The work consists of thirty-four old-style grain measures from the thirty-four provincial administrative divisions in China, filled with grains, cereals, and beans and placed directly on the floor in a pattern roughly resembling an outline of China. Surrounding *The Great Granary* were new studies based on *Music for the Great Earth*, her earliest mural painting.

Having started her career as a muralist, spatial formation, or installation, was an important yet lesser-known aspect of Liu's oeuvre that she began creating in 1985, a year after her arrival in the United States. Stephanie Hanor's essay chronologically discusses Liu's site-specific works, such as *Jin Jin Shan* (Old Gold Mountain) (1994) and *Going Away, Coming Home* (2006). Senior Curator of Oakland Museum René De Guzman's essay, "Snapshot," which captures moments of Liu's life that she knew personally, as Liu's studio assistant, is a little diffused and argumentatively thin. However, De Guzman's images, especially those of Liu's oil paintings and of photographs from the time of the Cultural Revolution, with their idyllic

and idealized representation, suggest how Liu complied with the government, giving readers an interesting and important point of comparison with her later works.

Curiously, the book contains no discussion of Liu's feminism. According to the chronology, however, she was a speaker at the 2011 feminist conference in China, *International Conference on Chinese Women and Visual Representation*. The subjects of Liu's paintings range from the powerful Dowager Empress Cixi, to orphaned girls, prostitutes, and Korean comfort women, and such scholars as Elaine Kim and Norman Bryson have eloquently written on the uniqueness of Liu's feminism.⁶ In the present catalogue, the Beijing-based art historian Karen Smith touches on some of Liu's female subjects. She also refers to a 2011 interview in which Liu discussed wanting to "restore dignity" to "the women who have completely lost their freedom, family, and identity" by returning "the male gaze in the more aggressive, strong, dignified way" (99). Missing, though, from Smith's essay, was how Liu's female subjects returned the male gaze.

The Art of Hung Liu: Summoning Ghosts has much to recommend it, and the essays are important contributions to scholarship on this artist. However, given the lack of a feminist lens, a biography, and a personal interview, the present volume would be best complemented by reading *Hung Liu: A Ten-Year Survey 1988–1998*, which includes Kathleen McManus Zurko's extensive interview with Liu, and Trinkett Clark's essay for *Hung Liu: Parameters* (1996), which discusses Liu's work in relation to her biography.

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Notes

1. Roslyn Bernstein, "Scholar-Artist: Hung Liu," in *Hung Liu: The Year of the Dog, 1994*, exh. cat. (New York: Steinbaum

- Krauss Gallery, 1994), 6. Although Liu was not aware of literati until she came to the United States due to the Cultural Revolution; Trinkett Clark, *Hung Liu: Parameters*, exh. brochure (Norfolk, VA: The Chrysler Museum of Art, and Oakland, CA: Mills College Art Gallery, 1996), n.p.
2. Clark, *Hung Liu: Parameters*, n.p.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1994), 66–111.
 5. For more on these images, see for example, Allison Arieff, "Cultural Collisions: Identity and History in the Work of Hung Liu," *WAJ* 17, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1996): 35–40.
 6. Elaine H. Kim, "Bad Women: Asian American Visual Artists Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min," *Feminist Studies* 22 (1996): 507–603; Norman Bryson, "Hung Liu's Goddess," in *Hung Liu: A Ten-Year Survey, 1988–1998*, ed., Kathleen McManus Zurko, exh. cat. (Wooster, OH: College of Wooster Art Museum, 1998), 17–26.

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith: An American Modernist

By Carolyn Kastner
University of New Mexico Press, 2013

Reviewed by Betsy Fahlman

Carolyn Kastner's *Jaune Quick-to-See Smith: An American Modernist* is a concise monograph on an important artist, curator, and political activist. Kastner's beautifully written and richly textured analysis is a model of literate, insightful scholarship. Five thematic chapters each focus on a specific body of work. Acknowledging Smith's particular vantage on the "racialized discourse of American history" (1), Kastner places the artist's oeuvre and practice within a broad historical, social, and contemporary context, demonstrating how her use of "dense sign systems" (2) enables the artist to deliver "complex messages" (3) referencing her identity as a Native American modernist.

In her first chapter, "Born in the USA," Kastner considers Smith's multiple inspirations, discussing how the artist has drawn on a broad range of influences to "enrich, resist, or confound" meaning (3). By deriving "imagery and color from the natural world and diverse cultures of North America" (7), Smith's experience is grounded in a "fragmented and complex" hybridity as a result of "being female, indigenous, urban, and a resident of the United States" (9). Born in Montana in 1940, and based in New Mexico since 1976, she has been inspired by nature: "My life's work involves examining contemporary life in America and interpreting it through Native ideology" (15).

For the artist, color and subject matter are directly connected, a topic Kastner explores in her second chapter, "Seeing Red: Indigenous Identity and Artistic Strategy." In addition to it being a primary color and thus deeply grounded in the history of painting, red also references racial identity, blood, and anger. Kastner deftly deconstructs *The Red Mean: Self-Portrait* (1992; Fig. 1), explicating how Smith's use of red signals "affirmation and resistance" (23).

"American Modernism and the Politics of Landscape," chapter three, locates Smith's work within the broad history of American painting, revealing her "personal sense of place and connection to the land of North America." (27) The artist's sources are imaginatively diverse and include Thomas Cole, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Willem de Kooning, although, writes Kastner, she recasts "the American landscape as a site of cultural conflict," visualizing "an indigenous viewpoint about land" (27). The works discussed here are vigorous and painterly, informed by a breathtaking and densely expressive abstraction richly resonant with "multiple and colliding cultural signs" (31) that Smith uses to "denounce the damage to the place and the people who hold the site sacred" (29).

In "Chief Seattle: Visualizing Environmental Disaster," the fourth chapter, Kastner explores how Smith "adapted the gritty urban styles of American pop and graffiti art to invoke the threat of environmental ruin in a

series of explicitly political art works" which have intriguing parallels to Robert Rauschenberg and Jean-Michel Basquiat (4). Passionately political, and referencing oil spills, acid rain, and drought, these intense works "resist the idyllic, yet resonate with poetic metaphor" (42). Each piece contains words from Chief Seattle's 1854 speech when "he surrendered his people and land" to federal control (41).

In her last chapter, "The Discourse of Modern Art in a Post-Columbian World," Kastner discusses the thirteen watercolors of paper dolls Smith created during the 1992 Columbian quincentennial in

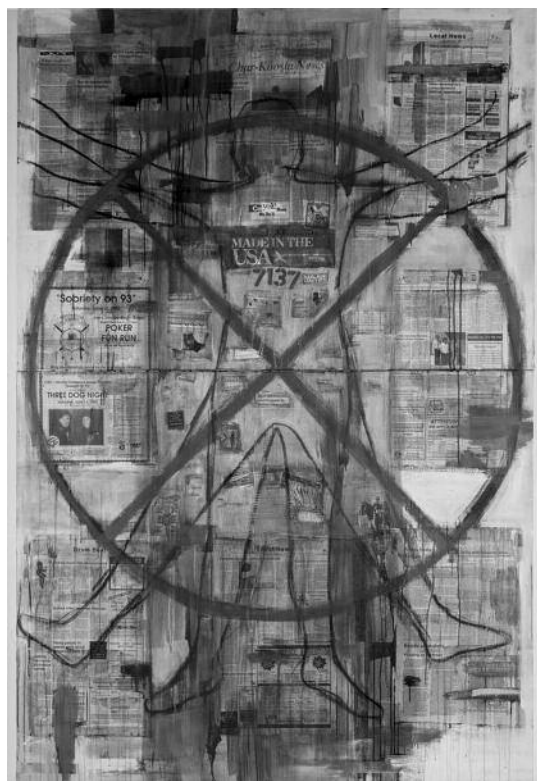


Fig. 1. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *The Red Mean: Self-Portrait* (1992), acrylic, newspaper collage, shellac, and mixed media on canvas, 90" x 60". Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts.