

Painting History

1.

A documentary photograph is not a factual photograph. –Dorothea Lange

Once regarded as the most exalted of all genres, history painting is defined as the depiction of one or several figures at a specific, highly-charged narrative moment in the past: a *once upon a time*, whether mythological or actual. Photography having largely taken over the job of representing significant events, twentieth and twenty-first century examples are relatively few; Anselm Kiefer's operatic visions of Nordic mythology come to mind, or Sandow Birk's canvases chronicling an imaginary war between Northern and Southern California. Another, genuinely committed to painting (post)modern history, is Chinese American artist Hung Liu, whose decades-long artistic investigation has drawn on an extraordinary set of both life and educational experiences.

Born in Changchun in 1948 just before the inception of the People's Republic of China, Liu's childhood coincided with a period of prolonged and sometimes violent social change that encompassed both Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Liu was sent to the countryside for 're-education' in 1968, where she spent four years farming; on her return to Beijing, she studied mural painting in the Chinese Socialist Realism style at the Central Academy of Fine Art. In 1984, after years of applying, she obtained a visa to travel to California for further graduate study in art at UC San Diego. Although she has visited China numerous times since then, she has considered the US to be her home since the day she arrived, in October of '86, with two suitcases and \$20.

For over three decades, Liu has pursued distinguished careers as both a professor of art and an exhibiting artist. She is widely known for her painterly reinterpretations of historical Chinese photographs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She has used images of prostitutes and of members of the last imperial court; pictures of prisoners, famine victims, women soldiers, and more.

Her subjects have also included Korean 'comfort women' and early Chinese immigrant laborers in Idaho. American figures have appeared from time to time, such as Billy Holiday or Babe Ruth. Recently, however, Liu has focused on a different kind of source material. Towards the end of 2015, as she found herself thinking about the role that migrants and refugees have played in American history, she began to study the photographs of Dorothea Lange-- drawn to them in part out of a sense that history was,

once again, repeating itself, in the form of a world wide refugee crisis. As Liu studied Lange's pictures of the victims of the linked disasters of Dustbowl and Depression, she learned about the photographer as well, who walked away from a successful portrait studio practice to spend the rest of her career documenting the disenfranchised. Lange did not mean for her pictures to merely report the effects of the economic failures of the thirties (and, later, the internment of Japanese Americans¹; she meant to change the hearts and minds of her viewers.

Lange's archives, including many unpublished images, reside at the Oakland Museum of California. Liu began to spend many hours there studying them, looking through binders of unpublished pictures and contact sheets. Over time, Lange's subject matter seemed increasingly relevant to Liu's own practice, as did the photographer's intention to bring compassion and dignity to her subjects. "Giving a human face to history makes such a difference," Liu insists—"statistics go right past us, but when we see the faces of the people who suffer, it means so much more. Lange's migrant mother became a symbol of the Depression."

2.

Propaganda... I don't know, I never have been able to come to the conclusion that that's a bad word."-Dorothea Lange

Using Lange's photographs as source material can be seen as a major departure for Liu. Exploring the work of a renowned artist and documentarian, that takes the form of carefully focused and composed black and white images- some, instantly recognizable-- is very different from conjuring faces out of faded, blurred portraits found in archives (the kind of images that Liu has most often used in the past).

At the same time, reinterpreting Lange's work seems like a profoundly natural extension of Liu's lifelong project of picturing the dispossessed. The 'ghosts' in Liu's paintings are those pushed out to the margins of history, whether by accident of birth or gender or simply as the result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Additionally, Liu finds echoes of her own past in Lange's uncompromising pictures. Having lived through the famine that killed tens of millions in rural China between 1958 and 1962, experiencing both draconian rationing and years of unremitting farm labor, Liu- an American immigrant now for nearly half her life-- not only sympathizes but *empathizes* with Lange's subjects.

¹ Lange's images of internees and camps were so critical that most were impounded by the Army and remained unseen for more than fifty years.

In *American Exodus*, Liu's first exhibition based on Lange's work², a soft, almost romantic palette of violets and umbers predominated. Many paintings featured one or two figures, rendered in soft grays against simplified backgrounds, and the veils of drips present in her work since the early 1990s appeared as well, softening and dissolving parts of many images much as time might fade memory. Billowing cumulus clouds or dandelions in several contributed to a sense of elegiac reverence for the nameless figures Liu selected from different periods of Lange's work. There were migrants, sharecroppers and internees. Many were children.

In *Promised Land*, Liu's current body of work, her approach-- not only to Lange, but to painting itself-- has visibly altered, taking a leap forward into a new exploration of both content and formal devices. The most distinctive of the latter is the infiltration of saturated color into figures and backgrounds, often in the form of outlines or slender but emphatic strokes. Liu describes these boundaries of color as "hope, coming through the cracks between things"-- suggesting the idea of a vivid emotional world behind the monochrome of these figure's lives in makeshift tents and cabins. In *Fetching Water 1-3* (all 2017), three paintings based on Lange's series of photographs showing children filling a bucket at a pump in the middle of a dusty field, Liu uses subdued tones of bluish gray and green to describe the shifting knot of little figures. Delineating their forms, however, are edges of red and orange, apple green and turquoise, simultaneously enlivening and abstracting the shapes of worn clothes and small bare legs.

To Liu, color itself has become a way of memorializing Lange's subjects: of drawing the viewer's attention to the desperately poor and displaced-- not only of that nearly-forgotten time, but of today, including here in the United States.³ In all three of the *Fetching Water* paintings, a toddler in the foreground clutches a doll, her face and body turned away from us. For Liu, this unidentifiable child has become an important figure. Lost to the tide of events like so many others, she nevertheless was a human being, alive in the world both before and after the moments captured in Lange's photographs. Three times, Liu paints her shoes an improbable shade of red, as if to draw our gaze to her and our thoughts to that invisible history.

² Exhibited at Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New, York NY, 9/8- 10/22/2016.

³ In 2015, 19.4 million Americans lived in extreme poverty. This means their family's cash income is less than half of the poverty line, about \$10,000 a year for a family of four. --*US Census*, 2015

Lily Pad (2017) is a melancholy picture of an adolescent girl, legs curled under her in an old tire, her expression suggesting that she, too, is lost-- in a dream of something wonderful. Both the plaid of her dress and the tread pattern on the tire are threaded with jiggling lines and amoeba-like marks of intense color, a flickering treatment that continues in the radically abstracted, rapidly-brushed background of weeds and shrubs. Like Chuck Close's portraits, the image reads more clearly from a few feet away, beginning to break up into its constituent parts up close.

Perhaps the most startling exploration of this almost topographical treatment of form can be seen in the portrait of a young African American man—a boy, really-- titled *Laborer: Farmhand* (2016). A delicate spider web of colored lines covers his face and hair, some following the contours of his features while others suggest characters in some secret language. He looks at us steadily, but it's almost impossible to return his gaze, distracted as we are by the subtext of color that transforms Lange's original image.

3.

A picture is worth a thousand words. –proverb

Chinese Socialist realism strives for a particular kind of perfection. Workers--their bodies and faces peculiarly aglow with shades of yellow, pink and orange (only warm hues; no greens or blues), engage in labor for the good of all, exhorting viewers to do the same. At the Academy in Beijing, students producing these kinds of images were required to work from life, rather than photographs, as much as possible. When the subject was mining, Liu and her classmates had to travel to the mines; when it was peasants in the fields, they were sent to study farmers as they planted or cultivated, even though the resulting ruddy, muscular figures bore little resemblance to what they had seen.

Liu admits that her initial attraction to working from photos might have derived in part from rebelling against this education, but something else has driven her as well. Few family albums remain in China. Most were destroyed out of fear that the pictures would furnish evidence of forbidden social or political behavior, resulting in punishment or execution.

For Liu, repainting the images she has found in archives—whether in China, or here in the US—is a way of recuperating her own past. In her current collaboration with one of the twentieth century's most skillful propagandists, she also reminds us to remember what took place-- even as she wryly admits that “history repeats and forgets itself.”