



Oakland Museum of California

"By the Rivers of Babylon" is a 2000 oil on canvas that is part of "Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu," at the Oakland Museum of California.

ART

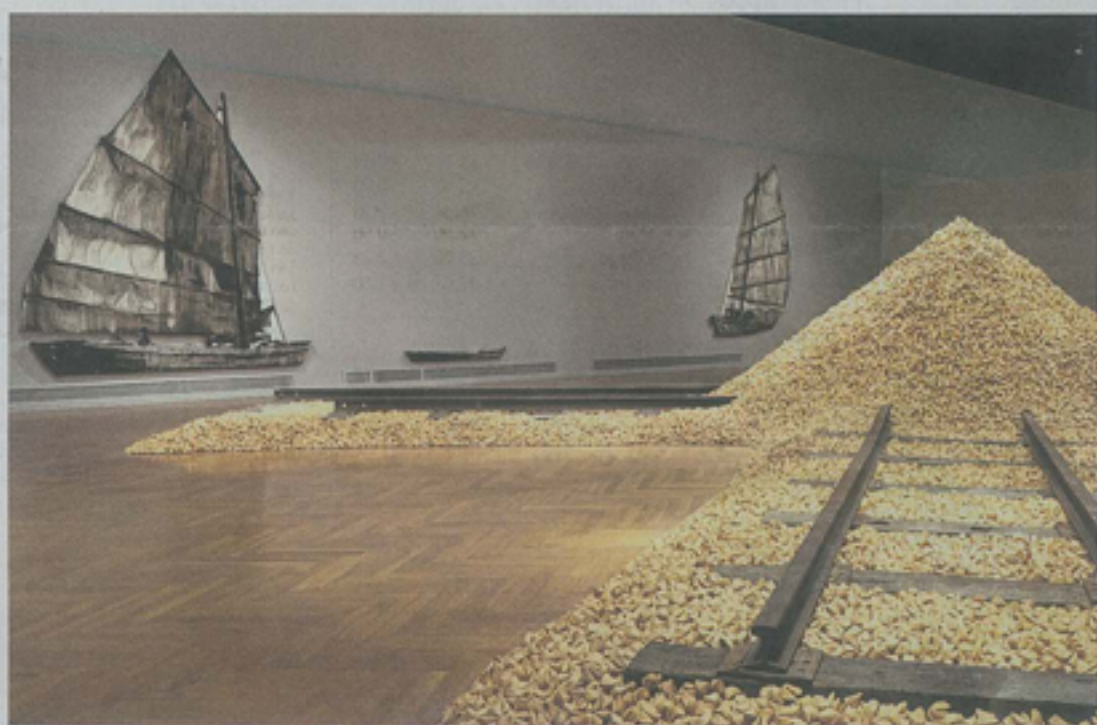
Paired Liu showings in Oakland

By Kenneth Baker

Many contemporary painters struggle to get history into their work without looking pretentious or ideologically motivated. But big events of the late 20th century weighed so heavily on the life of Oakland painter Hung Liu that she might have found it difficult to keep history out of her work.

Her retrospective "Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu," opening Saturday at the Oakland Museum of California, and an associated exhibition, "Hung Liu: Offerings," ending Sunday at the Mills College Art Museum, show Liu embracing

Liu continues on D4



Mills College Art Museum

"Jiu Jin Shan (Old Gold Mountain)" (1994) is 200,000 fortune cookies with support structure and train tracks, plus "Chinese Shrimp Junk I and II" (1994), oil on shaped canvas at Mills.

Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu: Paintings, drawings, photographs and video. Through June 30, Oakland Museum of California, 1000 Oak St., Oakland. (510) 318-8400. www.museumca.org.

Hung Liu: Offerings: Mixed-media installations. Through Sunday, Mills College Art Museum, 5000 MacArthur Blvd., Oakland. (510) 430-2164. www.mcam.edu.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Liu retrospective offers complex art

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without stint private and public memories of her era and its past.

In Beijing, younger artists refer to Liu as "big sister" because they see her — though not her alone — as having led the way out of the cultural provincialism and expressive straitjacket of the Mao Zedong decades to the global attention and market that contemporary Chinese art has enjoyed for the past 15 years or more.

Liu was born in 1948 in Changchun, a city remembered as the seat of power of Pu Yi, the "Last Emperor" of China, and a vassal of the Japanese occupation. The conflict between Mao's Communist and Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang forces, to which Liu's father belonged, shadowed her infancy, forcing the family to flee for a time.

In 1959, Liu took a train to Beijing with an aunt who already lived there. Her mother and grandparents soon followed. They survived the famine triggered by the perverse mandates of Mao's Great Leap Forward, and Liu qualified for elite schooling, but the ideological hysteria of Mao's Cultural Revolution in 1966 prevented her from graduating.

Forced labor

In 1968, Liu was subjected to a "re-education" of forced labor on rural farmland. Photographs she took while there, printed only recently, and postcard-size paintings that she made in scant off hours, defiantly nonpropagandist, though later titled "My Secret Freedom," are showing at the Oakland Museum for the first time.

In the 1970s, while Mao incrementally relaxed China's isolation before he died in 1976, Liu was able to resume schooling. After conducting an art instruction program on state television for several years, she entered the Central Academy of



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"Richter Scale," a 2009 oil on canvas, is a work that shows a byplay between complexity of purpose and complexity of execution.

Fine Arts in Beijing.

In 1984, after a prolonged struggle to obtain a passport, Liu finally entered the United States and began graduate study at UC San Diego, where Allan Kaprow (1927-2006), the father of Happenings and a key figure in the international Fluxus movement, was a guiding spirit. From him Liu learned to think of all studio work in performance terms, as the expressionistic and uncertainly finished qualities of her painting reflect.

Having met and married independent curator Jeff Kelley at UCSD, Liu moved with him to Texas for several years, pursuant to a job opportunity, and taught there before the couple finally settled in Oakland after a 1990 job offer from Mills College, where she continues to teach. Her success as a woman has garnered her an added measure of respect mirrored in

the prominence she gives to women in her painting.

A picture such as "Refugee: Woman and Children" (2000), like many others at the Oakland Museum based on an antique photograph, depicts a destitute grandmother and two small girls enduring hardship like that Liu herself witnessed and suffered. They are among the "ghosts" Liu tries to summon so that our conscience might feel the pressure of their witness.

Rather than peg the picture to an event, Liu introduced symbols from other eras of Chinese art, their anachronism expressing more irony and sorrow at injustice than reproach.

A crane, traditionally associated with high official standing and incorruptibility, stands to one side of the woman, on the other, a lotus blossom, Buddhist symbol of attainment and

a Chinese emblem of fortunate offspring. Two faint registers of transcendent beings — transcendent of suffering — typical of Buddhist iconography appear below.

Powerful work

Liu's interest centers less on decoding such images than on seeking viewers who know enough of history and power, injustice and compassion — and of graces peculiar to painting — to enter deeply into her work. She frequently attaches objects to her paintings, not only because of their symbolism but also because they occupy time differently from images. The Mills College Museum show presents two ensembles exemplifying Liu's way of depicting non-pictorial stuff.

"Tai Cang — Great Granary" (2008) reconstructs a long-destroyed mural that Liu made

while still an art academy student. She has supplemented it with 34 *dou* — traditional measuring containers — filled with grains and legumes, arranged on the floor to echo the geography of the provinces from which they come.

Both exhibitions affirm that Liu's work tends to shine when it avoids or scrambles everything programmatic. To trace her development is to see an evolving byplay between complexity of purpose and complexity of execution. When they come into the right balance, in paintings such as "Refugee," "Richter Scale" (2009), "Dirge" (2002) and "By the Rivers of Babylon" (2000), they are really something to see.

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