

RENA BRANSTEN

GALLERY

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Hung Liu: An immigrant takes on American history

By Leah Garchik
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Photo: Leah Garchik, San Francisco Chronicle
Inside the Rena Bransten Gallery and outside

The May sun shot long rays of light into the airy Rena Bransten Gallery on Friday, May 5, the evening before **Hung Liu**'s "Promised Land" exhibition opened there. A group of friends gathered there for a preview of the paintings based on the photographs of **Dorothea Lange**, as **Sam Whiting** has written.

Surrounded by paintings of Dust Bowl refugees, we sat down at two long tables for dinner. Among the guests were **Lori Fogarty**, director of the Oakland Museum of California, which will open "Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing" on Friday, May 13 (as Chronicle art critic **Charles Desmarais** has written); and writer/biographer/art historian **Elizabeth Partridge**, Lange's goddaughter, who has written at least three books about her. She is also the granddaughter of Imogen Cunningham.

The Lange photographs have become so well-known that the people in Liu's paintings seem like old friends, their familiar features recaptured in new portraits and images. It's as though the photographer and her work have been reborn. The Oakland Museum has the Lange archives, and Liu has spent much time there immersed in that work, "and I talk with her all the time."

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Photo: Leah Garchik, San Francisco Chronicle

Dinner at Rena Bransten Gallery in front of Hung Liu painting based on Lange's "White Angel Bread Line."

After thanking **Rena** and **Trish Bransten**, as well as the gallery's **Jenny Baie** and **China Langford** "for the great installation," the artist proposed a "toast to my hero, my mentor, my colleague, Dorothea Lange." Having painted these images of America, "I feel now I can say I am a true American. I think of this history as part of my history ... American history."

Before sitting down to dinner, guests walking through the gallery studying the paintings were lured by the light to glance through windows to Tennessee Street. An encampment there included tents, trash and a dumpster that looked as though it had been turned into a living space.

It was easy to wince at the squalor visible from those windows, a scene that included trash blowing across the street. Inside, the heartfelt paintings were celebrating "the resilience of the human spirit," according to press materials.

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