

Hung Liu @ Rena Bransten

by David M. Roth

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White Angel Bread Line, 2016, oil on canvas, 80 x 80"

For the first time in a 30-year career Hung Liu has mounted a show of paintings that are *not* about Chinese history. The Oakland artist instead tackles the legacy of Dorothea Lange, the photographer whose pictures of post-Great Depression America, of people fleeing the Dustbowl for the West, long ago became iconic. For Liu who's steadfastly stuck to Chinese subjects, this might seem like a departure. But it actually isn't. Her paintings have always portrayed the downtrodden, and these, like so many she's made of peasants, laborers, prostitutes, prisoners and famine victims, are very much of a piece with those she's created from vintage *Chinese* photos.

The main difference here rests with paint handling. The virtuosic flourishes that have defined her output thus far — washes and drips interleaved with a heavy impasto — are in this exhibition somewhat attenuated, and that, in the context of Lange's hardscrabble depictions of America's

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Migrant Mother: Mealtime, 2016, oil on canvas, 60 x 60"

dispossessed, feels about right. Liu's treatment of two of Lange's best-known images, *Migrant Mother* (1936) and *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco* (1933), illustrate. In these, her signature drips, which can sometimes feel melodramatic, are barely in evidence; while her other oft-seen trope, the circular Zen *enso*, gives way to photographic facts. Liu imprints her sensibility onto these images by zeroing in on tonal values. She renders the highlights of both images in bright orange, imparting an electrical charge not felt in the black-and-white originals. These are respectful tributes, not re-interpretations.

Where Liu takes real liberties are with Lange's lesser-known pictures. In these she uses blotchy, jagged cells to construct close-up portraits that may remind you of Chuck Close's. Two that stand out are of African-Americans. *Laborer: Farm Hand*, based on Lange's 1937 picture of a boy in Mississippi, transforms a sorrowful shot into a fragmented puzzle that far surpasses Lange's in complexity and expressivity. The second, *Mocking Bird*, shows young woman in a bandana surrounded by bubbles, the effervescence coming from a blizzard of ovoid shapes that surround her face and body. Those, I'd wager, are inventions on Liu's part, and they push an otherwise plaintive image into fantastical territory. *Dreamcatcher*, a picture of a girl on a narrow plank scooping water from a river is, I'd also speculate, an unremarkable scene in its original incarnation. Liu transforms it by appending multicolored bits of palette-knife-teased pigment to the top, to represent what I presume are blossoms dangling from a trestle. It's as fine an example as any of how Liu — *unlike* Lange — consistently wrings transcendence from austerity.

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Mocking Bird, 2017, oil on canvas, 48 x 48"

Of the latter she knows much. Growing up in China she survived Mao, the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward — and spent time in a rural “re-education” camp, where, at grave personal risk, she acquired a camera and surreptitiously snapped pictures of agricultural laborers. A representative sample of those shots, on view during the artist’s 2013 retrospective (*Summoning Ghosts*) at the Oakland Museum of California, showed Liu to be a gimlet-eyed observer with a nascent, but nevertheless well-honed documentary impulse that very much mirrored Lange’s in how it showed historical forces shaping individuals. As it happens, the OMCA, which holds Lange’s archive, opened it to Liu for this project, and is now (through August 17) staging an exhibition of those images to commemorate the 50th anniversary of their arrival.

Had Liu stuck to her early training in Socialist Realism and not gotten an American education that permitted and encouraged free expression, the paintings we see here would not, stylistically speaking, have been possible. That the best of them significantly depart from their sources lends double meaning to the title *Promised Land*, alluding to both the better life sought by the migrants Lange pictured, and to the storied career Liu achieved after arriving on these shores in 1984 with \$20 and suitcase.

Hung Liu: “Promised Land” @ [Rena Bransten](#) through June 24, 2017.

About the author:

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