

Hung Liu: Portraits of Promised Lands

A large, solid blue rectangular area occupying the bottom half of the page, likely intended for an image or additional text.

I want my work to be a comfort to people I've never known.

Hung Liu, 2020

For the artist Hung Liu, engaging with portraiture is an act of empathy. Since the 1980s, she has paid tribute to hundreds of individuals through her practice of expanding upon photographic imagery to create complex, multilayered paintings. "History is not a static image or a frozen story," she observes. "It is always flowing forward."

Liu, who was born in Changchun, China, in 1948, experienced political revolution, exile, and displacement before immigrating to the United States. She came of age during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and was consequently forced to labor in the fields for four years in her early twenties. In 1984, after studying art in Beijing, Liu left China in to attend graduate school at the University of California, San Diego. There, the experimental tendencies of fellow students and faculty members, such as the foundational performance artist Allan Kaprow (1927–2006) and the feminist art historian Moira Roth (born 1933), cultivated her conceptual approach to portraiture.

Liu's "portraits of promised lands" represent her family members as well as anonymous subjects. Over the past five decades, she has portrayed refugees, prostitutes, migrant laborers, women soldiers, orphaned children, and other overlooked individuals, whom she describes as lost souls or "spirit-ghosts." Liu reimagines their stories and seeks to honor them with her brush.

Unless otherwise noted, all works are by Hung Liu.

Curatorial Statement

With this exhibition, the first retrospective of an Asian American woman at the National Portrait Gallery, we celebrate Hung Liu, whose paintings have established new frameworks for understanding portraiture in relation to time, memory, and history. Liu's empathic world view has guided her practice for over five decades. She pictures forgotten histories as a way to reclaim lost lives and reckon with the past.

As we emerge from a period of isolation and confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and as we work against xenophobia in communities across the United States, Liu's powerful vision provides an opportunity for reflecting on the value of resilience and renewal.

Hung Liu as a graduate student, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China

From 1979 to 1981, Hung Liu attended graduate school at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where students were trained in the style of socialist realism. China had adopted the propagandist aesthetic from the Soviet Union in the mid-1950s, and it subsequently dominated the country's public spaces and educational institutions. Liu felt constrained by having to adhere to the school's restrictive approach and found she could exert a greater freedom of expression while working on large-scale murals.

As part of her graduate studies, Liu traveled to the Buddhist caves of Dunhuang, in the Gobi Desert, along the Silk Road, and spent forty days examining the stylized forms found in the cave murals. She also visited religious shrines throughout China and engaged with Chinese literary history.

The painting you see in this snapshot was a product of her trip. It was inspired by the ancient feminist poem "Mo Shang Sang," from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), as well as the cave murals.

Unidentified photographer; Reproduction of photograph from 1980; Courtesy of Hung Liu and Jeff Kelley

Village Photograph 5 (Peasant Grandma)
Village Photograph 10 (Water Children)

The Cultural Revolution began in the spring of 1966, during Liu's final year of high school. Mao encouraged Communist youth, known as Red Guards, to participate in violent rebellion in order to purge China of "counterrevolutionary" influences. As violence escalated, Mao ordered high school and college students to the countryside to be "reeducated" alongside peasants. Liu was assigned to Dadu Lianghe, a village about fifty miles outside of Beijing, and formed strong bonds with the people who lived there. After earning their trust, she made her first photographic portraits with a Carl Zeiss camera that a friend had given her.

Liu's initial approach to photography was formal and imitated studio conventions, yet she eventually embraced a documentary style. Today, Liu looks back on her early experiences with photography as both "scary" and "exciting," especially given the restrictions that the Chinese government had placed on the medium.

Photographs, 1970–72

Collection of Hung Liu and Jeff Kelley

Young Woman
Man with Coat and Hat
Boy with Hat in Winter

During Mao's "Down to the Countryside Movement" (proletariat reeducation), Hung Liu was forced to labor on the farmland of Dadu Lianghe, a village north of Beijing. She found a creative outlet in making sketches of villagers whenever the community was summoned to listen to revolutionary propaganda on a loudspeaker. She also drew portraits of workers and children she encountered throughout the day.

Drawing during the Cultural Revolution was a hopeful act for Liu, an assertion of her creative spirit and a recognition of the individual despite the era of mass indoctrination. Her charcoal portraits from the early 1970s, three of which are shown here, are casual and expressive. They reflect the instruction Liu had received during her middle and high school years, when she often sketched from live models and plaster busts.

Charcoal on paper, 1972–75
Collection of Hung Liu and Jeff Kelley

Where Is Mao?

Images of Mao Zedong (1893–1976), who led the Communist Party of China from 1945 until his death, proliferated as propaganda for his regime, particularly during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). He frequently posed with other world leaders as he sought to promote Chinese-style communism around the globe. Hung Liu initially trusted the communist movement and its call for change but watched in horror as Mao's policies unfolded, resulting in the killing and starvation of millions of Chinese citizens.

Where Is Mao? explores the collective memories associated with the Communist leader. Liu felt compelled to recreate some of the historic images without Mao's facial features. She views these sketches as "anti-monuments," explaining that at the time, she "was trying to find my own identity as a Chinese [person] in America. I was erasing Mao's. After all, he didn't need a face . . . because even without a face, you could tell it was him."

Graphite on canvas, 1988

Gift from Vicki and Kent Logan to the Collection of the Denver Art Museum

Mission Girls

Protestant missionaries flooded China during the nineteenth century and established several new schools to educate Chinese youth who were living in poverty. Hung Liu, who has long advocated for children, was perusing a book by W. A. P. Martin entitled *The Awakening of China* (1907), when a photograph of orphaned “mission girls” caught her eye. The subjects were identified as students at the Girl’s School of the American Episcopal Mission in Wuchang (the old district of modern Wuhan). The range of their expressions moved Liu to respond with this series of portraits.

The idiosyncratic drips, layered textures, and specific brushstrokes in *Mission Girls* underscore the individuality of each real-life subject. The circles, Liu says, are “light and airy . . . and full of hope.” For her, the round marks—usually painted in a single stroke—signify wholeness and transience. The art writer Jeff Kelley, Liu’s husband, views them as “riding on the surface of her paintings, reminding us of tattoos or thought bubbles.”

Oil on canvas, 2002–3
Castellano-Wood Family Collection

Chinese in Idaho, Portrait IV, 2004
Dangling, 2005
Chinese in Idaho, Portrait II, 2004

During the late 1800s, many Chinese immigrants arrived in the western United States as enslaved people or servants. Others came to search for gold or work on the railroad. Despite their significant contributions to the country, these individuals were policed by anti-Chinese and anti-Asian laws, which were not overturned until 1943. The population of Chinese in the Territory of Idaho was fairly large in the 1870s but had nearly vanished when Liu began her “Chinese in Idaho” series.

These three paintings are reinterpretations of black-and-white photographs from the life of Polly Bemis (1853–1933), the subject of *Dangling*. Bemis, who was smuggled into the United States and sold into the slave trade at age nineteen, escaped anti-Chinese immigration tactics when she married an American man. She eventually ran a boarding house, among other businesses, on a ranch near the Salmon River, where she was beloved by her community.

Oil on canvas
Castellano-Wood Family Collection

Laborer: Farm Hand (Clarence Weems)

When artist Carrie Mae Weems (born 1953) first encountered this painting, she immediately recognized the subject. She knew that her favorite uncle had been photographed by Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) and surprised her good friend Hung Liu when she identified him. Lange's inscription on the source photograph reads, "Delta cooperative farm. Hillhouse, Mississippi. Clarence Weems, a young co-operator on the farm. He remembers the evictions in Arkansas, for his father was beaten and disappeared."

Liu recalls how she was drawn to the young boy's weary face and describes her technical approach as "topographic mapping." With lines of saturated color that suggest roads, she likens the marks to tattoos. "They are our scars, our nerves, our stories," she adds.

By translating Lange's photograph into a colorful portrait, Liu layered new meaning over Lange's photograph to reinforce the importance of Clarence Weems's story. She views the bright outlines as "hope, coming from the cracks between things."

Oil on canvas, 2016

Collection of Josef Vascovitz and Lisa Goodman

Family

Hung Liu was raised primarily by her mother, Liu Zongguang (1922–2011), a middle school teacher. Her father, Xia Peng (1921–1996), was a captain in the Kuomintang (Nationalist) Army of Chiang Kai-shek. In May 1948, a few months after Hung Liu was born in Changchun, Communist forces led by Lin Biao and Mao Zedong advanced into the industrial city. A five-month siege ensued, and Liu's family was forced to flee Changchun to avoid starvation. During that flight, Liu's father was detained by Communist troops. Her parents were forced to divorce, and Liu did not reunite with her father until 1994.

For Liu, creating portraits of her family was a way of "summoning ghosts." She said, "They are with me all the time, but I cannot reach them." Liu's memories of her family are embedded in all of her portraits. She used color, texture, found objects, and shaped canvases to transport her family members into our contemporary moment, inviting us to look upon them as though they were our own.

Resident Alien

In 1988, four years after Hung Liu arrived in the United States, she was awarded an artist's residency at the Capp Street Project in San Francisco. Over the course of the summer, she produced a mural in the city's Chinatown district and a mixed-media installation entitled *Resident Alien*, which included this self-portrait. Both projects were based on her research into the history of Chinese immigration to California.

With irony and humor, this painting of an oversized green card underscores the fluid politics of identity, particularly for immigrants. Liu claims her birth year as 1984, the year she arrived in the United States, rather than 1948. "Fortune Cookie," of course, refers to the Chinese-American restaurant handout, but it is also slang for a woman of Chinese descent. By using this namesake, Liu stresses her invented identity as a "resident alien," the label used for U.S. green card holders.

Oil on canvas, 1988

Collection of the San Jose Museum of Art; gift of the Lipman Family Foundation

Little Artist

This portrait of Hung Liu's son Ling Chen (born 1978) is based on a snapshot that a friend took while visiting Liu's family in Beijing around 1980. The image captured the toddler after he had drawn in chalk on the concrete floor. It was a revelation for Liu to see the power of a candid photograph of her child in contrast to the posed studio portraits that her mother had orchestrated during Liu's youth.

Memories of such quotidian moments exist vividly, even monumentally, in Liu's mind. Her translation of a spontaneous moment from a small black-and-white snapshot to a larger-than-life colorful portrait emphasizes the poignant tension between time, memory, and the ongoing intimacy of a mother-son bond through the years.

Oil on canvas, 1998

Bill and Christy Gautreaux Collection

The Botanist

Hung Liu's maternal grandfather, Liu Weihua (1894–1962), was a teacher and scholar, who was active in Liu's intellectual formation. He instilled in her a sense of confidence and determination, and she credits him with shaping her approach to feminism. In his research, Liu Weihua focused on the ecological systems and religious shrines of Qianshan Mountain, as well as the monks, nuns, and priests who dwelled there. Liu, who has long been interested in her grandfather's discoveries, has based some of her paintings on photographs that he commissioned during his research trips.

When describing *The Botanist* and other portraits of her grandfather, Liu emphasizes the vivid memories she has of his physical presence: "I remember a lot of things: his face, his demeanor, his body language. He had hands that were very soft and big. So those kinds of things were very important for me as part of these paintings."

Oil on canvas, 2013

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; gift of Lorrie and Richard Greene and Accessions Committee
Fund purchase

Ma

Here, Hung Liu's mother, Liu Zongguang (1922–2011), stands in front of a rural landscape outside of Beijing, where she once posed for a tourist photo. The shaped canvas gives the impression that the landscape is resting on her shoulders and is a tongue-in-cheek reference to Mao's famous proclamation, "Women hold up half the sky."

After Hung Liu's father was captured by Communist forces in September 1948, when Liu was just an infant, her mother raised her with the help of other relatives. Liu Zongguang taught middle school and placed great emphasis on her upbringing and education.

The careful documentation of Liu's childhood survived through the years because Liu Zongguang had the foresight to remove several photographs from family albums before they were burned by the Red Guards.

Oil on shaped canvas, 1993

Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College,
Oberlin, Ohio. Oberlin Friends of Art and R. T.
Miller Jr. funds

Father's Day

While this portrait commemorates the intense bond that Hung Liu shared with her father, it also references the long separation they endured. Xia Peng (1921–1996) was detained by Communists and imprisoned in 1948, when Liu was an infant, and until Liu reached her mid-forties, she often imagined that her father must have had died.

In 1994, after locating Xia Peng, Liu traveled from California to China to reunite with him, coincidentally on Father's Day. She learned that during the intervening four decades, he had often been imprisoned and subjected to hard labor. He was living near Nanjing, on a rural work farm, when Liu found him.

Liu's interest in the physicality of shrines and altars, as well as her desire to highlight the past, guided her as she made *Father's Day*. She shaped the canvas to bring the figures closer to the viewer and incorporated an architectural fragment (from San Francisco's Chinatown) into the visual field.

Oil on shaped canvas and architectural panel, 1994
Entrust for Ariel Steinbaum

Avant-Garde

During the 1990s, Hung Liu created a series of “revolutionary” self-portraits as an assertion of her rebellious spirit and inner strength. *Avant-Garde* is based on a small photograph from 1973 or 1974 that shows Liu in the countryside, where she participated in China’s mandatory military training. Upon revisiting the image in 1993, she decided to use it as the basis for a monumental self-portrait.

Liu’s memories of carrying a semiautomatic rifle and being ranked “a top shooter” revived her youthful bravery and inspired her to use the bayonet as a commentary about her artistic identity. She took cues from a sliver of Claude Monet’s groundbreaking painting *Impression, Sunrise* (1872) when she painted the weapon with impressionist strokes. In addition to referencing European avant-garde art historical movements, which were considered taboo in China, the title also plays with the military definition of avant-garde, the part of an army that makes the first advance.

Oil on shaped canvas and wood, 1993
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; gift of Hung Liu and Jeff Kelley

Grandma

Hung Liu credits her maternal grandmother, Wang Jushou (1890–1979), with instilling in her a vision of “hard-won feminism,” which she traces back to the brave women of ancient China. These women, Liu notes, are “the type I’ve always hoped I would become. From Hua Mulan to Qui Jin, these are truly outstanding women, and I admire them all.”

Liu was close to her grandmother, who raised her alongside her mother. Reflecting on the process of making this portrait, Liu notes that she emphasized Wang Jushou’s strong hands because “all her life, she would make shoes [and] clothes” and do laundry by hand. “All her joints were arthritic and swollen.”

The stylized forms on Wang Jushou’s blouse connect her to Qianshan Mountain, where her husband—Liu’s grandfather Xia Peng—lived “in mind and soul.”

Oil on shaped canvas and antique architectural panels, 1993 and 2013

Collection of Hung Liu and Jeff Kelley

Hung Liu Family Photos

In the late 1960s, Hung Liu and her mother, Liu Zongguang, removed the photographs from their family albums to protect them from being taken by the Red Guards. Liu Zongguang hid some of the pictures and set fire to the rest. She also burned her journals.

During the Cultural Revolution, many people in China destroyed their personal records out of fear. Liu's family, among countless others, felt compelled to erase their past so as not to leave a trace of their earlier, more privileged lives. Because Liu's family was educated, they were seen as a threat to the government. Liu explains, "You couldn't keep anything personal. It was dangerous. That's why I'm so interested in old photographs. They are rare. It is not like today." Liu has carried these photographs with her through the years, not only as a reminder of her close-knit family but also as a tribute to their bravery and sacrifice.

Unidentified photographers
Photographs, 1949–80
Collection of Hung Liu and Jeff Kelley

Gender

Hung Liu describes her mode of feminism as a strength that she inherited from generations of Chinese women—especially members of her own family. In addition to Liu's mother, grandmother, and aunts, the artist credits her grandfather with encouraging her to defy traditional gender roles. The two of them often read *The Ballad of Mulan*, the epic poem about a young woman who disguises herself as a man so she can replace her father in battle. Liu notes that for her, this is "the type of woman that I pay homage to, or you could say the type I've always hoped I could become."

Liu's portrayals of empresses, women soldiers, mothers, refugees, migrants, prostitutes, and 1930s "Modern Girls," made over the course of her career, reveal the fortitude of women while commenting on the development of gender dynamics in China.

The art historian Lucy R. Lippard (born 1937) observes that "much of [Liu's] work focuses on the redemption of marginalized women through what might be called the body politic." For Liu, portraiture provides a means to empower those who were unable to assert themselves during their lifetime. Using her signature style of "weeping

realism," her large-scale, layered paintings present women as active participants who command the viewer's attention and "return the gaze."

Imperial Consort

This portrait of the twelve-year-old Wenxiu (1909–1953) is based on a photograph taken in 1922, when she and the Wanrong (1906–1946) both married Emperor Puyi (1906–1967), the last Emperor of China and final ruler of the Qing dynasty. Wanrong was granted the role of empress, while Wenxiu served as imperial consort, and in the months and years that followed the wedding, Wenxiu grew increasingly depressed in the Changchun Palace. She later described feeling as if she were a “half-burned candle, whose tears would run out soon and whose life would be turned into smoke.”

In 1931, after nearly a decade of marriage, Wenxiu became the first woman to divorce a Chinese Emperor. Hung Liu was drawn to paint this strong, warrior-like young woman wearing a wedding dress, which the artist likens to a “space outfit.” In the portrait’s backdrop, Liu chose to feature ancient Chinese characters to suggest “an unbearable tattoo,” her metaphor for the burden of inherited cultural norms.

Oil on canvas with painted wood, 1996
Collection of Janet L. Holmgren

Madonna

When Hung Liu visited the archives of the Beijing Film Studio in 1991, she came across several nineteenth-century photographs of prostitutes. The women, shown in formal studio settings with Victorian backdrops and props, were posed to solicit clients. Liu had no prior knowledge of this visual history and was shocked by her discovery. When she returned to California, she used one of the images as her basis for *Madonna*.

Here, a young Chinese prostitute stands in for the Virgin Mary. She is shown underneath a gold leaf halo, holding a bust of Cupid. Liu's searing subversion of the source photograph is a strategy she implements to make visible the strength of women. The reversal and reimagining of the historical circumstances that these women endured serve to highlight the Western objectification of Asian women and the post-colonial understanding of Chinese women as having control of their fate.

Oil on canvas, gold leaf, wood, and antique architectural panel, 1992

Estate of Esther S. Weissman

Goddess of Love, Goddess of Liberty

Hung Liu knew this portrait would provoke viewers when she created it in 1989. She had been in the United States for five years and watched from afar as violence overtook Tiananmen Square. The central black-and white image was inspired by a photograph from around 1900. At the time, bare, bound feet were never shown publicly in China, and that fact, coupled with the figure's pose, led the artist to surmise that whoever photographed this woman must have paid to take her picture.

The painting of a porcelain cup evokes the idea that women are "contained vessels," and further symbolism is conveyed in the artwork's three-dimensional components. For example, the Chinese character for broom is nearly identical to the Chinese character for "wife," and men often call their wives "old humble broom." Painted when "soldiers swept away the blood of massacre," the broom adds yet another layer of meaning to the events that were unfolding in real time.

Oil on canvas with wooden bowls, slate, and broom, 1989

Dallas Museum of Art; Museum League Purchase Fund

Chinese Profile II

Chinese Profile II is based on a photograph that was published in the Scottish photographer John Thomson's (1827–1931) *Through China with a Camera* (1898), a pseudo-anthropological book. Thomson made a trip through the country between 1868 and 1872 and described his publication as "portraying objects of interest along my route, and the races with which I came in contact."

The act of profiling human faces for ethnographic or anthropological studies has a long tradition in the history of photography. At the same time, many contemporary artists have embraced the profile as a way for women subjects to avert the "male gaze" and resist objectification.

By taking an image that was intended to promote stereotypes and turning it into a dignified, even heroic portrayal through the act of painting, Liu honors this woman's individuality. In addition, she has radically changed the representation through her use of scale, color, collage-like layering, and expressionistic washes.

Oil on canvas, 1998

San Jose Museum of Art; Museum purchase with funds contributed by the Council of 100

Miss Y

Many of Hung Liu's works from the 1990s reveal her interest in blurring the lines between portraiture and theatre. During this period, she frequently shaped her canvases to correspond with the outlines of her subjects, bringing the figures closer to the viewer, and she often incorporated found objects into her compositions.

Miss Y presents a young Chinese woman with a Westernized hairstyle and modern dress as she gazes at her reflection. The portrait is part of a series of works that Liu based on 1920s and 1930s photographs of "New Women" and "Modern Girls." These types were prevalent in Chinese literature, film, and magazines, and they challenged the traditional roles of women.

The mirror was a common trope in early-twentieth-century photography, and as a symbol, it carries many layers of significance in the history of art. By fashioning part of her canvas into the shape of a mirror, Liu comments on her practice of encouraging women to see themselves anew.

Oil on shaped canvas and architectural panel, 1993
Collection of Nancy and Peter Gennet

Refugees

The deep connection Liu had with refugees was rooted in her personal experiences. She often recalled a story her mother shared with her when she was six years old:

While fleeing the fighting around Changchun with countless other refugees—with no food and under fire—our family passed by a river. Sitting alone on that riverbank was a baby. The baby's mother had set it down and stepped into the river's rushing water. Nobody picked up the baby. Everyone just kept walking. I asked my mother if she would ever have drowned herself and abandoned me by the river. She looked at me and said, "I don't know."

The portraits in this gallery highlight the courage and sacrifices of women who have faced remarkable adversity. Liu illuminated the lives of refugee children, nursing migrant mothers, and displaced "comfort women." In doing so, she evoked the journey of her mother, who took unimaginable risks as she carried her infant child to safety while fleeing war between the Nationalists and Communists.

Refugee: Woman and Children

When Hung Liu came across the photograph that inspired this painting, she instinctively saw a desperate refugee mother who was trying to sell her infants. In translating the original image to this composition, Liu added a crane, a lotus blossom, Buddha figures, and other “blessings” as a way to guide the family to safety.

With the portrait’s large scale and the artist’s signature linseed-oil drips and washes, Liu aims to grant her subjects power. “I hope to wash my subjects of their otherness and reveal them as dignified, even mythic figures on the grander scale of history painting,” she says. Speaking of the refugees she has portrayed, she adds that even though they may be “poor or homeless,” they still have “a very rich heritage.”

Oil on canvas, 2000

Collection of Joan Mann

Strange Fruit: Comfort Women

In the early 1990s, Hung Liu discovered a collection of photographs that prompted her to look into the history of “comfort women.” Through her research, she learned about some of the Korean women who had been forced to work as sex slaves for the Japanese Imperial Army.

The source photograph for this painting was taken by the Japanese military. Liu used red paint to erase the soldiers that appeared in the photograph so that she could focus on the group of women. Each woman who is represented conveys a strong individual presence. Liu chose to paint the subjects with distinct—and varied—expressions of fear, hopelessness, strength, courage, and even anger. Some make eye contact with the viewer, yet their very existence is dissolving into the materiality of the paint with its washes and drips. It is as if Liu is suggesting that their existence is precarious, yet as images, they hold their ground.

Oil on canvas, 2001

Karen and Robert Duncan Collection

Refugee: Opera

Hung Liu, who is empathetically drawn to mothers and children, depicts a depleted woman nursing her baby in *Refugee: Opera*. The situation is reminiscent of what the infant Liu and her mother endured in 1948, when the city of Changchun was under siege and its citizens were forced to flee their homes to escape starvation.

While Liu centered the painting on the breastfeeding mother and child, she chose to include other weary figures in the frame. This decision, along with the way she cropped the image and incorporated half-hidden faces into the composition, hints at Liu's desire to draw attention to those who are unseen. Specifically, her focus on mothers and children in this portrayal and in her other complex, layered portraits of refugees, is her way of advocating for those whom she believes are the most vulnerable refugees in the world.

Oil on canvas, 2001

Collection of Peter and Dorothea Perrin

After Lange

This landscape of struggle is familiar terrain, reminding me of the epic revolution and displacement in Mao's China. Only, now I am painting American peasants looking for the promised land.

—Hung Liu

In 2015, Hung Liu visited the library of the Oakland Museum of California and spent considerable time in the archives of the American photographer Dorothea Lange (1895–1965). Liu became absorbed by the weathered faces of the Dust Bowl migrants in the Depression-era photographs and admired Lange's commitment to portraying the lives of those who had been marginalized.

As Liu looked closely at Lange's images and learned more about the photographer's life, she established connections with the work. Lange, like Liu, had witnessed political upheaval and endured unimaginable personal challenges.

Liu felt "almost a first-hand experience with the American farmers and the migrant families" in Lange's imagery. This affinity, along with her feeling of kinship with Lange, led to her ongoing series *After Lange*.

In creating this body of work, Liu transformed the imagery of Lange's black-and-white photographs into large-scale, colorful portraits that honor the subjects and further bring to the surface what Lange described as "the things about those people that were more important than how poor they were—their pride, their strength, their spirit."

Migrant Mother: Mealtime

In 1936, Dorothea Lange began working for the Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration), a New Deal agency established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Her initial assignment was to document the conditions of the Great Depression in the migrant farmworker communities of California. Although her work was documentary, Lange felt compelled to capture the humanity of the individuals she met. This approach comes through in her portraits of Florence Owens Thompson, the subject of the iconic photograph *Migrant Mother* (1936), which Lange captioned “Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age 32.”

Hung Liu, who based *Migrant Mother: Mealtime* on one of Lange’s lesser-known images of Thompson, notes, “Lange tried to photograph as a form of protest: the truth, the real picture.” And because Liu had experienced living—and laboring—in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, for her, bearing witness to Thompson’s conditions struck a very familiar chord.

Oil on canvas, 2016
Collection of Michael Klein

Cotton Picker

The source for this painting is Dorothea Lange's 1936 photograph *Young Cotton Picker, San Joaquin Valley*. During Lange's Farm Security Administration detail on the West Coast, she received several assignments to cover the conditions of migratory farmworkers in the fields of California. Many of these workers, including the young woman pictured here, were of Mexican descent.

Today, when discussions revolving around border crossing are prevalent, Hung Liu's paintings based on Lange's Mexican migrant workers carry renewed meaning. Liu notes that she feels deeply connected with Lange's subjects, as if they are people she might encounter in present-day California. "They are all my relatives. We don't need a language, but we can communicate across time and space. There is something beyond that links us."

Oil on canvas, 2015
Collection of Sig Anderman

Plowboy

This painting, Hung Liu's most recent portrait in the exhibition, is based on a photograph by Dorothea Lange but takes its palette and title from a poem by Carl Sandburg (1878–1967). The 1916 poem "Plowboy," begins:

*After the last red sunset glimmer,
Black on the line of a low hill rise,
Formed into moving shadows, I saw*

A plowboy and two horses lined against the gray,
The concluding lines, which focus on memory, have special meaning for Liu, who often refers to her paintings as "memorial sites."

*I shall remember you long,
Plowboy and horses against the sky in shadow.
I shall remember you and the picture
You made for me,
Turning the turf in the dusk
And haze of an April gloaming.*

Liu, like Sandburg, uses imagery to give voice to the forgotten. For her, though, it is "in the process of painting, [where] the invisible becomes visible, and the anonymous becomes familiar."

Oil on canvas, 2020

Collection of Dr. Matthias Bolten and Mr. Matthias Brücklmeier; courtesy of Nancy Hoffman Gallery

Sanctuary

Dorothea Lange interviewed the subjects of her photographs and often wrote detailed captions to accompany her images. This photograph's notation reads, "Mexican mother in California: 'Sometimes I tell my children that I would like to go to Mexico, but they tell me, *We don't want to go we belong here.*'" The hardships that migrant mothers face is universal, transcending borders and cultures. So, while this subject's statement was made nearly a century ago, it still resonates with many families today.

The Madonna figure appears in different forms throughout Hung Liu's oeuvre as seen here and in *Madonna*, 1992. In making this painting, Liu attached a gold leaf oval to the canvas, referring both to the halo of the Virgin Mary and child in Renaissance paintings and, in a more culturally specific sense, to the Virgin of Guadalupe. The round shape also highlights Liu's interest in combining Catholic and Buddhist symbolism. Circles, for her, represent many things, notably hope, communion, and sanctuary.

Oil on canvas with gold leaf, 2019

Collection of Hung Liu and Jeff Kelley, courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe, NM

Catchers

Hung Liu based this painting on a 1939 photograph by Dorothea Lange. Two young children gaze in opposite directions, and from Lange's caption, we learn they are migrant children, living at a Farm Security Administration mobile camp in Merrill, Oregon. Lange's portraits of migrant children are especially poignant for Liu, who remembers feeling a lack of control over her destiny while working in the fields during the Cultural Revolution.

Liu chose to remain faithful to many of the compositional elements in Lange's black-and-white image, but she deliberately used color and style to emphasize the hopeful aspect of looking ahead toward a brighter future. She translated the original's gray barren landscape into a textured ground of gold and brown hues. A rolling green and magenta hill sits on the horizon. Even more, the fine lines of color we see in Liu's figures—green and orange wisps of hair, for example, serve to tie the children to the land.

Oil on canvas, 2019

Collection of Tim and Donna Jones

August

When Hung Liu saw a 1939 photograph of a girl, clinging to a barbed wire fence, she was struck by the simultaneity of the young subject's despair and strength. Liu made this painting in 2017, almost eighty years after Dorothea Lange captured the moment on film. As Liu set out to interpret the scene, children at the U.S.–Mexico border were being separated from their parents, and she sought to prioritize the visibility of children. Liu has noted that when she paints portraits, she thinks of the subjects as her ancestors and contemplates the ways time and memory shape generations. Amy Sherald (born 1973), who painted the official portrait of Michelle Obama, has said that she views Liu's use of photographs as "not only a bridge from the past to the future, but a bridge from one world to another." Sherald is among several contemporary artists who have been influenced by Liu's work.

Oil on canvas, 2017

Collection of David and Debbie Popper

South

The black-and-white photograph by Dorothea Lange that served as Hung Liu's source for this portrait shows a group of children in the Mississippi Delta in 1936. A girl sits on the edge of a run-down wooden porch while two boys stand nearby. By omitting the boys and portraying the girl in a dignified manner, Liu radically changed the image. *South* reflects the artist's sustained interest in bringing the lives of women and girls to the fore, a fundamental aspect of her hopeful vision. Although she describes her feminism as coming from China and the strong women in her own family, Liu is often invited by feminist activists in the United States to advocate publicly for women and girls. At the San Francisco Women's March, held in 2017, Liu delivered a powerful speech, in which she said, "The story of America . . . is a story of desperation, of sadness, of uncertainty, of leaving your home. It is also a story of courage, of sacrifice, of determination, and—more than anything—of hope."

Oil on canvas, 2017

Collection of Marcy and Richard Schwartz

Hung Liu: Portraits of Promised Lands has been made possible through the generous support of the following donors:

John and Louise Bryson

Robert and Arlene Kogod

Anonymous

Fred M. Levin, the Shenson Foundation, in memory of Nancy Livingston Levin and Ben and A. Jess Shenson

E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation

Haynes and Boone Foundation, Purvi and Bill Albers, Susan and David McCombs

Roselyne Chroman Swig

Frances Stevenson Tyler

Robert and Jane Clark

Covington & Burling

Lorrie and Richard Greene

Koret Foundation

Rena Bransten Gallery

Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe, NM

Nancy and Peter Gennet

Maryellen and Frank Herringer

Nancy Hoffman Gallery

Gail Severn Galley

Mr. Charles Ziegler and Ms. Conan Putnam

Mr. Walter Maciel

Lise Goodman and Josef Vascovitz

This project received Federal support from the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, and support from the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative. Additional support was provided by the American Portrait Gala Endowment.

BECAUSE OF HER STORY



<http://womenshistory.si.edu/donors>