

Art

## A master of ‘weeping realism’ made heroes of workers and migrants

Blending socialist realism with pop art, Hung Liu made paintings that interrogate the myths of immigration and Mao’s Cultural Revolution.

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Review by Mark Jenkins

To understand Hung Liu’s fascination with historical pictures, it helps to know that she lived through two purges of memories — one personal, one societal. “Happy and Gay,” an exhibition at Georgetown University’s Maria & Alberto de la Cruz Gallery, presents some of Liu’s responses to the propaganda materials Maoist China substituted for real-world images.

When Liu was a baby, her mother destroyed most of the family photographs that included the girl’s father, who was arrested in 1948 by the victorious Communists for having served in the Chinese Nationalist Army. Two decades later, Mao’s Cultural Revolution sought to obliterate all vestiges of the past. Liu was one of many young people sent to the countryside to be “reeducated” by living and laboring with the rural proletariat.

Liu arrived in California in 1984, in her mid-30s, and lived there until her 2021 death from pancreatic cancer at 73. Her work in the United States often focused on the roles and mythologies of immigrants, especially those of Chinese origin. Among her best-known creations is a large painting of her own green card on which she is identified not as Liu, Hung but as Cookie, Fortune.

Liu’s paintings are usually derived from photographs, as is one of the artworks in “Happy and Gay.” But most of this show’s pictures remake simple illustrations from books designed to indoctrinate Chinese kids in the 1950s and ’60s. In Chinese, these are known as xiaorensu (children’s books).

The show was curated by Georgetown graduate students with Dorothy Moss, formerly curator of painting and sculpture at the National Portrait Gallery (where she organized a 2021 Liu retrospective) and now director of Liu’s estate. Its title is from a Maoist song for schoolchildren that extols, “Come, boys and girls, let’s sing, let’s dance. We are happy and gay. It’s our national day.”

Liu's approach will be familiar to anyone who knows the styles of American pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol. But where the latter reproduce such commercial art as comic book panels and consumer products, Liu replicates drawings of earnest children, often waving small Chinese flags under text exhorting national service — patriotism merchandised as relentlessly as Brillo pads or Campbell's Soup.

The émigré artist combines printing and painting, much like Warhol, in many of these works, which were made from 2011 to 2013. Scenarios rendered with simple black outlines are overpainted with soft, mottled colors. The reimagined illustrations also feature a Liu trademark, drips of linseed oil that gently disrupt the composition, suggesting history's mutability and memory's liquidity. This technique, more conspicuous in Liu's paintings than her illustration-derived work, was termed "weeping realism" by Liu and her spouse, art critic Jeff Kelley.

One of the largest pieces is a two-panel picture of female agricultural laborers, heroically hoeing and plowing. Liu subverts this paeon to collective-farm workers in several ways. In addition to including the usual drips, Liu has glamorized the women's faces with incongruous rouge and red lipstick. Wild splashes of color contrast the stodgily outlined figures, as do the naturalistically rendered raptors in the sky above the workers. It's as if the birds have somehow flown through a barrier that divides banal propaganda from three-dimensional reality.

Liu also combats flatness by pairing pictures with real objects, including a hand broom and several metal stars, mounted on the walls outside the artwork. More intricately, the artist insets a set of actual wooden shelves filled with small books into "Street Library." This painting is more typical of Liu's usual style. It's based on a photograph, like most of her work, and includes abundant drips as well as two of the freehand circles common in her paintings. The gestures give an impromptu spin to the photo-derived scene.

The show's most abstract entry is the looser half of "Red Flag Flowing," which pairs two versions of mainland China's national standard. On the right side, Liu reduces the flag's five stars to a thick gash of yellow pigment atop a heavily impastoed red field. The painting is a bid to transform post-1948 China into nothing more than an exercise in color. Yet burrowing beneath the heavy paint seem to be childhood remembrances, still indelible after all the attempts at erasure.

If you go

## Hung Liu: Happy and Gay

Maria & Alberto de la Cruz Gallery, Georgetown University, 3535 Prospect St. NW.  
[delacruzgallery.org](http://delacruzgallery.org). 202-687-8039.

**Dates:** Through April 13.

**Prices:** Free.

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