



Whorinal?, 2021

Marcel Whochamp

Hung Liu

Portraits of Promised Lands

Unveiled on August 27, 2021, just three weeks after the passing of Hung Liu from pancreatic cancer, “Portraits of Promised Lands” was not just a highly anticipated celebration of the artist’s career of five decades, but a vital opportunity for insights into Liu’s life and artistic concerns, including issues of identity.

The retrospective was presented across four rooms at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, each with a specific focus: family, gender, refugees, and Liu’s most recent painting series inspired by documentary photographer Dorothea Lange. The oil-on-canvas painting *Resident Alien* (1988), an enlarged facsimile of Liu’s United States-issued

HUNG LIU, *The Botanist*, 2013, oil on canvas. 243.8 × 137.2 cm. Copyright the estate of Hung Liu. Courtesy the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC.



photo ID card, was first to greet viewers in the family-themed gallery. Modified in the painted duplicate is the artist’s birth year, which was changed from 1948 to 1984, in reference to when she arrived in the US and was assigned new identities, including that of an immigrant. “Cookie, Fortune” also replaces Liu’s name, poking fun at the stereotyping of Asians.

From there, in the same section, visitors encountered a collection of family portraits. Caught in the Chinese Civil War and subsequent Cultural Revolution, the Lius were among many who had to flee their homes and destroy personal mementos, including photographs, for fear of being targeted by Mao Zedong’s Red Guards for their political affiliations and educated background. The artist, however, managed to hold on to a few precious images. Referencing a photo taken during a research trip led by her maternal grandfather, Liu Weihua, a scholar on the ecologies of Qianshan mountain, *The Botanist* (2013) depicts the elder Liu with flower motifs, in homage to his intellectual interest. The painting also accentuates her grandfather’s hands, which “were very soft and big,” as Liu described. The method of reinterpreting photographs or found images is characteristic of her painting practice. “In paint, the ridges and lines unique to each person’s experiences come alive,” she once said.

The notion of relaying the stories of individuals was central to the exhibition’s other works, including the canvases in the next section, on gender. For instance, the painting *Madonna* (1992) stems from a 19th-century photograph of a Chinese woman embracing a cupid statue—one of the images that Liu found in the Beijing Film Studio archives that depict prostitutes with Victorian backdrops and props. At the top of the composition, she

added a gold-leaf arch recalling the halos in portraits of Virgin Mary. Art critic John Berger theorized that in the history of art, men are presumed to be the spectators, while women are the subjects. Liu does away with this positioning. While alluding to the Western fetish for Chinese women, she creates a new narrative for the female figure wherein she is divine and with her own agency, highlighting the fact that she is worthy of respect.

The show’s following chapter centered refugees. An exhausted woman, hunched over in *Refugee: Woman and Children* (2000), is flanked by two children, each in a woven basket. The work draws from a photo that Liu interpreted as showing a mother desperately selling her children, perhaps in the hopes that they will have a better life. The inclusion of a crane and lotus blossom in the top half of the painting as well as a collection of Buddhist figures in the bottom left-hand corner indicate her wishes and blessings for the family’s safety, while drops of linseed oil spill down the image’s foreground, as if washing away their suffering.

Finally, the “After Lange” section spotlighted Liu’s beautiful reinterpretations of Lange’s black-and-white photographs capturing sharecroppers and migrant workers during the US’s Great Depression. In *Sanctuary* (2019), for example, Liu uses pastel tones of orange, purple, and pink to render a migrant mother and her child. A gold-leaf oval hovering behind the figures again nods to paintings of the Virgin Mary and Jesus. In these ways, Liu breathes into the monochrome compositions a renewed sense of life.

The comprehensive exhibition underscored Liu’s emotional depth and empathy for society’s most vulnerable. In her portraits, individuals emerge from the shadows and come alive.

ARIANA HEFFNER