

HEATHER JAMES  
FINE ART

Hung Liu: TOM BOY  
AT HEATHER JAMES FINE ART, PALM DESERT, CA



Hung Liu, *Underwater 2*, 2014, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches

**November 14, 2014 - Heather James Fine Art - Palm Desert is pleased to present an exhibition of paintings by Chinese artist Hung Liu. The exhibition opens on Thursday, January 29, with a reception from 6 to 8 p.m.**

*Tom Boy* is an exhibition of paintings by Hung Liu that contrasts two radically different representations of 20th century Chinese women: the unisexual, proletarian soldier of Maoist propaganda, and the feminized, high-class prostitute of the late Qing Dynasty and the early Chinese Republic. While Liu is known for paintings of young Chinese prostitutes whose images may be found in staged period photographs from the late 19th and early 20th centuries (they were advertisements for various big-city brothels), a more recent childhood memory of a well-known propaganda film from 1949, “Daughters of China,” rekindled her interest in images of women as soldiers in Mao’s revolutionary China, and in China’s war with Japan.

The film “Daughters of China,” which Liu remembers seeing as a child, depicts an actual 1938 event in which eight female soldiers fighting the Japanese staged a rear-guard action that allowed the Chinese army to escape. Cut off with their backs against a river, they were coaxed to surrender when the Japanese realized they were women. Rather than capitulate, the eight young soldiers—ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-eight—carried their dying and wounded into the river and drowned. *Arise Ye Wretched of the Earth*, (2008) shows the women as they struggle in the river. Indeed, with its drips and washes, the painting seems to be drowning its own subjects.

For her painting series, also named “Daughters of China,” Liu captured stills from the film and used them as templates for painting numerous large, poignant canvases. One, *We Have Been Naught, We Shall Be All* (2007, Denver Art Museum & Logan Collection), a painting whose title is taken from “The Internationale” (the worldwide Communist anthem), is a triptych showing a sequence from the film in which several women carry a comrade river-ward. It recalls the *Pietà* in its limp pathos. Liu’s runnels of dripping paint enact her subject: the figure struggling to stand but draining away. The meta subject here is the disembodiment of Socialist Realism; the artist bleeds dry its propaganda to reveal a narrative of common courage with women as its heroes.

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F I N E A R T

Born in 1948 and sent to the countryside for four years during the Cultural Revolution, Hung Liu, who emigrated to the United States in 1984, came of age in China during the era of Mao Tse-Dong. As an artist, she represents a perspective based in personal and family experience that takes in the whole of post-revolutionary Chinese history. Her story is well known: her father, an officer in the Kuomintang (the Nationalist Party), was sent to a labor camp when Liu was an infant, and she did not see him again until she was forty-six. She traveled alone from northern China to Beijing when she was only twelve; was “reeducated” during the Cultural Revolution; painted furtive landscapes—not propaganda—in the early 1970s; was trained and then taught at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where she became famous for painting an exotic, non-proletarian mural (since destroyed); came to America and studied with Allan Kaprow at the University of California, San Diego; was embraced by American feminists in the context of late-1980s multiculturalism; and has become, as the Wall Street Journal observed in 2013 “The best Chinese painter in America.”

Defying her training in Socialist Realism, Liu’s innovation as a painter has been to erode her own technical mastery using a combination of oil washes and loose, painted circles (brushstrokes turned back on themselves, like Zen calligraphy). Historical memory (the subject) dissolves into the visual field; images struggle to remain on the surface but, as paint, they cannot resist the gravity of the oil that cuts through them as it slowly drains downward along the cotton weave of the canvas.

Feminism was part of the state dream of Mao’s China. The purported equality of women during the Maoist era was founded on the repression of sexual difference. Clothing was rendered asexual, emphasizing military, peasant, or worker status. Since then, images of women in Chinese art and film have been caught between a kind of Maoist butch masculinity, in which women impersonate the dress and actions of male revolutionaries and soldiers (the women are rhetorically neutered, like double eunuchs), and a suffering, melodramatic femininity, in which pretty women bear, apolitically, the burden of a nation’s repressed emotions.

The works in “Tom Boy” constitute a kind of pictorial cross-dressing that meet somewhere between conventional stereotypes of men as soldiers and women as prostitutes. Growing up an only child without a father, Liu has often thought of herself as a tomboy, and this hybrid state of gendered identity, rendered here from old photographs and stills from a vintage film, constitute an unstable middle ground where the images of photography, film, memory, and painting meet. What holds these seemingly antithetical images together is the dignity imparted to them by the painter as individuals.

Liu’s subjects over the past twenty years, from prostitutes to soldiers, can be understood as reflections of her struggle as an artist to find dignity in the face of every woman she paints. State feminism and exotic femininity must be reconciled, if at all, one painting at a time by an artist—a woman (and also once a soldier)—free to identify with the underlying spirit of both. What Liu has always found beneath the fading surfaces of photographs - and films - are the ghosts that emerge from the prolonged and respectful act of painting them.

Heather James Fine Art is located at 45188 Portola Avenue in Palm Desert and features a wide array of art ranging from Impressionist and Modern art to Post-War and Contemporary, American, Latin American, Old Master, Photography and Design. For more information about the gallery and upcoming exhibitions, please visit our website [www.heatherjames.com](http://www.heatherjames.com) or contact the gallery at 760-346-8926.