

## A CLOSER LOOK

# Hung Liu



**Hung Liu (Chinese, b. 1948, active USA)**

*A Third World*, 1993

Oil on canvas with gold leaf on wood

SBMA, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Twentieth-Century Art Acquisition Fund, Jill and John C. Bishop, Jr., and Lillian and Jon B. Lovelace, 1993.<sup>29</sup>

## About the Artist

Hung Liu was born in Changchun, China in 1948 and grew up in the Maoist regime. At school, she was trained in the Socialist Realist style of art and studied mural painting as a graduate student at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing. In 1984, she immigrated to the United States to attend the University of California, San Diego. She now lives in Oakland, California.

## Themes

- Identity
- Immigrant Experience
- Oppression
- Intersectionality

## Overview

Hung Liu's *A Third World* addresses the complexities of personal and cultural identity that can arise from the immigrant experience. In her monumental self-portrait, Liu alludes to events that have shaped her life, using symbols to convey her message.

She presents herself larger than life, wearing a bright red scarf or shawl adorned with a Mao Zedong political button. The image of Mao refers to her experience as a young girl forced to leave school and work in the collective farms in order to be "reeducated" and freed of "elitist intellectual" prejudices. This idea of "reeducation" was part of the Cultural Revolution that took place in China from 1966 to 1976. Begun under Zedung, it was a chaotic, terrifying, and deadly assault on time-honored Chinese values in which children were forced to denounce their parents, their teachers, and their religious and cultural beliefs. It upended social trust and resulted in a million or more deaths.

In *A Third World*, the gold-leaf third eye painted on Liu's forehead is in the shape of San Francisco as cartographers first mapped it. In Mandarin, "San Francisco" translates as "Golden Mountain." By using this symbol associated with the inner world of Eastern thought and then making it gold—the symbol of material aspiration of the West and the United States—Liu suggests the conflict between the radically distinct

ideologies of capitalism and communism. By connecting these ideologies with her personal story, she suggests the ramifications of relocation for herself and other Chinese immigrants to the United States.

## Research: Chinese Immigrants in the United States

By 1851, 25,000 Chinese immigrants had left their homes and moved to California. Research the stories of Chinese immigrants to “Gold Mountain.” What did they expect to see? What did they find when they arrived? Write a news article describing the realities they encountered.

## Watch: Hung Liu

In this five-minute video on YouTube, listen to Hung Liu discuss her life and work:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jufwfd2W8fA>

## Research: The Red Guard

The Red Guard was a student-led paramilitary group devoted to Mao Zedong who carried out many horrible atrocities during the Cultural Revolution. How do you think a member of the Red Guard would react to Hung Liu’s portrait, especially her reference to Zedong? Write a monologue in their voice expressing a reaction.

## Art Activity: Making it Personal

Hung Liu uses symbols to create a self-portrait that reveals her personal and cultural history. Create your own self-portrait inspired by Liu’s painting.

Consider the following questions when creating your self-portrait:

What symbols or objects might you incorporate?

What size and shape would your portrait be?

What colors might you use to convey emotions or mood?

What cultural or historical references might you include?

What will be the title of the work?

At what stage in your life will your self-portrait be from?

What materials will you use and why?



## Reflect: The Dandelion

In her paintings, Hung Liu creates a form of collapsed history. Blending images and time, she includes scenes from her childhood in China and her coming of age as a new immigrant to the United States. She also often incorporates images of modern China from documentary photographs in her art, reimagining settings and people through a nostalgic and critical lens.

Throughout Liu's work, the dandelion is a common motif. She has called dandelions the "windblown seedlings of our inner lives." Connecting the dandelion with the idea of migration, Liu says, "They can be found anywhere in the world and thrive wherever they are planted." In dandelions she also sees an ironic pairing: the tenacity of life in the scattering of seeds, and the necessity of death. That duality, like the duality of the past and present, informs much of her work.

Image below: Hung Liu, *Dandelions 11*, 2015, oil on canvas, 60 x 120. Private collection. © Hung Liu.



## Read: Poetry of Li Bai

Liu often pairs the Tang Dynasty poetry of Li Bai with her dandelion paintings. In the poem below, with its reference to grief and a "belt of heartbreaking green," we find a connection between sorrow, nature, and returning home.

### *Beautiful Barbarians (Pu Sa Man)*

*Trees shading trees, mist-smoke weaves.*

*Cold mountains, a belt of heartbreaking green.*

*Dusk enters a high tower;*

*In it someone grieves.*

*All alone upon the jade terrace;*

*Homing birds return in haste.*

*Where is the way to return?*

*Long rest, short rest, bower after bower.*

## Read: Poetry of Li-Young Lee

Just as Hung Liu layers time and memory with paint, so too does the contemporary Asian American poet, Li-Young Lee, use the poetry of Li Bai to inform the following poem about his mother and grandmother:

### *I Ask My Mother to Sing*

She begins, and my grandmother joins her.  
Mother and daughter sing like young girls.  
If my father were alive, he would play  
his accordion and sway like a boat.

I've never been in Peking, or the Summer  
Palace,  
nor stood on the great Stone Boat to watch  
the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake, the  
picnickers  
running away in the grass.

But I love to hear it sung;  
how the waterlilies fill with rain until  
they overturn, spilling water into water,  
then rock back, and fill with more.

Both women have begun to cry.  
But neither stops her song.



Like Liu's meditation on the dandelion, Lee remembers the sweetness of peaches in his 1986 poem, *From Blossoms*.

### *From Blossoms*

From blossoms comes  
this brown paper bag of peaches  
we bought from the boy  
at the bend in the road where we turned  
toward  
signs painted Peaches.

From laden boughs, from hands,  
from sweet fellowship in the bins,  
comes nectar at the roadside, succulent  
peaches we devour, dusty skin and all,  
comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we  
eat.

O, to take what we love inside,  
to carry within us an orchard, to eat  
not only the skin, but the shade,  
not only the sugar, but the days, to hold  
the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into  
the round jubilation of peach.

There are days we live  
as if death were nowhere  
in the background; from joy  
to joy to joy, from wing to wing,  
from blossom to blossom to  
impossible blossom, to sweet impossible  
blossom.

## Activity: Memory Poems

Write a poem in which a past memory or story that connects to your identity is overlaid with the tension or emotion of the present.