

# RENA BRANSTEN GALLERY

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Hung Liu: Capp Street Project, 1988

September 16 – November 18, 2023



Rena Bransten Gallery is pleased to present *Hung Liu: Capp Street Project, 1988*. This collection of paintings and artifacts re-imagines the 1988 exhibition *Hung Liu: Resident Alien*, the culmination of Liu's two-month artist residency at the Capp Street Project in San Francisco, presented at the downtown Monadnock Building, a sprawling, under-construction office space which offered Hung Liu a liberating and engaging opportunity.

The original exhibition, which took place just five years after Liu immigrated to the U.S. from her native China, was instrumental in bringing her work to the attention of the larger art world. The multimedia installation – composed of paintings, wall drawings, Chinese calligraphy, ceremonial objects from Chinatown, a pile of abacuses, and small mounds of fortune cookies – addressed the history and complexities of the immigrant experience, looking specifically at the history of Chinese immigration to San Francisco from the Gold Rush of 1849 to her own immigration to the US in 1984 and her subsequent status as a “resident alien.” This exploration was both a central theme of the 1988 show, and a focus Liu would pursue for the rest of her career.

Included in the original exhibition, and reproduced in print form here, is what became one of Liu's best-known paintings *Resident Alien* (1988), a self-portrait re-creation of her green card, changing her birth year from 1948 to 1984 (the year she immigrated) and her name to “Cookie, Fortune.” The work *Chinese Trade Monopoly* (1988) alludes to anti-Chinese rhetoric, referencing George Frederick Keller's cartoon, “What Shall We Do With Our Boys?” Other works include a charcoal and oil triptych portrait based on family photographs of the Wongs, a prominent San Francisco family committed to local arts. Starting with a formal studio portrait prior to their emigration (late 1800's) and ending with a candid photograph at a 1970's gathering, Hung Liu's heroic scale (over twenty linear feet) traces and memorializes the family's journey. This work shows an early interest of Liu's in using historical photographs as foundational source material for her paintings – a practice which also remained an important aspect of her work.

The Gallery is additionally including one work that, while created the same year, was not part of the Capp Street Project exhibition. *18 Strokes* (1988) is an elaborate and beautifully rendered drawing with a large sculptural component. While *18 Strokes* avoids the specificity of the immigrant perspective and the consequences of San Francisco's, California's, and the United States' racist policies and actions, the work demonstrates another of Liu's longtime interests – this time in installation. The work is a demonstration of Hung Liu's deep scholarly training in Chinese art history and technique liberated by her new exposure to the scale and ambition of Robert Smithson's Land Art. A vortex central to the drawing and sculpture suggests Hung Liu's fascination with blending Chinese art historical practice with the freedom afforded American artists.

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This exhibition offers the viewer a chance to contemplate the genius of Hung Liu's remarkable career and immense body of work, both conceptually and materially. These works are as relevant today as when they were made – a declaration of our shared struggles and triumphs paired with a deep concern for the causes of human suffering. Liu's work personalizes the political and humanizes with fierce compassion.

**Hung Liu** was born in Changchun, China in 1948, growing up under the Maoist regime. Initially trained in the Socialist Realist style, Liu studied mural painting as a graduate student at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing, before immigrating to the US in 1984 to attend the University of California, San Diego, where she studied under Allan Kaprow. A two-time recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in painting, Liu also received a Lifetime Achievement Award in Printmaking from the Southern Graphics Council International in 2011. A retrospective of Liu's work, "Summoning Ghosts: The Art and Life of Hung Liu," was organized by the Oakland Museum of California in 2013, traveling through 2015. In a review of that show, the Wall Street Journal called Liu "the greatest Chinese painter in the US." In 2021, the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian organized "Hung Liu: Portraits of Promised Lands," a retrospective look at the artist's portraits. Curated by Dorothy Moss, this daring embrace of human countenance across multiple cultures, histories, and identities was the first solo show by an Asian American woman in the National Portrait Gallery's history. Unfortunately, Liu died of pancreatic cancer just three weeks before the show opened in Washington. Liu's works have been exhibited extensively and collected by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the National Gallery of Art and The National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C., the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, and the Los Angeles County Museum, among others. At her death, Liu was Professor Emerita at Mills College, in Oakland, California, where she taught since 1990.

*\*Rena Bransten Gallery is pleased to welcome Dorothy Moss as Director of the Hung Liu estate.*

Above image: Hung Liu at Capp Street Project, 1988. Photo credit Ben Blackwell

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