

A. K. T. P.

## HUNG LIU

11.01.2008

**H**ung Liu was born in China and trained in Socialist Realism painting during Mao's reign. In a few key ways, she has held onto her early lessons. She paints in a representational style, and she paints heroes. But she no longer tells an institutional or directly political story; her work is now much more rooted in personal history. Change begins with the individual's consciousness. She has retrieved heroes from a kind of false mythology and raised them to the level of authentic heroes, while connecting them to real human emotion. Her soldiers, peasants, or grandmothers cooking might be in China, but as she told me, they could also be in Vietnam or Georgia, because women are still carrying the load, whether it is family, corn, or war.

By connecting them to her own personal story, she has given a new universality and immediacy to her heroes.

– *Kenneth Caldwell*

**Q:** I think the last time you were here was five years ago. Tell us why you're back.

**A:** Printmaking is still one of the classic kinds of media; it can never be replaced by computer or high-tech. It's so tangible, and so physical.

**Q:** Let's talk a little about tradition and manipulating tradition. I look at your work and see its roots in socialist realism, but you've taken it somewhere else to tell another kind of story.

**A:** In the last few years, what's happened to me, first of all, is that I am getting

older, and that's nature's rule. When you get older, I think you go back to your roots, closer. We can never come to a full circle; it's more like a horseshoe. So it's close to the beginning, the end, but not really touching.

I have already lived two lives. The first half of my life was in China, still longer than the time I've lived in the U.S.

The Cultural Revolution happened when I was 18 and everything became chaotic. The intellectuals were punished and were sent to the countryside. I worked in a field for four years. I always loved art, and did drawing, did some propaganda things, walls, but mainly I worked in the field. You could see the political subject matter from inside and outside. You can paint an old man, but there must be a political agenda.



**Luzao (Stove), 2008**

Color spitbite, softground & sugarlift  
aquatint etching. 36" x 50"; Edition of 40

Hung Liu working at Paulson Press in 2008







I look back now and I have another label for it: socialist surrealism. Because in reality there's no such thing like what we painted. When you work in the mud and get up at three o'clock during harvest season, nobody is smiling.

**Q:** So when you were working in China, were you starting to experiment outside of the approved style?

**A:** Some of the artists, we joked around. We could only put our work underneath our bed, you could never show anything.

**Q:** Secret art?

**A:** Yes. I wanted to paint some landscapes, but it wasn't on the agenda. I just wanted to study the sky, the color of the sky, the land, the tree, the house, the color. That is where I came up with the title "My Secret Freedom".

**Q:** Would artists get together to share this secret work?

**A:** Not really. That time was pretty hard.

**Q:** What about the images in these new prints?

**A:** When I was little, I saw a movie based on a true story called Daughters of China. It was released in 1949, but it was

about the second Sino-Japanese War and events that took place in 1938. There are eight women soldiers, who fought to the point where they were backed into river, and they had to cover for the other troops to retreat. They had no choice, either surrender or go into the river. They carried the dead body of their comrade and walked into the ice cold river and drowned. It was very powerful.

**Q:** The idea was to show their heroism?

**A:** Exactly. The heroism really influenced my generation, because we were to dedicate our lives to a higher cause. When I revisit this film, they're still so believable. You see that in the print entitled, "Foshou (Buddha's hand)".

**Q:** Buddha's hand is on the right?

**A:** It is a kind of citrus. You have it for protection, for good fortune. But this is a hollow shape. It's all fingers, like an offering, a flower food. It is like a prayer.

Some of these other prints are about women working. "Luzao" depicts a woman cooking. Every mother is cooking for everybody, because Chinese do believe food is number one. The woman in "Zhuangjia" is a peasant carrying corn. It reminds me of my time in the countryside.

**Q:** Will the woman be paired with another image like the soldier?

**A:** No, that one's alone, because she already is carrying a large load. She doesn't need any more.

**Q:** What about the smaller prints?

**A:** My grandfather did a lot of scholarly work with maps, and so I use fragments of the maps as a background and the little birds are cranes. They have just come out of their shells. They are fresh and full of life, but facing a challenging and complicated world. They symbolize new life bearing hope for an uncharted future.

**Q:** What about the relationship between your printmaking and painting?

**A:** It goes back and forth. The paintings are pretty large scale and they take forever. Sometimes in the painting I realize it would be great if I printed it. The printing process makes you conscious about mixing color and there is a kind of clarity; you know which plate does what. Yet printmaking always surprises you. You can't foresee what is going to happen.

**Q:** What commentary are you making, now that the work is created at such a remove from China?

**A:** I am not sure there is a direct commentary. It's just that these women should not be forgotten. The hardship, even now, for women coming to the city. Now they can follow jobs, but the gap between the rich and poor is bigger.

**Q:** In much of your work, I see these circles. It isn't necessarily defining an object, it seems abstract.

**A:** It is. Perhaps they belong to another dimension of consciousness. In Chinese writing, the end of the sentence is a period, but it's a tiny circle. So it's also like a punctuation mark, but it isn't closed.

You don't have a beginning or an end. In Zen Buddhism, there's the ideal condition, your mind can be in this emptiness, so when you draw the circle, everything, all you see, is pure emptiness: the wholeness is also emptiness. So there you have everything. ✧



(left page)  
**Foshou (Buddha's Hand), 2008**  
Color spitbite, softground & sugarlift aquatint etching. 36" x 62"; Edition of 25

(above right)  
**New Old World Symphony: Blue Foot, 2008**  
Color aquatint, spitbite aquatint and softground etching. 19" x 16"; Edition of 50

**New Old World Symphony: Pink Foot, 2008**  
Color aquatint, spitbite aquatint and softground etching. 19" x 16"; Edition of 50

**New Old World Symphony: Tender Foot, 2008**  
Color aquatint, spitbite aquatint and softground etching. 19" x 16"; Edition of 50





**PLEASE JOIN PAULSON PRESS AT THE FOLLOWING ART FAIRS:**

**IFPDA Print Fair**, October 30th-November 2nd, 2008  
7th Regiment Armory, 643 Park Avenue at  
67th Street, New York, NY 10021

**INK Miami**, December 4th-7th, 2008  
Suites of Dorchester, 1850 Collins Avenue,  
Miami Beach, Florida 33139

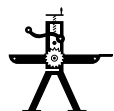


ifpdaprintfair2008

**Zhuangjia (Crop), 2007**

Color aquatint, spitbite aquatint,  
softground aquatint etching  
36" x 35"; Edition of 40

PAULSON PRESS  
INTAGLIO PRINTING



1318 Tenth St. Berkeley, CA 94710  
T. 510 559 2088 F. 510 559 2085 www.paulsonpress.com

First Class Mail  
U.S. Postage  
Paid  
Berkeley, CA  
Permit #559