

Q. K. T. P.



HUNG LIU

02.01.13



**SHUI – WATER, 2012**

Color aquatint etching with gold leaf;

Image: 36"x26"; Paper: 47"x36"; Edition of 40

**H**ung Liu has lived in the United States since 1984 and while she speaks English fluently, her malapropisms add a layer of humor and seriousness to any conversation. Likewise, her paintings, with their beautifully rendered scenes are commentaries on life in Communist China but also on the absurdity of life anywhere. What is happy and gay? What is an atomic family? The hardships of her early life in China are a source material of incredible power, but Hung Liu taps into it without bitterness.

The release of these prints coincides with *Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu*, at the Oakland Art Museum, March 16th – June 30th, 2013.

**Paulson Bott Press:** What made you come back to Paulson Bott Press to do another set of prints? How did that come about?

**Hung Liu:** They invited me, I love to work with them. I can draw everyday. Sometimes I could live here!

**Q:** What do the prints do that the paintings don't?

**HL:** The layering up. Of course, you can try to copy by hand something, but this process allows you to layer up. Look at how many layers. Plus you just don't know.

**Q:** You don't know what?

**HL:** What is going to happen. That's what we want in life, right? Surprise.

**Q:** Less control?

**HL:** Less control. If you can let go sometimes, I think this is the way. There are five people here today, all expert. But still we cannot totally control this process you know? That's the beauty of this. If you know exactly what happens then why would you do it?

*Shui-Water* is a water landscape. Like a standard Chinese landscape, but there's a boat sinking. The more you look, the closer you look, you may see a sinking boat. But she has a flower, there's a butterfly over her jacket. I really think that the language of printmaking is very hard to do in pen and ink. The transparent layering up, I like that.

It is like poetry. You live with layers.

**Q:** Who are the women in these prints?

**HL:** Both women are from turn-of-the-20th century photos of prostitutes. Someone started to introduce photography into China, and these women were in a mail order catalog kind of thing. It wasn't like Playboy that you could buy anywhere.

**Q:** More like a catalog for the connoisseur?

**HL:** I think so. How many people could afford a prostitute that could have a photograph taken?

With the Revolution, they burned a lot of photographs. But these archives from a Beijing film studio were in a cardboard box.

**Q:** How did you come across them?

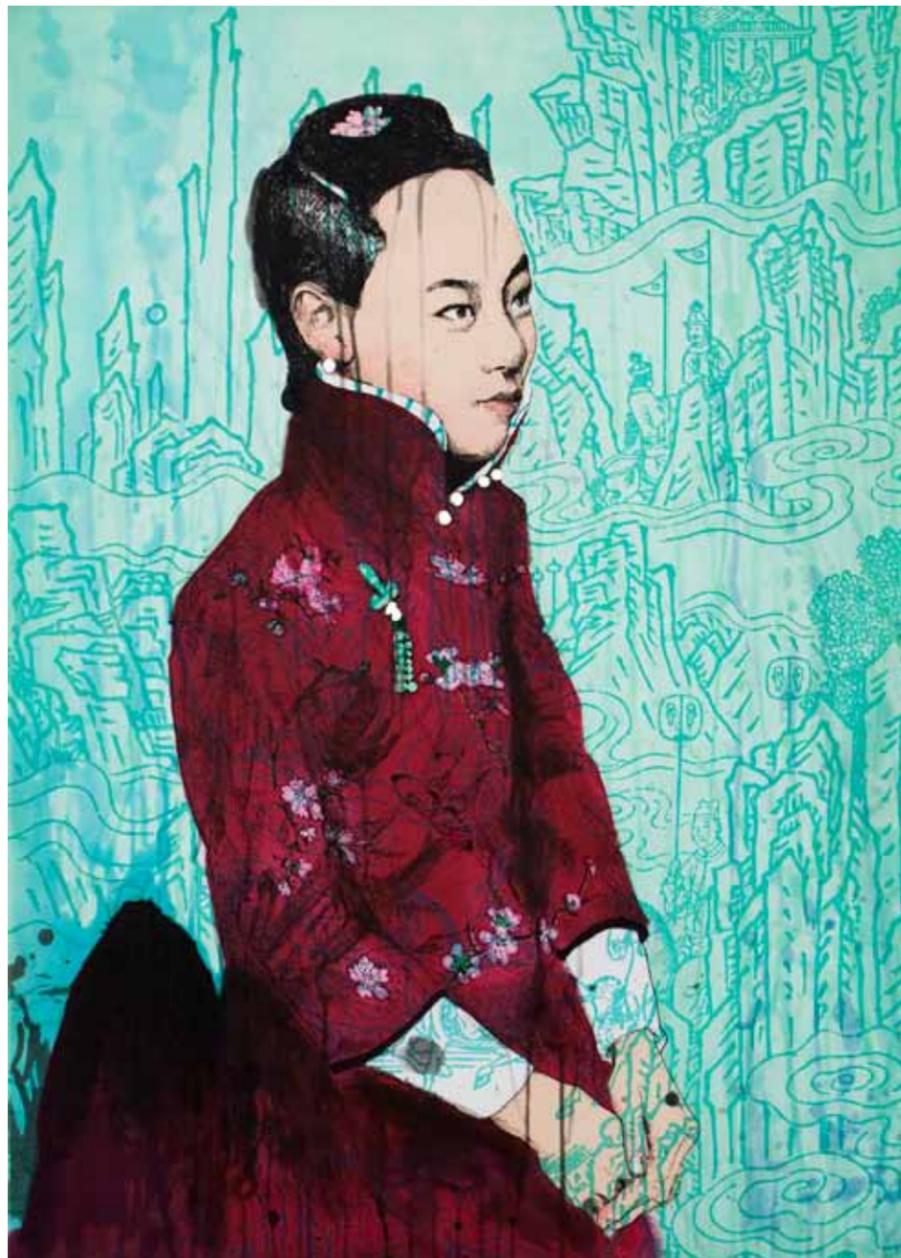
**HL:** I went to China in 1991 and tried to find old photos. That's my interest. If you have a picture with those wedding gowns, people say that you are from bourgeoisie family and you could be punished. So, I asked my friends, relatives, and nobody had much. And then somebody brought me a cardboard box and I saw this book of images. I had never seen this in China. I asked my mom—she was almost eighty at that time—and she had never seen anything like it.

**Q:** What did you do?

**HL:** I just took photographs of the book.

**Q:** So this etching in the plate came from the photographs that you took?

**HL:** Yes. I did a drawing from the photographs but made some changes. I believe that printmaking is a collaboration. It's so different



than working at your own studio. You can be excited, you can be frustrated, you can be angry—all the stuff, but you're on your own. But this is a different kind of working situation. It's good. You are not on your own. So they help me.

**Q:** When you came here, did you know what imagery you wanted to work with?

**HL:** We decided on some images beforehand. Here is one titled *Happy and Gay*.

**Q:** *Happy and Gay*?

**HL:** It could mean happy, but gay too. The reason I use that is because in my middle school in China we studied English. There's

#### **SHAN – MOUNTAIN, 2012**

Color aquatint etching with gold leaf;  
Image 36"x26"; Paper 47"x36"; Edition of 40

one text that goes, "Come boys and girls—come girls and—girl-boy, boy-girl, let's sing, let's dance. We are happy and gay. It's our national day." National Day was October 1st; we were still on vacation, so we always remembered "We are happy and gay. We are happy and gay." So, my upcoming show is called "Happy and Gay."

**Q:** Tell me more.

**HL:** In China in the early 60s, nobody had television. Most people didn't even have a radio or go to the movies. A popular form of entertainment was for people to sit on the street and rent a little storybook for one penny.

**Q:** Like a graphic novel?

**HL:** Yes? With each page, you can see the whole panorama of a war scene, then you turn and there's a living character. And every page is done by hand. The book is on the shelf, not a real shelf, but cardboard shelf that was on the street. So the street vendor takes your penny and you just sit on the curbside and read your book.

People get educated, but also brainwashed. But there are universal fairy tales.

**Q:** So that's some of the source material. Did you reinterpret the characters found in these books?

**HL:** You have to, but the tradition is the line drawing, linear art with a flat color. There were a lot of images for example, the landscape, the country houses, the trees, even the woman's—qipao, the Chinese traditional dress for women.

And the qipao changes from very long to very sexy. My mom wore it when she went to school. In wintertime, you have a cup inside, so it's a very warm qipao.

**Q:** So why is the boy's suit pink?

**HL:** That's happy and gay. There is an ideal life, here—America's dream and China's dream. We have a happy and gay life, you

know. I have a painting of a Mom going to the field as a peasant, Dad going to the factory as a worker, and then the little boy learning how to work at home. So it's all about an...

**Q:** Idealized life?

**HL:** Exactly. Like an atomic—what's it called, an atomic?

**Q:** A nuclear family?

**HL:** An atomic family! Nuclear. This is an ideal landscape, very peaceful—everybody is in their right place. In China, we always say workers, peasants, and soldiers are the valued class. The Communist party espouses to work for the proletariat and elevates their stature by using their images in propaganda. But it's not so simple. ✪

#### **HAPPY AND GAY: THE KITE, 2012**

Color aquatint etching; Image: 15"x12";  
Paper: 24"x20"; Edition of 20



Hung Liu working in the Paulson Bott studio.





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### HAPPY AND GAY: THANKS MAMA, 2012

Color aquatint etching; Image: 15"x12"; Paper: 24"x20"; Edition of 20



DESIGN: MICHAEL OSBORNE DESIGN

### HAPPY AND GAY: THE FLAG, 2012

Color aquatint etching; Image: 15"x12"; Paper: 24"x20"; Edition of 20

