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PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 12, 2012



***Mills College Art Museum Announces
HUNG LIU: OFFERINGS
January 23-March 17, 2013***

Oakland, CA—December 12, 2012. The Mills College Art Museum is pleased to present *Hung Liu: Offerings* a rare opportunity to experience two of the Oakland-based artist's most significant large-scale installations: *Jiu Jin Shan (Old Gold Mountain)* (1994) and *Tai Cang—Great Granary* (2008). *Hung Liu: Offerings* will be on view from January 23 through March 17, 2013. The opening reception takes place on Wednesday, January 23, 2013 from 6:00–8:00 pm and free shuttle service will be provided from the MacArthur Bart station during the opening.

Recognized as America's most important Chinese artist, Hung Liu's installations have played a central role in her work throughout her career. In *Jiu Jin Shan (Old Gold Mountain)*, over two hundred thousand fortune cookies create a symbolic gold mountain that engulfs a crossroads of railroad tracks running beneath. The junction where the tracks meet serves as both a crossroads and

terminus, a visual metaphor of the cultural intersection of East and West. Liu references not only the history of the Chinese laborers who built the railroads to support the West Coast Gold Rush, but also the hope shared among these migrant workers that they could find material prosperity in the new world.

The Mills College Art Museum is excited to be the first venue outside of China to present *Tai Cang—Great Granary*. The installation consists of two major components; the first is a reinterpretation of an earlier mural Liu painted while in graduate school in China which has since been destroyed. The second consists of a selection of 34 antique *dou*, a traditional Chinese food container and unit of measure, which contain a grain, cereal or bean from each of the 34 provinces and regions of China. The vessels are situated to form a map of China on the gallery floor.

Hung Liu: Offerings examines the themes of memory, history, and cultural identity through works that navigate the life-long liminal experiences of immigration and homecoming. Accompanied by related paintings and prints, *Jui Jin Shan* and *Tai Cang* serve as memorials to the past while acknowledging the rapidly changing cultural dynamics in contemporary China.

Born in Changchun, China, in 1948, a year before the creation of the People's Republic of China, Hung Liu lived through Maoist China and experienced the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Trained as a social realist painter and muralist, she came to the United States in 1984 to attend the University of California, San Diego, where she received her MFA. One of the first people from mainland China to study abroad and pursue an art career, she moved to northern California to become a faculty member at Mills College in 1990, and has continued to live and work in the Bay Area. She has exhibited internationally at premier museums and galleries, and her work resides in prestigious private and institutional collections around the world. Hung Liu currently lives in Oakland and is a tenured professor in the art department at Mills College.

Hung Liu: Offerings is planned in conjunction with the Oakland Museum of California's retrospective *Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu*. It is accompanied by a map of Hung Liu's permanent public art pieces in the San Francisco Bay Area. *Hung Liu: Offerings* is supported by the Agnes Cowles Bourne Fund for Special Exhibitions and the Helzel Family Foundation.

Image: Hung Liu, *Tai Cang—Great Granary*, 2008. 34 Wooden dou measures, grain, flour, mixed media mural, Dimensions variable (Mural: 8 x 40 feet)

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

(Visit <http://mcam.mills.edu> for full details)

Opening Reception

Wednesday, January 23, 2013, 6:00-8:00 pm

Mills College Art Museum

Free shuttle service provided from MacArthur Bart station. Shuttles depart for MCAM on the half hour at 5:30pm, 6:30pm and 7:30pm.

Artist Talk and Gallery Walk Through

Wednesday, January 30, 2013, 7:00 pm

Mills College Art Museum

Join artist Hung Liu in an intimate look at her work currently on view as part of *Hung Liu: Offerings*.

Temporality

With Stephen Ratcliffe and Thingamajigs Performance Group

Saturday, February 9, 2013, 8:00 am-10:00 pm
Mills College Art Museum

This 14-hour durational multi-media experience combines spoken word, projected images, choreography, and live sound. The work is built around Bay Area poet and Mills College professor Stephen Ratcliffe's work of the same name that documents 1,000 poems written in 1,000 consecutive days.

Funded in part through New Music USA's MetLife Creative Connections program.

Bill Berkson in Conversation with Hung Liu

Wednesday, February 27, 2013, 7:00 pm
Danforth Lecture Hall, Mills College
Seating is limited. Please RSVP <http://billberksonandhungliu.eventbrite.com/>.

Poet, critic and teacher Bill Berkson speaks with artist Hung Liu on the challenges and rewards of being an artist and arts educator.

Haunting

Performed by Molissa Fenley and Peiling Kao

Saturday, March 16, 2013, 6:00 pm and 7:00 pm
Sunday, March 17, 2013, 4:00 pm and 7:00 pm
Mills College Art Museum
Seating is limited. Please RSVP <http://mcamhaunting.eventbrite.com/>.

The Mills College Art Museum has commissioned Mills College dance professor and internationally recognized choreographer Molissa Fenley to create a new work responding to the artwork in *Hung Liu: Offerings*. Fenley will perform in the gallery with Peiling Kao (MFA 2010). Sound artist Michael Mersereau (MFA 2012) provides accompaniment with enhanced recordings of found sounds related to imagery and themes in the exhibition.

About the Mills College Art Museum

Founded in 1925, The Mills College Art Museum is a forum for exploring art and ideas and a laboratory for contemporary art practices. Through innovative exhibitions, programs, and collections, the museum engages and inspires the intellectual and creative life of the Mills community as well as the diverse audiences of the Bay Area and beyond. The Mills College Art Museum is located at 5000 MacArthur Boulevard, Oakland, CA 94613. Museum hours are Tuesday-Sunday, 11:00–4:00 pm and Wednesday, 11:00–7:30 pm. Admission is free for all exhibitions and programs unless noted. For more information, visit mcam.mills.edu

About Mills College

Nestled in the foothills of Oakland, California, Mills College is a nationally renowned, independent liberal arts college offering a dynamic progressive education that fosters leadership, social responsibility, and creativity in approximately 950 undergraduate women and more than 600 graduate women and men. The College ranks as one of the *Best 377 Colleges* in the country and one of the greenest colleges in the nation by The Princeton Review. *U.S. News & World Report* ranked Mills one of the top-tier regional universities in the country and lists it among the top colleges and universities in the West in the "Great Schools, Great Prices" category. For more information, visit www.mills.edu.

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HUNG LIU: Tai Cang (Great Granary)

Tai Cang (Great Granary) epitomizes Hung Liu's use of historical images and the material remains of the past to create multiple layers of history and memory. This installation consists of two major components; the first is a reinterpretation of the mural Liu painted at the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA) in Beijing, China in 1981. Entitled *Music of the Great Earth*, the work was an homage to the recent excavation of ancient bronze bells. The mural was destroyed when the CAFA property was sold and demolished. Liu's reconstructed mural, *Music of the Great Earth II*, serves as a kind of palimpsest, using digital images from the destroyed original overlaid with new elements pulled from across her later body of work.

The second part of the installation consists of a selection of 34 antique *dou*, a traditional Chinese food container and unit of measure. Each *dou* contains a grain, cereal, or bean from a different region of China. The country is composed of 34 provinces and special administrative or autonomous regions, and Liu arranged the vessels to form a map of China on the gallery floor. The connection to food as sustenance, community, and economic prosperity is echoed in the history of Liu's accompanying mural, as the original *Music of the Great Earth* was created specifically for the foreign student dining hall at CAFA.

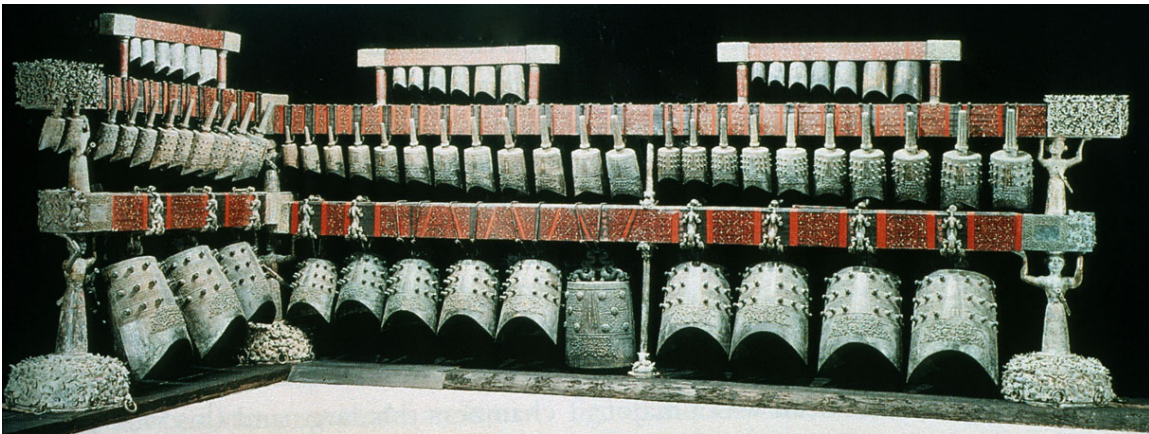


Music of the Great Earth, 1981, Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing, China



Detail of *Music of the Great Earth*, 1981, Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing, China

While the first mural was destroyed when the Academy moved to a new location, surviving line drawings and photographs of the work provided Liu with materials to revisit the past. Nearly forty feet in length, *Music of the Great Earth II* echoes Liu's initial references to ancient music and dance inspired by the Warring States bells, an ancient musical instrument consisting of 65 bronze bells known as a *bianzhong*, which was discovered in the fifth-century BC tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng in Sui County, Hubei Province, China three years before Liu painted her original mural.



Bianzhong of Marquis Yi of Zeng, 433 BC

The first version of the work served as reaction against the politically driven socialist realism of Chinese murals during the Cultural Revolution. Instead, Liu championed a more formal exploration of real and imaginary images to create a mass of rhythmic lines and forms. Liu conscripted two concepts from ancient Chinese philosophy, the idea of the Five Sounds (the ancient pentatonic scale of *gong-shang-jue-zhi-yu* that was exemplified by the discovery of the *bianzhong*), as well as the imagery of the Four Mythic Beasts (the Azure Dragon of the East, the Vermillion Bird of the South, the White Tiger of the West, and the Black Tortoise of the North), who guard the four corners of the world, with China as the center point. These themes remain in *Music of the Great Earth II*, but take on new meaning through the addition of personal references.

In her new iteration, Liu reworked the original mural's imagery, keeping the groups of dancing men and exotic women playing musical instruments. For this new version, however, she incorporated elements and fragments from significant pieces throughout her career. In revisiting *Music of the Great Earth*, Liu was not attempting to faithfully recreate the lost mural, but rather, to examine her passage between past and present and the ways distance and time both inform and change perspectives.

HUNG LIU: OFFERINGS

January 23 – March 17, 2013

Mills College Art Museum | mcam.mills.edu

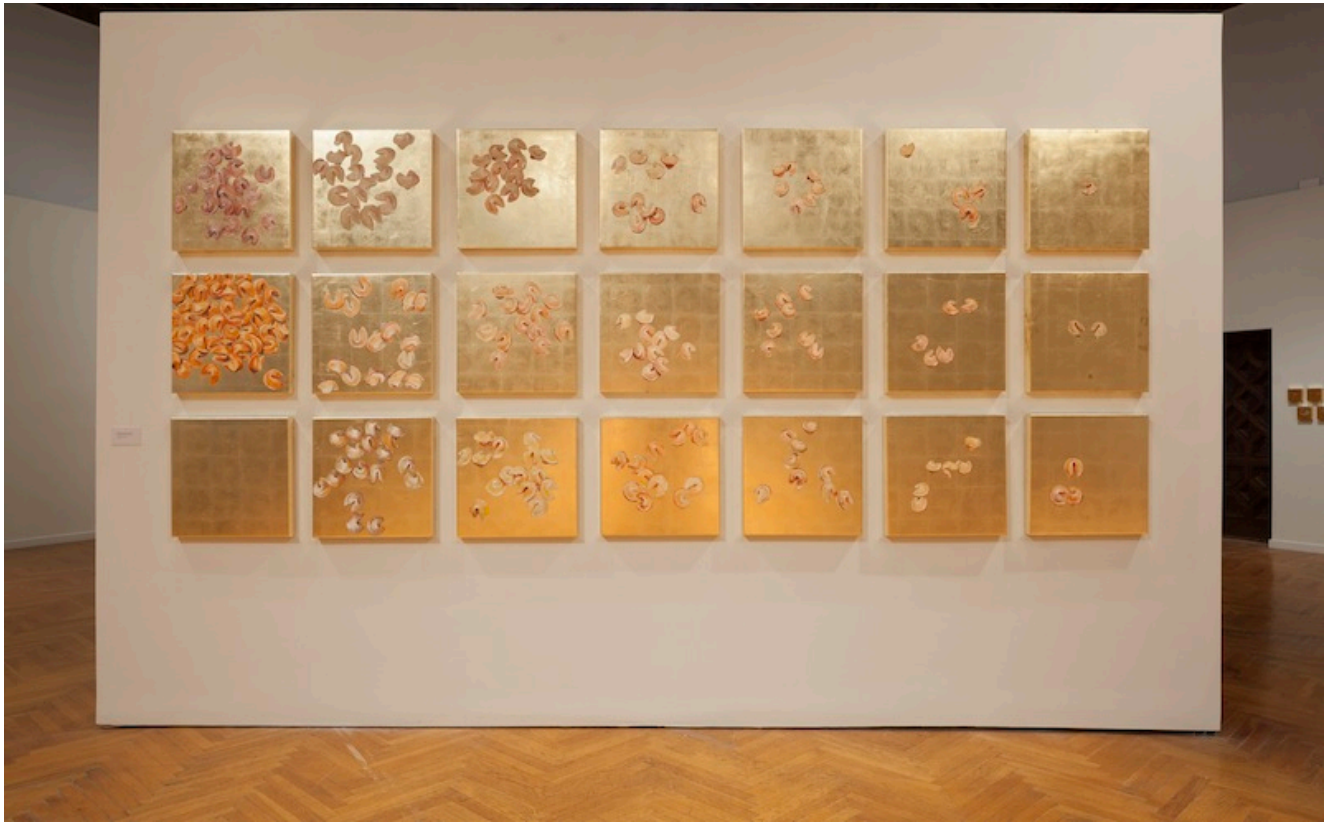
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2 Hung Liu showings in Oakland

Kenneth Baker

Updated 4:02 pm, Friday, March 15, 2013

VIEW: LARGER | HIDE

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PREV NEXT



"Jiu Jin Shan (Old Gold Mountain)" (1994) is 200,000 fortune cookies with support structure and train tracks, plus "Chinese Shrimp Junk I and II" (1994), oil on shaped canvas at Mills. Photo: Unknown



Entertainment Photos

Displaying 1-3 of 40



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Many contemporary painters struggle to get history into their work without looking pretentious or ideologically motivated. But big events of the late 20th century weighed so heavily on the life of Oakland painter [Hung Liu](#) that she might have found it difficult to keep history out of her work.

Her retrospective "Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu," opening Saturday at the [Oakland](#)

[Museum of California](#), and an associated exhibition, "Hung Liu: Offerings," ending Sunday at the [Mills College Art Museum](#), show Liu embracing without stint private and public memories of her era and its past.

In Beijing, younger artists refer to Liu as "big sister" because they see her - though not her alone - as having led the way out of the cultural provincialism and expressive straitjacket of the [Mao Zedong](#) decades to the global attention and market that contemporary Chinese art has enjoyed for the past 15 years or more.

Liu was born in 1948 in Changchun, a city remembered as the seat of power of [Pu Yi](#), the "Last Emperor" of China, and a vassal of the Japanese occupation. The conflict between Mao's Communist and [Chiang Kai-shek's](#) Kuomintang forces, to which Liu's father belonged, shadowed her infancy, forcing the family to flee for a time.

In 1959, Liu took a train to Beijing with an aunt who already lived there. Her mother and grandparents soon followed. They survived the famine triggered by the perverse mandates of Mao's Great Leap Forward, and Liu qualified for elite schooling, but the ideological hysteria of Mao's Cultural Revolution in 1966 prevented her from graduating.

Forced labor

In 1968, Liu was subjected to a "re-education" of forced labor on rural farmland. Photographs she took while there, printed only recently, and postcard-size paintings that she made in scant off hours, defiantly nonpropagandist, though later titled "My Secret Freedom," are showing at the Oakland Museum for the first time.

In the 1970s, while Mao incrementally relaxed China's isolation before he died in 1976, Liu was able to resume schooling. After conducting an art instruction program on state television for several years, she entered the [Central Academy of Fine Arts](#) in Beijing.

In 1984, after a prolonged struggle to obtain a passport, Liu finally entered the United States and began graduate study at UC San Diego, where Allan Kaprow (1927-2006), the father of Happenings and a key figure in the international Fluxus movement, was a guiding spirit. From him Liu learned to think of all studio work in performance terms, as the expressionistic and uncertainly finished qualities of her painting reflect.

Having met and married independent curator [Jeff Kelley](#) at [UCSD](#), Liu moved with him to Texas for several years, pursuant to a job opportunity, and taught there before the couple finally settled in Oakland after a 1990 job offer from Mills College, where she continues to teach. Her success as a woman has garnered her an added measure of respect mirrored in the prominence she gives to women in her painting.

A picture such as "Refugee: Woman and Children" (2000), like many others at the Oakland Museum based on an antique photograph, depicts a destitute grandmother and two small girls enduring hardship like that Liu herself witnessed and suffered. They are among the "ghosts" Liu tries to summon so that our conscience might feel the pressure of their witness.

Rather than peg the picture to an event, Liu introduced symbols from other eras of Chinese art, their anachronism expressing more irony and sorrow at injustice than reproach.

A crane, traditionally associated with high official standing and incorruptibility, stands to one side of the woman, on the other, a lotus blossom, Buddhist symbol of attainment and a Chinese emblem of fortunate offspring. Two faint registers of transcendent beings -

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transcendent of suffering - typical of Buddhist iconography appear below.

Powerful work

Liu's interest centers less on decoding such images than on seeking viewers who know enough of history and power, injustice and compassion - and of graces peculiar to painting - to enter deeply into her work. She frequently attaches objects to her paintings, not only because of their symbolism but also because they occupy time differently from images. The Mills College Museum show presents two ensembles exemplifying Liu's way of deploying non-pictorial stuff.

"Tai Cang - Great Granary" (2008) reconstructs a long-destroyed mural that Liu made while still an art academy student. She has supplemented it with 34 *dou* - traditional measuring containers - filled with grains and legumes, arranged on the floor to echo the geography of the provinces from which they come.

Both exhibitions affirm that Liu's work tends to shine when it avoids or scrambles everything programmatic. To trace her development is to see an evolving byplay between complexity of purpose and complexity of execution. When they come into the right balance, in paintings such as "Refugee," "Richter Scale" (2009), "Dirge" (2002) and "By the Rivers of Babylon" (2000), they are really something to see.

Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu: Paintings, drawings, photographs and video. Through June 30. Oakland Museum of California, 1000 Oak St., Oakland. (510) 318-8400. www.museumca.org.

Hung Liu: Offerings: Mixed-media installations. Through Sunday. Mills College Art Museum, 5000 MacArthur Blvd., Oakland. (510) 430-2164. www.mcam.edu.

Kenneth Baker is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. E-mail: kennethbaker@sfgate.com

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Artist Hung Liu's work blurs history, memory

By **Angela Hill**
ahill@bayareanewsgroup.com
Posted: 02/25/2013 12:01:00 PM PST
Updated: 02/25/2013 12:56:13 PM PST

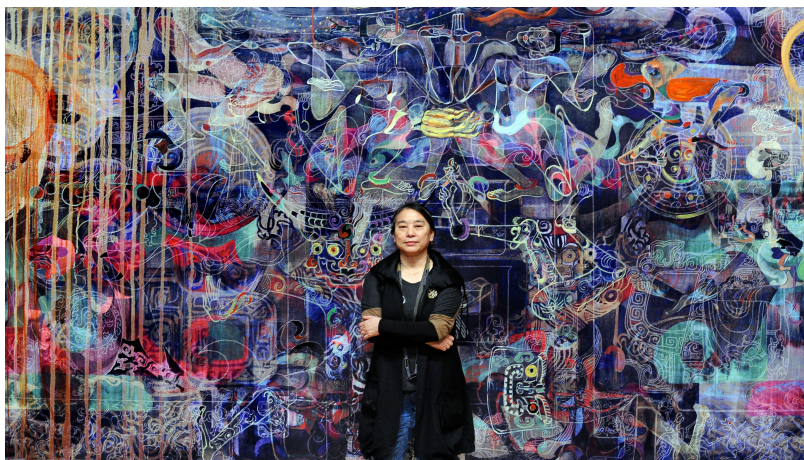


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OAKLAND -- Viewing the wild spectrum of artist Hung Liu's work -- from a massive mound of 205,000 fortune cookies atop intersecting railroad ties to giant ship-shaped canvases weathered with Liu's trademark technique of dripped linseed oil -- one would never guess the rigid training she received in her homeland China.

As a young artist learning her craft in the mid-20th century, Liu was limited to works that represented the official view of society under Chairman Mao Zedong. Even the artistic disciplines were firmly separated from one another.

"In China, when I went to the best art institute in Beijing, everything was so tight, so compartmentalized, only focused on one discipline -- you did sculpture only, or drawing only, or mural only. It's different here in America," Liu said, laughing gently at the Mills College Art Museum as she pointed to the mound of cookies, her striking installation, "Jiu Jin Shan" or "Old Gold Mountain," meant to symbolize the shattered dreams of Chinese workers who came West to find fortune.

"Is this sculpture?" she asked. "Who knows? Here you can do everything."

And she has. Liu, a professor of studio arts at Mills for more than 20 years and one of the first Chinese artists to establish a career in the West, is considered one of the most significant Chinese-American contemporary artists living today. This year her work is the focus of two back-to-back exhibits in the East Bay: "Hung Liu: Offerings" runs through March 17 at the Mills museum, followed by a major retrospective of her work, "Summoning Ghosts," at the Oakland Museum of California from March 16 through June. The show will then embark on a two-year national tour. And at the San Jose Museum of Art, where she already has several works, offers a new exhibit, "Questions from the Sky: New Work by Hung Liu" June 6 through September.

During her career, Liu has received two painting fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and her work has been exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution, the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, the National Museum of American Art and the Walker Center.

She's internationally known for her dramatic paintings, which often layer historical images with scenes from her own life or those of everyday people who didn't make it into the history books. The blurry linseed-oil technique is "to give the feel of distant memory," Liu said, and the inability to bring things from the past into focus.

"What I love about her work -- you can look at it and see all these layers of history embedded there, so many things you can pull out about immigration, emigration," said Stephanie Hanor, director of the Mills museum. "But it's not didactic. It's

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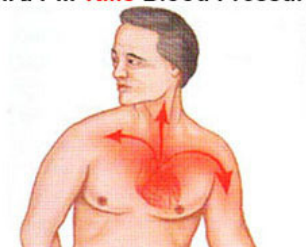
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"What I love about her work -- you can look at it and see all these layers of history embedded there, so many things you can pull out about immigration, emigration," said Stephanie Hanor, director of the Mills museum. "But it's not didactic. It's

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the history of China mingling with her own personal history."

For René de Guzman, OMCA's senior curator of art, Liu's body of work "reminds us of the important role of art to represent reality from the perspective of the individual's experience," he said.

Born in 1948 in Changchun, China, Liu came of age during Mao's Cultural Revolution. As a young woman, she was sent to labor in a remote village and learn a distorted account of Chinese history. She later earned a degree at Beijing Teacher's College before studying mural painting at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Art. After many years working as an artist and teacher in China, she was offered a scholarship in the graduate studio-art program at UC San Diego, finally immigrating to the United States in 1984.

"It took four years to get my visa," Liu said. "Chinese had started to come to the U.S. for education at that point, but most were studying engineering, chemistry -- you know, real things. It was pretty weird to be studying art from a socialist country."

Honor is thrilled to display some of Liu's large-scale installations at Mills.

"Hung is well-known as a painter, a legacy that's really embedded in the studio arts program here," Honor said. "But even many of her students don't know she's been doing installations from early in her career, stemming out of the mural tradition."

In the exhibit, the 40-foot-long mural spans one full wall. "Music of the Great Earth, 2" is a tribute to a public mural Liu created years ago in China, which was destroyed when the building was torn down. Against a background of deep blues and purples, scenes blur together in layers and layers of images, almost like double negatives.

"This is an image of my Chinese passport, and here's my green card," Liu said, moving back and forth along the wall to point out details. "Here's me when I was in college. We were sent to the military to learn to fight, so here I am with my semi-automatic rifle. I was a pretty good shooter."

She sees it as a joining of her personal history with that of China.

"It's a look at the way history plays out and how history is written by the winners," she says. "How with time and perspective, things are remembered differently."



Hung Liu, of Oakland, a Chinese-American artist and Mills College professor of art, during an interview at Mills College in Oakland, Calif., on Monday, Jan. 21, 2013. Liu's art work will be on exhibit at the Mills College Art Museum from January 23, to March 17, 2013. (Doug Duran/Staff) (Doug Duran)

Follow Angela Hill at [Twitter.com/giveemhill](https://twitter.com/giveemhill).

Hung Liu

Age: 65

Residence: Oakland

Claim to fame: Mills College professor, considered one of the most significant Chinese-American artists of our day.

Quote: "The exhibit, 'Offerings,' is about things in the past, long gone. It has a memorial kind of dimension to it."

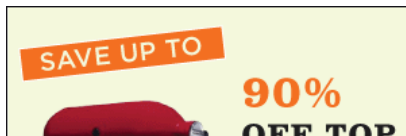
Hung Liu exhibits

Mills College Art Museum
What: "Hung Liu: Offerings"
When: Through March 17
Where: 5000 Macarthur Blvd., Oakland
Details: <http://mcam.mills.edu>

Oakland Museum of California
What: "Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu"
When: March 16 through June 30
Where: 1000 Oak St., Oakland
Details: www.museumca.org

SAN JOSE MUSEUM OF ART
What: "Questions from the Sky: New Work by Hung Liu"
When: June 6-Sept. 29
Where: 110 S. Market St., San Jose
Details: www.sjmusart.org

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Jan 23 - Mar 18

Mills College Art Museum

by [Ellen Tani](#)

The spare aesthetic of the exhibition currently on view at the Mills College Art Museum belies the fullness of the Bay Area artist and educator Hung Liu's major concern: history. Two large-scale installations are repositories for the effects of Liu's dynamic artistic transformation over the past thirty years, during which she has persistently kept one eye trained on history. This retrospective vision was borne from Liu's upbringing during China's Cultural Revolution, a period in which history was editorialized and artworks destroyed according to Maoist orthodoxy. Trained as a mural painter in China, Liu later pursued a master's degree at the University of California, San Diego, in the early 1980s. Under a faculty known for its radical, conceptual practices (including Allan Kaprow, Eleanor and David Antin, and Faith Ringgold, among others), Liu unlearned earlier ideas in order to access new ways of thinking and making. One might call this deskilling, but Liu did not sacrifice her technical skills; rather, she embraced a conceptual re-education. Leaving behind a traditional art school in China for the conceptual avant-garde in California informed her role as a professor of art at Mills College, where she and her students have pushed each other beyond their comfort zones for the past thirty-some years. *Offerings* embodies transcendence in numerous ways, from the geographical to the philosophical. It is a tight and complex presentation of Liu's work as an artist, a community member, and a mentor. The works on display both reflect and bear the accretions of personal and collective history that drive Liu's practice.

In the front gallery, *Jiu Jin Shan (Old Gold Mountain)* (1994) comprises a glowing mound of 200,000 fortune cookies piled over two railroad tracks that lead to nowhere. A nearby wall, featuring twenty-one paintings of fortune cookies on gold-leaf panels, lends a sacred aura, a nod to the exhibition's title. In the back gallery, the two-part installation *Tai Cang—Great Granary* (2008/2012) offers a darker palette. Thirty-four antique *dou*, wooden vessels full of grains and beans, are arranged in front of a massive ten-panel mural entitled *Music of the Great Earth II* (2012). A reworking of an image (later destroyed) that Liu created in 1981 while at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, *Music of the Great Earth II* is richly layered and brims with references to Liu's original mural, Chinese art history, Buddhist mythology, Liu's oeuvre, and the large-scale, all-over style of midcentury American painting.

One of the foremost Chinese painters in the United States, Liu is less known for her installations than for her large canvases based on historic Chinese documentary photos and films, many of which reside in the collections of major museums. Characterized by an immanent tension between inscrutability and realism, these works present photorealist scenes, but Liu thins her paint with linseed oil to destabilizing effect. The pull of gravity helps to produce Liu's signature drips, which obscure the precise images underlying them and, in the context of her subjects, read as sweat, blood, tears, and erosion. In a retrospective this spring, the Oakland Museum will honor Liu's painting practice. In *Offerings*, however, Liu's conceptual mastery speaks clearly through works that, albeit lesser known, speak to her artistic concerns more subtly—and perhaps more powerfully—than her paintings.



Hung Liu. *Jiu Jin Shan (Old Gold Mountain)*, 1994; installation view, *Hung Liu: Offerings*, Mills College Art Museum, Oakland, 2013. Courtesy of the Artist and the Mills College Art Museum, Oakland. Photo: Phil Bond Photography.



Hung Liu. *Tai Cang—Great Granary*, 2008; installation view, *Hung Liu: Offerings*, Mills College Art Museum, Oakland, 2013. Courtesy of the Artist and the Mills College Art Museum, Oakland. Photo: Phil Bond Photography.

Jiu Jin Shan (Old Gold Mountain), for example, articulates Liu's conceptual awareness of process-driven art and its historical potential. Originally conceived for the de Young Museum, the installation resonates differently now than it did in 1994, in the midst of the culture wars, when its minimalist aesthetic was dismissed by critics as "unexciting."¹ However, Liu's reference to the complex history of immigration and labor, in which American-ness and foreignness are held in tension, presciently alludes to more recent debates about the subject. After all, the fortune cookie, a longstanding symbol of Chinese culture, is an American invention.² The fragility and heft of these cookies can be seen to embody the speculative risks taken by waves of Chinese immigrants who came in the mid-nineteenth century to San Francisco, which earned the nickname "Old Gold Mountain" during the California Gold Rush. Most earned their living building the transcontinental railroad that connected prospectors from the eastern United States with their anticipated fortunes in the West.

The hushed glow of Liu's piece is tempered by its reference to the ancestral burial mounds of her family, an homage to the hundreds of Chinese laborers who perished while laying tracks through the Sierra Nevada section of the Central Pacific Railroad grade.

Linking to this elegiac gesture, *Tai Cang—Great Granary* presents edibles from each province of China, arranged in a map-like formation. These staples would have been traded from the coastal city of Taicang (known as “Great Granary” for the port's many storehouses of grain) from the third century C.E. to distant destinations via the Silk Road. Liu's *Music of the Great Earth II* was inspired by a Silk Road treasure: the painted walls of the Dunhuang caves. It depicts layers of dancing *apsaras* (Hindu and Buddhist celestial figures sometimes seen in representations of the *jakata*, the stories of the past lives of the Buddha) and *taotie* (zoomorphic patterning found on Shang-period bronzes). Depicting a kind of historical and spiritual cosmos, the mural—which Liu describes as a “ghost”—echoes the geographic arrangement of the *dou* with a different kind of map entirely.³

References to celestial figures and past lives call up the Chinese immigrants referenced in *Jiu Jin Shan (Old Gold Mountain)*, who were colloquially referred to as “celestials” by nineteenth-century Americans. Their spirits, one imagines, could reside somewhere among the topographic allegory of the mound of cookies and the unseen fortunes they contain. Together, the two installations bespeak Liu's deft handling of major themes such as history and time and the translation of these themes into form as the artist's own cartographic gesture.

In this sense, Liu's three-dimensional investigations recall Robert Smithson's in their relationship to history: almost mystical, obliquely referential, and fueled by an intense curiosity about how we make meaning out of distant places and times. In a conversation I had with the artist, she revealed her affinity with Smithson who, familiar with her love of poetry, once told her, “The language of poetry is not a dead language but it's dying. So the dying is still happening—it's always dying, always in the process of going from one condition to another.” To link closure with death, and decay to its constant deferral, is to preserve life for that much longer. This belief resounds in *Offerings*, as Liu rallies between criticality and celebration, decay and creation, between the allusive signs of history and the impossibility of representing it.

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***Hung Liu: Offerings* is on view at the [Mills College Art Museum](#), in Oakland, through March 17, 2013.**

Notes:

1. Kenneth Baker, “Chagoya's Culture Clashes,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 15, 1994, p. E1.
2. The fortune cookie as known to Americans was introduced in the late nineteenth century by the Japanese immigrant and landscape designer Makoto Hagiwara, at the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park. There is no accurate translation for “fortune cookie” in Chinese.