

so his first impression in the first few days in Japan was somewhat general, a general view that the Japanese culture does not have quality.

Quality, in today's industrialized and high-tech society, is related to things that are exceptional. How do we present an exceptional form? That's when we talk about quality. Ende's words have prompted me to examine "quality" and "exceptional" in relation to each other.

We want to move on to the third presentation. In Session II, we are discussing issues for critics and artists so we have invited an artist to speak. We have an American artist with us today. She was born in China. She grew up in China. She also has a degree from the University of California and she is an associate professor of art at Mills College in California. She participated in "Gender: Beyond Memory," held at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, which was a show that left a strong impression with me, and her impressive work deals with identities and change. She is also participating in the "American Stories" exhibition at Setagaya Art Museum. Here is Hung Liu.

Hung Liu: Yesterday, we all heard a fascinating discussion about who chooses contemporary Asian art, how it gets chosen, and who chooses the choosers. Although I am not a curator, museum director, or theorist, as an artist I make choices too. I choose my subjects, the methods and materials of my work, as well as the histories, ideas and even the institutions I associate myself with. I am not only chosen but I also choose. My identity as an artist is not simply given, but to some extent it is taken and even adopted.

I left China thirteen years ago as a Chinese artist. Tomorrow, I am going to the Setagaya Art Museum to see an exhibition I am currently in. It is called "American Stories." Have I returned to Asia as an American, or, in coming to Tokyo for only the second time, have I *returned* to Asia at all? Am I part of the contemporary Asian art scene? Am I still a Chinese artist? Could I ever show my work in Beijing where I once taught at the Central Academy of Fine Arts? I show my work now in San Francisco and New York. Does one make me part of the Asian Pacific Rim and the other part of the Eurocentric art establishment? Is San Francisco close enough to Asia or is it part of a "geography of the mind?" Am I a visitor in Tokyo, an immigrant in San Francisco, a multicultural novelty in New York, and a memory in Beijing? How would I be regarded in Australia or Singapore or Fukuoka?

Like a palate, these are some of the questions from which I choose my own identity and either accept or refuse the choices of others. So I would like to show you what I do as an artist, and I hope that the particularities of the choices I make in my work add an artist's perspective to the symposium.

I paint from historical photographs. My subjects include turn-of-the-century child prostitutes, upper class women with bound feet, Qing Dynasty courtesans (fig. 25), the Empress Dowager, imperial court eunuchs, the emperor Pu Yi, the empress Wan Rong, school girls of the 1930s imitating Western behavior and fashion, a male Peking Opera star playing a female character, immigrant children working in an early 20th-century cannery in Bal-

timore, my mother and grandmother, as well as myself as a student in post-revolutionary China, a farmer during the Cultural Revolution, and as a "resident alien" in the United States. The paintings I make are sometimes shaped according to 19th-century photo-templates (arches, ovals, etc.) or the actual organic outlines of my subjects, and I have often added such objects as lacquered shelves, antique Chinese artifacts or architectural fragments, and Chinese bird cages in order to reinforce the shrine-like formality of the photographs I paint from. Occasionally, I also create public scale installations that may include railroad tracks, a "gold" mountain of 200,000 actual fortune cookies, and commonplace artifacts excavated from specific public sites.

As an American artist born and raised in China until the age of thirty-six, I am interested in the migration of personal identity across genders, cultures, languages, and epochs, with special emphasis on the history of Chinese femininity since the invention of photography. Modern China corresponds with the period since photography was invented and imported from the West. Often, the historical photographs I paint from were elaborately staged in photo-studio settings designed to associate the subject, usually a woman, with the accouterments of Western civilization and art. But whether child prostitutes, infant emperors, beheaded rebels, or myself in my ancestral Manchurian village, these images come down to us today as pastiches of styles and clashes of cultures that were postmodern before they were modern. As a painter, I try to excavate the photo-surface, locating the stories beneath it. Since many of my paintings are of women, to "make-up" the faded areas of an old photograph with paint, color and heavy washes of oil is to substitute the artifice of painting for the artifice of photography. As a painter I try to render portraits of ironic historical and cultural ambiguity in which the projection of feminine identity and the fixation of the gaze that captures it are broken open. I paint posed historical photographs candidly.

I think much of the meaning of my painting over the past five years has come from the way the washes and drips dissolve the documentary authority of the photographs I paint from, opening them to a slower kind of looking, revealing perhaps the cultural and personal narratives frozen in the formality of the photographic instant. I also use clusters of brushstrokes and passages of color and shape to preserve or emphasize certain parts of the image. Between this dissolving and preserving is a rich middle-ground where the meaning of an image may be found. So the process of painting has become an investigation of the photo-document, which stands between history and me. But in painting its image, I screen the photograph through my experience, which is imperfect and can be easily forgotten or made-up—in the same way that a photograph can be worn out or faded. Out of this screening an ambiguity arises which is bigger than either my subjective experience or the photographic facts. I am interested to see how far away I can get from the photographic document and how close I can get to the historical memories.

During the Cultural Revolution, when I would hide my paint box under my coat and sneak into the fields by pretending to take a walk, my artistic goals were simply to paint, or at least to paint something that didn't have Mao's face on it (fig. 26). My goals are

different now. Fundamentally, I would like to make paintings that continue to surprise me. Like the ancient Chinese landscape painters, I want to fold multiple perspectives into my work, respecting tradition while avoiding formulas. I would like my paintings and installations to be culturally specific yet globally resonant, contributing to an international vocabulary of migratory experiences and cultural narratives in a post-modern world.

After brain-washing, propaganda, class struggle, and book burning, I face the media-age, websites, e-mail, and fast service. Social responsibility was once an ideology that was forced upon me—to “serve the people heart and soul”—and is now an ideal I am asked to personalize in my own way. I have seen real political correctness in action, and it doesn’t serve art or society. In America there are also party lines, but they are academic and of the marketplace. As an artist, I try to unearth hidden imagery, remember forgotten stories, locate misplaced histories, memorialize anonymous individuals, critique historical documents, and recycle recovered information in ways that hold me accountable to my own experience as an immigrant old enough to have seen Mao and met Mickey Mouse (fig. 27). In this way, perhaps I can be a better witness to my time.

But in my career as a Chinese born American woman artist, more attention has been paid to either my own personal story or to the stories of the subjects I paint than to the paintings themselves. Although my subjects bring their own narrative content to the painting, they are not the whole story. While it is true that I was trained in Chinese Socialist Realism, it is also important to know that 19th-century Russian Romantic painting and French Realism, which the Russians adapted, are both just beneath the surface. Traditional Chinese influences include ancient Buddhist murals (like those in Dunhuang), Chinese ink painting, and calligraphy, the staining and fluidity of which are central to my painting today. In other words, my painting is a hybrid of European and Asian styles that came to America through California on its way to New York (and now Tokyo), picking up influences of figurative abstraction, Pop, and feminism along the way. So these styles have migrated with me, congealing into what the critic Libby Lumpkin calls my own melting pot. For me, the story of cross-cultural identity comes not only from my subjects, but from the mongrel nature of my objects too.

In my newest paintings, I have shifted my interest from staged, historically specific images to more-or-less candid photographs of anonymous subjects, including Chinese children, a Tibetan prisoner, or a mother and daughter pulling boats upstream, who seem to be caught in the margins of historical events (fig. 28). They represent the anonymity of the witness in the crowd, usually looking outside the picture at something we cannot see. Painting from staged historical photographs is like facing history head-on; now, I am slicing through history at an angle, obliquely. Though my subjects are candid and unknown, I am interested in the mythic resonance beneath their poses: the poses of struggling, eating, laughing, being trapped or lost, or just observing historical events from the wings. These are mundane human acts, but their consequences can be grave. I want this sense of gravity in my new paintings, a weight that cannot be felt in

their photographic sources alone, but which can only be achieved the way a painting is: one stroke at a time.

The New York art critic Robert Hughes, himself an immigrant from Australia, has said of his own writing about American art and culture that “You need to be an alien to do this sort of semi-anthropology. You need to be both inside and outside the subject.” This has certainly been my experience, except that unlike Hughes, I came to America not to make art about America, but about China, my homeland. The point remains the same, however: that I find myself increasingly inside and outside my subject, especially given the exponential change taking place across Asia. This change conflicts with my own memory of the Great Leap Forward, its consequent famine, the Cultural Revolution, working in the fields, Nixon’s coming, Mao’s death, the reopening of the universities, the Open Door Policy, the four years it took me to get a passport out of China, my return after seven years in America, having to go to a hotel to get a taxi, and, nowadays, the yellow tide of taxis that rival the fleet in New York. It also conflicts with Western myths and stereotypes of Asia as a kind of colonial preserve, a cultural monolith, an exotic realm. The repatriation of Hong Kong signaled the closing of the colonial era in Asia, at least in the sense that the idea of military colonization is being replaced by the relentlessly emerging economic realities of global culture. If anything, it is global culture that now seems monolithic and exotic.

Amidst all this change, it is harder than ever to know where the lines between the inside and the outside are drawn. We are all aliens sometime, somewhere, voluntarily or not. The reconsideration of contemporary Asian art cannot be undertaken without reconsidering Asia in terms of the increasingly complex experiences of those of us for whom Asia is both home and foreign soil, history and uncharted future. The art critic Dave Hickey has referred to my paintings as “local solutions” to the complexities of an identity formed of multiple histories, languages, learning, and loyalties. When they travel, artists take their art with them and adapt it to local conditions, and it is my impression that Asian artists are on the move. Increasingly, ours is a mongrel experience, no more derived from a single style or ideology or history than our work is, and if I were asked to reconsider what is both contemporary and Asian about my work, I would have to identify its mongrel nature—which *is* a local solution.

Question (J. Clark): Your work isn’t cynical like cynical realism and political pop which have been presented as a lot of work from the last five years from the mainland. How do you view the situation which produced these works in China?

H. Liu: In the last few years, I have seen a lot of group shows and solo shows, but maybe more group shows of artists from mainland China. I can, of course, tell the difference between my colleagues, who still live and work in China, and myself. Although the Cultural Revolution is behind us—Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping have passed away and we are facing a new era—there are still a lot of unresolved historical left-overs in art and literature, mainly in Chinese *shangcengjianzhu*, the intelligentsia.