

“Offerings” and “Improvisational Elements”: Two Threads in Hung Liu’s Works

Haochen Bai¹

¹ The University of Chicago, US

Correspondence: Haochen Bai, The University of Chicago, US.

doi:10.56397/SAA.2025.02.03

Abstract

Born and raised in a turbulent and ever-evolving world, Hung Liu’s trajectory as both a Chinese American artist and a teacher coincided with the ever-changing international politics, cultural norms, and evolving art world. As a motivated and prolific artist, Hung Liu kept challenging her existing art practices and developed a heterogeneous oeuvre. Building on their pioneering and comprehensive research, this paper mainly deploys a “biography-centered” approach to find her turning points in her career and hence offer a different perspective to characterize Liu’s practices. This paper argues that there are two decisive moments in Hung Liu’s career: the teaching by Allan Kaprow and her first portrayal of suffering subjects’ photographs in 1988, which reveals the “offerings” and “improvisational style” in Liu’s works. My proposal is not against previous scholars’ analyses; instead, it merely offers new moments and new words to summarize the existing scholarship’s reflections on this ever-changing artist.

Keywords: Hung Liu, Chinese American artist, Allan Kaprow

Introduction

Born and raised in a turbulent and ever-evolving world, Hung Liu’s trajectory as both a Chinese American artist and a teacher coincided with the ever-changing international politics, cultural norms, and evolving art world. As a motivated and prolific artist, Hung Liu kept challenging her existing art practices and developed a heterogeneous oeuvre. Confronting the complex entanglements of both identity struggles and rapidly changing art practices, as well as the mystified symbolism within paintings, previous scholars approached Liu from varying angles and with different methodologies. One group of scholars, like Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Norman Bryson, mainly deployed

“works-centered” analysis, gave a close look at the paintings themselves, and characterized Liu’s practices by presenting their observations. Another group of scholars, like Wu Hung, Rebecca Jennison, and Rene De Guzman, used “biography-centered” analysis, utilizing details of her life to shed new light on Liu’s art practices, and periodized her art practice by presenting the turning points of her artistic career. Building on their pioneering and comprehensive research, this paper mainly deploys a “biography-centered” approach to find her turning points in her career and hence offer a different perspective to characterize Liu’s practices. This paper argues that there are two decisive moments in Hung Liu’s career: the

teaching by Allan Kaprow and her first portrayal of suffering subjects' photographs in 1988, which reveals the "offerings" and "improvisational style" in Liu's works. My proposal is not against previous scholars' analyses; instead, it merely offers new moments and new words to summarize the existing scholarship's reflections on this ever-changing artist.

Scholarship for Hung Liu

Previous scholarship has pointed out important threads in Liu's art practice. Lucy R. Lippard¹ and Norman Bryson² have pointed out the depiction of suffering as a major theme in Liu's work. Dorothy Moss³ and Dave Hickey⁴ revealed that drips are characteristics of Liu's art. Thalia Gouma-Peterson⁵ claimed that depictions of anonymous people underlie Liu's art. Heather Sealy Lineberry⁶ and Dorothy Moss⁷ elucidated on using photos as an important artistic thread in Liu's work.

Other scholars focus on the turning points in Liu's career. Thalia Gouma-Peterson⁸ indicted the Capp Street object as a turning point, focused on its term of fame, and did not elucidate what new element Liu introduced in her art practice. René De Guzman⁹ showed that Allan Kaprow's teaching plays an important role in Liu's career. Wu Hung provided four essential movements in Liu's career: 1981 (Liu's graduation project), 1988 (the Capp Street Project), 1989–1991 (reflections on the society), and 2008 (Liu's show in Beijing).¹⁰ While Wu mentioned the Capp Street Project and her use of old photography beginning with this project,¹¹ he did not mention her use of photos was all about anonymous people compared to her

previous use of photos.

Following pioneering and comprehensive research, I want to periodize her art practices and suggest two turning points: Allan Kaprow's teaching and the Capp Street Project, both of which respectively led to new perspectives on Liu's work — "offerings and offering tables" and "improvisational elements."

Art practices before staying in America

Hung Liu's art practices include sketches, mural paintings, oil paintings, installations, mixed media art, and even photographs, most of which were started in China. Her diverse interests in art attest to her passion for art-making and her multifaceted artistic expression. As I proved in the latter sections of this essay, those divergent artistic languages spoke to each other, intervened with each other, and altered each other. The mix and playfulness of art styles not only constituted her "encyclopedic" art style in her later developments but also attests to cross-medium connections in her works. In a sense, the diverse medium particularities were thrown into a "hotpot" of her art-making and appear as a mysterious complexity of Liu's art in America. Therefore, in order to elucidate her artistic developments in America, a clear and detailed illustration of her individual art practices in China is needed. This will also be joined with an introduction of her contemporary social and cultural contexts, which contributed to her "word play" of artwork titles and her "image play" of symbolism extracted from her cultural backgrounds.

Sketches

In 1958, Liu's mother, aunt, grandfather, and herself came to Beijing for her schooling. While attending Bei Xin'an primary school and Beijing Normal University Affiliated Girls' Middle School, Liu joined the after-school art club.¹² Because the primary school mainly served adult students, Liu joined the club as an exemption. The after-school art club mainly taught how to sketch from a plaster bust or still life or go out and paint a landscape. Nothing about figurative or life drawing was taught; at most, one person could do a quick sketch of a person. This extracurricular club was thus a combination of both teaching and group activities. Liu herself relates, "I still loved to paint, and I never

¹ Lucy R Lippard et al., (2021). *Hung Liu: Portraits of Promised Lands*. Washington, Dc: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 79.

² Norman Bryson et al., (1998). *Hung Liu: A Ten-Year Survey 1988-1998*, ed. Kanthleen Zurko. The College of Wooster Art Museum, 22.

³ Lippard et al., *Portraits of Promised Lands*, 14.

⁴ Norman Bryson et al., *A Ten-Year Survey 1988-1998*, 30.

⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁶ Heather Lineberry, (2001). *Hung Liu: Strange Fruit*. Rena Bransten Gallery, 6.

⁷ Lippard et al., *Portraits of Promised Lands*, 14.

⁸ Norman Bryson et al., *A Ten-Year Survey 1988-1998*, 9.

⁹ Hung Liu, René De Guzman, and Oakland Museum Of California, (2013). *Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu*. Berkeley: University Of California Press, 82.

¹⁰ Ibid. 18-49.

¹¹ Ibid., 24.

¹² Wu Hung, Hung Liu, and Jianguo Sui, (2011). *Hung Liu: Great Granary*. Timezone 8 Limited, 68-69.

stopped during that time. Back then, music, sports, and art were not seen as mattering much; the core academic subjects were given top priority, especially at our school.”¹ Therefore, attending an art club itself was thus unusual, alluding to her own passion for art.

Liu further advanced this habit by attending the Beijing Children’s Palace of Culture, the one by Jingshan Park. People there commented on her painting as “*you lingqi*,” which could be translated as “have a great sensibility,” but is also a popular term to describe someone with a talent in art.² The course content for this extracurricular club was similar to the previous one, mainly about sketches.

Teenagers were latter sent to the countryside to “learn from peasants,” which included Liu. At first, Liu was doing drawings at the mandatory political meeting; peasants saw those sketches and asked her for portraits. Liu then did quick sketches for them on broken papers, which also won praise from the models.

Becoming a student at the Teachers’ Academy after her experiences in the countryside, Liu received training on sketching plaster statues, still lives, and portraits. However, the classrooms served as factories and fields.

Photograph

A group of people from the film academy had a Shanghai Seagull brand 120 TLR camera and left it to Liu when they were sent to the countryside, which started Liu’s photography practice. The peasants were older farmers who held the superstitious belief that taking photos was a harmful practice that could extract part of a person’s soul. Having bought a few films, Liu could take photos for people who were more open-minded and befriended her. Excited by their invitations, Liu got up in the early morning to take photos of the landscape, ducks in the rivers, and peasants. Those pictures were printed off by Liu when she had the chance to visit a larger town and sent to peasants.

When revisiting this memory in the countryside, Liu commented, “So this says something about how I’ve always been interested in the link between photography and painting. A camera is another option you have for creating an image, and it’s a very subjective medium.”³ This

medium’s appeal and its associated entanglement later surfaced as conscious reflections and took on visual forms.

Oil Painting

Attending the teaching academy, Liu and other students in the studio were taught watercolor by a teacher. All their models were local farmers who were paid to sit for them, what is called “worker-peasant-soldiers”. Since the model was a long way from “Botticelli’s Venus,” Liu thought to herself, “This is the proletarian Venus.”⁴

Beside those mandatory courses on watercolor, Liu self-designed an assignment for herself to do landscape oil painting outside the school each day. She thought to herself, “The moment you got outside the school gates, you were in the countryside, so as long as you made it outside, you could paint landscapes. Of course, on the weekend, you could get a bit further afield, places like the Western Hills and so on.”⁵ In the end, she could paint a picture in just half an hour and had her palette with her at all times.

At that time, landscape painting was uncelebrated or even prohibited. Liu once got criticized and had a bad reputation because he painted a toilet. Despite the pressures from the surroundings and people’s critiques, she was still passionate about doing landscape paintings, which was probably because of her self-awareness of techniques’ importance and the influences of the Soviet Union’s paintings and the film academy. Liu rarely saw any prints of western paintings, most of which were from the Soviet Union. Liu said her oil landscape paintings were a way to practice color use and bring out the representation of lighting within the scene, which was inspired by the Soviet Union painting. Liu mentioned that she was in awe of the realist art of other students in the Film Academy, which may also be the reason for Liu to put pressure on herself.

Mural Paintings

Right after the Teacher’s Academy, Liu went to the Central Academy of Fine Art as a graduate student of mural painting. Liang Yunqing, who studied in Germany, taught them Western fresco mural paintings. During that time, Liu saw prints of western paintings more often than during her stay in the academy, notably the prints of Klimt, from which she developed a

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., 69.

³ Ibid., 68.

⁴ Ibid., 83.

⁵ Ibid.

taste for formalist paintings and paintings with an exotic appearance.¹ Another important influence during that time, according to Liu herself, are the two visits to Dunhuang (one in 1979, one in 1980), which she visited with oil painting departments.² Feeling sick the first year, Liu was allowed to go to the cave and make copies of the murals. She did not pay all her attention to the grand Buddha images at the center but also turned her attention to seemingly unimportant smaller images flanking the center images.³ She described those figures as “abstract, mystical, and interesting”.⁴ This period’s quick sketch of Apsaras (Fei Tian) reflects her interest beyond grand narratives and sensibility to overlooked subjects. This sensibility and her findings in Dunhuang symbolism later resurfaced in her art practices, which I will address in the next section.



Figure 1. Study for The Music of the Great Earth, 1980, Ink on paper

Her master’s graduation project for graduate mural painting was “Music of the Great Earth,” which drew inspiration from different sources. Conceptually, this piece penetrates her teacher’s slogan: “The uniqueness of mural painting lies in the coexistence of mural and painting.” This work was literally finished on the walls of the Foreign Students’ Dining Hall of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Attuned to news and recent archeology, Liu also paid attention to “Chime-Bells unearthed” and other Chime-Bells as inspirations.⁵ Wu Hung assumed “Chime-Bells Unearthed” referred to the

well-known *Chime-Bells From The Tomb Of Marquis Yi Of The Zeng State* (*Chime-Bells From Zeng State* as my abbreviation).⁶ Furthermore, Liu’s initial sketch mimics the composition and shape of the *Chime-Bells From Zeng State* (Figure 1), making the reference appear obvious. Sui Jiangguo observes that the “famous” Chime-Bells in the painting were elongated horizontally to make room for musicians.⁷ The use of “famous” here also alludes to *Chime-Bells from Zeng State* as the subject of this painting. The paintings were created using a “design before you go” approach; they went through several drafts before completion, and the artist had to obtain permission for the materials used. Initially, the work was drafted as a watercolor on shabby paper; it was later scaled up to a painting composed of various small parts placed on top of bricks; technically, the mural employed the traditional Chinese “gelled patterning and gilding” (*lifen tiejin*) technique, which she learned from experts. This technique applies gel to the detours of mural figures and then colors it with gold. Rejected the request to use gold, Liu then had to use other materials as substitutes.

Ceramics

After graduating from the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), Liu asks her friend studying at UC San Diego (UCSD) to send her applications for UCSD’s art practice department. Liu then heard the good news from America—she had been accepted by UCSD. Thwarted by governments and other teachers, Liu could not come to America immediately and spent two more years in China, during which she obtained an art teacher position at the CAFA, teaching middle school, and attended a continuing studies course on mural painting *de facto*.

She brought her students to a ceramics factory in Yixing, in Hubei, and we stayed there for several weeks. During that time, she shifted her attention from painting to ceramics. This use of ceramics also appeared in her later mixed-media works.

Calligraphy and Seal Carving

During her time working as a teacher, Liu also learned calligraphy and seal carving under a teacher called Niu Jun. At first, Niu was

¹ Ibid., 84-5.

² Ibid., 45.

³ Ibid., 86.

⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁵ Ibid., 114.

⁶ René De Guzman, *Summoning Ghosts*, 20.

⁷ Wu Hung and Hung Liu, (2011). *Great Granary*. Timezone 8 Limited, 116.

reluctant to accept her as a student because of her gender. Moved by her persistence, Niu did accept her and began one-on-one teaching each week. By providing Liu with the best materials, compiling handouts, and giving her detailed feedback, Niu gave Liu a really intimate teaching experience and exposed her to Chinese traditions. Those trainings in calligraphy, seal carving, and corresponding traditional composition were referenced in her works in America.

The First Turning Point: Studying Under Allan Kaprow

As I mentioned above, Liu had already become an art professor before studying abroad in America. Being an art professor symbolizes an acceptance of Chinese institutions and a full internalization of Chinese discourses around art and the style of art-making. It denotes mastery of fundamental techniques as well as readiness for future developments. It may also mean mental, historical, and artistic baggage that was embedded in Liu's training. Around that time, Chinese art education was mainly based on the Soviet model, and western contemporary art only entered China in the 1980s. While the illustrations of those works of art were imported into China, not a single art history or art theory book was published alongside them. In other words, Liu had never been fully exposed to European and American contemporary art. Allan Kaprow mentioned this in his memoirs about her: "When I first met Hung, I saw that she was reasonably familiar with Western modernism; what she wanted was to know more about the contemporary vanguard in America."¹ For Liu, American contemporary art was an unfamiliar Other, residing in an alien nation, filled up by new art concepts and theories and the abandonment of techniques. Allan Kaprow was the Other within the Other, a long-celebrated American contemporary artist, and an activist who turned against the techniques Liu taught. Therefore, by encountering Allan Kaprow, Liu was not just learning about art but also forming an understanding of American contemporary art, challenging her perception of art based on Chinese discourses, and resituating the position of techniques within art production. This ideological rapture thus gave rise to a sudden change in her career, symbolizing a new artistic

life along with her arrival in America.

Allan Kaprow's Instruction

While Chinese art education emphasized the techniques, American art education didn't talk about them at all. Hung Liu claimed that UCSD was especially open-minded and against the teaching of techniques, which was influenced by Allan Kaprow there.² In particular, she relates, "This is different from my original art education... they do not emphasize this; whether you learn or do not learn how to paint does not matter... Through those experiences, I opened up my mind and [realized that] sometimes artworks are gradually discovered and formed. We meticulously painted the draft, pinned down the colors, and enlarged the draft. Now, I draft simple lines and paint without designing the colors. I feel like this painting is also improvisational."³ This statement reveals Liu's transformation under Kaprow and her new practices of "using improvisational elements" and "painting while thinking".

Liu later pinned down the turning point on a specific event in Allan Kaprow's course. In one of Kaprow's courses, Liu and another student were taken to a garbage dump and "uploaded a couch, chairs, and buckets of house paint from the back of his truck".⁴ Liu was shocked because every art should be well prepared in China, and she was waiting for Allan Kaprow to give instructions. However, while Allan did not say anything, a student opened a paint can and poured it on the sofa. Liu reflects, "Probably I think back; the way I improvise while I paint today goes back to that moment in the dump with Allan Kaprow at UCSD."⁵

Among the many interviews in which Liu has mentioned this dump course, her interview with Kathleen McManus Zurko stands out to me. When the student poured the sofa, Liu thought to herself, "Ok, I can do that." This very moment of liberation haunted her: "In the most recent painting, I felt like when I was in front of the dumpster many years ago. Like I was going to do this with no concrete plan or idea. I was like, here, just brush to see what happens. I remember the moment when that young man poured that paint." She also claims, "Although

¹ Norman Bryson et al., *A Ten-Year Survey 1988-1998*, 7.

² Wu Hung and Hung Liu, *Great Granary*, 50.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lippard et al., *Portraits of Promised Lands*, 102.

⁵ Ibid.

these paintings are based on historical photographs, I also wanted to create some part of the old furniture or piece of junk.”¹

Therefore, this attest to the randomness when she applied symbols to her artworks. All of the primary resources above highlight her new practices of “using improvisational elements” and “painting while thinking”.

Influence of Allan Kaprow’s Teaching: Evidence in Teaching

Liu also taught this “taking risks” spirit to her own students. In an interview titled “Making Our Mark: Hung Liu and Michael Hall,” Hung Liu said, “I feel that liberation is very important. The way when you let yourself off the hook and get out of your comfort zone, you don’t know what will happen. That’s why, over the year, maybe with graduate students, I just said, ‘Do something, do anything.’ Get your canvas dirty. Don’t worry. This is not your first painting and won’t be your last painting. Do whatever you want with your bad painting. It may go beyond the painting. Just go 3D. Do something else.”²

This teaching was exemplified by her two students, Dave Kim and Gina Tuzzi, with whom I conducted interviews about Liu’s teaching.

Dave Kim was a graduate student of Hung Liu’s seminar at Mills College and is now working as an artist in different mediums, including oil paintings, murals, sculptures, and mixed media works. His artworks carry cultural reflections of his Korean origin, an examination of his identity as an American, and a strong interest in the histories of both Americans and Koreans. When Dave talked about Hung in the interview with me, he smiled and laughed frequently, showing me each interesting experience and his private relationship with Liu. With certainty, Dave delightedly told me that Hung was the dream professor in the film, being kind and providing help.

When speaking about whether Hung Liu prohibited her students from doing something, Dave replied, “No, I think, in fact, a lot of her courses are built around the idea of ‘going beyond.’” He then elaborated, “Go beyond what you are doing. Exploring other aspects of art, I think we are always stuck in a little bubble of

what we are doing. This is a consistent challenge. You know you are working so hard, trying to do something specific. I think you have to have a perspective. I think she is always trying to push for that.”

Gina Tuzzi was a graduate student in Hung Liu’s seminar at Mills College and is a lecturer at Humboldt State University. While teaching, Gina Tuzzi also makes paintings and drawings. She described Hung Liu as nice and friendly. Liu usually exchanged gifts with her and invited her to private dinners with other contemporary artists.

When talking about technique and Liu’s teaching, Gina mentioned, “Those things really influenced me because of how she took liberties with human figuration and representation. I think about that a lot.” Besides “taking liberties”, Gina also describes Liu as a person “taking risks,” especially after retiring: “I mean, her work was always profound and inspired, but I think that there was something that became really sort of experimental and playful about her work after she retired from mills. And I think it was because she had maybe more time to spend in the studio taking risks.” By taking Liu’s artworks of Dorothea Lange, Gina showed, “You know, like with the Dorothea Lange images, you know, those red outlines around those figures were kind of born from an absence of resources in her studio upon prepping those sketches, and she ran with that and it really changed something about the figuration by surrounding everything with this like a wreck electric red line, you know, is really simple.” By taking inspiration from a seemingly simple phrase — “an absence of resources” — Liu shows her willingness to experiment, to “go beyond,” and to keep challenging her current art practices. Gina not only described Hung Liu as a person who took risks but also as open to different art languages: “You know, painting is such a vast and spectral language, and I think that Liu was always open to having conversations about a lot of the elements on the spectrum, at least from my perspective. You know, I’m sure someone would be like, that was not the case for me, but it was definitely the case for me.”

Hung Liu’s “taking risks,” “taking liberties,” and “openness to different art forms” are demonstrations of her openness and her willingness to explore. As Gina said, even after retiring, Hung Liu still challenges her

¹ Norman Bryson et al., *A Ten-Year Survey 1988-1998*, 39.

² Hung Liu, (2016, December 5). “Making Our Mark: Hung Liu and Michael Hall,” [www.youtube.com, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3iqBFpFjV&t=7s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3iqBFpFjV&t=7s).

understanding of art by exploring different aspects of the art world and investigating different parts of history.



Figure 2. Hung Liu, *Wings*, 2011, mixed media with resin, 82 x 164. Private Collection

Legacy of Allan Kaprow: “Improvisational Elements” in Liu’s Works

Wings (Figure 2) exemplified her new practices of “using improvisational elements” and “painting while thinking.” By using an excessive amount of linseed oil on brushes, paint became fluid and was dripping due to gravity. Those drips interacted with previous layers of paint on the coarse surfaces and produced an unfettered shape outside of human control. In a sense, Liu removed brushes from paintings and lent artworks to spontaneity.

Although her paintings seem to be conventional photo-realism, Liu challenged this perception by introducing imagination. Her vintage photos were predominately black and white, opening up the possibilities of imaginative colors. The girl’s face, for example, was rendered in pink, white, green, red, and yellow, which is not a realistic depiction but a creative one.

In this painting, Liu was making a photomontage by using oil paints. Since the degree of mixing could not be well designed, Liu is doing an “image play” of the girl and the bird, mimicking the fading effects of Photoshop. This playfulness thus penetrates her art practices after Kaprow and reveals her “improvisational elements.”

The Second Turning Point Was the Capp Street Project in 1988

Liu’s American practices were characterized by the reworking and rendering of historical photographs of suffering people. Although she sporadically used photos before, her first depiction of anonymous people was in the Capp Street Project in 1988, which ushered in a new stage of her artistic development.

In 1988, Liu was selected to participate in an artist-in-residence project called “Capp Street Project”. Founded in San Francisco in 1983 by Ann Hatch, the Capp Street Project was one of the first visual arts residencies in the United States and was really renowned during that time. David Ireland, one of the founders of the project, made a building called the “Monadnock Building,” in which all three selected artists could stay for three months.

Her recently received green card might be a cause for Hung Liu to meditate on her identity and ask the question of what a Chinese American is. Also, Liu described the project as open-minded and “without orientation,” opening all possibilities for artists to make it.¹ This could also be the reason why Liu chose to depict some subjects differently that she was interested in. Because Liu spent three months in San Francisco, she had the chance to interview an official from an immigrant agency about the history of immigrant certificates. Along with the interview, Liu also went to Chinatown in San Francisco to find photo albums and other photos. “Ignoring responsibility, as a Chinese, I want to know previous Chinese’s lives in America; I want to know their histories, because their histories may be a part of me,” Liu says.²

Vintage Photos: Summoning the Ghosts of Anonymous People

In 1988, her practice of depicting unnamed, ordinary people originates from the Resident Alien exhibition at Capp Street Project: Her *Branch (Wong Family)* series was based on photos she brought from the Wong family; Tang Ren Jie delineates a prostitute in Chinatown; flanking a fortune cookie painting, Liu also draws a named Chinese immigrant railway worker. All those figures captured by the camera were not meant to be worshipped or celebrated. Instead, they had no glory past and were often stigmatized due to their identity as the resident “aliens,” prostitutes, workers, and immigrants.

In an interview, Hung Liu referred to those anonymous people as “homeless ghosts” and described her practice of “summoning the ghosts” as a way to properly bury those people and allow them to rest in peace using picture plane.

¹ Wu Hung and Hung Liu, *Great Granary*, 54.

² *Ibid.*, 55.



Figure 3. Exhibition view of *branch (the Wong family)*, 1988, 2x2 in, VAULT

Summoning and Offering: The Offering Table

Her summoning ghost practice came along with her practice of offering, which surfaced in her first artworks. In front of her *branch (the Wong family)*, she placed a statue holding fake incense to make offerings to the family photos (Figure 3). Although this installation-like artwork mimicked the Chinese tradition of offering to ancestors, her later art practices took different forms.

One manifestation of this departure is her metaphoric use of “offering tables.” “To mourn them. Because my Oakland Museum exhibition is called “Summoning Ghost,” and because so many people in China died anonymously, if I do this, they have a place to rest. So that [the object inserted on canvas] can also function as an offering table.”¹ As a result, Liu invented a new practice of inserting boxes into canvas and making it an “offering”. An offering table appears in China, Egypt, and other cultures, whereas Chinese offering tables emphasize the transference of offerings from this world to the afterworld. Resonant with this concept, Liu painted objects on the box as an offering: in *Ox Year (Cow and Girls III)* (Figure 4), the snuff bottle was always favored by prostitutes, and a painted one could be sent to a prostitute as a pain reliever.



Figure 4. *Ox Year (Cow and Girls III)*, 2009, Mixed media, 41 x 41 inches, JSMA Gallery

Another manifestation of the offering lies in her use of symbols. Her symbols, most notably, are all auspicious and derived from Chinese painting, Dunhuang mural paintings, and Buddhism, including auspicious cranes from Song paintings, auspicious Apsaras from Dunhuang caves, and auspicious lotuses from Chinese paintings. Her frequently used circle symbol has a connection to Zen Buddhism: she stated in an interview that circles in Zen Buddhism symbolize infinity and challenge the very concept of beginning and ending.²

Her designed art trainings are another form of offering. In Liu’s mixed-media work, she almost exhausts all her means to make offerings to the figures, forming an “encyclopedic” art style consisting of cross-medium citations. In *Ox Year (Cow and Girls III)*, the couplet was normally offered to the deceased, was a part of calligraphy and seal carving training and was given to two women; the auspicious cow was from a Chinese ink painting; the auspicious circle itself is an oil painting; the anonymous figures are from a photo; and the offering on the inserted box refers to installation art. Taken together, those cross-medium references all lend themselves to Liu’s offering.

Conclusion

Hung Liu, as such a prolific artist, imbues her artwork with mysterious symbolism and rich information, which could be approached in

¹ Hung Liu, “Making Our Mark: Hung Liu and Michael Hall.”

² Hung Liu, (2020, September 18). “Asia Talks: Artist Hung Liu with Laila Kazmi,” [www.youtube.com, https://youtu.be/ETk7a8e6M3E?](https://youtu.be/ETk7a8e6M3E?)

varied ways. My periodization of Liu's career, divided into two turning points, is primarily an attempt to comprehend her works. More importantly, I hope to contribute "offering," "improvisational elements," and "encyclopedic art style" as three entry points to a new understanding of her works.

References

- Bryson, Norman, Thalia Gouma-Peterson, Dave Hickey, Allan Kaprow, and Hung Liu. (1998). *Hung Liu: A Ten-Year Survey 1988-1998*. Edited by Kanthleen Zurko. The College of Wooster Art Museum.
- Hung, Wu, Hung Liu, and Jianguo Sui. (2011). *Hung Liu: Great Granary*. Timezone 8 Limited.
- Lineberry, Heather. (2001). *Hung Liu: Strange Fruit*. Rena Bransten Gallery.
- Lippard, Lucy R, Dorothy Moss, Nancy Lim, Hung Liu, Elizabeth Partridge, Philip Tinari, and National Portrait Gallery (Smithsonian Institution). (2021). *Hung Liu: Portraits of Promised Lands*. Washington, Dc: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.
- Liu, Hung. (2020, September 18). "Asia Talks: Artist Hung Liu with Laila Kazmi." [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETk7a8e6M3E?).
<https://youtu.be/ETk7a8e6M3E?>.
- Liu, Hung. (2016, December 5). "Making Our Mark: Hung Liu and Michael Hall." [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3iqBFpFjVk&t=7s).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3iqBFpFjVk&t=7s>.
- Liu, Hung, René De Guzman, and Oakland Museum of California. (2013). *Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu*. Berkeley: University Of California Press.