

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
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Hung Liu

Shaping, Pouring, Layering

January 8 – February 14, 2026

Opening reception: Thursday, January 8, 2026, 6:00-8:00 pm

RYAN LEE is pleased to announce *Shaping, Pouring, Layering*, an exhibition of paintings, mixed media resin works, and works on paper by Hung Liu (b. Changchun, China, 1948 - d. Oakland, California, 2021). This show explores the inventive processes that Liu employed to outmaneuver the limitations of media, merging painting and sculpture as she brought historical images to life. "I create and destroy an image concurrently by working freely – being both careful and careless at the same time," Liu said.

Inspired by the Chinese folk art tradition of cutting out figures from photographs to make them into objects, Liu used a laborious and distinctive process to form shaped canvases – previously mostly associated with abstract artists. Donald Kuspit wrote in a 1993 catalog essay, "The shaped canvas has been used in abstract art to create cohesiveness between imminent and external form – indeed, to make external shape formally relevant to and inseparable from the work – but Liu uses it in a ceremonial, theatrical way to emphasize the personal importance of her content."

Basing her paintings on archival Chinese photographs, Liu manipulated her canvases to conform with the eccentric curves and odd angles hugging the outlines of her subjects. "Breaking the boundaries frees me and my subjects," Liu said of her shaped canvases. "Even rectangular canvases look irregular to me now." The images in the photographs – for example, a posing Chinese sex worker or a self portrait – are brought forth as protruding objects while the wall recedes into the background.

In *Strange Rocks* (1995), the canvas edge hugs both the shapes of the rocks and the outlines of the figures, each of whom is painted in a different color. The figures, sourced from photographs that the artist found in 1991 in the Beijing Film Archive, have the hazy, low-resolution quality of old photographs as they perch amongst the stones. Liu's signature linseed drips call attention to the surface of the canvas, as she undermines the authority of the historical imagery she uses as inspiration. In Chinese culture, strange rocks (*guai shi*) are traditionally prized for their unique beauty, supernatural powers, and their ability to connect heaven and earth.

In the 1990s, Liu experimented with paper pulp to create unique works on paper, pouring and shaping imagery. Created from pigmented liquid paper pulp squeezed onto a wet paper pulp support and then run through the press, the resulting works are rich in color and remarkably calligraphic.

In 2003, Liu developed an elaborate process to create mixed media works combining aspects of painting, printmaking, and photography that allowed her to repurpose elements from her paintings and embed them in layers of translucent resin. The result was a prize-winning new kind of shimmering hybrid art.

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In these works, Liu experimented with light in a way that oil paint wouldn't allow, because the resin and metal leaf are reflective in a much different way. This process resonates with lenticular filmmaking techniques used to create animation cels and back painting on glass, creating layers of imagery that are coated in resin in playful dialogue with Chinese decorative lacquerware. The resin is cast on top of the paint or ink, enhancing its colors and providing a translucent source of light. The paint and resin can be layered as many as six times or as few as two.

When describing her practice, Liu often cited a poem by Stanley Kunitz titled "The Layers." Kunitz writes about the journey of life and the aging process, embracing the complications inherent in humanity. Kunitz advises, "Live in the layers, not on the litter." Liu wholeheartedly adopted this idea, embracing the power of layers to create transcendent artworks that as critic John Yao recently said, "position the viewer in a space of ambiguity." In the process of shaping, layering, and pouring, Liu surfaces erased histories and confronts the contemporary moment with distinct innovation and experimentation.

Hung Liu was a groundbreaking contemporary artist known for her powerful paintings based primarily on historical Chinese photographs, and her installations addressing the racial and cultural complexities she witnessed upon immigrating to the United States at the age of 36.

The exhibition *Hung Liu: Happy and Gay* is currently traveling and will be on view at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art until May 2026. In 2025, her work was included in exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, CA; Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UCSB, CA; and the San José Museum of Art, CA. In 2023, Liu's work was the subject of an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, titled *Hung Liu: Witness*. In 2021, the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery organized *Hung Liu: Portraits of Promised Lands*, a retrospective look at the artist's portraits. Curated by the museum's former curator of painting and sculpture Dorothy Moss, this was the first solo show by an Asian American woman in the museum's history.

In 2013, the Oakland Museum of California organized *Summoning Ghosts: The Art and Life of Hung Liu*, which traveled through 2015. In a review of that show, *The Wall Street Journal* called Liu "the greatest Chinese painter in the U.S." A two-time recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in painting, Liu also received a Lifetime Achievement Award in Printmaking from the Southern Graphics Council International in 2011.

Liu's works have been exhibited extensively and collected by the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, CA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; Museum of Modern Art, NY; National Gallery of Art, DC; National Portrait Gallery, DC; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; and Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, among others.