

[accessAtlanta.com](http://accessatlanta.com) > Arts

VISUAL ARTS & ARCHITECTURE: Ordinary figures gain mythic status

By DEBRA WOLF
For the Journal-Constitution
Published on: 12/16/2007

Hung Liu's paintings are filled with the contradictions that mark her personal story. When she was an infant, her father was imprisoned under Communist rule. Caught in the Cultural Revolution, she was sent away at 18, and ultimately studied art in Beijing. She immigrated to California in 1984, but China remains the territory she mines.

Ambivalence, uncertainty and stoicism mark Liu's transformation of ordinary people into near-mythic figures. Working from photographs, she activates her large surfaces with bold colors, layers of pattern, drizzles of linseed oil and occasional objects. Circles float in backgrounds as a leitmotif — emblems of perfect form and unity. She scatters them freely, as though celebrating her ability to do so.



Savannah College of Art and Design

This detail from 'Refugee-Opera' shows the effectiveness of Liu's expressionistic technique.

REVIEW

Hung Liu: "Memorial Grounds 1988-2006" Through Dec. 30. 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays; 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Fridays; noon-5 p.m. Saturdays, Sundays. ACA Gallery of SCAD, 1280 Peachtree St., Atlanta. 404-815-2931, www.acagallery.org.

Bottom line: Monumental paintings offer insights into contemporary Chinese experience

"Refugee-Opera" exemplifies Liu's vision. Mother clutches baby to her breast. Figures huddle nearby. The canvas is streaked with red, decorated with a flurry of birds and circles, lit by a pale yellow sky. Color drips from hair, mouths and fingers. Expressions show no breaking point, but the painting itself seems to weep.

Liu's China seems stripped of sentimentality, deciphering little for the Western eye but evoking much. Faces rarely reveal or explicitly conceal — placid and ghostly in her exquisite "Five Eunuchs," invigorated with thick impasto and colliding colors in her "China Mary" paintings.

Subverting the social realist style in which she was trained, she achieves a complex and intriguing mix of traditional motifs (birds, dragons, flowers), popular culture and gestural technique, heightening the mystery in her images.

In "Great Leap," young boys at play form a link in the chain of generations. Broad, animated and fluid brush strokes underscore the boys' vitality. Nakedness heightens their innocence and vulnerability, while a restrained palette sets an ambiguous tone. An oversize grasshopper looks on as a symbol of luck: a hopeful sign for an unknown future.