

IN THE FOREGROUND: OBJECT STUDIES

A Podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP) at the Clark Art Institute

“The Erosion of History”: Samantha Page on Hung Liu’s *Migrant Mother*



Hung Liu (b. Changchun, China, 1948), *Migrant Mother*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 66 x 66 in. (167.6 x 167.6 cm).

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Transcript

Caitlin Woolsey (host)

Join us for an immersive, personal encounter with a single work of art as seen through the eyes of an art historian. You're listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast series from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute.

In this episode, Samantha Page, program assistant in the Research and Academic Program, as well as the assistant editor of publications at the Clark Art Institute, discusses Chinese-American artist Hung Liu's painting *Migrant Mother* from 2015, in which Liu reframes Dorothea Lange's iconic Depression-era photograph of the same title, seeking to imbue the image's subjects with a renewed agency.

Samantha Page

My name is Samantha Page. *Migrant Mother* is a painting made in 2015 by the Chinese American artist Hung Liu. It's an oil on canvas painting, and it measures 66 by 66 inches. The painting shows an image of a mother nursing a baby on the right half of the canvas. It's a familiar image. We might recognize it as the same figure as the mother in Dorothea Lange's famous photograph of the same name. The woman is all gray, except for the shirt she's wearing, which is a lavender color. And she's looking down to her right, not making eye contact with us, the viewer. She's nursing a baby whose face is smooshed up against the mother's breast, and its small hand is gripping the side of the shirt. On the right side of the canvas, the far-right side, there's a pole of some sort in front of the woman. And the corner of a box is visible, which it appears the woman is sitting on. Behind her to the left there's a lantern but otherwise there's very little structure visible. Behind her there is sort of a muted background but it's hard to tell if it's meant to be background in the image that we're looking at, or if it's a more roughly finished part of the painting. On the left, level with a mother's head, we see a pink rectangle. It's a soft pastel pink that frames a disembodied hand offering out a bouquet of flowers. They look like they could be white daisies. There are a lot of flowers in this bouquet, maybe a dozen, and they're clustered tightly together, held by a grey fist, overlapping. They're bursting with petals. We see the beginning of the forearm of the person holding the flowers, but the edge of the pink rectangle cuts off the rest of their body.

The whole canvas is covered in what appears to be drips of paint or oil that have eroded away the paint they passed through. The mother's forehead, cheek, and neck are covered in striations of black paint that have trickled down from her hair. The paint where her knees might be has been washed away or worn through so the canvas is visible beneath it. And on the left side of the canvas, beneath the pink rectangle, light gray streams down into the lower left corner, almost like rain streaming down a window over where the lantern is painted.

This painting is part of Hung Liu's *American Exodus* project. Liu sourced the original image for the painting from those taken for the Farm Security Administration in the United States in the 1930s. The

original photo was one of five taken by Dorothea Lange in her pursuit of capturing the famous *Migrant Mother* photograph of 1936 that has since become an American icon. The project's name, *American Exodus*, is also the title of a book that Dorothea Lange published with her husband and collaborator, Paul Taylor, in 1939.

Liu's methodology of adapting and transforming images that began as documentary photographs into large-scale, ethereal oil paintings is central to her contemporary artistic practice. Through this approach, she highlights a contrast in the two media that provokes consideration of objectivity and intention in art. Through her appropriation, Liu questions the assumed authenticity and objectivity of the FSA photos. And she elevates the personal element that is often obscured in readings of historic photos.

[brief tonal musical interlude]

Memory is central to Hung Liu's practice, in that she sources images of subjects whose narratives may have been lost to history or whose pasts have been forgotten. In Liu's earlier body of work she focuses on Chinese propaganda imagery from the time of the Cultural Revolution. She's following and playing with the idea of social and socialist realism. Her work doesn't reinforce the idea that one must have accomplished something important to be worthy of being depicted in a work of art. Instead, her portraits reimagine the nobility of equality that one cultivates within. Notably, the woman in Lange's original photograph *Migrant Mother*, Florence Owens Thompson, identified herself as the subject of the original photos, and expressed criticism about the narrative surrounding the photo. Despite Lange's intentions to spread awareness about the US's poverty during the Great Depression, the subject's—Thompson's—marginalization for much of the photo's history suggests the persistence of a power dynamic between artist and subject. Hung Liu doesn't overtly criticize the framing methods and subject of Lange's photos. But her adaptations of those original images does complicate their perceived objectivity and undermines assertions about absolute truth. There's still so much we don't know about the subject of that original photo and this painting. And Liu is aware of that and seems to be honoring the subjects anyway. Or maybe even *more* so because of that personal knowledge of them that's lost.

[brief string musical interlude]

In Liu's work, she adopts images from small- to large-scale, black-and-white to color, pragmatic purposes like marketing, propaganda, and social sciences to artistic. As she stated in an interview, "It's about recreating and creating. It's about giving new life to old photographs, turning old photographs into new paintings." Rather than prioritizing the circumstances of the figures, Liu emphasizes the subjects themselves and reinvigorates them.

The ink wash to me seems to be conveying a material and conceptual erosion of history. The dripping lines of linseed oil that Liu uses unsettle the compositions and lend a sense of their temporality. To me, this calls to mind the fleeting nature of the moment and the malleability of our memory, even when aided by objects of visual culture. In this instance, Liu's ink wash shows that everything, even such an iconic image, is susceptible to revision and misremembering. While a very literal artistic addition, Liu's ink wash technique enacts the artist's thinking about the malleability of images, and reminds viewers that even contemporary interpretations of these figures are unstable and liable to change.

Now the outstretched hand on left is source of interest to me, and puzzling a little. I wonder if it's sort of an homage to the bouquets that we typically give to mothers as gifts from their children. Or maybe the unearthed daisies are sort of an echo of the untethered family, and the migratory subject at the heart of this painting. Or maybe an addition like the rectangle and the flowers within it reminds viewers that there's a lot of interpretation and artistic license happening in this image. Maybe it's Liu's reminder to us that these are not photos. They're not people seen in their natural state, but rather the artist's imagining of her subject's specificity and individuality. A marker like the flowers and the frame that Liu has made for them within this image reemphasizes that Liu's transparency about her quotation adaptation of images is part of her practice that she doesn't try to hide.

Through these methods of interpretation, Liu works to reclaim her subjects from context and frameworks where she found them. And she openly recognizes the layers of work that reframe the subjects.

Caitlin Woolsey (host)

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute. The Clark sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge Munsee Community. As we learn, speak, and gather here at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations, by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.

This series is created and produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with assistance from Caro Fowler, Samantha Page, and Jessie Sentivan; sound editing and musical interludes composed by John Buteyn; and theme music by lightchaser. To see images and more information about the artwork discussed, please visit clarkart.edu/podcast/object-studies.