

arts and entertainment

## Haunting portrayals by Hung Liu on display in Fort Collins

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Hung Liu, "Apsaras-Blue," 2009, oil on canvas, 72 by 72 inches. ( | )

A little girl holding a medical mask slightly askew across her face. Medical workers and soldiers hauling a body wrapped in a colorful rug up a hill. A young woman brushing her hair,

seemingly oblivious to the rubble around her. These are a few of Hung Liu's moving, sometimes elegiac scenes of the aftermath of the 2008 earthquake that killed nearly 90,000 people in the Sichuan province of her native China.

A dozen paintings from the 2009 series, titled "Apsaras," are on view through Jan. 2 at the Fort Collins Museum of Contemporary Art.

To secure this stunning, at times haunting exhibition, which was organized by the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York City and shown there earlier this year, is an impressive coup for

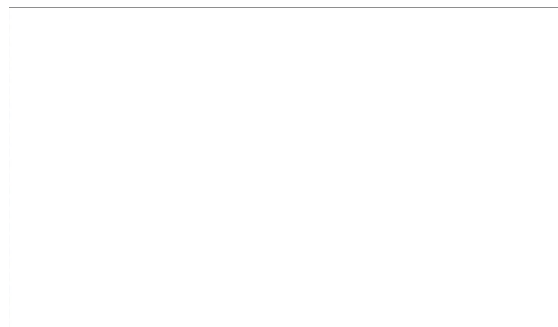


HungLiu: Candles, 2009, oil on canvas, 80 by 96 inches. ( | )

this sometimes overlooked institution.

Until the emergence of impressionism in the late 19th century, history painting held an exalted place for centuries in a carefully prescribed artistic hierarchy.

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Elaborate depictions of episodes from the past, as well as biblical, classical and mythological themes, were thought to eclipse what was seen as more specialized subject matter, such as still lifes or landscapes.

But with the rise of abstraction and new media amid the artistic upheavals of the 20th century, history painting nearly faded away.

A few contemporary painters, though, have kept the genre alive, reinventing it to fit their needs, as they address sometimes controversial events of the recent past.

Chief among them is Liu, an internationally recognized artist, who came of age during China's Cultural Revolution and was exiled in 1968 for four years to a so-called re-education farm.

She immigrated to the United States in 1984 for studies at the University of California at San Diego, and she has since become an internationally recognized artist who frequently draws inspiration from her native country's tumultuous past and present.

These paintings, which have an undeniable documentary component, show not only the confusion, grief and disbelief that are an inevitable part of such disasters, but also the will and determination to survive that soon follows.



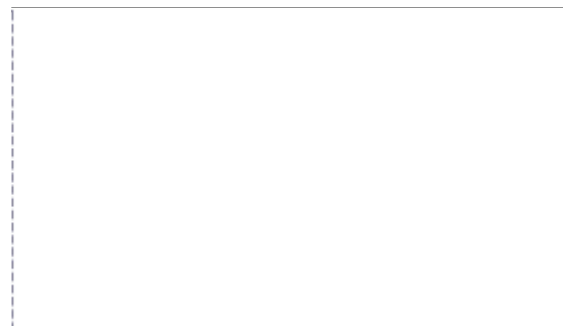
Hung Liu East/Spring, 2009, oil on canvas, 72 by 72 inches ( | )

These works transcend reality, however, as Liu blends fact and fancy, drawing on the spiritual power of the *apsaras* — flying angels without wings — depicted in ancient Buddhist images in China's Dunhuang Caves.

In her portraits of injured victims and mourners, such as "Apsaras-Blue" or "Apsaras- Red," flowing, semi-abstract evocations of the *apsaras* hover along the edges of the faces, turning these images into talismans of healing and hope.

Four of the most powerful paintings, titled after the four seasons and four principal directions, are not directly related to the earthquake at all, yet in Liu's hands, they seem inextricably linked to it.

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In November 2008, during a walk in the Oakland hills, she came across a dead deer and photographed it from various angles. While creating drawings and paintings based on those photos, she began to see the deer as a kind of flying angel as well.

She depicts this noble creature in four different positions against alternately colored, monochromatic backgrounds ("East/Spring," for example), and the stark gracefulness and beauty of these images serve as ideally fitting symbols of death and rebirth.

It is hard not to wonder, though, if it would have been better to separate the four paintings and place them at the four extremes of the installation, letting them serve as the grief markers implied by the directions that are part of their titles.

As significant as the subject matter is in all these paintings, it is impossible to separate it from Liu's extraordinary skill with a brush. She emphasizes the physicality of the paint, combining gestural, layered strokes with transparent washes of color and delicate, flowing drips.

"Hung Liu: Apsaras" is a timely and compelling exhibition that is well worth the drive from Denver.

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## "HUNG LIU: APSARAS."

Art. Fort Collins Museum of Contemporary Art, 201 S. College Ave. On view are Liu's moving paintings of the victims of the catastrophic 2008 earthquake in China's Sichuan province as well as four other, unrelated paintings. Through Jan. 2. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays and noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays. Closed today, Dec. 31 and Jan 1. \$5, \$2 seniors and free for members, students and youth. 970-482-2787 or [fcmoca.org](http://fcmoca.org).

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