

The Vanishing: Re-presenting the Chinese in the American West
Hung Liu and Rene Yung
University of Wyoming Art Museum, 2006
Educational packet for grades K-12

Introduction

In this museum visit students will observe the works of Hung Liu (born in Changchun, China) and Rene Yung (raised in Hong Kong before her relocation to California as a teenager). These two American artists expose and explore the lost history of the Chinese in the American West (specifically Idaho and Wyoming in this exhibit). Hung Liu's paintings and the installation by Rene Yung re-present the Chinese immigrants who have disappeared more through "communal amnesia both inside and outside communities" rather than through "loss and abandonment".¹

The University of Wyoming Art Museum invited Hung Liu to expand and deepen her consideration of the subject of the Chinese in the American West for this presentation of "*The Vanishing: Re-presenting the Chinese in the American West*". While this presentation has its beginnings in Idaho's Sun Valley Center for the Arts Project in 2004, photographs from the UW American Heritage Center were sent to Hung Liu for reference and inspiration. The resulting three paintings and the three reference photographs are all seen in this exhibition.

Hung Liu's interest in memory and lost histories, and her magnificent paintings made her a "natural centering place" for this project. "Rene Yung's idea for an installation that paid homage to the immigrant past and the process of cultural forgetting was potent and exciting,"² and provides a different way to consider the stories of the Chinese in the American West.

Historical Background Material

The first long-term employment for the Chinese seeking jobs in Wyoming was found along the Union Pacific Railroad as maintenance-of-the-day workers. An 1870 letter from J.W. Gannett, "auditor" to Oliver Ames, the Union Pacific Railroad President in Boston, points out that the railroad was pleased with the Chinese workers they had hired. Soon Chinese railroad workers and later coal miners were working along the Union Pacific railroad from Laramie to Evanston.

Throughout the decade of the 1870s, the number of Chinese living in southwestern Wyoming steadily increased. As the population increased, so did the diversity of jobs. At Rock Springs, where most of the Chinese residents of Sweetwater County lived in 1880, there were Chinese miners, laborers, and cooks, along with a barber, gambler, and a priest.

Both Rock Springs and Green River had Chinese women living in their towns in 1880. Although small in number, all of the female residents were employed outside the home. In Green River, two women worked as servants, whereas the only female in Rock Springs served as a cook. Chinese women prostitutes lived in Evanston, one of whom succeeded in becoming an entrepreneur involved in several different businesses. "China Mary" as she was called became the first woman to purchase property in Evanston. And there is some indication that she was the first Chinese



China Mary, anonymous, ca. 1930, Kodak RC print, 5 x 3 1/2 inches, Uinta County Library Collection #6629, courtesy of the American Heritage Center

¹ *The Vanishing: Re-Presenting the Chinese in the American West*, Catalog for August 6 – October 29, 2004 Sun Valley Center for the Arts Exhibition, Kristen Poole, Artistic Director.

² Ditto *The Vanishing: Re-Presenting the Chinese in the American West*, Catalog for August 6 – October 29, 2004 Sun Valley Center for the Arts Exhibition, Kristen Poole, Artistic Director.

person to own property north of Chinatown.³

The three paintings of the entire Wyoming collection by Hung Liu are from archival photographs of “China Mary” in Evanston, Wyoming.

Artist statement by Hung Liu

I paint from historical photographs, usually those taken of Chinese subjects by foreigners. These have included 19th century images of Chinese female “types,” prostitutes, child street acrobats, war refugees, and women laboring at such tasks as pulling a boat upriver, operating an industrial scale loom, and walking in circles (like mules) behind the handle of a millstone grinder.

As a painter, I am interested in subjecting the documentary authority of historical photographs to the more reflective process of painting; I want to both preserve and destroy the image. Much of the meaning of my painting comes from the way the washes and drips dissolve the photo-based images, opening them to a slower kind of looking, suggesting perhaps the cultural and personal narratives fixed in the photographic instant.

I also introduce traditional Chinese painting motifs into the photo-based field, hoping to enliven and stir up its surface. These include images of birds, flowers, stamps, and landscapes, among others, all borrowed from Chinese art history and suspended in the paintings. The traditional motifs evoke a sense of the cultural memory underlying the surfaces of history. . .

Altogether, I hope to wash my subjects of their exotic “otherness” and reveal them as dignified, even mythic figures on the grander scale of history painting. I am looking for the mythic pose beneath the historical figure – and the painting beneath the photograph.⁴

Hung Liu, 2004



Hung Liu, *China Mary I*, 2006, oil on canvas, 36 x 24 inches, © Hung liu, photo by Benjamin Blackwell

The other five paintings in the Hung Liu collection and the installation by Rene Yung entitled “. . . nges & disappearances” were commissioned by the Sun Valley Center for the Arts of Ketchum, Idaho, for the traveling exhibition “The Vanishing,” exploring the lost history of the 19th century Chinese immigrants to the region.

By 1870, Idaho contained the largest percentage of Chinese population per capita in the nation. The Chinese comprised nearly thirty percent of Idaho Territory’s entire population. In the Boise Basin, where placer mining was the principal occupation, the Chinese community boasted an even larger percentage-forty-six percent.⁵

Idaho was one of the many western states that witnessed voracious mining activity in the 1870’s and 80’s. In Idaho’s Wood River Valley, the 1880 census showed that 16% of the county was Chinese. By 1885, there were 150 Chinese in the town of Hailey alone. Historical records and articles in local papers referred to Chinese gardeners, miners, cooks and laundrymen. Historic photographs show Chinese New Year parades and small Chinatown settlements throughout the state.

Town after town in the American West was partially settled by Chinese Immigrants but today there is little trace of this population. The 2000

Census indicated that Idaho’s Chinese population was 2173 and Blaine County’s only 17. Today, in the Wood River Valley, there is a suburban neighborhood called China Gardens but no one who lives there is of Chinese

³ Information assembled from Wyoming and the Chinese and Chinese Women in Evanston 1869 to 1900 by Dudley Garner

⁴ *The Vanishing: Re-Presenting the Chinese in the American West*, Catalog for August 6 – October 29, 2004 Sun Valley Center for the Arts Exhibition, Kristen Poole, Artistic Director.

⁵ Arthur A. Hart, *Chinatown: Boise, Idaho 1870-1890*, 1996

descent and the vegetable gardens were abandoned long ago. In local cemeteries, there are no graves that bear Chinese names and no community families can trace their descendants to this 19th century population. When queried, most adults are unaware that the community was once home to a sizeable Chinese population. Seemingly, there is little public or private trace of the significant contribution made by Chinese immigrants in the settling of the West.⁶

Artist statement by Rene Yung

My work is about being, memory and place. As an immigrant to the United States who grew up in the hybrid and transitory environment of colonial Hong Kong, I am particularly interested in the complexities of cultural identity. I seek to voice the stories of my culture from the inside – the ethos, sensibilities and unspoken details of daily living which are often difficult to discern from the outside – as well as touch on the universals between cultures. Through my work I try to connect past and present, memory and idea, the personal and the universal, and find a home in this shifting world. . .

I work most often in installation form. I like the way it allows discourse across categories and boundaries in a way similar to life experiences, and it provides a platform from which I can connect my roots in Chinese lyrical-narrative sensibilities with my interest in Western conceptual thinking.⁷

Struck by the paucity of information about the immigrants themselves, Yung focused on memory as a communal and individual process in . . . *nges & disappearances*. ‘Memory informs identity. Memory is also the only thing that an immigrant can bring with certainty to a new land,’ an immigrant herself, the artist writes in her exhibition statement. ‘Yet with time, memory shifts and changes – and so too, the person who remembers.’ For the mine – and railroad – workers, the loss of personal memories parallels their erasure from the region’s communal memory, after they were no longer needed for local industries.”⁸

Lesson Overview

Students learn about the American artists Hung Liu and Rene Yung by spending time in the galleries observing and discussing the artists’ work, followed by time in the Shelton Studio creating art work inspired by the artists. Total time recommended: 1 1/2 hours (minimum) to 3 hours (maximum).

Students will learn about Hung Liu’s painting style and Rene Yung’s installation. They will learn about the Chinese immigrants, their work and lives in the American West as recorded by photographs taken from 1870-1890. In particular, they will learn about the Chinese in Rock Springs, Green River, and Evanston, Wyoming. At the museum they will observe, sketch and take notes in the gallery. Teachers will be given a choice between two different studio experiences; either, the students will experiment with painting in the style of Hung Liu by using their own photographs from home or they will create their own installations at their home schools after sketching and planning done in the Shelton Studio. These installations might depict a scene from students’ everyday settings and situations.



Hung Liu, *China Mary*, 66" x 66", oil on canvas, photo by Benjamin Blackwell

⁶ *The Vanishing: Re-Presenting the Chinese in the American West*, Catalog for August 6 – October 29, 2004 Sun Valley Center for the Arts Exhibition, Kristen Poole, Artistic Director.

⁷ Ditto, Rene Yung

⁸ From The Chinese Historical Society of America

Essential questions

- Can we understand history or anything about people who have lived before us from photographs?
 - Do photographs depict who we are from that single moment in time?
 - How can a painting represent a photograph?
 - How can a painting change (re-present) that photograph?
 - How can visual art be narrative?
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- How does an artist's style exhibit their philosophies about life, the world, etc.?
 - How does an artist's installation create emotions or thoughts about their subject or idea?
 - Can art bring the Chinese immigrants and their history forward in time and recover some of their dignity? And, for whose sake will it matter?

Art questions to consider:

- Let's look closely at one of Hung Liu's paintings (have the viewers choose one that interests them). Describe what you see.
- Which part of the painting seems most "real" to you? Why?
- Why do you think Hung Liu combines a very realistic painting style with a very "loose" painting style all in the same painting?
- Do you see traditional Chinese motifs or images in the painting? What do you think they mean?
- When you look at Rene Yung's work what does it make you think of?
- Do you think Rene Yung's installation is about a special event or a daily occurrence? How does she make you think that?
- What materials does she use to give you the sense that you are looking at a laundry?
- Why do you think she includes words in her installation?
- How does an artist's installation create emotions or thoughts in the viewer about their subject or idea?
- How does the way ideas are presented through art (ie. paintings vs. sculpture) influence or change the way we think about those ideas?

Pre-visit activities

In order to prepare students for their museum visit and extend learning possibilities, we suggest that teachers and students consider the following activities.

- Students will read about and research Chinese immigration in the West, focusing on the Chinese in Wyoming.
- Students will read all museum literature discussing Hung Liu's paintings and Rene Yung's installation.
- Teachers will select whether to have the students focus on 2-D (painting) or 3-D (sculpture) work in the Shelton Studio.
- If the teacher selects 2-D work as the studio project, students may bring a photograph from home to the museum to work on a Hung Liu inspired painting, or other project as agreed upon between the teacher and museum artists/teachers.
- If 3-D is selected they may bring an idea for an every day experience to capture as an installation plan to create in the spirit of Rene Yung, or other project as agreed upon between the teacher and museum artists/teachers.

Museum activities

Part 1 – Time Frame: 45 minutes**Location: Museum Galleries**

- Students will closely observe the paintings and techniques of Hung Liu.
- Students will closely observe and participate in the installation of Rene Yung.
- Students will record observations on museum worksheets.
- Students will answer questions on museum worksheets.
- Students will sketch any part of the exhibit they are drawn to.
- Students will be engaged in discussions over their answers on the worksheets regarding questions related to art.
- Students will be engaged in discussions over their answers on the worksheets regarding essential or contextual questions.
- Students will be given any additional information about painting techniques or the installation as needed.

Part 2 – Time Frame: 45 minutes - 2 hours and 15 minutes**Location: Shelton Studio**

Hung Liu inspired projects – the following projects may be considered, or museum staff will work with teachers to develop specific projects which support ongoing classroom work.

- Students will work and practice creating paintings from a photograph **or**
- Students will combine collage techniques with painting techniques to explore combining figures and symbols in a narrative way **or**
- Students will create collage images incorporating figures and symbols in a narrative way, and then write an accompanying short story, poem or essay.

Rene Yung inspired projects – the following projects may be considered, or museum staff will work with teachers to develop specific projects which support ongoing classroom work.

- Students will sketch and plan their own installation in the spirit of Rene Yung's installation.
- Students will construct models of their installation.

Post-visit activities

We have found that students achieve maximum benefit from a museum visit when time is scheduled for post-visit activities. Here are some suggestions.

- Students discuss or write about their museum experiences, reviewing what they learned, what has special meaning for them, how they will use new information and skills.
- Students continue to research the role of Chinese immigrants in Wyoming and complete a project (an essay, art work, research paper).
- An archaeologist (such as Dudley Gardner from Western Wyoming College or someone from the Wyoming State Archaeologist's Office) meets with students to discuss how archaeology helps us learn about historical communities.
- Students visit a local archives, library or city/county clerk's office to learn more about historical records and photographs and the information they provide in our understanding of history.

Prerequisite skills/knowledge

Museum staff will work with teachers to ensure that all projects are age and skills appropriate. At the very minimum:

- Students should have some familiarity with sketching objects.
- Students should have some familiarity with painting techniques.
- Students should be able to manipulate materials in a sculptural way (place objects in a 3-

dimensional space).

- Students should be able to create “stories” based upon their own experiences.

Suggested use in the curriculum

The study of Hung Liu’s paintings and Rene Yung’s installation, plus the historical knowledge gained about the Chinese in the American West ties to multiple curricular areas including art, history, writing, reading, and philosophy. Museum staff will work with teachers to address specific Wyoming Teaching Standards and to align museum projects and studies with ongoing classroom curricular units.

Some recommended resources

These are just a few of the many resources available. We welcome other suggestions that teachers and students find helpful which can be added to this list.

- UW Art Museum website: www.uwyo.edu/artmuseum
- Exhibition descriptive materials
- *The Vanishing: Re-presenting the Chinese in the American West*
- *Chinese Americans: The Immigrant Experience* by Dusanka Miscevic, Peter Kwong
- *Polly Bemis: A Chinese American Pioneer* by Priscilla Wegars
- *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* by Iris Chang
- *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present* by Judy Yung
- *The Acrylics Book: Materials and Teaching for Today’s Artists*
- *Understanding Installation Art from Duchamp to Holzer* by Mark Rosenthal
- *Symbols and Rebuses in Chinese Art: Figures, Bugs, Beasts, Flowers* by Fang Jing Pei

Materials to be supplied to each student

Materials for selected Shelton Studio projects are provided by the art museum.

Occasionally, teachers and students might be asked to bring materials with them to use as inspiration for their art work (e.g. an original photograph that holds personal meaning to be used as the basis for a painting).

Assessments and documentation of museum tour and studio experiences

In order to ensure that our museum tour program is meeting the needs of teachers and students, we ask that participants complete evaluation surveys. Surveys will be distributed to teachers and students, but they are also available on-line as a *pdf* file to be downloaded, or they may be requested via e-mail (wbredeho@uwyo.edu).

1. Students will self-assess using a quick survey that asks them to consider their response to the gallery discussions and research, and their studio experience.
2. Teachers will assess the overall visit by completing a quick survey that asks for their observation and assessment of students’ experiences, as well as assessment of the overall process of the museum visit.
3. Museum staff and artists/teachers will record their observations and assessments.
4. When studio time permits, we will ask students to briefly discuss their art work completed in the Shelton Studio visit.
5. Museum staff may take photographs of students and teachers to document the learning taking place and the work produced during a museum visit. These are available upon written request to teachers who would like to use them as part of teaching and student portfolios.