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Mind is a Pure Expanse of Space

TAM VAN TRAN

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ANTHONY MEIER FINE ARTS

by Christine Kesler

Tam Van Tran's "Mind is a Pure Expanse of Space" is an exercise in opposites, presenting the influence of meditation, mindfulness, and pursuit of beauty in paintings and sculptures that are also ripe with a distinct violence and formal aggression. The work often seems more bent on craft than any single idea, citing non-conceptual space and noting that Tran is a devout Buddhist. Many of the works in the two spaces seem to embody a sort of purity, work ethic, and uncommon discipline. Yet, simultaneously, they implore one to take one's time, as if a conduit for the freedom that exists at the end of a spiritual path. And it takes time, indeed, for language to emerge from such an abstract and deeply thoughtful body of work.

The front room contains a suite of panels set against opposing walls and the large-scale work *Long Distance Runner* (2010). "Change your attitude but remain natural," implores *Naked Simplicity* (2010). Flakes of silver leaf crust off the surface of this small panel, and an aggressively worked net of marks underneath these cursive letters gives the effect of a sandstorm viewed too closely. The processes employed here are mysterious, but carefully and painstakingly rendered, burnished down by the artist's hand or tools. The paintings use scribbles, crumples, calligraphic smears, and subtle topographies, and it is the viewing of these paintings and their palimpsests that creates the most harmonic moments in the show.

The flower-like formations of *White Chrysanthemum I* and *White Chrysanthemum II* (2010) that faintly emerge from almost within the canvas are driven by the

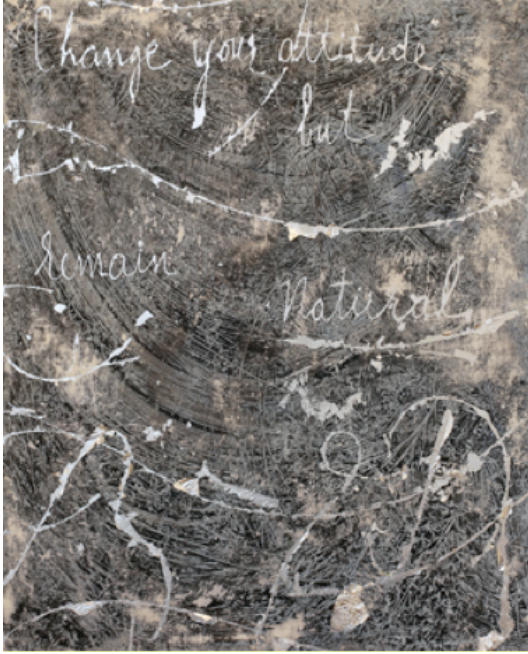


Long Distance Runner, 2010; acrylic, saffron, colored pencil, and staples on linen, paper, and canvas; 58 x 69 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco.

However, it is *Long Distance Runner* that leaves the most distinct impression. Flexing off the wall, it is all discord and struggle; it suggests an endurance that would be foreign to someone outside of the artist's cultural, mental, or athletic faction. Although Tran was a high-school athlete, this work is a pun, pointing at a discipline far more trying than physical feats. The garishness of so many staples overlapping and running over one another is unsettling, and the dimensionality and relentlessness of materials feels like an assault. Tran's larger works are unmistakably violent, yet somehow calming—as if addressing both the struggle and surrender of the madness of creation. The forms undulate from the wall and from themselves like the warped hide of a reptile from a ritual sacrifice in the creepy future.

In contrast, the back hallway is cast in seductively low lighting, and subtly sculptural paper works splattered with saffron paint are flashier than those in the front room. Despite the change in ambience, there is still a

most evasive phenomena—light, space, and perception—suggesting an expansive and liberating mental space outside of language. Indeed, these paintings work as language itself, as a pronunciation of differences. The slight disparities in technique and application of materials bring the viewer into a subtly shifting world, wrought with the tiny decisions that make viewing so satisfying.



Naked Simplicity, 2010; acrylic and silver foil on linen; 27.25 x 22.5 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco.

sense of clashing—meditation, calmness, and collections of thought arise against the more turbulent and intensely wrought materials. The low relief and collage topographies are reminiscent of [Nicola López's](#) impossible cities and systems, collapsing and spiraling into themselves. Pieces of paper that jut off the canvases' surfaces, thick coats of paint, and dozens of punched and layered holes make these pieces more overworked than the front room's meditation suite. Some quietly stand out in muted tones, but *Spatial Palace for Enemies*, *Organic Poster*, and *Storm the Gate of Confusion* (2009-10) are not served well by their scattered and chaotic picture planes, especially given the forcefulness of *Excellent Athlete* (2010), a huge stapled mess that curls gorgeously off the opposing wall, perfectly controlled and out of control all at once.

Gallery Director Rebecca Camacho writes that Tran's own history is evident here in glimpses of the cultural legacy that precedes the Vietnam-born artist. Most notably in the two wall sculptures, there is an energy in conflict with itself: meditative but obsessive, piecing itself apart, and sewing itself back together, perhaps suggesting unstable and war-torn history of Vietnam. The manic detail and formal rigor of disassembling and re-assembling *Long Distance Runner's* pieces of linen, paper, and canvas into one bowed and animal-like form suggests an all-too-close relationship with discomfort and struggle. The works broadly point toward abstractions of inner and outer conflict, as well as the discipline required to let it all go in honor of pure awareness. In contrast to the show's suggestive title, Tran's stapled-up and sweated-over works, *Long Distance Runner* and *Excellent Athlete*, will not prove to vanish naturally into a pure expanse of space.

"MIND IS A PURE EXPANSE OF SPACE" IS ON VIEW AT
[ANTHONY MEIER FINE ARTS](#) IN SAN FRANCISCO
THROUGH MAY 14, 2010.