

# ARTE FUSE

REVIEWS AND PHOTO STORIES

## Tam Van Tran at Susanne Vielmetter Projects

05/21/2015 by KRISTEN OSBORNE BARTUCCA



Stepping into Tam Van Tran's show at Susanne Vielmetter in Los Angeles, one may be forgiven for wondering if they have not, in fact, stumbled into a group show. After all, the





front gallery is full of large, bombastic abstract canvases in garish colors while a perambulation to the back gallery yields the discovery of several sculptural pieces

consisting of dozens of tiny ceramic vases assembled in rows and formations on low white cubes. The back gallery also contains two muted abstract paintings, closer in tone and mood to Rothko or new works by Zhao Zhao than anything glimpsed in the first room. Indeed, while there are some thematic continuities between all of Tran's work in the exhibition, the artist seems more intent on sampling from various mediums, materials, and artistic predecessors than presenting a unified body of work. Not all artists can pull this off, but Tran manages to come across as creative and experimental rather than haphazard or dilettantish.

The large paintings in the front gallery practically explode off the wall. The vibrant reds, neon yellows, creamy blues, and matte blacks are rendered in sweeps, smudges, and swirls. Works like *Aikido Dream I* (all works 2015), *Aikido Dream II*, and *Afternoon Chigong* reveal Tran's heavily gestural side. He clearly revels in the vigorous, muscular brushstroke as well as the meticulous scraping away of paint -there is application, then effacement. In some places on the canvases Tran allows the paint to accrete, which gives a sense of weight and permanence, but these spaces abut brushstrokes with ebullient downward slopes; the effect is reminiscent of Hans Hofmann's classic "push-pull" dichotomy, here rendered in terms of movement and stasis. The other two messy but dynamic works, *Rushing Waterfall* and *Crossings*, are reminiscent of florid jungle landscapes.



The two abstract paintings in the back gallery, *Chigong at Night* and *Master is gone but she is not forgotten*, convey a far different sensation. Gone are the lurid colors of the other paintings in the exhibition, replaced by purple hues ranging from light-infused lilac to an almost opaque violet. They are close to monochromes but studying them close-up yields visible brushstrokes.



Strokes of lighter-colored paint appear to float like feathers down the canvas, ethereal and moody, and

suggestive of hazy memories.

The solemnity offered by the previous two paintings is perfectly suited to the works that accompany them. The seven separate sculptural works consisting of individual, miniature ceramic objects organized in neat formations may initially look like offerings at a marketplace, but the obsessiveness with which they are assembled and their enigmatic but evocative titles indicate that Tran is interested in something much deeper than commodity critique. In fact, in the number of ceramics in works like *The Americans*, *The Laotians*, and *The Khmer* consist of the characters in each of the alphabets associated with each group; i.e., there are twenty-six individual pieces for *The Americans*. The titles of the works obviously suggest the various players in the Vietnam War that consumed Southeast Asia (and that Tran grew up amid), with the formations of the vases alluding to formations of military troops. Adding to this is the fact that while each little vase is different, arrayed together they lose their individual characteristics and become part of the whole.

Tran's multifarious works engage with his homeland of Vietnam, celebrating its beauty but acknowledging its complicated past. He is not content with eliciting just one emotion from his viewers, which creates a destabilizing but, with the right amount of contemplation and perhaps a sense of humor, ultimately satisfying experience.

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