

* Militant Pop

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transPOP: KOREA VIETNAM REMIX is a sprawling and ambitious cross-section of works by sixteen contemporary Korean and Vietnamese artists, which recently opened at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in downtown San Francisco after traveling from Seoul, Ho Chi Minh City, and southern California.



Manh Hung Nguyen, Go To Market, (2004). Acrylic on canvas, 39 1/4 x 39 1/4 in. Courtesy of artist.

Curators Viet Le and Yong Soon Min chose to focus on the two countries' "shared history of a highly accelerated modernization process with militarized roots and the Cold War", and the "increased cross-pollination of cultural influence and exchange" between Vietnam, Korea and the United States.

Because of my background, an American child of Chinese parents who were part of the Vietnamese diaspora of the late 1970s, I'm aware of arriving at the gallery with a certain amount of expectation. Having visited Vietnam some years ago, I frequented museums in Ho Chi Minh City filled with nationalistic artwork rendered in a range of perfectly-studied techniques, which either glorified the pastoral, agricultural lifestyle we've grown accustomed to seeing in travelogues, or categorically condemned the atrocities of the Vietnam War.

With *transPOP*, I was especially interested in seeing artworks that reflected a homegrown, post-embargo Vietnamese popular culture, artworks which explored or critiqued a described spirit of

“accelerated modernity” that, if not completely independent of propagandist bent, at least had subtlety of message. What I found was that, perhaps despite the best efforts of the curators, a well-edited timeline and even an addition of a resource room with relevant books, posters and media about the current “Viet-Pop” and “Korean Wave” movements, I couldn’t get past how much of the actual artwork in the show centered around the nations’ distinctive wartime past, rather than on a present-day exchange of contemporary cultural elements. For example, a majority of Min-Hwa Choi’s paintings that were exhibited referenced events like the 1972 napalm bombing of Trang Bang, and the aftermath of Fascism. The aim of these paintings seemed too similar to the sort of overt, literal critique of Communism evident in the recent wave of contemporary Chinese art, and were not as successful as Choi’s figurative portraits of disaffected, modern Koreans from her *To the Rocker* series.



Min-Hwa Choi, *Lying on Fascism*, 2005. oil on canvas. Courtesy of artist.

There were a number of works which were exceptions. My favorite piece in the show was Yong-Baek Lee’s *Angel Soldier*, a wall-sized video projection of a floral print backdrop with suspended “vines” of flowers blending into the backdrop, accompanied by a soundtrack of forest sounds. Several minutes into the video, soldiers dressed in floral-printed camouflage slowly, inexorably traveled carefully across the frame, hunched as if stalking an enemy. Lee’s other video, *Steaming Out (Post-IMF)*, channels the self-administered obstacles of early Nauman videos; created in response to the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997, it now reads as a prescient comment on our current economic climate.



Yong-Baek Lee, *Angel Soldier*, 2005. Single Channel Video Projection. ArtNet.com image, Courtesy Arario Gallery

Manh Hung Nguyen’s pop-colored canvases, which poked light fun at the blending of Western technology with Vietnamese agricultural life, were also enjoyable. “Building” depicts a high-rise condo mash-up of the country’s traditional tin awnings and huts in the sky, commercial planes flying by.



Manh Hung Nguyen, Building, 2004. Acrylic on canvas, 39 1/4 x 39 1/4 inches. Courtesy of artist

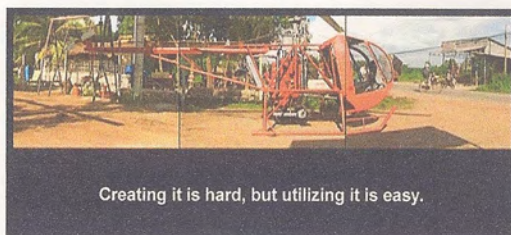
Eventually, the realization came that the shadow of the Cold War that I'd expected *transPOP*'s artists to have shed was intrinsic to their practice, as inescapable as the paintings of fields and farmers in the museums of Ho Chi Minh City. Yet there were still many provocative works in the exhibition which successfully managed to both acknowledge the historical impact of the war, as well as leave room for the viewer to meditate on its repercussions in Korean and Vietnamese society today.

An-My Lê's documentation of the U.S. military's training exercises in preparation for combat in Iraq (*29 Palms*) alludes to the parallels between the wars, eerily blurring our ability to discern the difference between real and staged battles.



An-My Lê, From 29 Palms, 2005, © An-My Lê, Courtesy of Murray Guy

In his powerful film, *The Farmers and The Helicopters*, Dinh Q. Le examines the potent symbolism of the helicopter as both a tool of destruction and the embodiment of his countrymen's dreams of economic and community revival. While the current pop music and film industry of Korea and Vietnam reflects the cultural progress that these countries have achieved, it is video pieces like Le's and Baek's that contribute something much more substantive towards a real dialogue about its future.



Dinh Q. Lê, Tran Quoc Hai and Le Van Danh, *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, 2006. Three channel video installation. In collaboration with Ha Thuc Phu Nam and Tuan Andrew Nguyen. ©Stills: Dinh Q. Lê

Among the elements of Lin + Lam's *Unidentified Vietnam* series, a remixed clip from a South Vietnamese propaganda film is spliced with clips of one of the artists dressed as the protagonists in the film. Quotes from the novel *The Quiet American* appear onscreen, in ambiguous contrast to the nature of the video being watched.



Lin + Lam, detail from *Unidentified Vietnam (Invisible Like Peace)*, 2003-present. Multi-media installation. Image courtesy of artists.

"In way you could say they died for democracy, he said. "I wouldn't know how to translate that into Vietnamese."

The twenty-four abstract, black and white film stills from a second of this footage "(24 Frames=1 Second)", implies, at least to this viewer, that while the world continues to fix this nation to a singular political or cultural moment, those events too will become transient, as Vietnam's story continues to evolve.

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