

By Jayne Keedle

Twilight Zone

Asia meets America in a new art installation

In the middle of the Asian American Cultural Center on the Storrs campus of the University of Connecticut is DMZ XING. Enter it and you cross a line. Once inside, you're surrounded. White lights beat down on your head. Under your feet red lights flash on and off. The floor lights shine through grills that radiate from an octagonal pillar of mirrors in the middle of this circular enclosure. You see your own reflection but also the reflection of glass panels that surround you.

Etched into these panels are the stories of refugees from Cambodia, Laos, Korea, Vietnam. They are Buddhists, Hmong, Amerasians—those born to American fathers and Vietnamese mothers during Vietnam—all ages and all living in Connecticut. Artist Yong Soon Min, an art professor at U.C. Irvine in California, came to this country from Korea at the age of seven. She was commissioned by Real Art Ways to create this installation. Through it, local Asian immigrants tell their stories.

In 1979, when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia, the Sruns decided to escape to Thailand. They took their wedding pictures with them during their escape along with clothing and food. The escape took two days and a night walking barefoot, mostly through forest. Along the way they saw and smelled many dead bodies. They were fearful of the many land mines planted in the area. One of their children was six months old and had to be carried. Another was three years old. They were in constant fear of being caught.

They were in a Thai camp from 1979 to 1982. There they met up with Vuth. Vuth's mother died in a refugee camp hospital from malnourishment suffered before she got there. The Khmer Rouge had killed his father in 1973. His mother had remarried but in 1975 his stepfather was also killed.

An estimated three million perished under the Communist Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. The Srun family lost many relatives and friends through starvation and killings. The Sruns agreed with Vuth that "it was a lot worse than the movie, The Killing Fields."

Standing in this small enclosed space reading this, you can imagine yourself in an interrogation room. It's too bright, too hot and, but for the click and whir of the flashing red lights, silent. That, says artist Yong Soon Min, is the desired effect.

"I wanted the red light to be alarming. The kind of a light that's very strong that would kind of throw people off a bit," says Yong Soon Min. "DMZ is a very disturbing concept, certainly historically, and in terms of what it identifies or refers to it's a real misnomer. It's heavily militarized.

Certainly in Korea it is a very highly charged zone."

My trip to the DMZ was a routine tour, albeit quite surreal at times. I boarded a bus in Seoul full of Japanese and Western tourists. I may have been the only one of Korean descent...

...Next stop was a building where meetings between the north and south Korean government official and the U.S. officials take place. This barrack-like wooden structure straddles the 38th parallel. A bold line ran along the floor dividing the room and the table lengthwise. On the tabletop were the north and south Korean flags, each on its respective side of this line. Looking out of the windows, I saw a few north Korean soldiers peering inside the room through their cameras. I was told that it's like a staring game—each side is constantly pretending to record every movement of the other.

You have to peer closely at the panels Min has created. They're hard to read in more ways than one. They cast shadows on the stark white wall they lean upon. The light reflects off the glass, the words seem to disappear. Not surprisingly, then, most people want to know why the words are so hard to decipher.

"The narrative is important but what I did was to transform that. It's a vehicle of expression. It's not pure journalism. I guess I wanted there to be a process people had to go through to retrieve the information," she explains. "I did want the narrative with the glass to function in a way that alludes to how difficult it is to interpret history, so-called official history and things that are recollectored. [I want people] to question how they might also interpret what they see. It's not that easy to make this sort of interpretation and there's a reality to what the refugees went through and what I went through as an immigrant."

The reality for all the immigrants is a balancing act between two worlds. Today the Srun family lives in Hartford. Mr. Srun works 11 hours a day making airplane parts. His wife was laid off from her job on a fac-

tory assembly line. They have three children in college, a house and a car. Most people think they're Chinese because they don't know much about Cambodians and the Srun family says younger people don't seem to want to learn.

Because the Khmer Rouge tried to destroy Cambodian culture and religion, it's important to the Sruns that their children carry on the customs. They speak Cambodian at home and are learning to read and write Cambodian at a weekly school. But retaining their Asian heritage isn't always easy for the younger generation who came to America and discovered MTV, Nikes and Burger King.

"Hung is an 18-year-old senior living with his Vietnamese mother and a 14-year-old half-brother, Tua, in a small one bedroom apartment in a poor neighborhood of Hartford. The two sons sleep in the living room.

In Vietnam, his mother worked in the U.S. military base. Hung's father was an American soldier named John who Hung guesses must be about 36 years old. His father left Vietnam in 1972 and Hung was born the following year. Hung had a picture of his father and a letter from him but lost it in the Philippines. Hung says that he looks like his father.

Tua knows Connecticut history but not U.S. or Vietnamese history. Hung wants Americans to know about his country and its history. "When I first came to Hartford High, they spoke Spanish with me. I mean kids came and ask 'Are you white?' I tell them I'm Vietnamese. Hung has been accepted to the University of Connecticut and plans to major in Engineering.

Meanwhile, at the University of Connecticut, students learn of Hung's life through photos. The pictures behind the text reflect this mixture of cultures. A family of Hmong farmers are pictured in their new Hartford apartment, the youngest child in traditional clothes, the toddler playing with a Matchbox car.

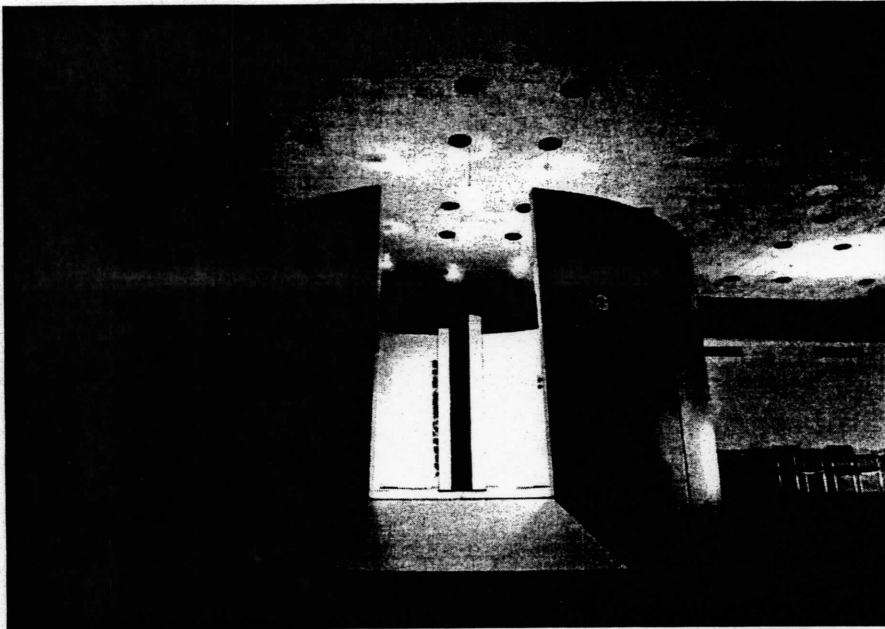
A photo of a Buddhist temple reveals its

location as a suburban Bloomfield home. A teenage boy in jeans stands next to a Buddhist monk in a photograph hanging by a thermostat on an apartment wall. Christmas decorations and Coca Cola bottles sit side by side with family photos of relatives in Southeast Asia.

Born in Korea in 1953, Yong Soon Min calls herself a child of the Cold War. Her father fought with the U.S. in Korea against the Communists. Yong Soon Min's first participatory experience of war was in peace protests against the Vietnam war. Needless to say, her father and she don't see eye to eye on politics.

"I think that's a very

important aspect of immigrant reality—the generational differences," says Yong Soon Min. "It is the kids who are sponges, who absorb the new environment and often times the parents have carried over the heritage and history



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and the traditional ways. I think there is a period of major clashes where the kids have one life outside the home and a very different life inside the home."

As the viewer progresses from one panel to the next, the line of lights on the floor gets shorter. So what was once literally a line of lights viewers had to cross for a closer look at photos of Vietnamese farmers surrendering to armed GIs shrinks to lines of three, two and one light. Photos at the end reflect life here in America.

"For me, it was an attempt to be more optimistic and the process for me is coming into a greater awareness of history and understanding," says Yong Soon Min. "Coming to terms with their realities here is a two-fold kind of process for an immigrant. You feel incredibly dislocated. I think they have to acquire new awarenesses to make their way through this reality. It involves the person reclaiming their history and getting a better understanding of their country and where they come from. I think you can better deal with other people if you know where you're coming from."

For the penultimate panel, entitled Heartland, Yong Soon Min etched a portrait of herself, arms crossed over her chest, on the glass and these words.

For those of us whose histories have been marginalized, or who have been colonized or displaced, or have lost a "heartland," memories are all we have.

Especially those that are painful. They must be preserved and activated to renew their meaning and relevance. We must re-member and re-invent, and create new contexts for understanding our histories and ourselves.

Yong Soon Min's installation DMZ XING remains at the Asian American Cultural Center through May 2. There will be a reception and gallery talk by the artist April 26 at 4 p.m.. Real Art Ways will also present DMZ XING at the Hartford Civic Center, May 4-30. Call 232-1006 for more information.