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CRITIC'S PICK

Vietnam, Through the Eyes of Artists

The war and its human toll had a profound impact on artists addressing the turbulent times. The personal and political meet in a poignant show at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.



A detail of Leon Golub's "Vietnam II" (1973), at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Credit: The Nancy Spero and Leon Golub Foundation for the Arts/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Tate, London; Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times



By Holland Cotter

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WASHINGTON — Whatever happened to “protest art” — issue-specific, say-no-to-power-and-say-it-loud art? Here we are, embroiled, as a nation, in what many in the art world regard as a pretty desperate political situation. Yet with the exception for actions by a few collectives — [Decolonize This Place at the Whitney Museum](#), and Prescription Addiction Intervention Now, or PAIN, at the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum of Art — there’s scant visual evidence of pushback.

Has the product glut demanded by endless art fairs distracted from the protest impulse? Has the flood of news about turmoil in Washington put out the fires of resistance among artists? Has protest art simply become unfashionable?

Such questions came to mind on a visit to “Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965-1975,” a big, inspiring survey at the [Smithsonian American Art](#)

[Museum](#) here. Everything in it dates from a time in the past when the nation was in danger of losing its soul, and American artists — some, anyway — were trying to save theirs by denouncing what they viewed as a racist war.

Of the '60s shows I've seen in the past few years, this one is the best, evocative of its time, and in sync with the present.

And, importantly, it comes with a second, smaller show that's far more than a mere add-on. Titled "[Tiffany Chung: Vietnam, Past Is Prologue](#)," it's a view of the Vietnam War era through Vietnamese eyes, the eyes of people on the receiving end of aggression. In the 1960s — before identity politics, before postcolonial studies — few museums would have thought to do such a show, but it absolutely needed doing.

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All but left out of the picture, though, are Asian-Americans. (There are exactly three: Yoko Ono, James Gong Fu Dong and Mr. Kawara.) And this makes the separate exhibition of document-intensive work by the Vietnamese-born American artist Tiffany Chung crucial. Indeed, if Ms. Chung had presented only one component of her complex show, a set of video interviews with an older generation of Vietnam refugees to the United States, that would by itself have been an invaluable contribution.



A still from Tiffany Chung's video interviews with older Vietnamese refugees to the United States, "Recipes of Necessity," 2014. Her "Vietnam, Past Is Prologue" is at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Credit Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

Each interview encapsulates a lived narrative shaped by the effects of a war — in Vietnam referred to as the American War — which killed millions of people and inalterably changed a culture. Some of the speakers are tense with anger; others half mute with grief. Even the most neutral narratives are laced with laments, resentments and regrets.

‘Tiffany Chung: Vietnam, Past Is Prologue’



A detail of Tiffany Chung's "The Vietnam Exodus History Learning Project: the exodus, the camps and the half-lived lives," 2017, at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. Credit Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

Ms. Chung, born in Vietnam in 1969, is an example of artist-as-researcher, one who taps into many media — painting, weaving, video, photography, writing — in her investigatory tasks. For her solo show, organized by Sarah Newman, the museum's curator of contemporary art, she approaches the American war in Vietnam, which was also a civil war, through the lens of family history.

Ms. Chung's father was a helicopter pilot in the South Vietnamese Air Force when he was taken prisoner in North Vietnam in 1971. He was held for 14 years. After his 1984 release, he moved with the family to the United States. Apparently, he rarely spoke of his time in combat and captivity, so his daughter tries to piece the story together herself, by assembling old photographs, painting locational maps and composing speculative accounts of her mother's emotional life, which inevitably colored her own.

The show's second section deals with the refugee experience in video interviews with 21 Vietnamese men and women who arrived in the United States in the war's wake. Together they represent a history that has never become part of the American view of the conflict, and that is being forgotten, if not deliberately erased, in Vietnam itself. It's a history of in-between-ness, of people, now elderly, who identify neither with the country they've come to, nor with the one they've left behind. Most feel abused by both.

In the show's third and last section, the perspective goes global, and also points to the future. A 12-foot long embroidered world map covers a wall. Lines of stitched colored thread trace the paths of forced South Vietnamese migration across the world. A nearby

display of documents from the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) in Geneva gives a sense of the archival ardor that has gone into Ms. Chung's Vietnam project, while a set of small watercolors indicate a way to insure that research continues.

The watercolor images — of migrant camps, food lines, displaced families, crammed and capsizing boats — are paintings based on photographs taken in the 1970s and '80s, when the fallout from war was most crushing. They were created recently by young Vietnamese artists, commissioned by Ms. Chung, in Ho Chi Minh City. Most had no knowledge at all of the past depicted. Now they do.

Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965-1975 (through Aug. 18)

Tiffany Chung: Vietnam, Past Is Prologue (through Sept. 2)

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington; 202-633-7970, americanart.si.edu.