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A work by Tiffany Chung that overlays 1973 and 2009 maps of Dubai with one showing planned development through 2020.

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Abstract Maps That Read Between the Lines

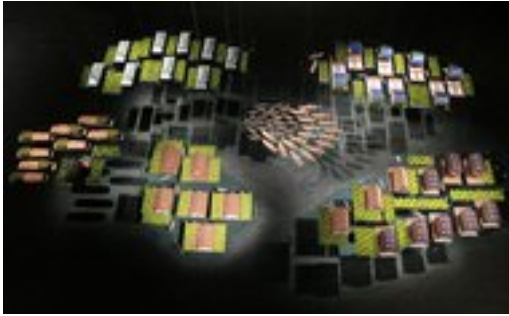
By MIKE IVES

HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam — At a recent art event in the United Arab Emirates, Tiffany Chung was asked by a journalist to explain the sourcing for one of her artworks, a cartographic drawing of land-mine removal in Afghanistan. The journalist wanted to be sure that the map accurately represented a border that the country contests with Pakistan.

The answer was complicated. Ms. Chung said that her aim had not been to depict the border in a conventional way, but to “remap” the region and underscore how so many borders throughout history have been created, changed or erased based on political decisions and public perceptions.

“My role is to bring fiction into the fact,” she explained one recent evening at her whitewashed home studio, “to make the point that I’m trying to make, and sometimes even make the point more profound.”

Her drawings investigate how political and environmental traumas alter landscapes, and her subjects include Iraqi state railways in 1930, Hiroshima and Nagasaki in [World War II](#), the demilitarized zones of the Korean and Vietnam wars, and even the flooding projections for 2050 of Ms. Chung's adopted hometown. (She was born in the central Vietnamese city of Da Nang and attended college and graduate school in California before relocating — with a long stop in Japan — to Ho Chi Minh City.)



A mixed media installation by Tiffany Chung that will be shown at Galerie Quynh in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Each artwork is typically inspired by weeks of meticulous research, and Ms. Chung's captions can be intensely specific. For example, one that accompanies a drawing of San Francisco before the devastating earthquake of 1906 quotes an 1895 blurb on a map from the United States Geological Survey: "distribution of apparent intensity based on Rossi-Forel scale, the known faults, and the routes examined."

However, the drawings usually venture beyond the literal and into pseudo-abstract territory. And despite their weighty subject matter, they are dazzlingly beautiful.

Large swaths of Ms. Chung's drawings are often left blank, while the colored areas are packed with swirling patterns and ornate details. A glaring absence of explanatory charts or legends prompts the viewer to focus back and forth, from macro to micro, while pondering the artist's conceptual intentions.

"She has all this information and content, and half of the times it turns into a visual abstraction," said Apsara DiQuinzio, who commissioned Ms. Chung to create drawings for "Six Lines of Flight," a group show last year at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art featuring artists from six cities. "Her rendering sort of loosens it up — it's almost like she's looking very closely at the area with a magnifying lens, and then she zooms out so that you get a bigger picture of what's happening through that abstraction."

Up close, the ornate patterning may recall Victorian embroidery, or even diagrams of the human pulmonary or cardiovascular systems. Ms. Chung, who draws with an extra-fine pen that is commonly used by architects, said her microlevel details are inspired by her research of bacteria and fungi.

Ms. Chung, 43, added that her interest in cartography stems partly from the two years she spent living in three Japanese cities. In particular, she was fascinated by the coexistence of ancient and modern buildings, and saw in it what her native Vietnam might eventually look like once it reached a similar level of economic development.

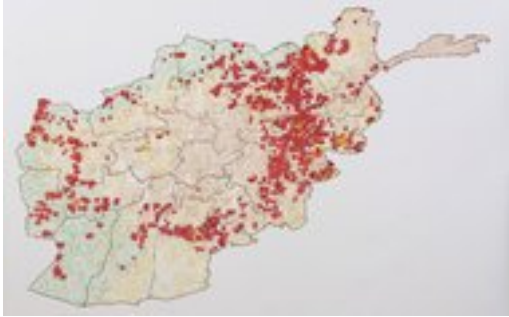
Her work after she graduated, in 2000, from the fine arts program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, mainly focused on how Japanese urban cultures were spreading around the world, she said.

During her stay in Japan, she began to look specifically at the transformation of urban landscapes. An early product was a scale model of a city skyline that Ms. Chung created using polystyrene electronics packaging. That 2006 work, “from sidewalk cafes to the stars,” was later exhibited at galleries in Japan and Thailand. (Like many of her works, it has a lowercase title, as if to underscore her attention to microlevel details.)

After returning to Vietnam in 2007, Ms. Chung grew interested in an outer district of Ho Chi Minh City where land had been removed to provide soil for land-reclamation and real estate projects in the city center. She drew the scarred terrain that remained, and the result surprised her.

“Oh my God, I am mapping something” was her reaction, she recalled. “So I started to go more into that.”

Since then she has created more than 50 mapped drawings. Some look into the past, the future or both. For example a drawing of Dubai, United Arab Emirates, overlays 1973 and 2009 maps of the city with one showing projected development through 2020. (It was later collected by members of Dubai’s royal family.) Colin Gardner, Ms. Chung’s mentor and a professor of art at her alma mater, calls it a “sociopolitical palimpsest.”



Ms. Chung often explores the recovery and growth of war-torn areas, as in "Hazard Location Map of Afghanistan."

A cartographic impulse also runs through pieces Ms. Chung has created in other media.

For example, at the 2011 Singapore Biennale, she exhibited a scale model of a floating community that was partly inspired by maps of how climate change may affect Vietnam's low-lying Mekong Delta. And a two-channel video she is creating will explore how landscapes have changed near abandoned coal mines in Japan's Yamaguchi Prefecture.

Mr. Gardner said that while Ms. Chung's minimalist aesthetic is difficult to categorize, it could feasibly be called "speculative realism."

"There's something very artificial about the colors and the look of things which undercuts the more documentary qualities of the work," he explained.

In that sense, Ms. Chung's latest project, "an archaeology project for future remembrance" is a departure from her previous work because it has a clearer documentary element. It focuses on a trove of physical debris she has collected from a riverside district of Ho Chi Minh City where she says thousands of people have been evicted by officials in recent years to make way for planned development projects.

Most of the land is now fallow, and Ms. Chung has been interviewing evicted residents and "excavating" remnants of their homes, including windows and a concrete slab from a foundation measuring 50 by 25 inches, or 128 by 64 centimeters.

The objects are scheduled to be exhibited this week at Galerie Quynh in Ho Chi Minh City, marking the first time since 2008 that the artist has exhibited in Vietnam, said Quynh Pham, the gallery's director. The show includes some of Ms. Chung's older

drawings, and some new ones that she based on urban-planning maps of Ho Chi Minh City, then called Saigon, from 1795 and 1972.

The newer works will be exhibited next April in Texas as part of a group show at The Chao Center for Asian Studies at Rice University and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, said Christine Starkman, who curates the museum's Asian art collection, adding that the working title is "Capital Class Culture: A contemporary Asian Art Festival."

Ms. Chung, who is represented by Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York, said having a show in Vietnam ahead of the Texas events would not advance her career much. If anything, she added, its politically tinged subject matter — controversial evictions — may attract unwanted attention from government censors.

But the project is relevant to the city's past and future, and she wants to urge her neighbors to be more critical of official development policies, she said.

"From the beginning, the whole point of doing cartography was to kind of reflect urban development in Saigon, and now I'm doing all this political stuff," she said in her apartment. "For me that's the most surprising thing: To see how artwork can take you to places that have turned you as a person into someone else."