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Artist Tiffany Chung's maps trace tragic routes



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Artist Tiffany Chung stands near her embroidered work “IDMC: numbers of worldwide conflict and disaster IDPs by end of 2016,” which is on view in the exhibition “New Cartographies” at Asia Society Texas Center.

Photo: Melissa Phillip, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Maps can reveal many kinds of truths, depending on the maker’s agenda.

Asia Society Texas Center’s engagingly provocative show “New Cartographies” illustrates this through the diverse work of four internationally prominent artists.

Sohei Nishino’s terrific “Diorama Maps” contains thousands of collaged photographs from his travels through the streets of some of the world’s densest cities. The carefully angled brushstrokes of Li Singsong’s monumental 2D topographic painting “Beihei” evoke a zen landscape of peaks and valleys that look untouched by humans. Allan deSouza’s sly, fictional maps rethink 19th-century colonial histories.

And then there are the two rooms of works by Tiffany Chung, who recently moved to Houston.

Her signature cartographic paintings and embroidered canvases — based on reams of data analysis, historical study and field interviews — are as hard-hitting as they are aesthetically pleasing. Examining how human conflicts, urban growth and environmental disasters have impacted people and cultural memory, they trace the routes of refugees and count casualties, among other things, often as a corrective to official accounts.

Chung also creates nuanced and topical sculpture, film and performance. She has participated in most of the major biennials or art fairs in Europe, Asia and the U.S.; and it's a rare year when she isn't juggling shows at major museums.

The Smithsonian Institution commissioned video histories for her upcoming solo “Vietnam, Past is Prologue,” which is scheduled to open March 15, assuming it's not postponed by the government shutdown. Meanwhile, her “Thủ Thiêm — An archaeological project for future remembrance” is at Zurich's Johann Jacobs Museum through May 5.

Chung also conducts workshops with refugees and stages panel discussions on global issues that have nothing to do with showing art. “I don't think artists just need to make art anymore,” she said. “We do so many things.”

Moving to Houston

Her route to Houston involves a story as layered as her work.

On the surface, there's this: She wanted to be near her parents, who moved to southwest Houston from Los Angeles about nine years ago. She bought a townhome near River Oaks Shopping Center because the wide-open, naturally lit third floor makes a perfect studio.

Further back, some things are harder for her to verbalize.

Chung, 50, doesn't talk much about the home where she grew up during the 1970s and '80s, Vietnam's early postwar years. There's not much to tell, she said.

She was raised by her paternal grandmother while her father, a South Vietnamese helicopter pilot captured in 1971 by the Viet Cong, spent 14 years as a prisoner of war; and her mother, a midwife but a ‘traitor’ by default, was sent to work in one of the government's harsh economic zones.

Her grandmother's place in Ho Chi Minh City was “just a small house, a typical house in Vietnam,” Chung said. “There was so much hardship. People were packed like sardines in tiny houses with so many relatives who ran away from new economic zones. Either you lived in a city illegally or died.”

Chung had finished high school by the time her family, including her parents, a brother and a sister, made it to California. They were among an estimated 2 million refugees who fled Vietnam after 1975, a diaspora that lasted well into the 1990s.

While the rest of her family embraced life in the U.S., Chung seemed destined to roam. She headed back overseas after earning her MFA in studio practice at the University of California-Santa Barbara, bouncing among Denmark, Japan and Vietnam for the first decade or so of her career.

In a sense, she was fleeing expectations, fed up with being pushed to explore her past in her art. Her early work was Pop-influenced and less politically sensitive. She made Ho Chi Minh City her base in 2007, the year she co-founded the independent, nonprofit contemporary art collective Sàn Art with Dinh Q. Lê, Tuan Andrew Nguyen and Phunam of the Propeller Group.

“When I came back to Vietnam, it was refreshing at first because nobody talked about it. The war was just a memory. I didn’t have to deal with it,” she said. “But soon enough, it started to feel really strange.”

Vietnam clamps down

The history she knew — and she thought everyone knew — had been erased. Vietnam’s government still doesn’t acknowledge its postwar diaspora. “It’s not part of the national narrative,” Chung said. “It’s never been recorded in their official history, and they don’t talk about it or teach it in schools.”

So — how could she not? — she began to focus on hidden histories. She was already examining how urban development projects in Ho Chi Minh City were displacing people — work that led to the creation of her first maps and her anthropological approach to research. She had not set out to make maps, but the technique proved useful.

“I never start with a grand plan,” she said. “I start doing something small, and it keeps growing because I cannot stop.”

She launched her still ongoing “The Vietnamese Exodus Project” as a quiet protest against what she calls “politically driven historical amnesia.” Early on, she boldly commissioned young artists to make drawings based on vintage photographs of Vietnamese refugees in Asian asylum camps, so that they would learn to ask questions.

Nothing happens legally in Vietnam without permits — even art exhibits must be approved. And the more celebrated Chung’s work became, the harder she had to work to outwit censors — literally staying ahead of them, say, when a crew from Bloomberg came to film a documentary about her. Once, trying to cross into Cambodia, she was denied exit. “It happens all the time; either that, or you are refused entry, or they detain you at the airport,” she said.

Then in 2017, Vietnamese diplomats pressured a Japanese organization to pull Chung's work from a major museum survey in Tokyo. "Living in Vietnam, everything is censored there. But to be censored in another country — that is something unheard of," she said. "It was a big blow. I learned a lot about cultural diplomacy and about us being artists living in a region where there's no support from the governments."

Although she still had an international platform, she feared more and tougher retribution at home, so Chung packed up her studio and left. "It was just the last straw," she said. "I was tired

Allying with Syrians

This is not the story she really wants to share. "I am not interested in that rhetoric of hardships in the region," she said. "My work is not about that. That is just something you deal with, coming in. And when you can't deal with it anymore, you leave."

She declined interviews after the Tokyo incident because she didn't want to embarrass the Japanese curators or be thought of first as a censored artist, detracting from the work.

Her art speaks volumes enough, eloquently and subtly.

The paintings on vellum — a deliberately slippery and semi-transparent medium — collapse time with layers based on different periods of history. Chung's punctured, embroidered canvases sparkle with metallic threads, grommets and baubles — as precise as her vellum pieces but more metaphorically loaded by the medium of needlecraft, which implies the strength and silent power of women, and acts of endurance and waiting.

Chung's compelling 2010 installation "scratching the walls of memory" suggests a classroom with a single desk. It was inspired by an old building in Hiroshima's Fukuromachi Elementary School compound, where scrawled messages were uncovered in 2002 as the space was being made into a museum.

Chung envisions her setting as a space where survivors of a number of 20th-century conflicts have left fragments of painful narratives, with text embroidered on cloth satchels crafted from recycled army tents or written neatly on handmade chalkboards.

She undertook that piece to put her family's story into context and see a bigger picture of forced migrations. But it was unusually personal — revealing, for example, how her mother had stood alone in the fog, pining for Chung's father as she peered across the 17th Parallel.

That stirred up such raw feelings, Chung abandoned Vietnam-based work for a while. She started two other projects that also continue to evolve — one based on the Syrian refugee crisis and another examining histories of global migration.

“Focusing on someone else gives me distance and objectivity to look back without feeling so emotional,” she said. “With time, you gain more experience. You can focus on aspects of the history other than your own.”

She has returned to and expanded “The Vietnam Exodus Project” for the Smithsonian show, speaking with former refugees in Houston, northern Virginia and California because she now sees so many parallels with displaced Syrians.

“History keeps repeating itself,” she said, “so why can’t we learn?”

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