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The 2002 oil painting "He is Inside of Me" by Nguyen Thi Chau Giang illustrates the tension between artistic identity and women's roles experienced by the Vietnamese artists who contributed to the "Changing Identity" exhibition.

Women artists offer look into Vietnamese culture

By: Lauren Buell

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Suzanne Lecht's tour of the exhibition, "Changing Identity: Recent Works by Women Artists from Vietnam," at the Crow Collection of Asian Art offered insight into the distinct vision, influences and experiences of featured artists.

Lecht is art director of the Art Vietnam Gallery in Hanoi and the Fielding Lecht Gallery in Austin. She has lived in Hanoi since January 1994—over a year before Vietnam and the United States resumed diplomatic relations. Her galleries have exhibited many of the Vietnamese artists that appear in the "Changing Identity" exhibition.

Vietnam was colonized by France in the mid-1800s. French control of the country lasted until nationalists under Ho Chi Minh ejected French colonial forces in the First Indochina War and established communist North Vietnam. Buddhism, Confucianism imported from China, traditional folk religions and ancestor worship also contribute to the complex cultural heritage that influences Vietnamese artists.

"We can see something we relate to from our own culture, but with an infusion of Asian motifs," said Lecht.

Vietnam's first art school was founded in Hanoi under colonial rule in 1925. Only three women graduated from that school, but after Vietnam gained independence nearly 50 percent of university-level art students were women. Although many Vietnamese women are now educated in art, the solitary, introspective and sometimes revealing nature of artistic work is still perceived to be at odds with persistent beliefs about women's identity and traditional roles.

Lecht called attention to the similarity between Frida Kahlo's autobiographical self-portraits and "He is

"Inside of Me," by Nguyen Thi Chau Giang to illustrate the synthesis of Western influences and Vietnamese artistic identity. The artist portrays herself with a somber face and muffled ears and eyes. Her husband's image is secured within the center of her chest. Embryos appear at the base of twin trees forming lung-like structures. Tiny nude self-portraits appear inside rambutans, a sweet, spiny tropical fruit, in the background.

"She is struggling with how to retain her identity as a female artist, how to manage her new life and give new life. She can see, but cannot fully express what she sees. This is the Asian idea of the life behind the veil. You have to keep some things for yourself. It's a characteristic of the Vietnamese psyche," Lecht said.

Nguyen's muffled senses might also allude to political repression of the arts. The Ministry of Culture examines a photograph of every work of art slated for exhibition in Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh cannot be portrayed unfavorably. Political commentary in art tends to be subtle to avoid attention from the Ministry.

Several black-and-white photographs by An-my Lê appear in the exhibition. Her family fled Vietnam in 1975 and became political refugees in the United States. Her photography in "Changing Identity" juxtaposes serene agricultural landscapes with photographs of staged war scenes.

"The war is very much in the consciousness of American Vietnamese, but if you travel to Vietnam, you will see no evidence of the war. People are happy because business is thriving and there is no animosity towards Americans whatsoever. Vietnam is a Buddhist country. People honor the past, but live in the now, and are very pragmatic," Lecht said.

Photography by Phuong M. Do expresses alienation from her country. "Self in La Chu, Grandma's Visit to Home Village" depicts her detachment from an organic communal scene. She is clearly the observer and the photographer even as she is part of the photograph herself. She conspicuously holds the trigger of her camera, described by Lecht as an "umbilical cord that connects her to Vietnam."

"Many of the artists in the exhibition were very young when they left Vietnam. They look different when they return because their body language and speech, even their physical appearance as a result of their diet, has made them different from other Vietnamese... There's a sadness that they don't quite fit in," Lecht said.

"Changing Identity" is the first collection of works by women artists from Vietnam to tour the United States. The exhibition appeared at the Trammell and Margaret Crow Collection of Asian Art Museum located in the Dallas Arts District through May 27.

Although "Changing Identity" has closed, another exhibition exploring women's identity in a cultural context is open to the public.

"Female Buddhas: Women of Enlightenment in Himalayan Art" inaugurates a partnership between the Crow Collection of Asian Art in Dallas and the Rubin Museum of Art in New York. "Female Buddhas" can be seen at the Crow through Aug. 26. Daily admission to the museum is free.