

Putting a face on a 'Changing Identity'

By Robert Taylor
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THE ASIAN ART Museum fills an impressive building in San Francisco's Civic Center, galleries in San Francisco and Berkeley specialize in art from Asia, and a big exhibit of contemporary art by young Asian-Americans opens at the UC Berkeley Art Museum in September.

Still, it was newsworthy when a Vietnamese art exhibit opened last week at Mills College in Oakland. (Among the other news of the week, Nguyen Minh Triet became the first Vietnamese president to visit the White House since the Vietnam War.)

Vietnamese art is seldom the focus of major exhibits -- let alone contemporary work by artists born as recently as the 1960s and '70s.

"I can only speculate about why Vietnamese art is not more often displayed or better known," said Naja Pham Lockwood, a Bay Area Vietnamese art consultant and a trustee of the Asian Art Museum.

Most Americans still associate the nation primarily with the Vietnam War, she said. In Vietnam, artistic expression has developed -- and found an international audience -- after relatively recent economic reforms. Vietnamese overseas, she said, are mostly immigrants and children of immigrants focused on the future, not looking back to their culture or collecting art.

"All that being said," Lockwood concluded, "Vietnamese contemporary art is vibrant, amazingly beautiful and honest. It's a wonderful balance truly of East and West."

The Mills College exhibit, "Changing Identity: Recent Works by Women Artists from Vietnam," displays a wide variety of styles and subjects among the 48 works by 10 artists. The touring show runs through Aug. 5 in the bright, expansive college art museum.

Two of the 10 women live in the United States, and some of the exhibit's most intriguing works are photographs by Phuong M. Do, who left Vietnam as a child at the end of the war and didn't return until the 1990s.

She photographs herself on the street in Vietnam and visiting relatives, clearly looking at the camera lens -- at the photographs' eventual viewers -- while life goes on around her. "I am the observer and the observed," she says.

Whether it applies to a wider range of contemporary art, there is a somber undertone to the exhibit, from Nguyen Bach Dan's black ink paintings that resemble stone engravings to Din Y Nhi's sketchy, scowling faces to Ly Tran Quynh Giang's blue-tinged oil portraits.

Dinh Thi Tham Poong's colorful watercolors of women among layered trees offer a welcome breath of fresh air, and there's even a mystical image that she titles "Gardens of Eden."

If Vietnamese art does not have an indelible image in the West, that may be in part because the region has come under so many influences throughout the centuries -- occupied by China, a French colony in the 19th century and occupied by Japan during World War II. Independence from France came in the 1950s, and then the Vietnam War in the 1960s and '70s took an estimated 1 million to 2 million lives.

"Vietnamese art has a long history," curator Nora Taylor says, "but the colonial period of French occupation from the late 19th century until 1945 shaped much of what is known today as Vietnamese national art."

In 1925, a classmate of Henri Matisse, Victor Tardieu, helped establish an art school, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine, in Hanoi. Now it is the Hanoi College of Fine Arts, with a branch in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) as well.

An American art dealer, Judith Hughes Day, loaned Bach Dan's moody ink paintings to the exhibit, and she has specialized for more than a decade in art from Vietnam. A former San Francisco resident, she now lives in New York and represents many Vietnamese artists.

"Art is very important in Vietnam now, particularly painting, but it isn't a traditional art form," Day said in a telephone interview.

"Artists receive a classic education, more out of the European tradition. But they're Asian, and they're Southeast Asian, and they're Vietnamese. Their spatial concepts, and obviously their motifs, are Asian, not European.

"For many Westerners there is something very comfortable and understandable about Vietnamese art," Day said, "and a sense of the exotic as well. It's familiar, and yet it's not -- which I think is very intriguing."

There's a cross-cultural aspect to the most appealing works in the "Changing Identity" exhibit.

Poong's watercolors juxtapose women in colorful costumes with woodland settings -- sometimes with the patterns merging. The artist was born in a province on the Chinese border and her heritage is Thai and Hmong, two of 54 ethnic minorities that make up Vietnam's population.

Bach Dan's brush-and-ink paintings, with such titles as "Silent Marsh" and "Forest Reflections," have the aura of 19th century European engravings. Giang's painterly oil, "Serenade II," could just as easily be titled "Nude with Violin."

Do's series of straightforward photographs are among the most intriguing works in the exhibit. Born in Vietnam in 1967, she is a cross-cultural figure herself, and the photos lead her through a kind of slide show of her heritage -- from her grandmother's return to a Vietnamese village to a visit with aunts in France to her parents' home in Colorado.

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exhibit

- **WHAT:** "Changing Identity: Recent Works by Women Artists from Vietnam"
- **WHEN:** Through Aug. 5; 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays-Saturdays; 11 a.m.-7:30 p.m. Wednesdays; noon-4 p.m. Sundays
- **Artist Ly Hoang Ly performs and curator Nora Taylor discusses the exhibit at 7 p.m. July 11.**
- **WHERE:** Mills College Art Museum; 5000 MacArthur Blvd., Oakland
- **HOW MUCH:** Free
- **CONTACT:** 510-430-2164, <http://www.mills.edu/museum>.
- **MORE VIETNAMESE ART:** Can be seen on the following galleries' and dealers' Web sites: NajaArts, San Francisco, <http://www.najaarts.com>; the Fielding Lecht Gallery in Austin, Texas, <http://www.fieldinglechtgallery.com>; Judith Hughes Day Fine Contemporary Vietnamese Art, New York, <http://www.artnet.com/Galleries>, then type Judith Hughes Day into the search bar

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