

Vietnamese Artists Take an Edgy Approach



The Propeller Group, a rising-star art trio based in Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City, started out a decade ago as an advertising agency, sort of. The artists found that if they billed themselves as admen, they could more easily get permits to film around the city—and their cameras attracted less attention from government censors. Along with making a few commercials, they made art.

On June 4, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago will open the group's first U.S. museum survey show, featuring installations and videos of their vision of Vietnam, from graffiti artists to monks to traders in fake antiquities. The national portrait that emerges is both globally hip and distinctly Vietnamese.

The group's ascent also mirrors Vietnam's expanding presence on the international art stage. The Propellers, who formed in 2006, have quickly climbed the ranks of Vietnam's most significant living artists, along with Tiffany Chung, who is known for embroidering maps that chart damage caused by war and natural disaster, and Dinh Q. Lê, who weaves strips of photographs together.

"The fact they live in Vietnam sounds exotic," said curator Naomi Beckwith, "but these artists are having a sophisticated, savvy conversation about global art and media in a country that's changing rapidly—and their art reflects that."



Two Propellers, Tuan Andrew Nguyen and Phunam (who only goes by one name), were born in Vietnam in the 1970s but left with their families as children. Decades later, they returned from the U.S. and Europe and teamed up with Matt Lucero, now 40, a California native who went to art school with Mr. Nguyen. Their collaborations have become favorites of the international biennial circuit, from Venice to New Orleans and beyond.

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They are best known for “The Living Need Light, the Dead Need Music,” a hypnotic short film in the show that the Propellers created for New Orleans’s Prospect.3 international art exhibition in 2014. In the film, they documented a dayslong wake in Vietnam. The funeral procession becomes increasingly carnivalesque, with fire-breathers, a brass band and people hired to cry on cue. The film’s backdrop along a watery south Vietnamese coast evokes New Orleans, which has its own culture of jazz funerals. That rounds out the artists’ point: “No one can claim a monopoly on culture, because traditions evolve and overlap,” Ms. Beckwith said.



“Fade In,” another one of the seven videos and installations that can be seen in Chicago, shows workers unpacking crates full of wooden objects. On the soundtrack, someone is arguing with a customs agent. A similar showdown inspired the video: After working on a project in the Netherlands, the group’s members struggled to persuade Dutch customs agents to let them ship home fake antiques that

they had used as props, including a reproduction of an 18th-century house facade made from carved jackfruit wood. The ensuing debate offers a surreal commentary on the trade in both real and fake Vietnamese antiques.

A similar house facade is in the Chicago show. “You can only imagine how nervous we were getting the house through U.S. Customs,” Ms. Beckwith said.

Museums in the U.S. have been paying more attention to contemporary Vietnamese art—among them, New York’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum with its 2014 show “No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia.” Auction houses are also championing Vietnamese artist Danh Vo. His 2010 “VJ Star,” a piece of cardboard covered in gold leaf and stenciled with the image of the U.S. flag, sold at Phillips for \$930,358 last October.