

DINH THI THAM POONG



“I simply don’t see the difference between a human and a tree or a fish.”

Dinh Thi Tham Poong’s work is whimsical and sincere. Her work is steeped in a feeling of genuine wonder. Wonder at how one survives in harsh conditions, wonder at the love that surrounds us all, wonder when experiencing the deepest silence. As Poong says, “To my mind everything has two distinct halves. A fish, for example, is half animal, half vegetal. The same is true with humans. Everything contains, holds each other, is intertwined with each other.” It is this idea of the two-fold nature of life and its simultaneous interconnectedness which plays itself out in Poong’s work. Poong combines images from her own Muong heritage with a surrealist visual landscape imbuing her works –both formally and emotionally – with a quality which can be described as utterly unique and completely global. Pure flights of the imagination fuse with concrete details from daily life creating images that work and play in the ethereal landscape of the mind.

Typically, her works reflect a structured convergence of her life in nature with her city life. Utilizing pattern upon pattern in a flat palette of color on traditional Do paper, the artist creates a world at once introspective and surrealistic. Depictions of ethnic minorities juxtaposed with flat decorative pattern are flights of imagination fused with normal daily life,

In 2007 Tham Poong’s works were shown in the traveling exhibition “Changing Identity: Recent works by women artists from Vietnam”, which opened at the Kennesaw State University Art Galleries, Kennesaw, Georgia and traveled to several museums in the United States; Trammell & Margaret Crow Collection of Asian Art, Dallas, Texas, Stedman Art Gallery, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ, Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City 2008, Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota 2009.

Dinh Thi Tham Poong has exhibited widely internationally and her works are in the permanent collections of the Singapore Art Museum, Fukuoka Asean Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan, the Rupertinum Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria, the MacLean Collection Mundelein, Illinois, USA, the New York Historical Society NYC, and the Post Vidai Collection, Vietnam/Switzerland among others.

Dinh Thi Tham Poong

- 1970 Born in Lai Chau, Vietnam. An ethnic minority artist whose father is Muong and mother is White Thai.
- 1993 Graduated from the Vietnam Fine Arts University, Hanoi, Vietnam
Member of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 *Gold in the Darkness*, Art Vietnam Gallery, Hanoi, Vietnam
- 2016 *Destination Point of an Oblique Line*, Art Vietnam Gallery, Hanoi, Vietnam
- 2013 *Green Something*, The East Gallery, Toronto, Canada
- 2010 *Falling Into Nature*, Goethe-Institut, Hanoi, Vietnam
- 2006 *Natural Instinct*, Art Vietnam Gallery, Hanoi, Vietnam
- 2003 *Connecting With Nature: Celebrating Vietnam's Ethnic Peoples*, Kismet Gallery, New York, USA
- 2000 *Fish And Stream*, Mai Gallery, Hanoi, Vietnam
- 1997 *Emigration*, Salon Natasha, Hanoi, Vietnam

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *Trànsguration*, curated by Viet Le, Slash Art, San Francisco, USA
- 2023 *Vietnam in Transition, 1976-Present*, Wende Art Museum, USA
- 2019 *Space in Between – Three artists three continents* – group exhibition, Hanoi, Vietnam
The Female Figure, Picturing Women in the Center – group exhibition at the United Nation, Hanoi, Vietnam
- 2017 *The Vietnam War: 1945-1975*, New York Historical Society, New York, USA
- 2016 *Art in Bloom*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA
- 2014 *A Woman's View*, Goethe Institut Hanoi, Vietnam
- 2007 *Five Changing Identities: Vietnamese Women of Today*
Nguyen Bach Dan, Ly Tran Quynh Giang, Nguyen Thi Chau Giang, Dinh Y Nhi, Dinh Thi Tham Poong Fielding Lecht Gallery, Austin, Texas
- 2007 *Changing Identity: Recent works by women artists from Vietnam*, Kennesaw State University Art Galleries, Kennesaw, Georgia, Trammell & Margaret Crow Collection of Asian Art, Dallas, Texas, Stedman Art Gallery, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ, Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City 2008, Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota 2009
- 2006 *Il Dragon e la Farfalla, Arte Contemporanea in Vietnam*, Complesso del Vittoriano, Rome, Italy
- 2005 *Triennial of Asian Contemporary Art*, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan
- 2004 *1 + 1 + 1* Vietnam Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi, Vietnam
15 TRACKS : Contemporary Southeast Asian Art traveling exhibition 2003-2004, Singapore Art Museum, The Japan Foundation, Tama Art University Museum and the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, (ASEAN-COCI)
- 2003 *Ideas from Asia*, Rupertinum Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria.

2001	<i>Art After DNA</i> , The Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, USA <i>Brush to Block: Vietnamese Works on Paper</i> , The Eastern Gallery, Chicago, IL, USA <i>Images Vietnam: Perspectives of Leading Contemporary Artists</i> , The Landon Gallery, New York, USA <i>Tradition And Change: Contemporary Vietnamese Art</i> , The Landon Gallery, New York, USA
2000	<i>Young Sculptors</i> , National Art Museum, Hanoi, Vietnam
1999	<i>Women Imaging Women</i> , Culture Center of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines <i>Gap Vietnam</i> , Haus der Culturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany
1998	<i>Spirit of Hanoi</i> , Bau Gallery, Helsinki, Finland
1995	National Exhibition, Van Ho Exhibition Center, Hanoi, Vietnam <i>Before The Sun Rise</i> , Giang Vo Art Exhibition Center, Hanoi, Vietnam
1994	Art Exhibition, Art Exhibition Center, Ngo Quyen, Hanoi, Vietnam
1993	<i>Minority Artists</i> , National Art Museum, Hanoi, Vietnam
1990	National Exhibition, Van Ho Exhibition Center, Hanoi, Vietnam

AWARDS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

1993	First Prize for the <i>Minority Artists</i> Exhibition
1995	Third Prize of National Fine Art Association
1995	Promotions Prize by National Fine Art Association

COLLECTIONS

Singapore Art Museum
 Rupertinum Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria
 Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan
 MacLean Collection, Mundelein, Illinois, USA
 Post Vidai Collection, Vietnam/Switzerland
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Massachusetts, USA
 The World Bank
 The George Washington University School of Business and Public Management,
 Washington DC, USA

WRITINGS

Destination Point of an Oblique Line by Dinh Thi Tham Poong

Solo exhibition – Artist Dinh Thi Tham Poong

26 Feb 2016 – 26 Mar 2016

Opening reception Friday 6pm 26 Feb 2016

At Art Vietnam Gallery – 2nd Floor, 24 Ly Quoc Su, Hanoi

Oblique: Diverging from a given straight line or course, neither perpendicular nor parallel to a given line or surface; slanting; sloping, indirectly aimed at or reached, as ends or results; Indirectly stated or expressed; not straightforward: An oblique allusion – innuendo.

One could say all of life is the intersection of oblique lines or occurrences. As we go throughout life, our point of view shifts, like the world on its' axis, poised between just one aberrant movement that could send all into total chaos.

In this artist's view, life is orderly. Tham Poong's childhood, born of an ethnic Muong father and White Thai mother in the remote northern region of Lai Chau, began in nature in close alignment with the seasons and the phases of the moon. Life was simple and free to morph and align with the shifts in nature. This natural spirit resides in the artist to this day and has always been reflected in her art.

After graduating from the Vietnam Fine Arts University in Hanoi in 1993 Tham Poong quickly established herself as one of Vietnam's leading female artists.

Art Vietnam Gallery presented her solo exhibition in 2006, *Natural Extinct*, comprised of works which reflected a structured convergence of her life in nature with her city life. In these works, utilizing pattern upon pattern in a flat palette of color on traditional Do paper, the artist creates a world at once introspective and surrealistic. Depictions of ethnic minorities juxtaposed with flat decorative pattern are flights of imagination fused with normal daily life, they are but one destination point in this versatile artist's work.

Tham Poong's new works are a departure in form, medium and presentation but are once again a convergence of the intersection of the many paths or lines she has crossed or encircled in her life. As the artist matures, she extrapolates the twists and turns, the lines, shapes and circles with the acute realization that all these elements come from a very simple shape or starting point but as they move, they fragment and multiply, provoking many different ways of being and seeing.

Acknowledging as one of her influences Rene Magritte, Tham Poong explains, "Magritte sees with his mind's eye while painting, he represents not the apparent but the evolutive, not the present but the future, not what is being but what will be. As I have been on my artistic journey, I began to perceive the limits of the visible. Everything is held in, and partially veiled by, everything... I realize that the real can be deceptive and obscure the truth."

The artist's new works, comprised of many mediums, oil on canvas, ceramic fragments held by embroidery, natural bamboo baskets, are the result of the evolution of the artist's thinking about new ways of seeing. As the artist says, "I perceive two ways of seeing. One, the real, actual mode of seeing the real point, and the second being the imaginary point, what one wants to see, or the aim or concentration point. These two different points connect and disconnect but they should not be too far apart or too connected."

The works on canvas are a departure from her traditional Do paper, the texture alone evoking a different way of seeing and feeling. In the work "*Like the Shadows on Water, 2015*", two figures

sit beside Hoan Kiem Lake reading a newspaper, absorbed in their reading, seemingly floating atop the water while actually their shadow is an embroidered target, yet another point of concentration, pointedly focused.

Trying to concentrate, 2015 depicts three figures in a landscape highly focused on their activity and yet they are tentatively balanced upon a labyrinth of intersecting lines, all askew, the view is clear but the point of view is forever shifting. *"Lake of the Sword 02, 2015"* is a serene cityscape surrounding the lake, lazy clouds reflected in the water that morph and change as they drift by.

Connecting and disconnecting these shapes reflect a reality at times near, at times very far. Departing from her visual landscape mode, Tham Poong has created a series of small golden ceramic pieces, like a small fingerprint, held in place on a canvas background much in the same way the weavers from her native village place an object in the loom to weave around thereby creating pattern. The threads are sewn straight or not straight, or turn in many ways as if they are trying to lead the viewer to a specific point.

"I think as you do, 2015" is a diptych of the two forms of expression, the angular dissecting lines of embroidery at times mirroring the lines of intersection in the oil on canvas, creating a tension that at times intertwines and at times repels.

Completing the objects is a very large bamboo nest in which triangular cushions are placed in a pattern, referencing a mandala of the universe or the sacred dance of Venus and Mars, where the conjunction of the shapes indicates or forms the nature of the relationship.

She invites the viewers to imagine entering the mandala basket, contemplating their interaction with the intersecting lines and shapes, exploring their interconnectedness. Points of intersection, crossing, dividing and morphing into a new existence.

Dinh Thi Tham Poong has exhibited widely internationally and her works are in the permanent collections of the Singapore Art Museum, Fukuoka Asean Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan, the Rupertinum Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria, the MacLean Collection Mundelein, Illinois, USA, and the Post Vidai Collection, Vietnam/Switzerland among others.

Please come to celebrate the new work of this very talented artist and explore your own shifting points of view.

Suzanne Lecht
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Ilza Burchett – About Exhibition “The Destination Point of an Oblique Line” by Dinh Thi Tham Poong - 2016

The Destination Point of an Oblique Line is the name that Dinh Thi Tham Phoong gives to her latest exhibition at Art Vietnam Gallery.

This exhibition is a mix of different thoughts held by the artist simultaneously, and widely different from one another ways of seeing [1], projected by her in a variety of — and formally — widely different ways of artistic expression.

In this exhibition, on a par with oil paintings: landscapes, interiors, figurative compositions and a (self -) portrait, there are geometrically embroidered stretched canvas panels, some of them featuring “like a small fingerprint”[2] made by the artist — gilded ceramic ornaments.

The same type of gilded ceramic ornaments are also embedded between layers of perforated Plexiglas surfaces, fashioned by the artist as free-standing objet d’art.

Also, placed on the floor of the exhibition space to invite the viewer”... to enter the mandala basket and sit within its intersecting lines to explore the interconnectedness of those around them. Points of intersection, crossing, dividing and morphing into a new existence.”[3] is the work Nature’s Nest, in the form of a large bamboo basket with a fabric cushion.

This apparent disparity in the formal artistic expression gives an impression of abruptness in Dinh Thi Tham Phoong’s artistic thoughts in pursuit of their own continuity, seeking relief in the promise of validation through sharing in the idea of Nature’s Nest.

It is acutely sensible in the deliberate juxtaposition of conceptually non-corresponding ways of expression in her diptych ‘I Think As You Do’ and is pronounced by the artist as a statement: “I perceive two ways of seeing. One, the real, actual mode of seeing the real point, and the second being the imaginary point, what one wants to see, or the aim or concentration point. These two different points connect and disconnect but they should not be too far apart or too connected.”[4].

A simultaneous articulation of formally different artistic ways of expression in the work of an artist is not an uncommon occurrence in contemporary art practices, but it seems that no matter how much apart or opposing these may seem to appear in a given body of work, the artist’s specific consistency of vision and uniqueness of touch need to be overwhelmingly present, evident, and dominate in their art for it to be intelligible, visually convincing and so appreciated.

Taking “The Destination Point of an Oblique Line” as a metaphor for “evolutive” [5] — where the ambiguous ‘oblique line’ of thought is present and evident, where it seems that ‘the destination point’ is — perhaps naturally so — ambiguously unclear, as expressed in her Plexiglas creations Destination Point of Reflection— this exhibition presents the current oeuvre of Dinh Thi Tham Phoong in an aesthetically unresolved and transitive, though self-assured mode of being.

Notes:[1], [2], [3], [4], [5] references and quotes from ‘Exhibition The Destination Point of an Oblique Line by Dinh Thi Tham Phoong’, text/exhibition announcement from Art Vietnam Gallery as published by Hanoi Grapevine

Woman artists' voices in a men's world

By Thuy Linh, Thanh Nien News

HANOI - Tuesday, March 15, 2016 09:44

Though the artists do not see themselves as 'woman artists' but simply 'artists,' it is important to add the prefix where it is due

In popular memory, the brilliant graduates of the famous colonial fine arts college in Hanoi and “masters” of modern Vietnamese painting are men.

They include the great quartets “Tri-Van-Lan-Can” (Nguyen Gia Tri, To Ngoc Van, Nguyen Tuong Lan, Tran Van Can) and “Sang-Lien-Nghiem-Phai” (Nguyen Sang, Duong Bich Lien, Nguyen Tu Nghiem, Bui Xuan Phai).

There have been rare woman exceptions, such as Le Thi Luu, who migrated to France and, along with three talented male compatriots - Le Pho, Vu Cao Dam, and Mai Trung Thu - made up the center of the Vietnamese-French school in Paris.

Today female artists remain far fewer in number, and Suzanne Lecht, art director of Art Vietnam Gallery in Hanoi, blamed it on social expectations and roles.

Women are already too busy as wives, mothers, and caretakers of the extended family in addition to working to have time for individual art practice, she said.

Dinh Thi Tham Poong, whose works are being exhibited at Art Vietnam Gallery, said out of 25 students in her graduating class at the Vietnam University of Fine Arts only six were women, and not all of them remained in the art field after graduation.

Poong said she did the best that she could, painted with care and was able to make a living out of her paintings.

“People often label this or that exhibition a woman painter’s exhibition, but I don’t care to be identified as such,” said Poong, whose exhibition titled “The Destination of An Oblique Line” will run until this 26th.

Poong said though viewers might see women in her works, they were not her preoccupation.

What she is interested in are nature and love and misery and every other human emotion in between.

“Before we talk about our being male or female, we have to talk about our being human,” the 46 year-old ethnic artist from Lai Chau Province said.

Poong’s themes at the exhibition are indeed diverse, though the image of women recurs beautifully.

There are paintings about natural scenes and Sword Lake, experiments with geometrical lines and shapes, and ceramic and embroidery works.

For what it’s worth, however, Poong’s handling of the female image is both tender and tough, showing women who look fragile yet strong, concrete yet abstract, reflecting the Chinese philosophy of Yin-Yang in which there is masculinity in femininity and vice versa.

Floating Courtyard, for instance, is a beautiful work in which ethnic women with strong, round, full figures perform their familiar daily chores like carrying babies, spinning, bathing or are simply sitting.

In white and blue and surrounded by yellow leaves and flowers, these women and their domestic world take on an abstract, transcendental quality that is often the preserve of men in patriarchal cultures and is nicely contrasted by the darker orange brown of the earth under their feet.

Poong's women seem to be able to find the middle ground between the hard, gritty world of domestic or otherwise earthy tasks conditioned by natural necessities, and the transcendental, which she often represents with the motif of a slightly cloudy blue sky contained within the contours of a male body (women, in contrast, appear in their more solid, earthier, more colored clothes).

I Think As You Do is another intelligent work. It shows a man sitting chin in hand in the familiar position of the male thinker with his blue-sky shadow by his side. The woman stands up, which makes her more physically active, but she too has a blue-sky shadow of her own. In this portrayal, she is clearly his intellectual equal.

And it is in the direction of the woman's eyes that I Think As You Do changes from human figures to lines, from oil paint to embroidery, from one plane of expression and representation to another. Whatever this other plane, or "destination", is, the woman is positioned in such a way that we feel it is she who mediates between different worlds and leads.

This is a far cry from the image of the woman as a sexual object, stripped of mind and identity, raped, murdered, disembodied or otherwise distorted, a site of projected male fantasy and experiment that can be observed in the works of the surrealist master Rene Magritte, who Poong said was a major source of inspiration for her.

Magritte saw with his mind's eye, representing not the apparent, visible, or real but the evolutive, not what is being but what will be, she said.

Unlike Magritte and the male-dominated Western art tradition which often achieves male ideals at the expense of women, Poong, living in a different time and place, gives women their due: a wholesome image in terms of both mind and body.

Le Kim My's ongoing "Everyday Stories" painting exhibition at L'Espace features not the female image but various subject matters gleaned from daily life. Yet the woman artist herself makes a compelling portrait.

As she gave a short speech at the opening of her first ever solo exhibition, the 70-year-old painter, who used to teach at the Vietnam University of Fine Arts for 30 years, was too moved to speak.

The soft-spoken daughter of the late master of lacquer painting, Le Quoc Loc, was deeply thankful to her teachers and to the fact that she is still healthy to make things happen.

Created since 2010, the many skillful lacquer and silk paintings of various sizes showcased at the exhibition reveal rigorous effort.

My said her joy in painting and daily life is endless: She can be inspired by anything from a bottle and a vase to scenes she encounters everyday around her while on the way to work or to a street market.

Her birthplace Hanoi, both old and new, with its innumerable motorbikes and cars today, is also an endless source of inspiration.

Hanoi's streets indeed are a major theme of her works, though there are also natural images and pictures of rural and ethnic life.

Painted with sketch-like brushstrokes, the varied untitled works reveal an urgency to capture all the minute and seemingly unconnected inspirations that life has to offer.

The artist said she put equal effort into every detail and work. But her lacquer paintings stand out, revealing confident formal experiments with the medium.

Some lacquer works look abstract and spontaneous, the result of the artist's attempt to play with the medium itself by letting images change or form according to the complex, arduous process of painting, rubbing and polishing that is lacquer painting.

The postmodernist tendency to de-emphasize content and extol experimentation with the medium has become a bit too self-conscious, repetitive and tiring.

But the medium of lacquer painting, which is a truly painstaking process, seems to deserve the spotlight here. After all, whatever they mean to the uninitiated, those smooth color blotches on My's lacquer paintings require much rubbing.

Both My's formal experimentation and the abstract, intellectual elements in Poong's works seem to point to an effort by contemporary Vietnamese women artists to move beyond what Lecht described as "classic feminine concerns".

They are the more intimate and emotional themes related to a female artist's own world and to women's tendency to nurture, give and preserve life.

Two woman artists' exhibitions in Hanoi

1. Dinh Thi Tham Poong's "The Destination of An Oblique Line", Art Vietnam Gallery, 24 Ly Quoc Su Street, from February 26 to March 26
 2. Le Kim My's "Everyday Stories," L' Espace, 24 Trang Tien Street, from March 1- 30
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Tham Poong's Interview with Hanoi Moi newspaper - 2016

- *Why did you give this show the title "The Destination Point of an Oblique Line"? What message do you want to send the viewers?*

- "Look" is a verb and "Point (of view)" is a noun. I think the title explains itself. But somewhere I heard people say "looking is not enough", so then I paint about the View. I don't remember if I painted first or I had the title first. Sometimes I think I should start painting first, but actually the idea has to come before I reach for the brush. That's when I see the "destination point".

- *For a long time, the viewers are used to see your paintings on Do paper. This time we see oil and some other materials. Are you following something new and how does the new material work to express your new ideas?*

- I have had many exhibitions with Do paper and watercolor for quite some time already. However for the fun of working, I also started to work with many different materials. Sometimes I heard stories about my paintings being sold, or people talking about my paintings on Do paper... and maybe it was too much for me to hear...

- So then I think I must do something new, make some changes, to see what a new way of working will look like... So I tried with oil, it's also terribly difficult! But I don't care, I just continued working, I am happy to face its difficulties! I even love to try more materials because I feel enjoyment from fighting with them and I think the result is worth my effort. I tried to make ceramic objects, I tried to design simple furniture and then I connected them to nature.

- *Ceramic on canvas is a very new experiment? Can you talk more about the bamboo "bed" with small cushions? What does it mean and do you intend to work with installation?*

- Oh, what you call a "bed" is actually a "nest". It's a huge nest that I ordered a traditional craftsman to make, with a much bigger size than normal so kids can hide and play inside. About the ceramics: they could be anything, for example a leaf? When the leaf falls down from the tree, it will lay on the ground in many different ways but completely naturally. I use a very simple way to connect the ceramic leaf to the canvas. I call them "the art of objects, not installation".

- *The artworks in this show seem to have more philosophy and more thought? They are also not very colorful and strong like your other series of works. What do you say about this?*

- Maybe you see this show in a different way? I think I still work like I have from a long time ago. Or perhaps you think too much and have some doubts? Some paintings in this show were painted many years ago, but I just finished them recently. I also have had many nonsense experiments recently. But thanks to them I have the new inspiration for this exhibition.

Natural Instinct, Heart and Mind become One

Tham Poong is now drifting into the fanciful floating world of love and human connection. Well known for her personal narratives on the life of the ethnic minorities, the world of her origin, the artist is now exploring life beyond.

The natural world is still dominant in her works but the colors have softened, the feeling has lost its solemnity and a playful frolicking has replaced the stoic rural figure of her previous works. Although remnants of her early work remain in the abundance of trees and nature, the images and stage set become dreamlike as spiraling lotus abound entwining reclining figures.

“1 + 1 = 2, Happy Eyes make everything beautiful, Questioning oneself, Relax”, these collective works embrace the union of the physical with the spirit world. As they contemplate, celebrate, and wonder, the figures seemingly submit to a gentler, kinder world full of love. The subdued palette emphasizes the ephemeral nature of life and the abundance of surrounding lotus adds purity to the emotion.

The lines and forms in these new works are simplified, loose and abundant in structure and emotion. “Becoming Flowers” is a fanciful movement injecting Poong’s rather solemn origin with a new feeling of fancy and giddy lightness. As the muted figures merge with the flower world, they move planes from the human to the spirit world. Sensual and dreamlike these figures celebrate love. “Emotions of Paradise” is a fitting triumphant expression of the power of this passion uniting with the fabric of life.

Suzanne Lecht

Art Director

Art Vietnam Gallery

“Natural Instinct” Solo Exhibition by Dinh Thi Tham Poong

Opening Friday September 22nd, 2006 at 6:00 pm

Showing from September 22nd through October 13th, 2006

at Art Viet Nam, 30 Hang Than, Hanoi

tel. 844 927 2349 fax. 844 927 2804

email. artvietnam@fpt.vn - www.artvietnamgallery.com



PUBLICATIONS

Muong artist takes a leaf to paint a world of trees, fish and human

(Vietnam News - Wednesday March 1, 2000)

Hanoi - in a painting by the young Muong Artist, Dinh Thi Tham Poong. Villagers in traditional dress are involved in obscured activities while turned up and down on a background of fallen brown and yellow leaves.

Only a female and male face are recognizable. In place of their feet, oversize green leaves grow. The other 12 women and men sprout giant leaves for heads. The relationship between people and trees is just one of the topics Poong tackles in her first solo exhibition. *Fish and Stream* at the Mai Gallery Hanoi.

In this exhibition, Poong creates a surrealist world inhabited with the mutated human form.

"I can't see any difference between a tree and a human," Poong said. "Both have to struggle against many difficulties to survive".

Poong said like humans, trees reveal their true character if you pay close attention.

"When I see a tree flourishing in harsh surroundings, I think about how they are able to survive in such conditions. They give me encouragement", she continued.

Poong explores her Muong identity, childhood and role as a woman in society, through this exhibition. The paintings express her search for identity in a changing world.

Over and again, she connects the body with the natural world. In one painting, she marries man with fish and turns leaves into clouds.

The repetition of human figures in her pictures, underlines the power of community.

Poong paints one step removed from reality, nevertheless her paintings are as beautiful as they are sincere. Poong was born in 1970 in the northern Mountainous province of Lai Chau.

She studied sculpture at the Hanoi Fine Art College and has received several prizes for her work from the Ministry of Culture and Information.

The exhibition, organized by the Swedish-Vietnamese Fund for the Promotion of Culture, opens today and runs through March 10 at the Mai Gallery 38 Phan Huy Chu Street - Hanoi

15 TRACKS : Contemporary Southeast Asian Art

DINH THI THAM POONG

Vietnam

If one were to approach Dinh Thi Tham Poong's work from a broad and sweeping view of Vietnamese art, the viewer might extrapolate qualities that signpost the contemporary Vietnamese archetype. While her choice of medium (gouache on Vietnamese Do paper) and her palette of intense flat colors point to a Vietnamese type, it is the psychological ambiance of her introspective and surreal visions that is most suggestive. Dinh's paintings dig into memories of her childhood and dwell at the edges of loss and imagination. Born of Muong and Thai parentage, the Hanoi-based artist grew up with her ethnic Thai mother in the hilly regions of northern Vietnam. Memories of nature and her ethnic heritage fuel her work and provide the twin platform for expressions of identity and meta physical themes. Dinh's paintings are at once wistful, wrapped in a melancholia that pervades her ghostly rendering of ephemeral figures and forms, and are in the same moment possessed of humanistic values and aspiring ideals. It is this psychological tension, heightened by the indeterminate and the equivocality of her symbolic forms, that is most compelling and haunting about Dinh's work.

Although she trained in sculpture at the Hanoi College of Fine Art, Dinh has turned exclusively to painting. She acknowledges the influence of Rene Magritte, and attributes the 'encounter' with the surrealist's work in 1998 as a turning point in her own. Explaining, she says: "(Magritte) sees with his mind's eye while painting, he represents not the apparent but the evolutive, not the present but the future, not what is being but what will be ... I began to perceive the limits of the visible. Everything is held in, and partially veiled by, everything... I realize that the real can be deceptive and obscure the truth."

Dinh layers, overlaps, merges and brings in enigmatic contiguity figures and matter that defy the 'real' of the physical order to create a surrealistic vision and a personal reality of inter-relationships, interdependence and order. Her approach is not intellectual but intuitive and emotive. For Dinh, the relationship between man, nature and the built environment is a recurring theme. Her views approximate a form of animism, where the animate and the inanimate are intertwined. Another recurring theme in Dinh's paintings is the ethnic Muong woman. She appears as a faceless and featureless protagonist in whom Dinh invests and mounts identities of ethnicity and gender that return to inform on the artist as subject and self.

Joanna Lee

From catalog published in conjunction with 15 Tracks: Contemporary Southeast Asian Art. Traveling in 2003-2004, the exhibition is organized by the Singapore Art Museum, the Japan Foundation, Tama Art University Museum and Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. a project of the Association of Southeast Asian nations, Committee on Culture and Informationm (ASEAN-COCI).

Published in July 2003