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## CULTURE & MORE

# 3 generations of artists explore Vietnam's war years

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### SINGAPORE

In Vietnam, art was so closely associated with craft that there was no real pictorial tradition until the *École Supérieure des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine* was established in Hanoi by the French in 1925. The school opened the door to the rapid development of Vietnamese art, which embraced the French academic style while finding its own voice by digging deep into its own traditions of lacquer and silk.

As the Vietnamese fought for and gained independence in the 1950s, there was a sense of urgency to erase any colonial influences and a form of patriotic realism emerged, akin to Soviet social realism, albeit pictorially less constructivist and more romantic.

In 1976, as the Communists took over the country, art became an important propaganda tool to express nationalistic sentiment. Artists who wanted to exhibit had to be members of the Fine Arts Association. They were encouraged to paint allegories to the country's workers and leaders. Nudes were viewed as decadent, self-portraits as indulgent and self-expression was discouraged.

"Post-Doi Moi: Vietnamese Art After 1990," running until Sept. 28 at the Singapore Art Museum, examines what happened to Vietnamese art when the Communist government opened up to a market economy with the Doi Moi, or "renovation," policies.

"For visual artists, Doi Moi meant greater freedom in artistic expressions," said Joyce Fan, the curator of the exhibition. "Art for art's sake was no longer frowned upon and artists got a chance to experiment beyond realism."

The imagery most often associated with Vietnamese art is that of lyrical realist paintings of women wearing conical hats in flowing ao dai (traditional dress) and of the romanticized depictions of streets in the Old Quarter in Hanoi. However, while these are still commonly found in the dozens of art galleries in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh, they do not fully embody today's art.

"A lot of people associate Vietnam art with women in ao dai. There are a lot more things happening and I wanted to show with this exhibition the breadth of practices over the last 18 years," Fan said.

The starting point in the exhibition is 1990, the year marking the opening of the first commercial art gallery in Hanoi. Fan pointed out that the exhibition spans the works of three generations of artists: those who experienced the Vietnam War as adults, those born in the late '50s and '60s who grew up during the war, and those born after the 70s who did not experience war first-hand.

Unlike their Chinese counterparts, with their all-out commentaries on the politics of Mao Zedong and fast-developing consumerism through the political pop and cynical realism movements, Vietnamese artists took a much more introspective approach when they were finally given some freedom.



Le Quang Ha



Singapore Art Museum

"Self-Portrait under the Moonlight," above, by Nguyen Quan (born in 1948); at left, "The Dictator" by Le Quang Ha (born in 1963). Their works are in an exhibition of Vietnamese art since Doi Moi, the "renovation" policies that, among other things, permitted greater artistic freedom.

"I'm very tired of political art," quipped the artist and art historian Nguyen Quan, whose "Self-Portrait Under the Moonlight" (1992) is displayed in the exhibit. "Artists have dismissed collectivism in style, and traditional topics of leaders, peasants and soldiers, have been replaced by flowers, fishes and women."

"Post-Doi Moi became a period of liberation of expression so a lot of artists took the genre of self-portrait because they saw it as the ultimate in self-expression. Self-portraits also allowed them to give commentaries on changing attitudes, talk about the pining for the past that is fast disappearing," Fan said.

Abstraction was another strong direction in the early years of post-Doi Moi because the style is also viewed as allowing greater self-expression, and several paintings on display show how Vietnamese artists like Bui Huu Hung and Le Hong Thai embraced and adapted the genre by experimenting in lacquer on wood.

One of the curatorial themes of the exhibition is "Reminiscence," a look at how different generations of artists tackled references to the intense period of the Vietnam War. Artists who grew up during the war would often be evacuated to the countryside, and they remember their time spent in small rural villages — as in Tran Luong's abstract "Underwater" (1994) — while older artists tend to recall the hardships and horrors of the war. Yet, as Fan noted, the approach is often extremely subtle, as in Do Son's "Heart of Motherer" (1994), which depicts a mother praying for loved ones lost to the wars.

"This piece is very poignant because if you look at the images of the loved ones and how they're dressed, you realize they are from two different wars," Fan noted, referring to the resistance against the French and the later Vietnam War.

"Some remember the war, but it's not blatantly in your face. In a lot of the work I see there is something very poetic and lyrical," Fan added.

"The exploration of the motherland is another curatorial theme, which is linked to the question of identity. While there are quaint scenes of Hanoi streets,

the theme also allows artists to reflect on the changes in the social and economic spheres," Fan said.

In Vuong Van Thao's stunning installation "Living Fossils" (2006), the artist has replicated old houses from Hanoi in stoneware and then encased them in transparent resin. The 36 houses are laid out in a street scene along with 36 resin-encased metal poles with loudspeakers from which public messages would have been broadcast throughout the day in the '80s.

Though Vietnamese artists have more freedom today, it is not complete, which might explain why most of the work is not politically engaged.

"There's always been a comparison between Vietnam and China. But this is, I think unfair," said Nora Taylor, the author of several books on Vietnam art and a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. "You must look at the Vietnamese relationship to politics compared with the Chinese relationship to politics. The Vietnamese didn't have a strong Cultural Revolution and they didn't have a strong cult following of Ho Chi Minh, nor do they have a downfall from Ho Chi Minh, so they can't use his image, while the Chinese have allowed Mao's image to be propagated popularly in a way the Vietnamese government won't allow. Ho's image is still taboo."

Still, a few of the works on display at the Post-Doi Moi exhibition show that some Vietnamese artists are trying to push the country's boundaries in terms of social and political commentary. Le Quang Ha's giant gray canvas "The Dictator" (2003) shows a man with eight arms extending menacingly toward the viewer against a background of industrial machinery. Ha's works are often a commentary on corruption and greed, and are regularly populated with police and military officers.

"A lot of artists are doing more subversive political work, but they're underground, mainly doing performance art. Things will change in the next couple of years. This show is more an overview of what happened post-Doi-Moi; it is not really a reflection of what's happening now," Taylor said.