Weaving together his Vietnam

Tapestries explore war and identity

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Dinh Q. Lê learned how to weave mats from his aunt in his Vietnamese hometown of Tien when he was 6 or 7.

Decades later he would use the technique to make sense of his life and of the complicated relationship between Vietnam and the United States.

Lê was born in 1948, and in 1977 his family fled Vietnam and ultimately settled in Los Angeles.

“A Tapestry of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê” at the Tufts University Art Gallery, showcases Lê’s photo weavings. Borrowing images from photojournalism, art history, and film — in particular, American films about the Vietnam War — Lê creates brilliant large-scale works in which warp and weft narrow and widen and images coalesce and disperse, battling for the eye’s attention.

In the series “From Vietnam to Hollywood,” he questions to what degree his own memory has drawn on images from movies. “Paramount” revolves around that film company’s starry logo, with shots from “Apocalypse Now,” “Indochine,” and “Heaven & Earth” woven around and through it. Memory, he suggests, is interleaved and fueled by images that may have nothing to do with personal experience.

In other works, he starkly pairs movie stills with iconic black-and-white news photos from the Vietnam War. “Russian Roulette” sets Eddie Adams’s chilling image of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong prisoner in Saigon against a backdrop of a parachute drop borrowed from “The Deer Hunter.” Lê doesn’t weave these images; rather, he makes them into one. He does weave through that a photo of consumer products — Aloids, Kellogg’s cereal, Coca-Cola. It’s a bleak, disturbing mix, with each element denoting a different manner of perception. News photos such as Adams’s rivet the eye; films hypnotize with story, image, and sound; the products’ bright packaging bedazzles.

“Mot Câu Đơn Vi (Spending One’s Life Trying to Find One’s Way Home)” isn’t exactly a weave; Lê has strung together in a giant, loose grid, hanging from the ceiling like a curtain, scores of found black-and-white photos and postcards inscribed in English or Vietnamese. The piece feels both ephemeral and enveloping, like a chorus of images and voices whispering from the past.

In his photo weavings and two video installations, Lê, who now lives in Ho Chi Minh City, plays and joins several versions of the story of the war in Vietnam. It’s a generous vision that enables us to see how so many threads create a nuanced, always changing tapestry.

Visual and textual delight

Drawings of Vietnamese chandeliers created ambiguously are the spines around which Laurence Sparke’s gaudy, outrageous, and smart paintings grow. Press material says that her show at Howard Yezerski Gallery was inspired by the color and lunacy of queer experimental film. The title, “Plunder Dome,” is a nod to avant-garde filmmaker Kenneth Anger’s 1954 movie “Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome.” Sparke’s paintings have the visual and textual delight of a second grade peering at her heart into arts and crafts. Poison greens, neon pinks, and electric blues appear in dollops. Then there’s glitter, marble dust, and wads of bright paper mache that the artist throws at the canvas and looks at the canvas and looks at the canvas like spirals after she has finished painting.

But sheer variety of materials and tones doesn’t make a good painting, heaven knows. In works such as “Genesis” and “Christmas in July,” Sparke rigorously provokes at some of painting’s eternal riddles. Background floats to the surface and back. Figure and ground densely exchange places. The loopy, abstracted lines of the chandelier might describe a central figure, but the way Sparke paints around them — sometimes filling them in, sometimes dripping over them, sometimes drawing them to the surface — she engages the viewer’s eye in a constant dance of veils.

Quiet/riot

“Some Things the World Gave” is a vague enough title for a two-person show that features two very different bodies of work. Painters Jan Lhorner and Susan Schwab provide a sharp, satisfying contrast in the exhibit at Trustman Art Gallery at Simmons College.

Lhorner is exuberantly gestural, layering swaths of paint in a variety of marks to build lush abstracted gardens. Schwab’s technique is reductive; she layers colors of acrylic paint, then finishes with metalpoint — shades of gray — and abrades the surface to reveal the layers of tone beneath. Her still, meditative panels seem to quietly absorb the riot going on in Lhorner’s canvases across the gallery.

Both arguably refer to landscape. Schwab’s “Afterimage III,” cut evenly across with horizontal bands that echo a horizon line, with its blue and yellow glimmerings winking between the lines in a sinuous puddle of light, recalls the sun shining on water. The tomatoes in Lhorner’s “John’s Tomato Garden,” pendulous swirls of red, reside in a house of other botanical marks and tones. The two artists’ differences spark against one another; one’s work enriches the experience of the other’s.