Dinh Q. Lê: A Weaving of Words

From January 22 to March 29, 2009, the Tufts University Art Gallery will present a hallmark survey exhibition on the work of American and Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê (b. 1968). This exhibition of 18 photo-weavings, two white-on-white embroideries, two videos, and an installation draws from museum and private collections across the nation and spans the artist’s oeuvre since 1995. Physically dislocated and culturally displaced from his homeland, Lê has sought to negotiate his Vietnamese background within the prevailing philosophical, aesthetic, and cultural values of the West. A Tapestry of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê is organized by Bellevue Arts Museum and made possible in part by the generosity of The Paul G. Allen Family Foundation.

This article summarizes an interview between the artist and Stefano Catalani, exhibition curator from the catalogue A Tapestry of Memories: Dinh Q. Lê. All quotes in this article are by Dinh Q. Lê.

The “Myth of Vietnam”
The chilling history of the Vietnam War and the allure of an exotic and stunningly beautiful country fascinate Americans. Immigrants are drawn home again by a “connection that [they] cannot see.” Vietnam encompasses disparate notions—beauty and pain, complex history and uncertain future, fact and fiction—that make it mysterious and captivating.

Photo-Weaving: Technique & Tool
Lê feels that painting and sculpture are “somebody else’s medium” and his use of photo-weaving “was a conscious decision to use a technique that is universal and was also part of my culture, a medium that was not coming from the West.” The artist uses a traditional Vietnamese grass mat technique to weave together strips of film stills, photo-journalistic images, and anonymous vintage Vietnamese photos “to present my point of view because I feel that information out there doesn’t speak to and of my experience...the weaving brings together and yet it’s disrupting...you can still see the iconic image, but at the same time it’s breaking up and there’s this new image merging and...
A Weaving of Words continued

forming...the iconic images are always the dominant ones. But there are all these stories underneath that the public rarely knows about, and I think what I’m doing is exposing the other story.” Lê’s work capitalizes on “how easily images can be manipulated, how the media has manipulated them for years, and how anybody who wants to can do it.”

Religious Art: Lessons in Difference
Lê recalls as a child witnessing his first Christmas celebration of Vietnamese Catholics and seeing “Christ, all bloody, hanging on a cross. I was so scared I ran out.” His childhood fear of a mysterious religion was later augmented when his studies in the U.S. revealed the preponderance of religious imagery in the western art historical canon. His early photo-weavings reference the altarpiece and are about “the problem of trying to force myself into this system, trying to fit into this Western culture...[coming] to terms with the fascination I had with Renaissance paintings...along with asking myself where I am in relation to all this.”

Hollywood Directs Us: The From Vietnam to Hollywood Series
Film and media sell ideas, perspectives, and passions which, when successfully propagated, appear as truth; Lê’s art debunks these myths as they relate to the Vietnam War. “The more research I did, the more I realized that the Vietnamese have no voice in the writing and rewriting of the story of the Vietnam War.” He noted that “Hollywood directors studied documentary footage and photos to simulate and legitimize their visions...I was interested in this idea of how these two elements of fiction and nonfiction are merging in and out of each other...and these works were also a way of asking about myself and about my memory of the Vietnam War, and especially where my memory is in between the fiction and the non-fiction.”

His approach to the problem is to take the iconic voices telling the story and merge them with personal memories to “create a surreal landscape memory that is neither fact nor fiction,” that “talk[s] about the struggle for control of meaning and memories of the Vietnam War between these different sources of memory.”

Memories of Cambodia
The idea of memory permeates Lê’s work: how memory is formed and informed, how some memories are perpetuated and others buried, how personal and collective memories differ, and how memories guide our future paths. Lê remembers when his family left Vietnam in 1978 (the Khmer Rouge invaded his
A Conversation with Christian Tomaszewski

Gallery Director Amy Schlegel sat down with Christian Tomaszewski to discuss his installation, Hunting For Pheasants, on view in the Koppelman Gallery and Remis Sculpture Court of the Tufts University Art Gallery at the Aidekman Arts Center from January 28 to March 29, 2009.

Amy Schlegel: You were born and educated in Poland, before moving permanently to the U.S. in 1997 at the age of 26. What Polish influences do you acknowledge in this installation?

Christian Tomaszewski: I don’t try to consciously infuse my work with my Polishness. I don’t explore it in my artwork. In fact, nearly a decade of living in the States has made me feel to some extent detached from my roots. I also think that the idea that being an artist means being a cultural ambassador of one’s specific cultural/geographical region is a bit archaic…unless it is done with humor and irony as in the case of recent works by Piotr Uklanski.

A.S.: The founder of the Polish Poster School, Henryk Tomaszewski (no relation), passed away in 2005; his New York Times obituary described his distinctive style as “stunningly colorful, often humorously surreal and decidedly free of any heavy-handed ideological symbolism.” How would you describe the impact the Polish Poster School on your work, both broadly, and specifically, with regard to this installation of about 60 fake “posters” for non-existent movies about assassinated historical and contemporary figures?

C.T.: When beginning my work on the poster project almost two years ago, I definitely had the Polish Poster School in mind. But it interested me only as a phenomenon – the fact that a group of Polish artists and/or graphic designers was able to create something distinct that resonated throughout the international art world, and that it was recognized as something stylistically uniform and unique. Other than that, I don’t try to appropriate their style.

A.S.: You’ve said that your Top Five movies are, in order: David Lynch’s “Blue Velvet”; Jean-Luc Godard’s “Contempt”; Pedro Almodovar’s “Bad Education”; Alejandro González Inarritu’s “21 Grams”; Andrei Tarkovsky’s “Solaris”. Does a non-linear cinematic narrative structure translate in your work, or is it the characters in these films or the cinematography that appeals to you?

C.T.: It is definitely the non-linear narrative structure that always appeals to me and makes me want to carry it further.

A.S.: Can you describe how you envision the translation of filmic space into a visual art/installation context, one in which the viewer can explore physically, rather than access purely optically?

C.T.: I don’t think I have any clear-cut recipe for how to translate filmic space into an art installation. I am, in general, interested in playing with the narrative potential of space and/or architecture. Also, I think the desire to enter the world that one sees on the movie screen is something that has been present since the beginning of the cinema and in a way my work plays on that desire.

Continued on page 11
Sculptor and ceramist Patty Rosenblatt is a new member of both the Tufts University Art Gallery Advisory Board and a supporter of The Contemporary Art Circle. We asked her a few questions about her career as a sculptor and her interest in and support of the arts at Tufts. What follows are Patty’s own words about her career path, processes, and connection to the Tufts University Art Gallery.

Interview compiled and edited by Kristen Heintz-Perkins

I attended Goucher College, where I received a B.A in English, and Boston College, where I obtained an M.A in English. I taught for several years, and then decided that the needs of students beyond the classroom were so acute that I might make a more significant contribution if I trained as a social worker. I was a student at Simmons School of Social Work when, in the mid-1980s, our family moved to Philadelphia. I expected to resume my training in social work; however, in the time between applying and receiving notice, I signed up for a ceramics class at a community arts center along with my daughter Mia. I fell in love with clay, withdrew my application to social work school, and took a job as the monitor (janitor) in the ceramics studio so I could learn by doing. I spent several years there, eventually running the ceramics program at the Main Line Center for the Arts in Haverford, PA, taking classes and becoming a part of the vibrant clay community in Philadelphia.

When we returned to Boston in the mid-1990s, I enrolled at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. There I was introduced to conceptual art, was initiated into “art as process,” and discovered Lucy Lippard’s book Overlay, about the resonances of prehistory for contemporary artists, which became my artistic “bible.” These experiences gave me a way of looking and thinking about art-making that fit with my natural proclivities and gave me permission to employ them in my work.

I call myself a sculptor for want of a better descriptor. All of my work to date has been rooted in clay or raw earths. I have created large-scale outdoor sculptures that originate as small gestures of my hand squeezing clay and that emphasize the transfer of energy and the transformation of scale; I have created print series that document the visual aspects of clay’s changes of states as it passes from wet to dry; and I have worked with a choreographer on a dance piece that involves dancers interacting with clay in several of its chameleon states.

Amy Schlegel recently honored me by requesting that two prints from my series, "First Violin: An Octave of Prints,” be proposed for accession to the University’s Permanent Art Collection, which I just learned has been made official. For this work, I sank a (rough) violin in wet clay and worked with

Somerville photographer Ken Richardson to document the violin’s emergence as the clay dried and shrank away. I am thrilled to have my work included with the illustrious works from the permanent collection sited in the Granoff Music Center, next door to the Arts Center.

My awakening to the excellence of the Tufts University Art Gallery is fairly recent. Because my husband’s work is centered on Tufts’ Chinatown campus (Michael Rosenblatt, Dean of the Medical School), the Tufts events that I attend are more often there than in Medford. I did see some thesis shows here when I was a student at the Museum School, and attended my daughter’s own MFA thesis show at Tufts in 2000. I have always loved the space, but it is only in the last few years that I have taken note of the Gallery’s excellent offerings. I came to this realization from the “other side,” as an artist working in Somerville who was extremely excited by Amy

First Violin: An Octave of Prints, Courtesy of Patty Rosenblatt

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Orientalism: Then and Now

This fall, the Gallery hosted a panel discussion, Orientalism: Then and Now, organized by the Director of the Middle East Studies department, Eva Hoffman, to discuss the legacy of Edward Said’s book and the manifestation of this legacy in different disciplines. Setting the talk against the backdrop of the Gallery’s exhibition Empire and Its Discontents (September 11-November 23, 2008) provided an inspiring foil to discuss elements of history, anthropology, art, and politics.

As Hoffman convened the panel, she laid the groundwork for how Said’s book “changed the way we think and talk about the study of the lands and cultures of the east.” She defined Orientalism as a western construct of the east that was based more on fantasies about the exotic than on the reality of the subjects and that posited foreigners as “other” in opposition to the western “self.” The artists in the exhibition have appropriated Saidian strategies by challenging hierarchies, offering viewers new ways of thinking about east and west, and demonstrating the “limitations and contradictions of categorization.” Then, Hoffman posed the questions the panelists would answer, key among which were: What lessons have we learned from Orientalism and how has it complicated the categories of east and west?

The first panelist, Ina Baghdiantz-McCabe, Darakjian Jafarian Chair of Armenian History presented her paper Reflections on Orientalism and Empire. She began talking about how the import of exotic things (spices, curios, books, feathers, tools) to Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries orientalized Europeans and had a “profound impact on [their] thought, custom, and daily life.” Baghdiantz-McCabe argued that this concept of exchange gave the east agency in the colonial relationship. To the contrary, today we are witnessing the westernization of cultures in the form of a material imperialism. The global hegemony of western products and a western focus on hygiene are represented in Farhad Moshiri and Shirin Aliabadi’s photographs of cleaning products (see image at left). Instead of encouraging change, the agents of power today whitewash difference and promote homogenization through the spread of products to every corner of the earth.

Beatrice Manz, Professor of History, followed with her talk on Fighting Tyranny, Eastern and Western. Manz gave the group an enlightening lesson on empires of the past and she further discussed the traditional relationship between the dominant and the subordinate. She clarified that most colonies were ruled by local power so colonized people often served both local and distant authorities. This duality played itself out in a simultaneous homogenization and preservation of cultures. The suspension between multiple cultures and traditions that defined the colonial period is evident today in the artwork in
Orientalism: Then and Now continued

“The exhibition’s underpinning opens up a rich body of ideas for consideration. This is one of its major successes. Visitors well-versed in Said’s ideas can draw from a familiar post-colonial discourse to contemplate the art, but such knowledge is not a pre-requisite. The exhibition stands on its own.”

Ayesha Jalal, Mary Richardson Professor of History, saw this blending of styles as a part of a tradition of appropriation whereby people have “invariably found ways to resist and subvert the enterprise” of imperialism. In her talk Beyond Orientalism: Political Satire as Post-Colonial Statement, Jalal talked about how post-colonial theorists have largely misunderstood this tradition of resistance. The resistance movement continues today in our post-colonial period and “political satire as a counter-hegemonic tactic...is of crucial relevance.” Jalal specifically pointed to Farhad Moshiri and Shirin Aliabadi’s Supermarket series and Andisheh Avini’s khataam sculptures as “concerted acts of political resistance in a context of tyranny and censorship.” Jalal called the exhibition “an extraordinary collage of tradition and modernity, tragedy and comedy, heroism and roguishness.”

The final panelist was Amahl Bishara, assistant professor of Anthropology, who, though new to Tufts, contributed impressively to the panel of established Tufts faculty with her talk Orientalism 2008: Routing Knowledge, Capital & Violence. Bishara began by commenting that Orientalism asked us to question our monolithic perceptions of “other” and be open to internal variation within societies. Said “was interested in the relationship between culture and power” and the works in the exhibition “do not just show how cultures can mix, they make clear the arrangements of global power that shape how cultures mix today.” Today global power is less centered on a state and its clear dominion over another, and more centered on those who control the capital and knowledge having agency over those who do not. According to Bishara, the movement of money and knowledge around the globe today has built a complex and abstruse web of power.

Bishara’s questions at the end of her talk were an ideal segue into the follow-up discussion, as she asked: “can art challenge assumptions about universal knowledge and evoke something of the complex intersections of voice and silences, of expression and pain, of the multiple identities and forms of power in which we all live?” The audience became active participants and though we were, of course, unable to answer the question, there was a lively discussion!

-Mari Dumett
Excerpted from her review of Empire and Its Discontents in Art Papers magazine November/December 2008

Empire and Its Discontents exhibition catalogue
With essays by Rhonda Saad and Amy Ingrid Schlegel, published by the Tufts University Art Gallery; distributed by D.A.P and available through the Gallery, $20 + $5 s&h
Our newest Circle supporters ~ Welcome & Thank You!

Ginny Loeb & Jim Sperling  Lori & Roland Pease  Orna Shulman

They Join:
Ellen & Ken Aidekman
Susan & Gary Aidekman
Shirley & Ben Aidekman-Kaye
Adele & Larry Bacow
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Patty & Michael Rosenblatt

Nancy Schön
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Ricardo Viera
Dr. Thomas Winkler
Randi & David Zussman

Recent Events – Fall 2008 Exhibitions

Contrapuntal Lines: Rania Matar & Buthina Abu Milhem
Coincided with a series of symposia on the theme of humanities and human rights organized by the Center for Humanities at Tufts (CHAT) during the fall of 2008. A concurrent exhibition of work by Hoda Jamal ran at CHAT.

In conjunction with Empire and Its Discontents, the Tufts University Art Gallery held several events featuring artists, faculty, and curators.

Artists’ and Curators’ Discussion on Empire and Its Discontents: (L to R) Rhonda Saad, Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung, Kamrooz Aram, Mark Shetabi, & Amy Schlegel, 9/17/08

Mark Shetabi in his installation A Persian Garden, 9/17/08

Eva Hoffman and Mohammad Alwan at his lecture The Rise of Printing in Arabic, 11/5/08 (sponsored by the Middle East Studies Department)

Our December MFA Thesis Exhibition featured installation artists Daniel Phillips and Eugene Scott Finney; Phillips worked in the gallery during the exhibition.

Daniel Phillips at work, 12/17/08
New Supporter Profile: Patty Rosenblatt continued

Schlegel’s initiation of the juried summer show for Medford and Somerville artists. The exhibitions Amy has organized have been of exceptionally high caliber, visually exciting and thought provoking.

The creation of The Circle provided a way for me to become a part of the Tufts community. Since Mike’s (and my) arrival at Tufts, I have been very impressed by the University’s ethos of community service. The Circle allowed me to enter the community on my own terms, and to support the arts at Tufts. It was through the contact that The Circle afforded me with Amy and Adele Fleet Bacow that I was able to make known my wish to contribute my personal efforts to the support of the Gallery. I expect that being on the Advisory Board will teach me a lot about the mechanics of running-and growing-a successful art institution, and inspire me to stay on my toes about what is happening in contemporary art.

Recent Events – Circle Launch in Miami

In conjunction with Art Basel Miami Beach and related Fairs – December 4, 2008

Gallerist Bernice Steinbaum in her booth at the Art Miami Fair, looking at Robert Wilson’s video, Princess Caroline

Art Basel Miami Beach Vernissage Party, 12/3/08

Steinbaum graciously offered her Midtown Miami gallery to launch The Circle in Miami, attended by 45 people. Thank you!

New Feature – Cell Phone Tours!

In an age of connectivity, where consumers are hungry for instantaneous information, the Tufts University Art Gallery offers (for the first time during the fall 2008 semester) expanded insight into its exhibitions to those who seek it, delivered in an easily accessible way that is adaptable to each viewer and available anywhere. Our cell phone tour includes commentary from participating artists, curatorial introductions and interpretations, explications of techniques, explorations of terminologies and themes, and other disciplinary perspectives.

FALL 2008 statistics
- 202 visitors initiated cell phone tours, spending a total of 1,870 minutes!

SPRING 2009 topics in conjunction with A Tapestry of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê
- Exhibition Introduction
- Traditional Grass Mat Weaving and Lê’s process
- The Haunting Power of Photography
- The Tale of Kieu and a Voice of the Vietnamese
- The Vietnamese Diaspora Experience
- Cambodian Genocide
- Hysterical Blindness and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
hometown of Ha-Tien, on the Vietnam-Cambodia border, and murdered the villagers). When he visited Cambodia in 1994 to try to “understand the Khmer Rouge and their brutality [he] was fascinated by the obsession people had with the Angkor Empire period. They don’t want to remember the Khmer Rouge regime; they want to remember only the glorious moments of their history.” His works about Cambodia take “this memory that they don’t want to remember—the victims of the Khmer Rouge—and insert[s] it into the memory they do want to remember—the palaces of Angkor Thom.” In the Texture of Memory series the viewer touches “the white-on-white embroidery of the faces of the people who were killed by the Khmer Rouge. As the viewers touch the embroidery, the oil on their hands will darken the threads and bring forth these ghostly faces. In a way these embroidery works show how memory works. The more people participate in the memory process, the more that memory will remain alive and not fade away.”

Deconstructing His Own Work
The suspended tapestry Mot Coi Di Ve (Spending One’s Life Trying to Find One’s Way Home) from 2005 is less cohesive than the tightly woven style of Lê’s earlier work though echoes of warp and weft are still evident. In this work, Lê looks beyond the Vietnam War to show the viewer a more personal Vietnam. The artist collected postcards from secondhand stores in an effort to recreate his family portrait that was lost when they fled Vietnam. Though he did not literally find his own family, the postcards and letters of the installation combine to make a portrait of Vietnamese life. As viewers, we shift between feelings of recognition (in the daily normalcy of life in the photos) and exclusion (from the letters written in foreign languages or the display of traditions unlike our own). This tapestry is like memory itself – shifting, layered, and impossible to avoid.

- Jeanne Koles

A Tapestry Of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê
Published by the Bellevue Arts Museum
Available at the Tufts University Art Gallery
$40, plus $5 s&h
Calendar of Events

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 28
6:00-7:30pm
BOSTON, MA

Contemporary Art Circle Preview Reception with exhibiting artists Dinh Q. Lê and Christian Tomaszewski
Invitations were mailed to Circle supporters in December.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 16
Launch of the new and improved Circle website! contemporaryartcircle.tufts.edu
Members can access reception photos, newsletters, calendars, podcasts, slideshows, “spotlights”, as well as register for events!

SATURDAY, MARCH 7
12:00-1:30pm
NEW YORK, NY
$25 per person (includes day admission to The Show)

Guided Tour of The Armory Show–International Fair of New Art, New York, NY, with Gallery Director Amy Ingrid Schlegel (www.thearmoryshow.com)
Space is limited–make your reservations early. An electronic reminder will go out in late January.

Registration for The Armory Show Guided Tour

If you would like to attend the tour of The Armory Show, please complete the form below, enclose your payment of $25, and return to: Contemporary Art Circle Administrator, Tufts University Art Gallery @ Aidekman Arts Center, 40R Talbot Avenue, Medford, MA 02155

NAME:

ADDRESS:

CITY: STATE: ZIP:

PHONE: FAX: EMAIL:

- Enclosed is my check for $25 made payable to “Trustees of Tufts College”
- Please charge $25 to my: AmEx Visa Mastercard Discover

NUMBER: EXP. DATE: NAME ON CARD
Conversation with Christian Tomaszewski continued

A.S.: The vertical bands of colorful stripes connecting and consuming the Remis Sculpture Court and the Koppelman Gallery act as the backdrop, the mise-en-scène, for your "poster-drawings" and maze. Can you describe the significance or symbolism of these stripes, especially in relation to the abstraction of the portraits depicted in the "posters"?

C.T.: The vertical bands of color have no symbolic meaning; they are an extension of what is happening on the surfaces of posters - as if the game of colors, shapes, and design was trying to take over the entire space.

A.S.: The title of this installation, Hunting for Pheasants, invokes a sporting analogy to describe politically-motivated acts of violence and assassination. Can you explain this analogy a bit more and the humor you might find in it?

C.T.: I don’t think there is any humor in making this analogy between politically-motivated assassinations and hunting for the hauntingly beautiful birds that make a great trophy and whose meat is a delicacy. If there is any humor it is a bitter and dark humor. But in general it is a simple analogy – or maybe there is more to it – the similarity between the colorfulness of pheasants’ feathers and the vertical bands in my installation.

A version of the project was first presented at Galerie Michael Wiesehöfer, Cologne, Germany October 15, 2008-January 10, 2009.

Yes, I would like to become part of The Circle

Please complete the form below, enclose your donation, and return to: CAC Administrator, Tufts University Art Gallery @ Aidekman Arts Center, 40R Talbot Avenue, Medford, MA 02155 (Donations apply to Circle activities running from July 1 to June 30)

NAME:

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Are you a Tufts Alum?: ○ Yes ○ No
In what year did you graduate?: ____________

○ Enclosed is my check made payable to “Trustees of Tufts College”
○ Please charge my: ○ AmEx ○ Visa ○ Mastercard ○ Discover

LEVELS:
○ CONCEPTUALIST $250 ($190 tax deductible)
○ REALIST $500 ($380 tax deductible)
○ EXPRESSIONIST $1,000 ($750 tax deductible)

NUMBER: EXP. DATE: NAME ON CARD