

## The New York Times

### ART IN REVIEW; Tam Van Tran

By ROBERTA SMITH

Published: Friday, October 10, 2003

Cohan and Leslie

138 10th Avenue, near 18th Street

Chelsea

Through Oct. 25

In his first New York solo show, Tam Van Tran, a young Vietnam-born artist living in Los Angeles, puts too many eggs in the basket of process and technique. In dusky canvas works like "Country Music," Mr. Tran uses strands and patches of superfine screen as paint stencils, building up gossamer semi-abstractions that suggest far-off fairgrounds, decaying cities or space stations that seem both festive and apocalyptic. In contrast, the green bubbles and tendrils of "Air Power," a large work on paper using chlorophyll and spirulina, imply magnification, perhaps a drop of pond water under a giant microscope.

Best are the decidedly reptilian "Beetle Manifesto IX (Baghdad Lover)" and "Beetle Manifesto X (Baghdad Lover)," which resulted when drawings like "Air Power" were cut into dozens of curving strips, stapled obsessively together and attacked with a hole-punch. At once hidelike and leaflike, these lacy, armored parabolic surfaces seem to writhe, suggesting specimens on a pin. A closer examination of the canvas works closes the symbiotic circle: their ethereal structures often incorporate the hole-punched dots from the stapled together drawings.

Recycling materials and motifs, Mr. Tran wastes nothing and posits the natural and the man-made as part of the same organic scheme. A problem is that, excepting the "Beetle" pieces, the results are less exciting than his ingenious, overlapping techniques. But since new forms often require new techniques, Mr. Tran may have the battle partly won.

ROBERTA SMITH