



Tam Van Tran at Anthony Meier

By Kenneth Baker

Updated 1:27 pm, Friday, November 21, 2014

Few contemporary artists seem as able as Los Angeles-based [Tam Van Tran](#) to confirm Picasso's definition, "A painting is a sum of destructions." See the selection of his recent work at [Anthony Meier's](#).

Whether on the scale of a big canvas such as "Flower Offerings" (2014) or the small untitled one on view, Tran gives a convincing account of abstraction as free-wheeling performance, a possibility supposedly played out 60-odd years ago, certainly no later than the deaths of greats such as [Joan Mitchell](#) (1925-1992) and [Nicholas Carone](#) (1917-2010).

But Tran reminds us that, extracted from the cultural moment when it was enlisted to corroborate the West's artistic freedom or was thought to objectify emetic private fears of nuclear annihilation, Abstract Expressionism distilled something essential about creative production. At some point, probably at many, creating this work inevitably involves a reckless leap forward — some risk of overreach, incoherence or breakdown.

Tran's dazzling confidence makes us wonder about his failure rate.

How many false starts or re-enactments does it take him to arrive at something that feels as unrehearsed and bravely well judged as "Hurricane Flowers" (2014)? It really doesn't matter: Any amount of labor or luck expended to arrive at such a knockout picture has got to be worth it.

Close looks at Tran's work discover that headlong gesture and rough-house, everyman signatures such as footprints do not fully represent the tempo or temperature of his sensibility.

"Blue and Black Cologne" (2014), one of several large works on paper here, incorporates a zipper, a device that might symbolize almost remorseful repair, or creative ambivalence, but also wryly references the ragged stripes in [Barnett Newman's](#) work that he called "zips" and [Robert Rauschenberg's](#) "Hiccups" (1978), an epic mixed-media work whose 97 paper components connect by means of zippers.

Scuffs and tears bandaged with collage elements typify Tran's works on paper, but their most surprising moments take the form of apertures in which tiny ceramic vessels sit, as if on windowsills. These objects, indefinite as to age or possible function, represent Tran's parallel creative life as a ceramist.

The tiny vessels look at first like an absurd intrusion in a work such as "Blue and Black Cologne," but they come to seem like tokens of meditative states nearly forgotten — but not quite — in the subjective upheaval evoked by the artworks' visual turbulence.