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Tam Van Tran @ Anthony Meier



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Installation View: L to R: Hurricane
Flowers and Flower Offering

An insistent materiality continues to define the work of Los Angeles-based artist, Tam Van Tran. From his breakout work, *The Beetle Manifesto* (2002), Tran has employed a well-stocked arsenal of methods. In his drawings Tran tears, cuts, staples, crumbles, crushes, pokes and pastes. In his paintings, he tramples, smears, scratches, scrapes and stains. Working at the edge of chaos, Tran's investigations recall the strategies of avant-garde art forms of the mid-1960s, quoting such artists as Franz Kline, Rauschenberg, and Johns. These works require us to see them first as physical entities, and then as representations of ideas.



Burlap Perfume

The drawings (all 2014) are richly scored and battered papers that have been scraped with acrylic paint, sliced, stapled and zippered. Punched-out holes expose backsides painted with a skin of silver leaf. These are storm-tossed works. Their palette of Payne's gray, blacks, and oceanic blues, together with patterning evocative of boat decks, suggests flickers of the artist's emigration from Vietnam. But the dense, organic surfaces also chart journeys of linear discovery and spacial progression. Gestural planks dart around like hastily assembled scaffolding to hold aloft abraded patches of murky, collapsing sails of paint. We are at sea, upon the reckless craft of art.

Along the bottoms of two drawings, rows of tiny ceramic vessels perch on lengths of stretcher bar emerging from the versos. Their individually made, slightly irregular shapes suggest oilcans or miniature perfume casks. This unexpected literal stability is possibly a too precious counterpoint to the works' otherwise searching, irregular graphic gestures. One drawing, *Burlap Perfume*, makes a

literal reference to commercial sea trade in collaged pieces of burlap coffee bean sacks. As a formal

device, burlap's rough weave gives the work warmth and heft and infuses needed balance in Tran's cool color combinations. But if Tran's work poses questions, they concern the nature of journeys spanning minds, time and values that we bind and bag for ourselves.

Tran's paintings are bravura exercises in gestural composition. Neither maximalist nor minimalist, they present a delicate balance between chaos and order, space and gesture, surface and edge. The crudely spattered, splayed, and scraped paint of *Hurricane Flowers* can only be applied with speed, and the painting seems to be made all at once, recalling the urgency and dash of Franz Kline, as well as the 19th Century romance with nature. But it's a tough love. The cold maritime palette of blues and blacks again slaps us on the scratched and scarred deck of Tran's personal Pequod, as he sets sail on a journey that is as unsettled as it uncharted.

–JULIA COUZENS

Tam Van Tran: "Survival Skills" @ [Anthony Meier Fine Art](#) through December 5, 2014.