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BRONX COUNCIL ON THE ARTS



Solo Show

Skowmon Hastanan

Sovereign State, mixed media room installation, 1992

of equilibrium, as the many layers of imagery and textual translation become suggestive of personal and historical circumstances of exile, and a coming to have a political voice and identity.

Pham renders the experience of displacement and alienation as a series of cultural, linguistic, and performative shifts and ruptures in

the narrative. The two rows of short texts running along the sides of the images strike me as painfully honest. Speaking of a "she" that is "fearful of black gay men" and "enchanted by white women" the text seems sensitive to the fragility of identity, of being both privy to and estranged from "native languages," especially those constructed around forbidden and wounded desire. Is "she" triply Other (non-white, woman, lesbian), multiple ("Miss Earth, Miss Water, Miss Clouds"), and in-between ("KGB or CIA")? All or none of the above? The piece is one of anxiety and defiance. Pham's work makes me think that "here and now" is also always constituted by "now and then."



Down the hall in Skowmon Hastanan's mixed media installation "Sovereign State," the viewer is positioned in a room in which travel posters and brochures featuring Thai architecture in idyllic

landscapes and wide-eyed smiling children—images which in the mainstream media are meant to be seductive and inviting—are littered throughout the room. The posters are hung askew and uncomfortably below eye level if at all; and the brochures are scattered any which way on the floor and on the television monitor in the center of the room. The neglect and carelessness seem intentional, and the critique of the packaging strategies of the tourist industry and the commodifying of cultures in the media is made complete when you make your way around the disarray on the floor, to the front of the television screen, on which is a frozen textual admonishment: RUMORS ARE BAD FOR OUR COUNTRY. The viewer is to be made aware that the representation of Thailand in the mainstream media

is altogether lacking; that the travel industry facilitates and attempts to fulfill the privileged traveler's desire for leisure-time adventures in exotic foreign places without having to confront the larger social and political realities of its people.

The site is unwelcoming and a sense of absence pervades the room. It is an absence that gives you the feeling that someone had just been there and left in a hurry; or perhaps even that you have stumbled upon the scene of a crime. Given the contextualization, the advertisements exclaiming "Exotic Thailand...land of culture and tradition...land of mystery and adventure...land of history and hospitality...land of a thousand bargains" can only be read ironically.

The artists in this show, originally from both Hanoi and

Saigon (and in Hastanan's case Bangkok), live in America now, and through their transformations, ambivalences, and negotiations between East and West, and through their efforts in establishing themselves in relation to their past, they challenge stereotypes and help us see the authoritative "Official History" as but one discursive text among many. As we live in a nation still haunted by the Vietnam war, still bombarded with unfair media representations of "other" cultures, their work seems ever more urgent and important for us to study.

On my way out of Longwood, I picked up one of Dinh Le's posters to take home. It wasn't until a few days later that I looked at it again: "...shouldn't the U.S. be held accountable for all our actions in Vietnam?" I took note of the

collective *our*.

* Special thanks to Betti-Sue Hertz and Allan deSouza for their useful comments.

Sowon Kwon

Notes

- 1 Alain Boubilil, "From Madame Chrysanthemum to Miss Saigon," *Miss Saigon* souvenir brochure (New York: Dewynters, 1993), 5.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 449.
- 4 J. Hoberman, "Vietnam: The Remake," in *Remaking History*, edited by Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989): 176.
- 5 Ibid., 195.
- 6 Le cites his sources as *Indochina Newsletter* (Nov-Dec 1992) and *Earth Island Journal* (Winter 1988-89).
- 7 Walter Friedlander, *From David to Delacroix* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 16.
- 8 Ibid., 17.
- 11 Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Edited by Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West. Cambridge and New York: The MIT Press, 1990., 366.