

Sung Tieu

VIEWS FROM THE 10*

By Adam Carr



Sung Tieu was born in Vietnam and raised in Germany. Her work addresses the discourse surrounding topics such as cultural hegemony, class, and the gendered or racialized aspects to how we respond to imagery in a visualized world. Questions on how our reactions to the image are embedded in our cultural references—either in actively lived or passively learned experiences—are explored through Tieu's commentary on the effects of continuous aesthetic consumption. Her photographs, sculptural objects, and installations are at once part of the familiar and the identity of the other. Tieu spoke with writer and

asylum. We moved to the Berlin two years later, where we lived in an asylum home in Hohenschönhausen, in East Berlin. My work is informed by these experiences of alienation and non-belonging, and the search for defining one's identity elsewhere. I would like to perceive my own subjectivity as in a state of constant flux, which acts as a destabilizing mechanism my work. The cultural collisions and struggle of displacement is very much a part of the discourse in my practice.

emerged from an eponymous conference held at the Technical University Berlin in 2011. Former Vietnamese 'Boat People,' who escaped to Germany in the late 1970s and received refugee status had formed the association in order to meet the needs of the Vietnamese community abroad. As a person who grew up in Germany, but is of Vietnamese origin, the relationship of the diaspora community towards their new homeland and how they relate to their new environment is something I often think about.

Chinese work migrants would utilize the bag to travel with their belongings from the periphery into town. The Chinese "People Workers' Bag" is called the "Refugee Bag" in Great Britain, and "Türkenkoffer" in Germany; all terms strikingly relating to an immigrant population. In Nigeria, these bags are called "Ghana Must Go" bags, after Nigerian President Alhaji Shehu Shagari enacted an expulsion order in 1983, demanding all immigrants without legal papers to leave the country within fourteen days. I was captivated

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curator Adam Carr on the sociopolitical conditions of her work, the migrant experience, and the regressive meaning inherent within appropriation and counterfeit objects.

ADAM CARR: Your upbringing, cultural background, and history seem to play out at the forefront of your work regularly. I thought it would make sense to start this conversation in asking about that...

SUNG TIEU: I emigrated from Hai Duong in Vietnam to a small village called Freital, near Dresden, Germany, when I was 5 years old. My mother and I walked through the forest between the Czech Republic and Germany to cross the German border in 1992, and sought

AC: Living in Germany for most of your life, do you feel German? What culture do you identify with?

ST: I have lived in Germany for 23 years now; a certain part of me feels very German. I owe a lot to Germany—especially to its education system—and my formative years were spent here. Yet, I cannot deny that I am predominately perceived as Asian. I recently interviewed an association called "Danke Deutschland," a Berlin based sociocultural center for Vietnamese culture within Germany. The name of their association stroked me so much that I got curious in their work, and what led to their decision to call their association "Danke Deutschland." The association

AC: The issue of counterfeiting, and its surrounding ideas, is one vehicle through which you tackle your biography. Could you explain these interests, and perhaps give some examples of works dealing with them? The mannequin objects, which are inspired in equal parts by the brand Céline and black-market trading immediately comes to mind.

ST: Within the *Alien Refugee Collection* works, I was intrigued by the "laundry bag" pattern Céline copied for its fashion line in A/W 2013. What caught my attention was that the nylon bag, which was invented and is manufactured in China, first got called among the Chinese population 'mingong' bags—translated into English it means "People Workers' Bag"—since

by how the simple naming of the "Ghana Must Go" bag exposes us to a history of dislocation, of fractured and sudden enforced exile, but also to an underlying social fabric that carries with it economic forces. By one of the most prestigious fashion brand in the world putting its trademark on top of that history, and appropriating this bag, its plaid marker became a compelling opposite. For me, one of the key components was the inherent conflict over various aspects of territory I became interested in, which formed a significant point of departure for that work.

AC: Do you see the work as appropriating appropriation, and perhaps subverting the bag's origin even further?



ST: I see my work as a way of raising questions on the issues and conditions I am both surrounded and affected by, as a way to try and make sense of it. The counterfeit perfumes, for example, which I used for a series, were products that my mother and I had in our apartment when I was growing up. They were very much part of my cultural upbringing. Back then, I was not even aware of the fact that there were “original” versions of these perfumes. I perceive myself as coming out of a conceptual tradition, and for that work, appropriation became particularly a great way to generate images and discourses surrounding topics such as the cultural hegemony, class, and sovereignty issues I wanted to address. There are classed, but

also gendered and racialized aspects to the way we respond to imagery. Of course, these reactions are embedded within our cultural references, either as actively lived or passively learned experiences of everyday life, which caters to deep-seated desires and yearnings that are acquired through continuous aesthetic consumption. I further feel close to Nicolas Bourriaud’s concept of *postproduction*,¹ where the recombination of information and data flows reflect altered notions of authorship and originality; creating new interpretations on the basis of pre-existing material. Within today’s global culture and information age, I am aware of my contribution to the confusion of the traditional distinction

between production and consumption, creation, copy, and original work. I am not interested in the mere eradication of references, but rather compelled by working with objects that are *already* informed by other objects, and a set of references I can make use of and translate within this context.

AC: As he is one of my all time favorite artists, I wonder if you could speak about your experiences studying under Andreas Slominski in Hamburg. Your recent work *Subnational MP3* infiltrates not only the artworld, but also (and perhaps more so) the “everyday” world, in a way that could be seen to be reminiscent of Slominski’s own interventions. Could you speak more about this project?

ST: I felt very lucky to be able to study under Andreas Slominski in Hamburg. As a professor, he laid emphasis on a strong class dynamic, establishing a tight group of students, which would facilitate us getting to know each other very well. I am still in continuous dialogue with many of them. For my own practice, the one aspect I feel influenced by is his amazing sensibility for space, and how to create a narrative by placing art works in a certain order within a given environment. *Subnational MP3* is an edition I created and dedicated to Binh & Hoa Import Export, a shop within the Vietnamese run Dong Xuan center. The center is essentially a vibrant Vietnamese shopping mall, and the heart of Berlin’s Vietnamese community, located

in the suburbs of Berlin. The MP3 player itself is an appropriated iPod shuffle I discovered in Binh & Hoa’s shop during my research. Elements of the design—the casing, typography, layout—were inspired by Apple’s aesthetic. I worked with graphic designer Per Törnberg on redesigning the entire player.² We came up with a new logo, packaging, and typography for the MP3 player’s casing that would resonate the sound work I was creating for it. The idea for the project was to re-contextualize this second-rated item, and play with the idea of adding another layer of artistic value onto it. The object provided a great way to emphasize—and to literally resonate—the already existing creative labor invested in the second-rated product itself. For the sound work, I used recordings of a traditional Vietnamese instrument called *Đàn bầu*; a simple, but very particular sounding monochord zither. Together with music producer Ville Haimala, we worked on generating electronically manipulated new textures for that instrument. I took field recordings at KaDeWe (Berlin’s most well-known luxury shopping mall) and placed those sounds alongside product-placement sequences from movies. The intention was to compose an alien and fragmented sound scape that would investigate different audible notions of product value, which could afterwards infiltrate the system of the busy Dong Xuan center sales market and would instantly get incorporated into their commercial structure.

AC: I know that this process of infiltration at Dong Xuan Centre went even further—could you tell me about the LED pieces that you did there?

ST: Yes—in one of the halls of the center, there is a bright glowing LED shop named CECO LED. The owner, named To, imports the LED parts from China, but produces these LED signs in his shop himself. Normally, the signs in his shop either have a kind of template text of an imagined dry cleaners service, or just letter compositions such as AAA. For my show, I re-programmed all the LED signs in his store—in total twelve signs—and equipped each of them with significant dates and countries related to international recruitment agreements and alien laws. One sign, a relevant one for emergence of the Dong Xuan Centre in particular, displayed: “1918 German Democratic Republic & Social Republic Of Vietnam – Recruitment Agreement On The Importation Of Contract Labor.” Another LED sign read: “1913 Alien Land Law California,” pointing toward limiting rights for certain “aliens ineligible for citizenship.” The shop inadvertently became an exhibition site within an already existing apparatus. It was great to have this altered experience of the shop and to incorporate how the reception of events, people, and objects is dependent on context and placement.

AC: This sense of trading, which has ties to your biography, also has ties to your other pieces, in which you have people from nail parlors participate. Can you elaborate on these works?

ST: The first time I asked a nail studio to participate in my exhibition, I was invited to show at a project space in Brandenburg an der Havel. The project space was located on the town’s busiest shopping street,

and right across from the exhibition space was a Vietnamese-run nail studio. Relating to the shop environment of the project space, I knew that I wanted to work with perforated metal plates, the same ones that hang in hardware or utility stores to display shop items. I decided to ask the nail studio ladies from next door if they could paint them with designs they liked. What came out were very particular, colorful, individual looking nail designs composed across the surface of the metal, which showed the painting style of each nail artist. To me, these nail studio works are an opportunity for conversation. The work titles share the name of the nail studio, and include its exact address, so anyone can go and speak to the workers—but they also lay open the visual representation of a social group that barely has any voice on the cultural or democratic landscape. As most of these workers have a migration background, their German skills are limited, and most of them do not have the right to vote since they are not German citizens. To me, this work became a chance to enter a dialogue with these individuals, and explore their craft, work environment, and the ways they sustained a living for themselves.

AC: What are you currently working on?

ST: The main project I am working towards at the moment is a solo show at Micky Schubert opening in the beginning of November in Berlin. I am also working with eleven nail salons on new works for the nail studio pieces. So far, I have gotten four plates back, and they are vastly different from the ones

I received back previously. I am very excited to exhibit them.

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Sung Tieu is an artist born in Vietnam and raised in Germany. She studied at the University of Fine Arts Hamburg and Goldsmiths College London, between 2009 and 2013. Her forthcoming exhibitions include group shows at Jose Garcia, Mexico City and Chez Valentin, Paris as well as a solo show at Micky Schubert gallery, Berlin, which opens November 7, 2015.

TITLE PAGE:
Sung Tieu, *No #1 Classic*, 2014, photograph. 42 x 29,7 cm.

LEFT:
Sung Tieu, *Recruitment Agreements Between Nations*, 2015, reprogrammed shop LED-signs. Installation at CECO LED, Dong Xuan Center, Berlin, May 30–June 31, 2015.

FOLLOWING SPREAD, LEFT:
Sung Tieu, *Alien Refugee Collection*, 2015. Fiberglass female mannequin, nylon fabric, 160 x 60 x 40 cm.

RIGHT:
Sung Tieu, *Recruitment Agreements Between Nations*, 2015. Reprogrammed shop LED-signs, 70 x 38 x 6 cm & 94 x 19 x 6 cm & 76 x 19 x 6 cm & 76 x 19 x 6 cm.

- 1 Bourriaud, Nicolas, Caroline Schneider, and Jeanine Herman. *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*. New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2005. Print.
- 2 Per Törnberg homepage, www.pertornberg.com

*10 is the region postcode of Berlin, Germany.

