TIFFANY CHUNG

Vietnam, Past Is Prologue

Tiffany Chung (b. 1969, Đà Nẵng, Viet Nam) excavates a history hidden in plain sight for the past forty-five years. Her subject, the War in Vietnam (1955–75), has achieved a nearly mythic significance in the United States. In Vietnam, “the War” devastated life as it had been known, dividing time into a “before” and “after.” Yet missing from the narratives told by these two sides is the perspective of the South Vietnamese, on whose behalf the Americans entered the War, and for whom Tiffany Chung aims to give voice in Vietnam, Past Is Prologue.

Through her meticulously drawn and stitched maps, emotional interviews, and intensive archival research, Chung explores their experience, from the intimate to the global. She begins with a fine-grained look into one person’s story—that of her father, who fought for the South Vietnamese military during the War; widens out to encompass the stories of former refugees from Vietnam; and pulls out further still to show the global effects of their collective migration in the War’s wake.

The project is personal, stemming from Chung’s own life. After her father spent fourteen years in a North Vietnamese prison camp, Chung’s family immigrated to the United States. She witnessed war, fled her country, and reconstituted her life as an American, first in Los Angeles, and then in Houston where she lives today. The exhibition features Vietnamese voices from American cities—including those from nearby Falls Church, Virginia—who were part of the large-scale immigration that reshaped this country’s culture. Foregrounding stories left out of official histories, Chung reframes the legacies of war.


Please be aware that some videos contain language describing graphic violence.

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REMAPPING HISTORY:
an autopsy of a battle, an excavation of a man’s past
Tiffany Chung’s father was a helicopter pilot in an elite squadron of the South Vietnamese Air Force. Fighting alongside American forces, he was taken prisoner by the North Vietnamese for fourteen years. After his release, he moved to the United States with his family. While the outlines of his story are known, the details of his experience remain elusive, even to his daughter. Remapping History is Chung’s attempt to unearth them by returning to Vietnam and tracing his steps, creating a meticulously researched and plotted diagram of her discoveries. Documentary materials record her father’s movements during the War and the major battles and events that affected him; a parallel sequence of events interspersed throughout documents the artist’s own journey while piecing it together.

Part historical timeline, part personal scrapbook, the installation asks in a visceral way whose stories get remembered and how individual memories intersect with larger recorded narratives. Anchored by established events, it explores most poignantly a daughter’s attempts to imaginatively recreate her father’s story.

Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations for Remapping History
ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam; South Vietnamese Army
DMZ: Demilitarized Zone
FSB: Fire Supporting Base
King Bee: Code name for the VNAF 219th helicopter squadron that supported U.S. forces
MACV-SOG: Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group; a U.S. special operations unit that conducted covert unconventional warfare operations prior to and during the War
MR: Military Region
PAVN or NVA: People’s Army of Vietnam; North Vietnamese Army
POW: Prisoner of War
PRC: People’s Republic of China
USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; Soviet Union
VNAF: South Vietnamese Air Force

Remapping History: an autopsy of a battle, an excavation of a man’s past
2015/2019
vinyl decal, photographs, videos, archival photographs, found images and audio recording, texts, drawings, and handmade maps
Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

COLLECTIVE REMEMBRANCE OF THE WAR:
voices from the exiles
In these videos, Chung presents the stories of twenty-one former refugees from Vietnam living in Houston, Texas, Orange County, California, and Falls Church, Virginia. Focusing on the War and its aftermath, their stories reveal uprooted lives, brutal deaths of family and friends, food shortages, and reeducation camps in Vietnam. In their recountings of these routine horrors and deprivations, anger at both the Communist regime and treatment by their U.S. ally after the War is visibly still raw.

Since the experiences of the South Vietnamese “fit into neither the triumphant national narrative of Viet Nam or the sorrowful one of the United States,” as scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen has lamented, they are not commonly known. Chung captures and preserves these memories, bringing forth a history that has been integral to two cultures—Vietnamese and American—but largely forgotten by both.

In a separate, related video, Recipes of Necessity (2014), a group of people who remained in Vietnam discuss the political and economic turmoil they experienced after the War.

Please be aware that some videos contain language describing graphic violence.
Terms and Abbreviations Used in Videos
ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam; South Vietnamese Army
CNC: Command and Control
COSVN-R: Central Office for South Vietnam, officially known as the Central Executive Committee of the People’s Revolution Party (American term for the North Vietnamese military and political headquarters in the South; Vietnamese name: Cuc R)
FSB: Fire Supporting Base
HO program: Humanitarian Operation program
NFL: National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (communists in South Vietnam)
PAVN or NVA: People’s Army of Vietnam; North Vietnamese Army
Red Fiery Summer: 1972 Easter Offensive
RVN: Republic of Vietnam; South Vietnam
WWII: World War II
USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; Soviet Union
VC: Viet Cong; Vietnamese Communists
Tết Mậu Thân Offensive: 1968 Tết Offensive

Recipes of Necessity
2014
HD, color, sound, 33 minutes
Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York
In this video, a group of Vietnamese people who remained in their country after the War gathers around a dinner table to share their experiences of living through the Subsidy Period (1975–86), when the Vietnamese Communist government imposed ambitious political and economic reforms. During the course of the meal, they recall difficulties endured along with the camaraderie born of hardship. They recount struggles to secure food and basic necessities as well as their attempts to navigate the new currency system that had rendered the money they had saved valueless. The conversation is interspersed with scenes of a dance inspired by their stories, choreographed and directed by Chung.

THE VIETNAM EXODUS PROJECT: reconstructing history from fragmented records and half-lived lives

Here Chung takes a broad view of the legacy of the War, focusing on collective experience and transmuting personal memory into an expanded official history. With maps, documents, and watercolors, she offers a model for how an individual can engage with history and global trauma writ large.

In the center of the gallery are documents from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva, where Chung researched largely unstudied records from agencies that dealt with Vietnamese migrants. Along with her interviews of resettled people, Chung used the information she collected to understand the breadth of migration and create maps that show a new, fuller view of how the contemporary world was formed.

Viewed in accumulation, Chung’s work questions what we know about the Vietnam War. Illuminating the malleability of memory and the foreignness of the past, she interrogates how we understand history as much as its agreed-upon facts. We come away comprehending less and understanding more.
**The Vietnam Exodus History Learning Project: the exodus, the camps and the half-lived lives**

2017
15 watercolors on paper
The Vietnam Exodus History Learning Project is carried out in collaboration with Hồ Hưng, Huỳnh Quốc Bảo, Lê Nam Đy, Nguyễn Hoàng Long, Đặng Quang Tiến, Phạm Ái, Võ Châu, and Hoàng Vy. Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York
In this series, Chung commissioned a group of young artists from present-day Ho Chi Minh City to make watercolors based on photographs of the refugee crisis in the late 1970s and ’80s. The images—heart-wrenching and unsurprising to those familiar with the country’s forced migration—were previously unknown to the artists painting them, having grown up in a country whose textbooks and public discourse do not acknowledge the crisis. Through the process, the artists begin to recover parts of their own past, and Chung effectively collapses the distinction between art and history, using one to understand the other.

**Reconstructing an Exodus History: flight routes from camps and of ODP cases**

2017
edition 2/2
embroidery on fabric
Commissioned by Tai Kwun
Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York
This map represents the forced migration of South Vietnamese refugees by plane in Asia and through the Orderly Departure Program to locations all over the world thirty-five years ago. In one comprehensive summary, it shows how Vietnam’s people and culture fanned out across the globe after the War.

To map out the trajectories, Chung combined interviews, archival research, and the history of commercial carriers’ pathways and capacities. While the result documents a previously unexamined phenomenon, its historiographic function never supersedes its status as a work of art. The laboriously and delicately embroidered global escape routes that stretch across oceans evoke the migrants’ poignant and tenuous real-life journeys.