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Fat-free Museum

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museum... culture... art... life... body... fat... free.

The metonymic exercise of associating words by proximity can often reveal a completely nonsensical correlation between the final remark and the original word. *Fat-free Museum*, Hoang Duong Cam's latest body of work, requires viewers to engage in a kind of visual metonymy.

New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art provides the backdrop for this series. Taken at the fine art institution during Hoang's visit in 2005, the digital photographs combine the artist's cultural references with works displayed at the Met. The absurd exhibition title suggests a packaged product purporting to be healthy and contributing to our edification. While the title could be read as a send-up of fine art institutions (particularly in light of the current trend of blockbuster exhibitions), it is more likely a cheeky acknowledgment that museums do indeed display high quality works without excess trimmings.

All of the works in *Fat-free Museum* were not carefully contrived but created intuitively. Hoang first observed and then photographed the artworks at the Met; he then mixed well-known references from his own culture to create a series of photographs to highlight the relationships between the images.

Fat-free Museum encourages viewers to actively participate in finding connections between disparate images. The exercise is unique to individual viewers based on their own cultural and subjective experiences. To the sophisticated art audience, works by prominent contemporary Western artists will be recognizable; to the art viewer versed in Vietnamese art history, iconic works of art by Vietnamese artists will also be discernible. While the average person will unlikely be able to identify the art, they will have an equally rewarding experience making the connections between the images on view. Being liberated from specific references, they can discover their own connections and even invent their own narratives. Hoang's work, however, should not be mistaken as a trivial game. The work is playful but not without depth.

In all but one of the photographs Hoang strategically adds his physical presence such as his fingers or visage into the compositions. Strangely, while the images appear comical and sometimes absurd, they do not feel incongruous. On the contrary, they are surprisingly harmonious. For example, in *Untitled, Flower By...*, Hoang holds a small picture of *Girl by the Lilies* by To Ngoc Van. However, in place of the young girl's face, we see the artist's visage romantically contemplating the flower. The blurred painting in the background is unmistakably a work by Lucian Freud. Freud's fleshy male nude, with his back to viewers, is balanced by the femininity of To's fully clothed girl in a white *ao dai*. That the artist's hand is holding the picture as if it were he himself dreamily regarding the To painting reinforces the tongue-in-cheek sentimentality that pervades this work.

Hoang's depiction of himself in *Fat-free Museum* does not revolve around the politics of identity. Instead, it marks the artist's personal experience. While his presence is obvious, it is not the focus of the works. Guiding viewers through his own museum-going experience, Hoang assumes the role of a mute docent.

Hoang's sense of humor does not detract from the importance of the works, but makes them more accessible. While so much art in Vietnam portrays romantic, clichéd images of the country, it is refreshing to see a Vietnamese artist who can successfully instill wit and irony (though not skepticism) into his work.

In *Untitled, Attack – Sculpture – Protect*, on the Met's rooftop against the Manhattan skyline, a 1966 Vietnamese wartime sculpture stands "protected" behind Sol LeWitt's *Splotch #3* (it is amusing to see the grey Vietnamese sculpture behind the ridiculous camouflage of LeWitt's colorful work). Hoang's fingers appear like a giant gently touching LeWitt's sculpture from above as if playing a balancing game with the work. With a gun and arm raised to the sky by the Vietnamese figures, it appears as if they are trying to shoot down the artist's fingers or some other object threatening New York. The irony of Vietnam protecting its former adversary does not go unnoticed.

As the link between the images in *Fat-free Museum*, Hoang presents an honest view of both himself and present-day Vietnam. The connection between the Western and Vietnamese artists exists because Hoang himself connected them through his own personal experiences and the culture in which he lives.

Vietnam is not just a quaint country despite what all the paintings and photographs of girls in traditional *ao dai* or boys playing with water buffalo might

suggest. Nor is it the struggle against foreign powers that fought deep in the jungle. Certainly these are elements but the real Vietnam of 2006 is a rapidly developing country with a huge amount of multi-cultural exchange on all levels. It is a young country full of hope and optimism. More and more people are traveling, ingesting and experiencing foreign cultures. Hoang may have been born in Vietnam but he is a product of an amalgamation of global cultures. Even for the Vietnamese who has not traveled there is still TV, cinema with the ever-popular Hollywood films and the internet.

In this age of globalization, modern Vietnam is inextricably intertwined with the rest of the world. The fact that Hoang, as a young Vietnamese, has probably spent more time at the Met than half the New Yorkers living in its shadow makes the museum as much a part of modern Vietnam as it does of New York.

Fat-free Museum reflects Hoang's constant questioning of society, culture and our ways of looking. Hoang's work does not make judgments; he shows the negative as well as the positive sides of culture. The content is presented in a way that simply represents rather than justifies or decries the current state of affairs. *Fat-free Museum* does not just hand us facts on a plate; it invites us to make new associations and to discover for ourselves the complex relationships that exist in our world.

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