

## **GALERIE QUYNH**

65 De Tham Street, District 1

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Tel: +84 8 3836 8019

### **Filename.disan**

by Quynh Pham

The present state of Vietnamese art highlights a common predicament of artists living in postcolonial societies. Since the advent of *doi moi*, finding a national identity in one's work has preoccupied many Vietnamese artists. There is a conflicting desire to be recognized for innovative work, yet, at the same time, a striving to create art that reflects the values of Vietnamese culture. That there is a preponderance of paintings of young women in *ao dai*, rural scenes of children playing with water buffalos or charming street scenes can be seen as symptomatic of this desire to create something uniquely "Vietnamese."

This approach, however, depicts only a small cross-section of the complex nation of Vietnam today. While young women certainly still wear *ao dai*, they are likely as not to be found chatting on their mobile phones or driving around on their new Piaggio scooters. Tradition and identity are not fixed values and change with society. What is considered traditional today may have been considered shocking and new as recent as one or two generations ago.

As an artist who is unencumbered by the burden of trying to discover or portray a national identity in his work, Hoang Duong Cam is able to subtly address the issue from the perspective of a critical observer.

"Filename.disan" is Cam's latest work that explores the transformations of culture and tradition in present-day Vietnam. The inspiration for this series began when the artist caught sight of women's lingerie displayed prominently in shops in downtown Saigon. Cam observed the reactions of passersby, which ranged from the indifferent to the truly shocked. To have seen women's underclothes conspicuously on view like this before *doi moi* would have been unthinkable, not simply due to the traditional reticence for blatant sexuality, but also because it would not have occurred to most individuals that undergarments should be anything other than purely practical. The women's underclothes demonstrated not only the changing values in society brought on by the onset of globalization, but also the increased freedoms and power of women in Vietnamese society.

The first painting in this series addresses these issues fairly literally: a girl dressed in a traditional *áo dài* is partially covered by a frilly, modern bra. She appears to be gazing forward, either at the viewer or, perhaps with a certain longing, at the bra itself. The placement of the bra not only reinforces it as an object of increased importance, but also as a new layer in the fabric of society, which will begin to erase what has come before. While this erasure is inevitable, traces of previous cultural values and traditions cannot be removed completely.

Cam's working process involved building up multiple layers of paint, usually over an image of a woman in an *áo dài*. The figure and her dress are almost hidden to viewers. As Cam continued with the series, he began to realize how much more complex and wide this issue is as a subject – covering all areas of culture and history. Thus the paintings themselves became more involved, touching on topics from women's rights to western art history, from technology to advertising to mass production.

"Filename.disan XV," the final work in the series, is an intriguing amalgamation of many of these issues. The images in the foreground resemble stylized clouds borrowed from traditional Chinese depictions of dragons, often seen in ceramic ware, textiles and paintings. While this reflects the earlier, strong influence of China upon Vietnamese culture, the clouds could also represent the tradition of painting and representation itself. Floating through the canvas, they are reminiscent of video game graphics, connecting traditional art to modern, digital renderings.

Moving backwards through the layers of the work one can find references to 20<sup>th</sup> century western art history. All the images appear to be loaded with multiple meanings. Jasper Johns' familiar targets are appropriated to become a symbol for the direction of Vietnam, the aim of Vietnamese society. The image of the bra itself is much more abstract and distorted in this work; the outlines repeated in multiple colors are perhaps a representation of mass production and the growing range of choices available to consumers. As in all the works in this series, the attractive colors are bright and playful, reflecting the general optimism of Vietnam today.

"Filename.disan" is an objective observation of the metamorphosis of Vietnamese culture, but one conducted with an insider's knowledge of the society and its complex history. Cam is remarkable in his ability to step back and view the current climate in Vietnam in a critical manner where he is neither judging nor advocating the mutation of "traditional" values.