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### **Tran Van Thao**

by Joe Fyfe

Painter Tran Van Thao spends his days away from the busyness of Ho Chi Minh City. His house in the Binh Thanh District is tucked away in a quiet alley. Inside, the high-ceilinged space is broken up by a brick wall and an open stairway that leads to the second floor studio. Thao planned the building himself when he was alone. He is now a husband and father; he shares his workspace with his family. However, the house still says much about him.

Thao's house is all about simple elements: light, because he is visual; materials, like the exposed beams, because he is direct. Most of the brick interior walls are painted but Thao has left other brick areas unpainted, usually at the edges. This decision exposes small areas of raw brick color and texture and shows that he uses paint both to cover and to reveal. This is a good way to look at Thao's new paintings, to look at the paint but behind it, too. Simple things are combined so that the eye must move around in order to understand the space.

In his use of papier-mâché, for example, he builds up an area that is like a step for the eye, where it can walk into or out of the flat plane of the canvas. The fast brushstrokes that run over the crumpled pieces of canvas have a different kind of feeling, one that is more like hide-and-seek, where different ways of painting build up the picture's structure and disguise it, too.

Thao's paintings have gotten less mysterious. Atmosphere and metaphor were present earlier in the "Origins Revisited" paintings of 2000. His palette of old stone and slate colors evoked a prehistoric world. The new paintings do not tell stories in the same way. The titles are numbers; the color is bright and decorative. This is very modern, like Matisse's statement that art should be free from troubling or distracting subject matter, something like a comfortable armchair.

In his book on abstraction, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art since Pollock*, the late Kirk Varnedoe, former chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum

of Modern Art in New York, described abstraction as a search, but not for meaning, so much as for a temporary degree of meaninglessness. "This is found," he writes, "not in exotic realms but rather on the edges of banality, familiarity, and the man-made world." The everyday is where life takes place. If Thao's crayon marks, brushy dabs and layers of paper pulp signify anything, it is that our daily life is important. This goes for all the color changes, like the soft violet over vibrant parrot green, or the primaries that peep through the thick layers of white.

There is joy in this new work, and it is probably a by-product of the artist's relationship with his young son. The paintings are like the endless afternoons of early childhood, filled with sunlight and sleepy excitement. Here is the edge of familiarity that Varnedoe writes about. Thao seems to have discovered an eternal present and his works burst forth with life.

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