

Press Reviews

Lillian Davies, 'Thu Van Tran', Artforum, summer 2011



of ground cover. For her triptych *Trainée de Poussière (Présence Nuage)* (Dust Trail [Cloud Presence]), 2011, Tran brought together a plaster low-relief sculpture of billowing clouds, a black-and-white photograph of an American plane spraying Agent Orange over a dense stretch of jungle, and a small drawing marked with orange spray paint. Together, the three elements of this work present a spectrum of aesthetic, physical, and political representations of a modern tragedy.

At the center of the main gallery space, *Demi Cube (Socle au contenu minimal)* (Half Cube [Base of Minimal Content]), 2003, a wooden half cube, stood almost six feet wide and deep, and three feet high. Referencing Tony Smith's steel cube *Die*, 1962, Tran sliced her volume to half the height of the original work and painted its dark metallic surface white. Confounded by what she perceives as American Minimalism's lack of political engagement during the Vietnam War, Tran made a clean incision into the aesthetic of this artistic movement, and grafted, through the surrounding works in this exhibition, contemporary political and social debates onto its open wound. In language as precise and profuse as Roth's, Tran is taking the bold step of bearing witness.

—Lillian Davies

Thu Van Tran

GALERIE MARTINE ABOUCAYA

La Tache, the French translation of Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* (2000), a gripping confrontation of race, religion, academia, and the Vietnam War in late-twentieth-century America, provided the title and starting point for Vietnamese-born artist Thu Van Tran's exhibition of sculpture, drawing, and installation. Addressing French colonialism, the Catholic Church's mission in Southeast Asia, the rubber trade, and the Vietnam War, as well as American Minimalism, Tran introduced a myriad of moral and political conflicts similar to those engaged by Roth. Tran did not distill her concerns into a coolly communicable set of works; instead she overwhelmed her audience with urgent questions concerning personal identity, national history, and sexuality, presenting work that, like Roth's, balances between raw passions and rage.

For the four-part text piece *La Langue* (Language), 2011, Tran cut letters or words into four identical sheets of white paper. On one page, she phonetically spelled *pur sang* (purebred); on the next, *sale race* (dirty race); and the next, *la mère jaune* (the yellow mother or, phonetically, the yellow sea). On the fourth sheet, as if to conceal her identity, the artist repeatedly spelled her name backward, yielding what she found to be a more Germanic-looking nomenclature. In this simple, elegant exercise of language and cutting, Tran indicted the myths of pure and impure and of self and other.

For *Être Hévéa* (Being a Rubber Tree), 2011, Tran created a sculptural triptych with wax casts of rubber-tree branches placed in three narrow casketlike wooden crates, which lay parallel across the gallery's concrete floor. The interior of one of the boxes was lined with a layer of translucent white wax. Some of the viscous liquid had melted out of Tran's mold, recalling the sap that seeps from rubber trees, and so even in escaping the artist's control, the material retained a reference to the intended representation. The adjacent box contained a slightly more successful cast, as the wax for just a few rubber tree leaves had leaked into an amorphous form. The third crate contained a perfectly realized (and so all the more fragile-looking) cast of the spindly branch and its broad leaves.

Introduced by French colonists, and soon exploited by international businesses including the French tire company Michelin, Vietnamese rubber trees were decimated by Agent Orange, a substance used by the American military as a defoliant in an attempt to deprive the Vietcong



Thu Van Tran, *Être Hévéa* (Being a Rubber Tree) (detail), 2011, wood, wax; three boxes, each 90 1/2 x 17 3/4 x 12 1/4".