ALMINE RECH

Thu-Van Tran
In spring, ghosts return

May 7 — Jun 15, 2024 | New York

Almine Rech New York, Tribeca is pleased to present *In spring, ghosts return,* Thu-Van Tran's third solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from May 7 to June 15, 2024.

Forming the focal point of her exhibition *In spring, ghosts return*, Thu-Van Tran's *Colors of Grey* evokes a world of intense paradox. Vivid hues enact their own negation, their multiplicity eclipsed through their mixing by the emergence of a gray singularity. Differentiation morphs into that which is almost indistinguishable. Begun in 2012 as a poetic reckoning with the so-called Rainbow Herbicides that the United States weaponized against Vietnam during Operation Ranch Hand, the series has taken many forms, from wall-sized frescos to monumental paintings. In her most recent expression, the artist explores expanded vistas on a more intimate scale. These works engage the legacies of Renaissance perspective, 19th-century panoramas, and Christian devotional painting only to subvert them through a meditation on landscape that unfurls across metaphoric and geographical registers.

Arranged at the height of windows with a shared horizon line, the paintings in the exhibition offer a 360-degree view onto a compositionally and conceptually complex miasma of colorful abstraction. Their astounding beauty is rooted in horror. Indeed, the gestural washes that veil the canvas belie the steely logic of Tran's politically encoded color theory. Between 1962 and 1971, the United States sprayed 19 million gallons of chemical weapons onto the jungles of Vietnam. Agent Orange was the most notorious, but Agents White, Blue, Pink, Green, and Purple were also unleashed in an act of chemical warfare that caused decades of ecological and human devastation. Limiting her palette to the colors used to identify these lethal herbicides, Tran paints each color alongside its opposite, gradually producing a shroud of gray pigment that floats above its originally colorful substrate. Her systematic approach results in a painterly negation that poetically figures the trauma of neocolonial occupation. This is a landscape twice abstracted. First, through the familiar gestural marks of nonobjective painting and, second, through the coda waiting to be deciphered in the very colors that Tran initially employs.

The resulting panoramic installation that encircles the viewer formally echoes a system of visual representation popularized at the height of colonial expansion. Offering the public an immersive, even cinematic viewing experience, the panorama technique was patented in 1787 to instant acclaim. Visitors flocked to spectacles such as the "panorama du commerce" at the Bourse de Commerce in Paris, where seamlessly fused canvases hung in the round detailed scenes of colonial trade across the French empire. Commissioned to coincide with the Exposition Universelle of 1889, the panorama was a magnum opus of Orientalist painting. Allegories representing each country left no room for doubt as to the hierarchy of civilizations according to the French: Europe was represented as the arts and architecture, while Asia was reduced to elephants and a hookah.

Conversely, Tran's installation works against the panorama's historical roots in imperialist expansion. Traditional panoramas borrowed a compositional style adopted from military protocols used to survey enemy land. They delivered scenes of heightened realism, typically from a bird's-eye view. Tran immerses the viewer in a shifting landscape of suggestion and abstraction. Rather than indoctrinating viewers through an illusionistic palimpsest deployed to conceal violent conquest, the artist confronts the perpetual unfolding of imperialist aggression through the enigmatic commingling of color, form, and perception.

In *In spring, ghosts return,* Tran introduces an additional structural element that mitigates the surveilling mode of observation courted in 19th-century panoramas. Interrupting the revolving pan of paintings are two triptychs, whose triple-paneled format borrows from Christian devotional painting. An altar is a threshold to divine mystery. In the Christian tradition, it illustrates the apotheosis toward which all other elements in the church, such as the stations of the cross, narratively progress. Its appearance here is a reminder of forces greater than the visible world and its conquest. This formal intercession in the rhythm of the panorama suggests space for contemplation. The panoramic effect, in turn, exerts reciprocal pressure on the altarpieces, confounding the notion of chronological time fundamental to the Christian worldview. Rather than an explicit narrative mapped onto an advancing timeline, the horizon line that laces across Tran's panorama suggests a continual cycle akin to the Buddhist belief in reincarnation. In spring, ghosts return reminds us that everything circles back to a point of origin only to begin again.

Tran's incorporation of altars in the form of dual triptychs invites a spiritual dimension into what might otherwise stand as an exercise in history painting. As the exhibition title suggests, there are ghosts in this landscape. Apparitions coalesce and evanesce in the swirling veils of paint, pointing to mourning, mystery, and the possibility of communion. Tran has previously described her preoccupation with "the melancholy of a shifting landscape into which we must project and construct ourselves."1 For centuries, Western painting prized various perspectival systems developed in the Renaissance, whose power lay in the promise of projection. These systems relied on the metaphor of the window, placing the viewer in a fixed position relative to the scene before them. A window might provide a view, but Tran's panorama invites us to choose our own perspective. In this haunted terrain, the act of seeing is also a radical act of reconstruction that forges a future through the vivid condensation of history in the present.

— Katherine Rochester, PhD, art historian and curator

1 Hélène Guenin,"Interview: Thu-Van Tran and Hélène Guenin," in Thu-Van Tran: Nous vivons dans l'éclat, ed. Hélène Guenin (Nice: MAMAC; Paris: Editions Dilecta, 2023),141.