

Art Criticism, Notes On

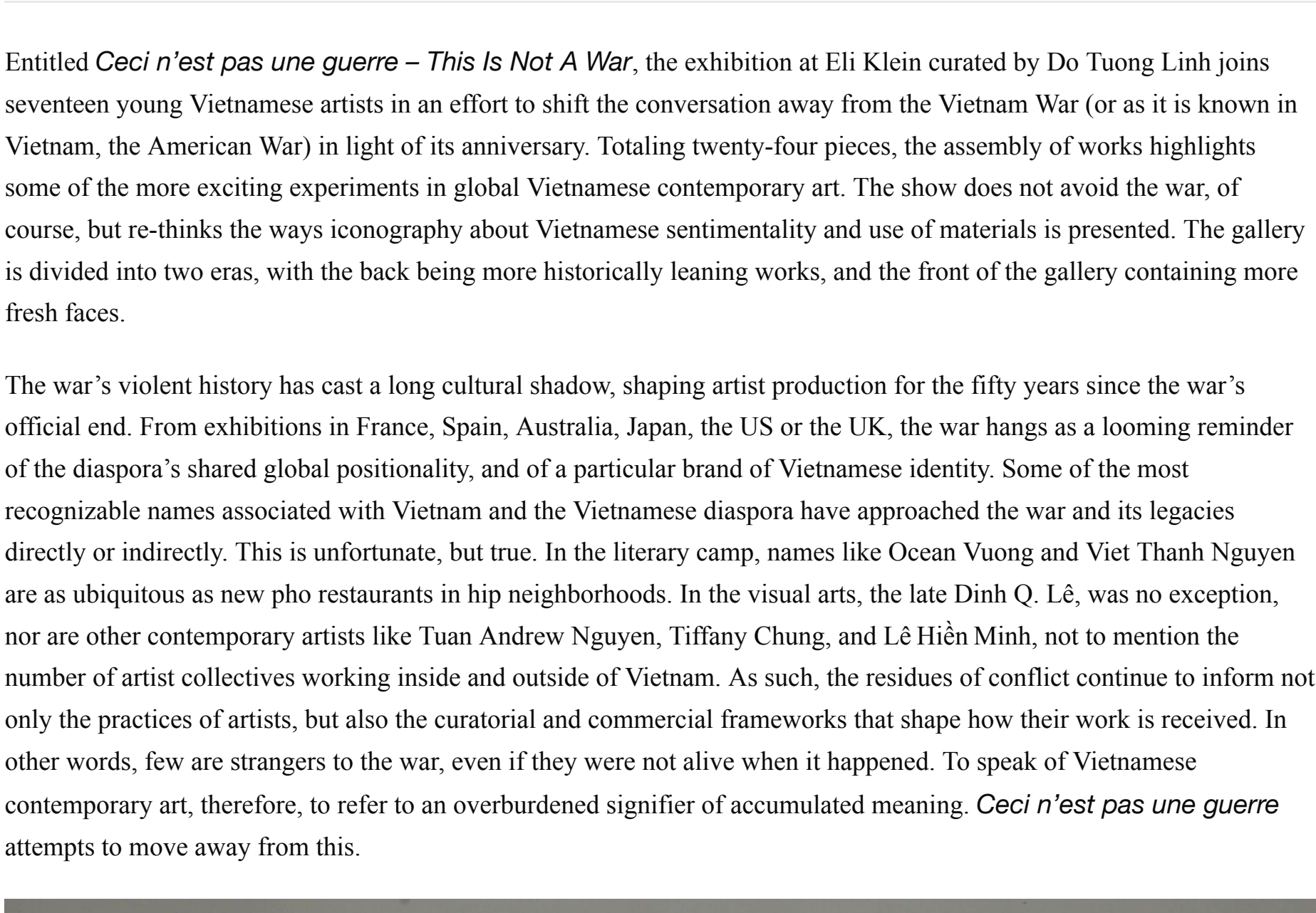
Framing New Directions in Vietnamese Contemporary Art

Vinh Phu Pham
June 24, 2025



Truong Tan, "The Hand of God," 2010. Lacquer, 30 1/2 x 39 3/8 inches (80 x 100 cm). Courtesy of Eli Klein.

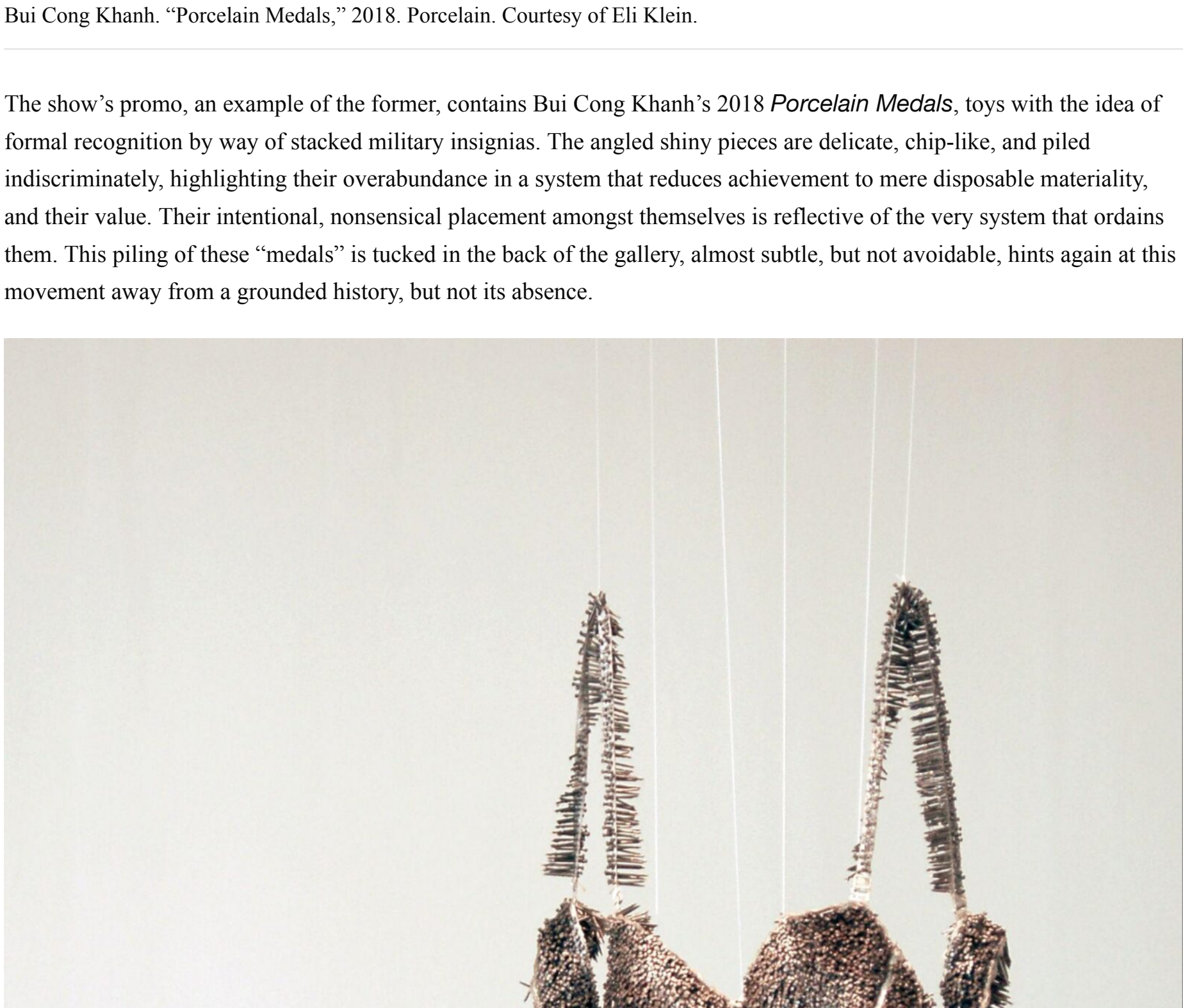
As early as the 1990s, scholars and art historians working on Vietnamese art, such as Pamela Corey and Nora Taylor have had their work cut out for them, trying to document the various attempts of different artists, dealing with the question of self-definition—*how exactly does a Vietnamese artist make work that avoids the war, or to approximate it without being a cliché?* The answer is unclear. What is clear, however, is that *dõi mõi*, or the economic reforms that shifted the country from state-sanctioned, central planning to more market-friendly policies, have undeniably, and drastically changed the country's view of itself, and its modes of cultural production. As early as the 1990s, Vietnamese artists from abroad began returning to Vietnam and were met with a nascent scene of movers and thinkers, who were providing much needed conversations in a country just recovering from its post-war slump. As the years went by with more and more artists moving back and forth, the gap between Vietnamese diasporic art, and the art that comes from outside of Vietnam was no longer as stark, giving rise to a more fluid understanding of Vietnamese identity and alternative aesthetic discourses. As newer generations of artists came of age, many have sought to move beyond the shadow of war, repositioning the question of *what makes Vietnamese art* toward a broader terrain—one not bound by conflict, but by curiosity, self-invention, and the present.



Installation view. Courtesy of Eli Klein.

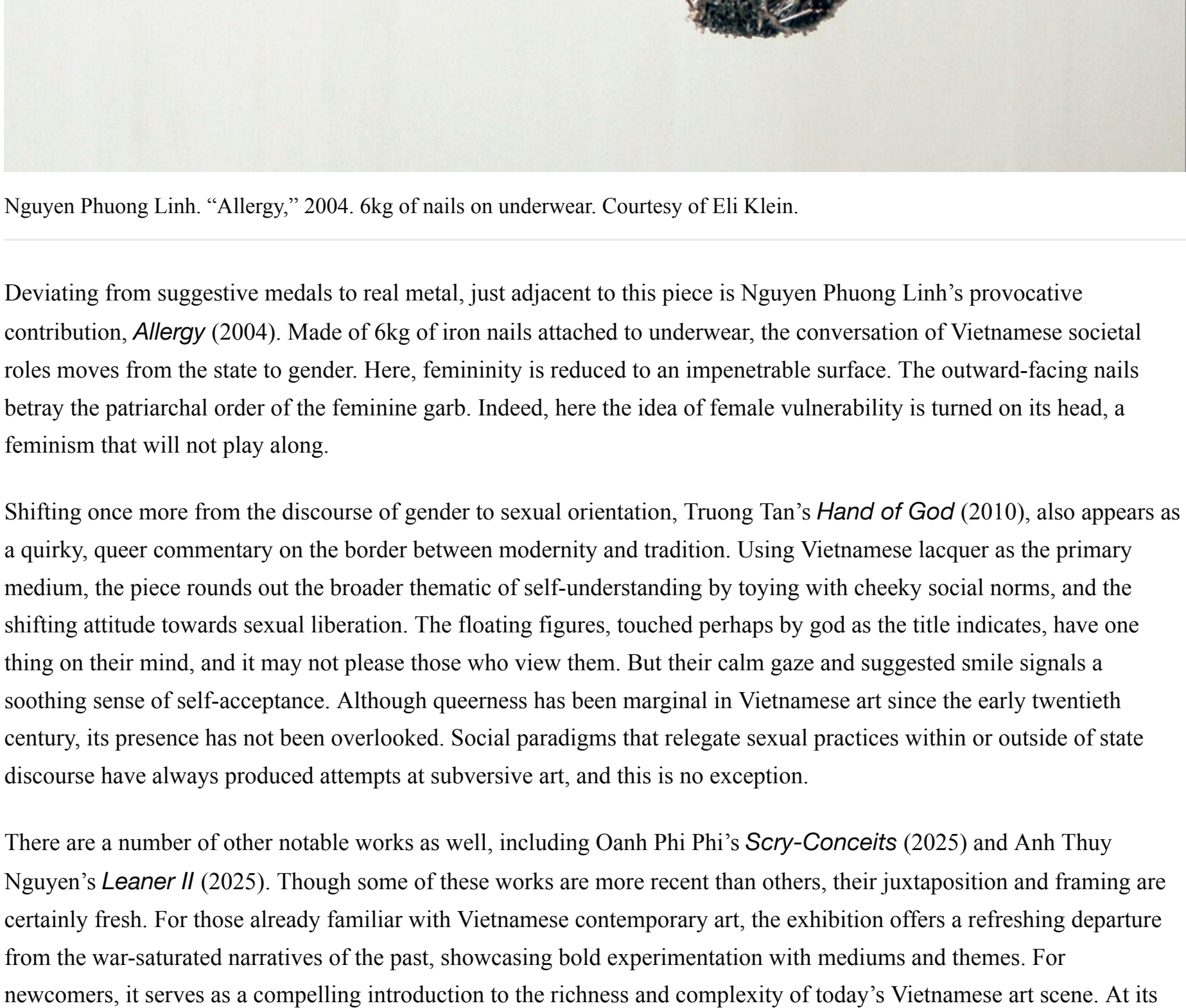
Entitled *Ceci n'est pas une guerre – This Is Not A War*, the exhibition at Eli Klein curated by Do Tuong Linh joins seventeen young Vietnamese artists in an effort to shift the conversation away from the Vietnam War (or as it is known in Vietnam, the American War) in light of its anniversary. Totalling twenty-four pieces, the assembly of works highlights some of the more exciting experiments in global Vietnamese contemporary art. The show does not avoid the war, of course, but re-thinks the ways iconography about Vietnamese sentimentality and use of materials is presented. The gallery is divided into two eras, with the back being more historically leaning works, and the front of the gallery containing more fresh faces.

The war's violent history has cast a long cultural shadow, shaping artist production for the fifty years since the war's official end. From exhibitions in France, Spain, Australia, Japan, the US or the UK, the war hangs as a looming reminder of the diaspora's shared global postionality, and of a particular brand of Vietnamese identity. Some of the most recognizable names associated with Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora have approached the war and its legacies directly or indirectly. This is unfortunate, but true. In the literary camp, names like Ocean Vuong and Viet Thanh Nguyen are as ubiquitous as new pop restaurants in hip neighborhoods. In the visual arts, the late Dinh Q. Li, was no exception, nor are other contemporary artists like Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Tiffany Chung, and Lê Hiền Minh, not to mention the number of artist collectives working inside and outside of Vietnam. As such, the residues of conflict continue to inform not only the practices of artists, but also the curatorial and commercial frameworks that shape how their work is received. In other words, few are strangers to the war, even if they were not alive when it happened. To speak of Vietnamese contemporary art, therefore, to refer to an overburdened signifier of accumulated meaning. *Ceci n'est pas une guerre* attempts to move away from this.



Bui Cong Khanh, "Porcelain Medals," 2018. Porcelain. Courtesy of Eli Klein.

The show's promo, an example of the former, contains Bui Cong Khanh's 2018 *Porcelain Medals*, toys with the idea of formal recognition by way of stacked military insignias. The angled shiny pieces are delicate, chip-like, and piled indiscriminately, highlighting their overabundance in a system that reduces achievement to mere disposable materiality, and their value. Their intentional, nonsensical placement amongst themselves is reflective of the very system that ordains them. This piling of these "medals" is tucked in the back of the gallery, almost subtle, but not avoidable, hints again at this movement away from a grounded history, but not its absence.



Nguyen Phuong Linh, "Allergy," 2004. 6kg of nails on underwear. Courtesy of Eli Klein.

Deviating from suggestive medals to real metal, just adjacent to this piece is Nguyen Phuong Linh's provocative contribution, *Allergy* (2004). Made of 6kg of iron nails attached to underwear, the conversation of Vietnamese societal roles moves from the state to gender. Here, femininity is reduced to an impenetrable surface. The outward-facing nails betray the patriarchal order of the feminine garb. Indeed, here the idea of female vulnerability is turned on its head, a feminism that will not play along.

Shifting once more from the discourse of gender to sexual orientation, Truong Tan's *Hand of God* (2010), also appears as a quirky, queer commentary on the border between modernity and tradition. Using Vietnamese lacquer as the primary medium, the piece rounds out the broader thematic of self-understanding by toying with cheeky social norms, and the shifting attitude towards sexual liberation. The floating figures, touched perhaps by god as the title indicates, have one thing on their mind, and it may not please those who view them. But their calm gaze and suggested smile signals a soothing sense of self-acceptance. Although queerness has been marginal in Vietnam art since the early twentieth century, its presence has not been overlooked. Social paradigms that relegate sexual practices within or outside of state discourse have always produced attempts at subversive art, and this is no exception.

There are a number of other notable works as well, including Oanh Phi Phi's *Scry-Conceits* (2025) and Anh Thuy Nguyen's *Leaner II* (2025). Though some of these works are more recent than others, their juxtaposition and framing are certainly fresh. For those already familiar with Vietnamese contemporary art, the exhibition offers a refreshing departure from the war-saturated narratives of the past, showcasing bold experimentation with mediums and themes. For newcomers, it serves as a compelling introduction to the richness and complexity of today's Vietnamese art scene. At its best, the show sidesteps familiar tropes and creates space for artists whose names are not yet widely known—but perhaps should be.

Ceci n'est pas une guerre – This Is Not A War is on view through August 23, 2025 at Eli Klein Gallery, 398 West Street, New York, NY 10014.

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VINH PHU PHAM
Vinh Phu Pham is an artist, literary scholar, and critic based in New York City. His writing covers Vietnamese contemporary art, the musical legacies of the Republic of Vietnam, and Asian American literature in diaspora.

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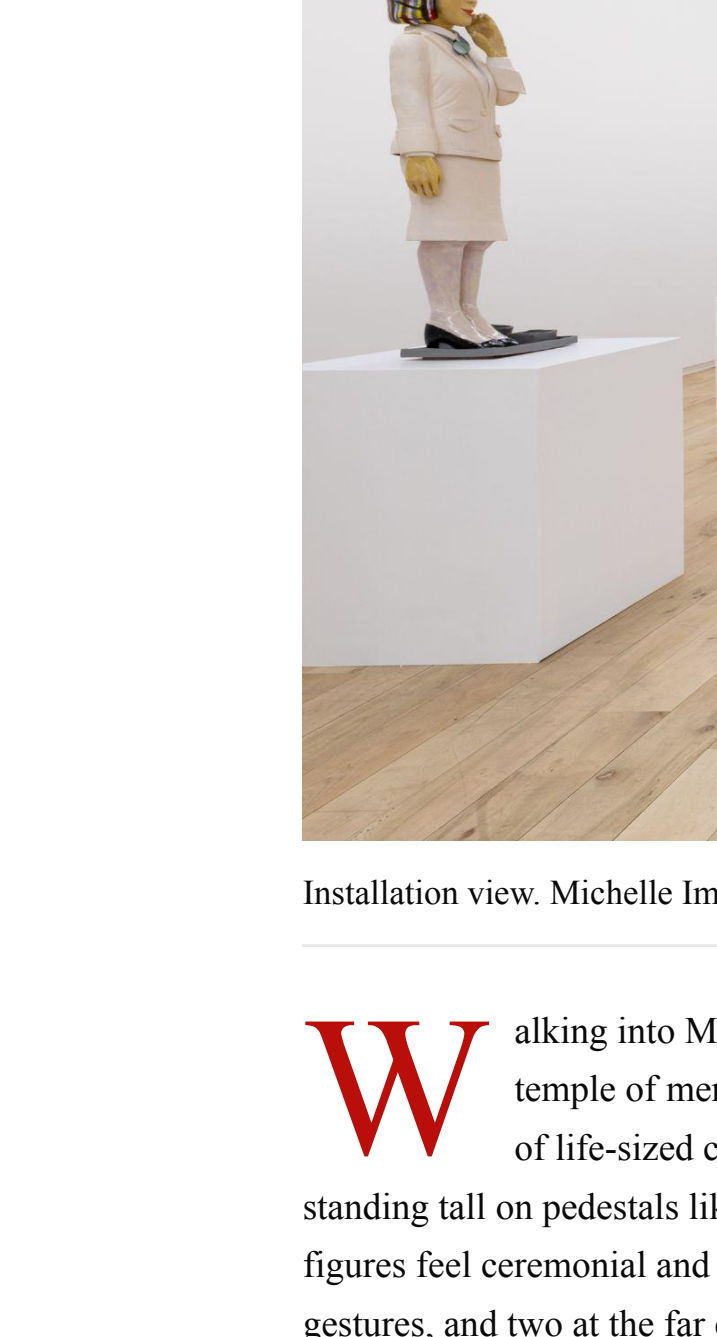
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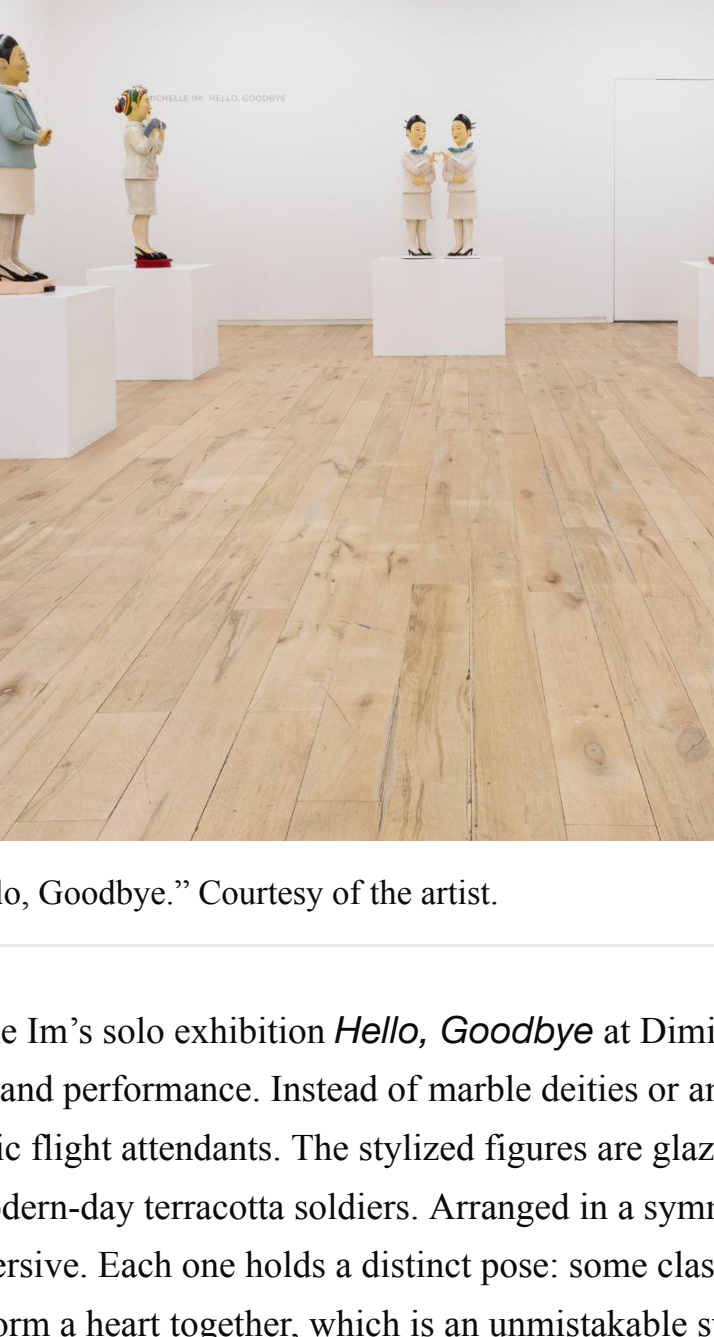
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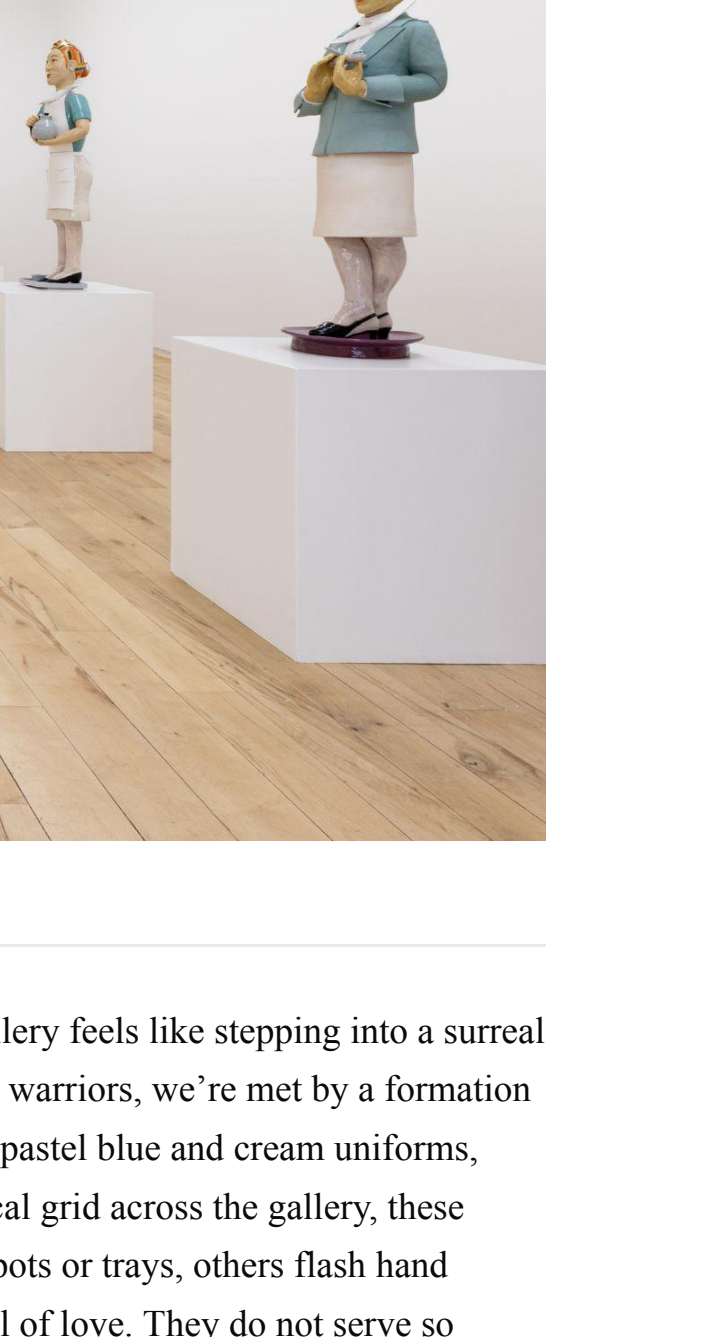
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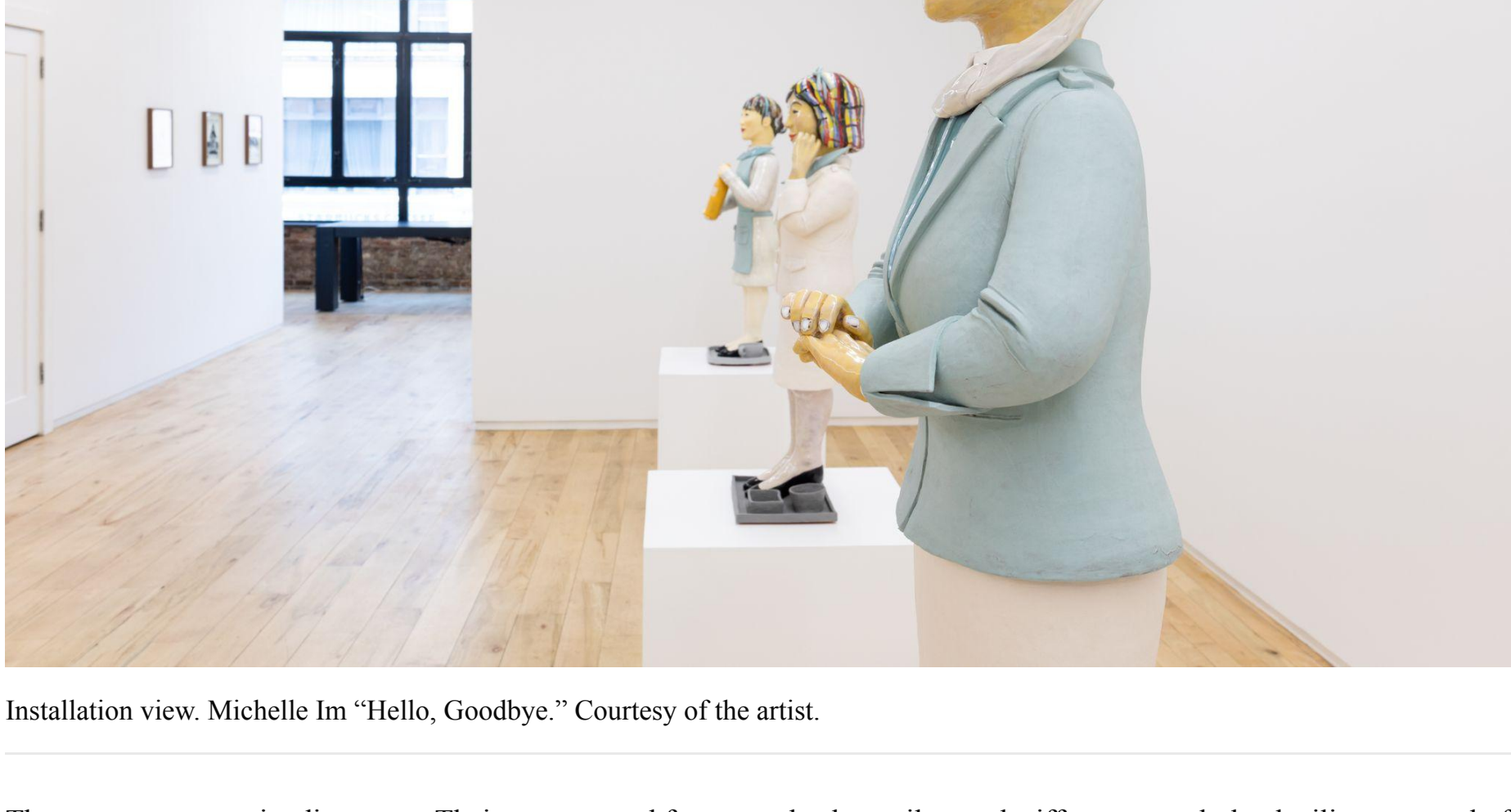


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Art Criticism

Michelle Im: Hello, Goodbye

Lauren Cohen
June 23, 2025



Installation view. Michelle Im "Hello, Goodbye." Courtesy of the artist.

Walking into Michelle Im's solo exhibition *Hello, Goodbye* at Dimin Gallery feels like stepping into a surreal temple of memory and performance. Instead of marble deities or ancient warriors, we're met by a formation of life-sized ceramic flight attendants. The stylized figures are glazed in pastel blue and cream uniforms, standing tall on pedestals like modern-day terracotta soldiers. Arranged in a symmetrical grid across the gallery, these figures feel ceremonial and subversive. Each one holds a distinct pose: some clasp teapots or trays, others flash hand gestures, and two at the far end form a heart together, which is an unmistakable symbol of love. They do not serve so much as they *stage* the act of service.

Hello, Goodbye is incredibly layered with meaning. Im began the body of work directly after a trip to Korea where she was visiting her father before his passing. The act of sculpting these women—each of whom has been lovingly named by her mother according to the Korean naming practice of *gwansang*—becomes a ritual of remembrance. What results is not just an installation, but a tender farewell.

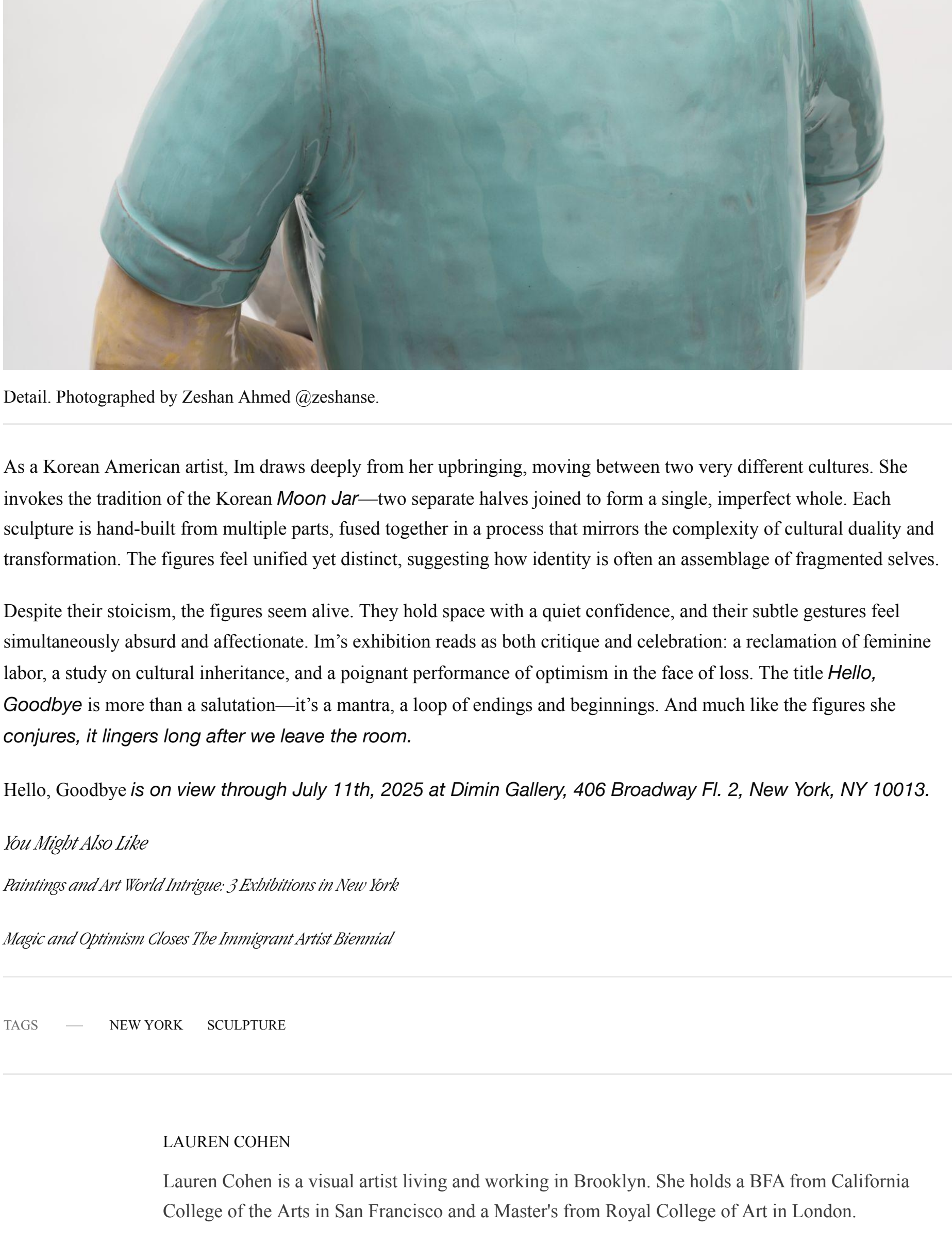


Installation view. Michelle Im "Hello, Goodbye." Courtesy of the artist.

These women are quiet disruptors. Their exaggerated features, cheeky smiles, and stiff poses mock the docility expected of service workers. Though Im herself was never an airline host she has had other gigs contoured by decorum and an adherence to detail orientation and meticulous service, like being a captain in a Michelin star restaurant—their stringent rules may seem extreme to workers in other professions. The decision to add bright colorful glazes that seem to melt down her sculpture's coiffed hair disturbs the neatness of their uniforms. Their placement in the stark white gallery removes them from the context of an airplane aisle and elevates them to icons—enigmatic, unknowable, and reverent.



Michelle Im, "Ja-Bi Eun-Bi," 2025. 40 1/2 x 22 x 13." Ceramic, epoxy, acrylic, white gold luster, enamel. Courtesy of the artist.



Detail. Photographed by Zeshan Ahmed @zeshanseo

As a Korean American artist, Im draws deeply from her upbringing, moving between two very different cultures. She invokes the tradition from Korean *Moon Jar*—two separate halves joined to form a single, imperfect whole. Each sculpture is hand-built from multiple parts, fused together in a process that mirrors the complexity of cultural duality and transformation. The figures feel unified yet distinct, suggesting how identity is often an assemblage of fragmented selves.

Despite their stoicism, the figures seem alive. They hold space with a quiet confidence, and their subtle gestures feel simultaneously absurd and affectionate. Im's exhibition reads as both critique and celebration: a reclamation of feminine labor, a study on cultural inheritance, and a poignant performance of optimism in the face of loss. The title *Hello, Goodbye* is more than a salutation—it's a mantra, a loop of endings and beginnings. And much like the figures she conjures, it lingers *long after we leave the room*.

Hello, Goodbye is on view through July 11th, 2025 at Dimin Gallery, 406 Broadway Fl. 2, New York, NY 10013.

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LAUREN COHEN

Lauren Cohen is a visual artist living and working in Brooklyn. She holds a BFA from California College of the Arts in San Francisco and a Master's from Royal College of Art in London.

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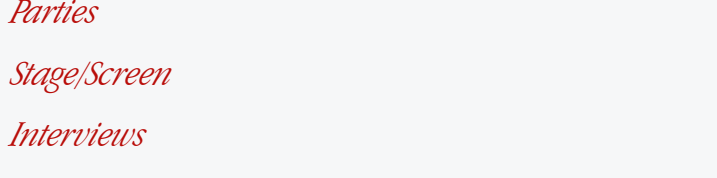
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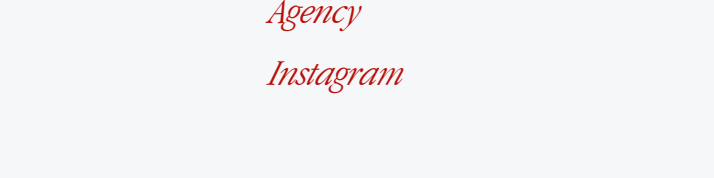
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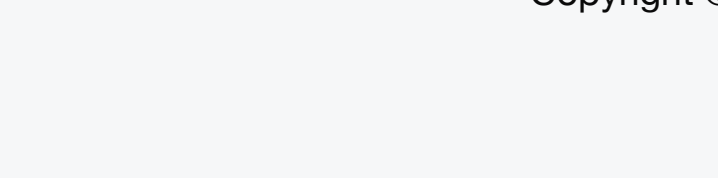
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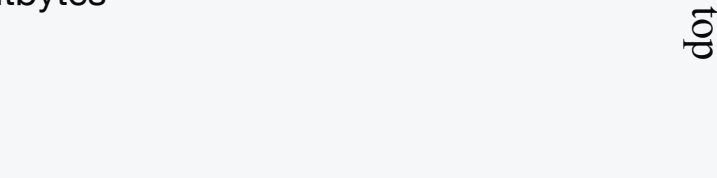
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