

The Propeller Group

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART CHICAGO

Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol

FOR THE PROPELLER GROUP, contemporary Vietnam pulses with an exhilarating energy; their videos show graffiti artists and street dancers taking over cities by day, and motorbike gangs ruling the streets under the cover of night. Tuan Andrew Nguyen and Phunam, who hail from the younger generation of Vietnamese artists that has played a crucial role in revitalizing Ho Chi Minh City's art scene, cofounded the group in 2006 amid the metropolis's rapid economic transformation. The pair were joined by artist Matt Lucero in 2009, and the trio expanded into a full-service commercial video-production company, executing projects ranging from corporate marketing campaigns to music videos for pop singers. Indeed, by pursuing such projects while also regularly exhibiting in film festivals and art biennials, the group has consistently resisted categorization and, no less, the expectations that typically constrain Vietnamese artists, who are all too often asked to speak of heritage and history rather than of the here and now.

The Propeller Group's first major institutional exhibition, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston, and the Phoenix Art Museum, unapologetically takes the spectacular side of popular culture as a point of departure. Comprising seven projects, all completed since 2010, the show features some of the collective's strongest work, including *The Living Need Light, the Dead Need Music*, 2014, which opened to much acclaim at the Prospect New Orleans triennial. The film revels in exotic appeal but remains intent on producing resemblance rather

than reifying difference. In the opening sequence, sword swallows, snake charmers, and dancers appear in an exuberant funeral celebration uncannily similar to a carnival in the Big Easy. Later, Vietnamese songs for the dead blur smoothly into high-spirited Dixieland standards, as a processional brass band wades through an oneiric landscape as reminiscent of the Mekong as of the Mississippi.

Transformation is not construed as a linear process in these films but is instead located in the present tense of the viewing experience. No work shows this more forcefully than the group's debut feature-length production, *AK-47 vs. M16, the Film*, 2016. Screened in the museum's theater, the forty-minute montage draws from Hollywood movies, educational documentaries, and YouTube clips, all featuring the Cold War's two most recognizable assault rifles. But the apparent clarity of this seemingly mundane documentary exercise actually develops a new mode of viewing. When the game of visual identification—of guns, and of the good and bad guys who wield them—has become so easy as to exhaust interest, the viewer's attention is finally freed to attend to the particularities of appearance. We pause to notice the way a gun hangs loosely as ornament from the hand of a cocky action hero; how it is pressed tightly and purposefully against the body of a guerrilla in ambush; we see it tremble in the unrehearsed grip of a child soldier. Such moments bypass familiar understandings of the AK-47 and M16 as symbols of the Vietnam War, and instead present the weapons as sources of an unpredictable and divergent visceral appeal, of a fascination that perhaps more honestly accounts for their continued influence on the popular imagination than does any grand ideological narrative.

If the Propeller Group's latest projects are effective because they frankly admit to the pleasures of the moving image, the affectless irony of some earlier works appears less gripping in comparison. Placed at the exhibition's entrance as a primary example of the group's manifold media practices, *Television Commercial for Communism*, 2011, features a hyperpolished video tableau of people

living and working in harmony. Accompanied by large white flags sporting a new Communist logo and a banner displaying a rewritten Communist manifesto, the project espouses an all-too-literal understanding of rebranding. Although the critical potential of the collective's commercial practice is touted repeatedly in the exhibition catalogue, it hardly seems substantiated by *Television Commercial* or many of the other works actually on view. That the group's more incisive—and more entertaining—collaborative and online forays into the complex interplays between consumerism and cultural expression are not included speaks to the difficulty of representing the full range of their practice within a museum setting.

The Propeller Group resists the expectations that typically constrain Vietnamese artists, who are all too often asked to speak of history rather than of the here and now.

Rather than a comprehensive survey, the exhibition is perhaps best thought of as a showcase of recent works that powerfully evince the Propeller Group's unique style and promise. Approaching topics of death and violence with heady sensuality, their videos ask what a less melancholic relationship to Vietnam's history might look like—a crucial first step in moving beyond entrenched notions of trauma that have long loomed large over the reception of Vietnamese artists. □

"The Propeller Group" is on view through Nov. 13; travels to the Phoenix Art Museum, Feb. 15–May 14, 2017; Blaffer Art Museum, Houston, June 3–Oct. 7, 2017.

CHANON KENJI PRAEPIPATMONGKOL IS A WRITER AND ART HISTORIAN BASED IN SOUTH EAST ASIA.



Left: The Propeller Group, *The Living Need Light, the Dead Need Music*, 2014, 5K video, color, sound, 21 minutes 15 seconds. Below: The Propeller Group, *AK-47 vs. M16, the Film*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 40 minutes.

