

Art in America

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and worked with for years. The screens simultaneously show disjointed scenes from the war and its aftermath. The women raise animals and tend gardens, deliver addresses over the radio, dance at an outdoor festival, pilot a motorboat through the channels of San Juan Bay. An asynchronous female voiceover weaves together quotes from the novel with occasional bits of narration that do not coincide with the action on-screen.

Like Wittig, who never explains how the war is won, Muñoz seems primarily concerned with how experimental forms can help viewers imagine the new kinds of social relationships among women that might develop in a differently structured society. As in earlier works, Muñoz here returns to images of animals in the wild to suggest a timeless freedom outside of civilization's impositions. Wild horses, their backs free of saddles, are seen lazily eating grass in a field that smolders with small fires, as the female narrator's voice reads, "I am already separate. I am already in the land of women."

A selection of Muñoz's handmade masks—a few of which briefly appear in the video—and a 16mm film portraying people she has come to know through previous projects rounded out the exhibition. The masks—made from materials like palm bark, fish netting, and mirrors—are fascinating. The film, with its black-and-white footage of mysterious figures on a beach, is at times quite lovely. Yet the props, film scraps, and the unfinished video never quite cohered on their own. The show's main themes, the meaning of the masks, Muñoz's real-life connection with the women on-screen, and even the video's connection to Wittig's book—all remained opaque unless one read a lengthy interview with the artist in the broadside provided to museum visitors. Muñoz's skilled camerawork and attention to detail delight at times; in the black-and-white film, a long, grainy, close-up of foamy waves washing over a black sand beach quietly thrills, unexpectedly evoking the expressive hand-painted films of Stan Brakhage. Unlike the powerful survey of Muñoz's earlier works on view at the Perez Art Museum in Miami through November, however, "Song, Strategy, Sign" ultimately felt unsatisfying: less a fully realized exhibition than a tantalizing sneak preview of what could be a major work to come.

—Erick Lyle

CHICAGO

PROPELLER GROUP

Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

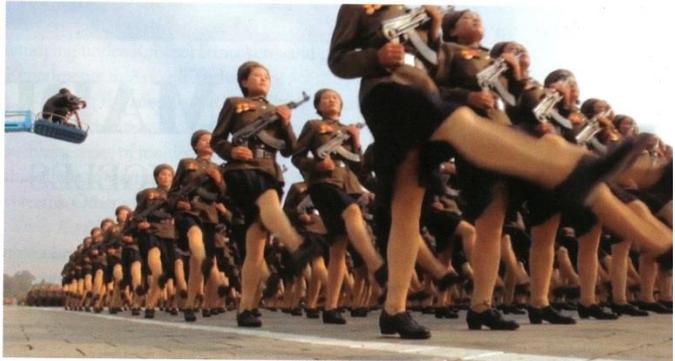
ON VIEW THROUGH NOV. 13

In May, Barack Obama visited Vietnam. The visit brought international attention to the Southeast Asian nation's economic rise and geopolitical importance, and also provided an ideal backdrop for this exhibition (which opened a few weeks later) spotlighting the video-centered art of the Propeller Group, a ten-year-old collective based in Ho Chi Minh City and Los Angeles that was featured in the 2015 Venice Biennale.

The show brings together seven projects from the past five years, each consisting of a video and an assortment of props, artifacts, or other related visual objects. While maintaining a global outlook, the group—whose members are Phunam Thuc Ha, Matt

Lucero, and Tuan Andrew Nguyen—produces work that is deeply rooted in the history, politics, and everyday life of Vietnam, especially its pervasive gun culture and the legacy of what is referred to in that country as the "Vietnam-American War."

The video *Television Commercial for Communism* (2011) is one of the best-known examples of the Propeller Group's mildly subversive and sometimes irreverent approach. The group hired a leading advertising agency, TBWA\Vietnam, to create a fictional rebranding campaign for the country's governmental system, and the results play on a monitor, alongside flags and an edited banner reading, MANIFESTO FOR THE NEW COMMUNISM. The slick, make-believe commercial represents a kind of surreal merger of two seemingly opposed systems (Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization just four years before this video was created) and offers a critique of both. On the one hand, such an advertisement embodies exactly the kind of marketing and consumer choice unthinkable under communism, and on the other it points to the dangers of that very commercialization—that even a governmental system can be packaged and sold.



As part of the multimedia project "AK-47 vs. M16" (2015–16), the collective offers a subversive take on a twenty-one-gun salute. They worked with ballistics engineers to fire bullets from the two infamous assault rifles into opposite ends of twenty-one translucent ballistics gel blocks (items used to test the impact of bullets on soft tissue). Five of the eerily beautiful blocks from the experiment—sort of sculptural versions of Harold Edgerton's famed stop-action photo of an apple pierced by a bullet—are each presented in an elegant, tall-legged vitrine. That installation along with a documentary video and two panels from the related series "Collateral Damage" (2015), in which bullet residue spreads cosmiclike across black paper, form a compelling ensemble.

The death theme touched on in "AK-47 vs. M16" is explored more deeply in *The Living Need Light, The Dead Need Music* (2014), a lush, meditative twenty-minute video produced for the international exhibition Prospect.3, in New Orleans. This piece highlights the surprising similarities between the storied funeral traditions in that historic American city and in Vietnam, two places where death is not an end to be mourned but a transition to be celebrated.

—Kyle MacMillan

The Propeller Group: *AK-47 vs. M16, The Film*, 2016, video, 40 minutes; at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

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with his own distinctive techniques, developing, for instance, his trademark paintings composed of dense fields of short marks. In *The Age of the Desert* (1957), which is dominated by shades of luminous gold, areas of short vertical strokes delineate a vaguely human figure flanked by two ghostly apparitions, with small red and green cell-type forms augmenting the scene. *California Landscape* (1959), one of four graphite drawings on view, comprises clusters of marks that build into a kind of webbing, in which ambiguously figural shapes appear as negative space.

At James Cohan were mostly paintings from the early to mid-1960s, many of which favor deep, rich reds or golden ochers. In the large main gallery hung four works from 1962 as well as a raucous, polychromatic canvas from 1964, *Meditations on a Jazz Passage*. In the 1962 paintings, Mullican's thin marks coalesce into wood-grain patterning, heralding the formal integration between image and surface that he had been working toward. *Transfigured Night* (1962) is painted in reds ranging from blazing vermilion to muted rose madder; the vibrating passages of differing hues produce an Op-like design. In the 1957 *Caravan to the Sun* (the only work at James Cohan that wasn't from the 1960s), shadowy shapes suggesting the silhouettes of Aztec priests are cast upon an ocher field, while vermilion marks cover the entire composition, evoking a cascade of raining fire.

The jagged shapes in *The Arrival of the Quetzalcoatl* (1963) hint at the form of the Mesoamerican feathered-serpent god. Hot shades of red, orange, and yellow electrify the umber-stained canvas, which is visible between the painted strokes. Several passages of chartreuse and deep chrome green inflected with blue give the composition a sense of depth. The luminous *Sounds and Stains* (1962) is more restrained than many of the other works on view. Diffuse striations gather around an oblong crimson passage glowing at the center of the image. While mid-century American art has long been synonymous with gesture and forceful mark-making, such works remind us that abstractionists like Mullican favored the slow burn over the explosion.

—Eric Sutphin