



TIFFANY CHUNG—Excavating and Remapping Erased Histories: an artistic practice on protesting against historical amnesia

Interview / Asia Hundreds

[ツイート](#) [Like](#) [Share 14](#) [B! ブックマーク](#) [G+1](#) [Pocket](#)

Renowned Vietnamese-American artist Tiffany Chung shares her methodology of excavating buried personal stories and collective memories, how she processes her findings both internally and as an artistic output, and current engagements that lead to the further expansion of her practice.

Chung's persistence in uncovering hidden (hi)stories and examining geopolitical shifts throughout history has coaxed then-policymakers and refugee lawyers to resurface, offering an impetus for current policymakers and the society at large to reflect on and confront the ongoing refugee crises, one of today's largest socio-political issues.

Interview and Text : Meiko Sano (The Japan Foundation Asia Center) Published : May 18, 2017

PROFILE



Tiffany Chung

Tiffany Chung has received worldwide recognition for her exquisite cartographic drawings and installations that examine conflict, migration, and displacement amidst urban progress and geopolitical shifts. Through her cartographic works, videos, installations, and performances, Chung continues to push the boundary of her artistic practice as well as the borders of what people think "art" is and can do.

Chung holds an MFA from University of California, Santa Barbara (2000) and a BFA from California State University, Long Beach (1998). A co-founder of [San Art](#), an independent, artist-initiated space in Ho Chi Minh City, Chung is committed to furthering the development of contemporary art and artists in Vietnam. She currently lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

● The Artist's Identity and Methodology

Listening to the Community

Meiko Sano (hereinafter Sano): Thank you for joining me today, Tiffany. Let's jump right into it. Much has already been said about your cartographic works so, while going over some of them, I'd like to know more on your methodologies, and how you work between different mediums and outlets. But first of all, let me ask you: you're referred to a lot as being a researcher, a historian, an archaeologist, and sometimes an anthropologist. What do you identify yourself as the most?

Tiffany Chung (hereinafter Chung) : I am an artist, first and foremost. Recently, I have become a little more confident about my role as a researcher, regardless of my having formal training or not. But my methodology and interdisciplinary approach *do* make my research more in line with ethnographic and anthropological fieldwork.

Sano: Because you actually go out and speak to people in person, don't you?

Chung : Well, you become part of a community. I don't go there with just a list of questions because that's not how one should do it. Of course, I read a substantial amount of texts on the socio-historical issues I am dealing with, but I also want "real" stories—the stories of those who were *directly* affected. For instance, with *The Vietnam Exodus* project, I joined Facebook or online forums of each of the former Vietnamese refugee camps; many of the refugees who went through these camps would be there, online. And I would go in and be part of those groups.

Sano: Did you identify yourself as an artist or use a pseudonym?

Chung : I tell them my name, but I'm basically there just talking to them online. I don't ask direct questions, I stalk them [*laughs*]. There were so many comments: one person would post photos of a camp, another would come in and comment, "Oh, I remember that; I was there." Then another would join in saying, "I was there between '80 and '82" and so on. That's how I stalk them; listen and chat with them. So then I hired a research assistant, and extracted all of these stories and compiled them onto huge spreadsheets—one spreadsheet for each camp with each of their names, if we could identify it, and stories. And for each name we had columns for the year they left Vietnam, the boat number, the year they arrived or got rescued in the East Sea—or South China Sea—, the dates they stayed in a camp, whether they were able to resettle, if so in which country, and in what year.

Sano: I think that's one of the fascinating elements of your work: how you delicately fuse these two very different types of data—the hard and the soft.

Chung : Well, you have statistical data and the policies, but you also need the refugees' experiences to make the story complete. I want a comprehensive understanding of the history, not just a one-sided one. My objective, ultimately, is to counterbalance official accounts. I've spent a lot of time with the former refugees in Hong Kong; I'd just ride the bus with them and listen to the same stories repeatedly to the point that I could memorize them. It's become a reflex.

But one thing I must stress is the fact that there literally are no official narratives surrounding the post-1975 Vietnamese mass exodus history in Vietnam; it has been erased into oblivion by the state. So stories that the refugees tell—some of them extremely traumatic—are testimonies that contribute to the understanding of the impact of top down policies on this group of human populations

Sano: How did they tell you their stories? Because their trajectories must be very complicated, I assume.

Chung : They *are*. When I worked with the Vietnamese community in Hong Kong—I followed them around for about two years—one man finally came up and said, "My journeys were very interesting, you should record them." And we sat down with his laptop, and he showed me his escape routes using Google Maps and satellite maps. Some of them still think I do this research for the [UNHCR \[United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees\]](#). The gentleman who showed me his escape routes first asked me if the UNHCR had decided to look into stateless cases like his. He lives in Hong Kong, but he is not a citizen, you see. He has a travel document but he is still stateless because he was undocumented to begin with.



Chung's ordered desk covered in research materials



Here is another interesting story: I was chatting away with people on the online forum of the Vietnamese refugee camp in Singapore. This woman and her family were saved by a merchant vessel and brought to Singapore. She then gave birth to her son just a day after disembarking, so she named him after the vessel, and I helped her locate the vessel.

Sano: You located the *actual* vessel?

Chung : Yes, the exact one. I found some photographs and showed them to her. She said it *may* be the one and showed it to her husband, and he replied saying, "This is it!" I told them about the history of the vessel and what happened to it in the end. But then, there was a list of people asking me to locate their vessels too [*laughs*]! So I helped four more cases and after that had to disappear from that forum for a while.

Sano: Had she become stateless too, like the gentleman in Hong Kong? What was her situation once she arrived in Singapore?

Chung : Well, Singapore was an interesting case. Although there was some rule-bending here and there, its policy was to only accept refugees whom the merchant ships rescued and were able to find resettlement offers for. Singapore would host them over a course of three months while waiting for their resettlement, and that's why the vessels are particularly embedded in the refugee's memories.

Combing through the UNHCR Archive

Sano: So you become a part of the community to listen to the stories. But how did you accumulate all the statistical data?

Chung : Well, like I said, you need both sides of the story, and with *The Vietnam Exodus* project I realized there were still many missing links. So the next step was for me to go to the UNHCR—UN Refugee Agency in Geneva to dig into their archives. The thing is, they have indexed the old records by countries and years, but they haven't digitized anything. So they are still the actual documents that I could touch; the papers were worn out and some almost torn. It really was an amazing experience.



Sano: It must be a lot of work even just to navigate yourself through the indexes.

Chung : That is true. You also have to know all the boxes' ID numbers of the files you're looking for. You have to be familiar with the historical background of what you're dealing with and be able to approximate—between this year and that year, there was this incident during a migration peak, so maybe there were certain policies at play here, et cetera.

Sano: How long would you spend at the UNHCR in one visit?

Chung : Usually, I would spend one week in there. I'm a calm person when I work. I am not interested in hysteria and I think my work has that quality to it. But to sit there and go through all of these old corresponding cables, looking for *something* can get quite exhausting.

Sano: Especially because you're looking for something you don't know is even there.

Chung : Exactly. I think the problem with some academics is that they go knowing what they're looking for just to substantiate their theories. I'm not interested in that. I'm there to discover the hidden histories that other people might not know about or have missed, and I'm open to every bit of information that I come across.

The Processing of and Going Back-and-Forth on a Project

Sano: Do you work on one project after another in sequence or do you work on a few simultaneously? I read that you felt it was too much when working on *an archaeology project for future remembrance* (2010–ongoing) and *finding one's shadow in ruins and rubble* (2014), for instance, and you revisited them at a later year.

Chung : It was also like that with *scratching the walls of memory* (2009–2010), the project that was inspired by the story of Fukuomachi Elementary School in Hiroshima, Japan.^{*1} About fifty years after the A-bomb was dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the school was turned into a peace museum. At the time of renovation, chalkboards and layers of old paint were removed to reveal all these messages inscribed on the black-burned walls of this once relief shelter for A-bomb victims. Inspired by the discovery, I did a project that surveyed the major conflicts of the twentieth century, including the Vietnam Conflict and its aftermath. However, it was too close to home and, after this project, I had to put this history in the back of my mind until *finding one's shadow in ruins and rubble* and *The Vietnam Exodus* project.

^{*1} Fukuomachi Elementary School in Hiroshima, Japan, was one of the closest schools to ground zero (460 meters) when the atomic bomb fell on August 6, 1945. Only the west wing remained afterwards, which became a place for refuge and, on its black-burned walls, people left messages using the scattered pieces of chalk on the floor. After renovations, part of the building built in 1937 re-opened as a peace museum in April 2002.



Tiffany Chung, *scratching the walls of memory*, 2010, *Threads* exhibition installation view, Museum Arnhem, Arnhem, The Netherlands, March 15–August 17, 2014



Tiffany Chung, *scratching the walls of memory* (detail), 2010

Sano: What made you come back to it all?

Chung : It was the Syrian refugee crisis. With *The Syria Project*, I was able to look at it from a distance and ask myself, "Why am I so obsessed with this?" And I realized that it is because it bears striking resemblances to the Vietnamese exodus history.

Sano: So there was a repeat of history.

Chung : Yes, history tends to repeat itself. I was living in Singapore and working on *The Syria Project* when Viet [Thanh] Nguyen,^{*2} the 2016 Pulitzer Prize winner in fiction, was also there. I discovered there was a former camp in Singapore that is totally abandoned. So we went there together and we also visited the former Galang Refugee Camp in Indonesia. After these visits I started to become more determined to cover this crisis. Now more than ever, we need to look back at history and unpack certain policies that emerged during particular periods and how they were imposed on different groups of human populations. This would help us to understand the actual impact of these policies on human lives.

^{*2} Viet Thanh Nguyen won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction for *The Sympathizer*. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (New York: Grove Press, 2015).

Sano: It's not about sentimentalizing the crisis, is it, your work.

Chung : Absolutely not. It's not about evoking a sense of guilt either. It's about staying rational and discussing what needs to be discussed, and using them to generate change.

Sano: It's interesting because your cartographic drawings, which we'll get to later, are talked about as palimpsests of histories, of time, policies, and the shifts of space. And it seems like your methodology itself—of working on one project, moving away and then coming back to it—resembles that. It's that layering of process that is consistent in your oeuvre.

Chung : Yes, my process is the same whether I am making art or researching. It is always about revisiting certain projects at different points in time. A project is never entirely *complete* because processing historical trauma and memory takes years.

Between Reason and Hysteria: To be Emotional to be Rational

Sano: Are you revisiting any of your other previous works at the moment?

Chung : As I've mentioned earlier, *The Vietnam Exodus* project is the continuation of *scratching the walls of memory* and an aspect of it is to show the scale and scope of the Vietnamese refugee migration. For this, my work will encompass the entire globe.

Sano: That sounds like a lot of work.

Chung : It is. And I have entirely new information to back it up—as I said, there is no discourse or narrative surrounding this history. At the UNHCR, I've found bits and pieces of corresponding cables on the Vietnamese refugee crisis from 1975. So how to reconstruct this vast history of refugee migration through the fragmented correspondences is a whole other layer of work that I have to deal with. But, so far, this has been very exciting and rewarding.

Sano: Did you scan the actual correspondences?

Chung : Yes. A lot of them were confidential because the communication among the UNHCR staff might be different in tone compared to the communication between the UNHCR and governments worldwide. Obviously, the UNHCR communicates and negotiates with all the different governments on issues regarding refugees. So when they received a cable from, say, Singapore that stated certain issues, they'd have had to crosscheck and assess everything among themselves with various information they received from other countries, or from their own field visits.

Sano: I see. In a way, their conversations were the "live" backdrops against which all the governmental or national negotiations were underway.

Chung : Yes. It was really interesting because regardless of some criticism the UNHCR might get in handling refugee crises, the staff are also human and would sometimes respond emotionally to people's tragic situations. They might also become really involved in helping the refugees to get back on their own feet.

Sano: Is that all on record too?

Chung : You have to read between the lines, but it's all there. I've come across really amazing documents.

Sano: It's fascinating because ordinarily you don't really think about what goes on behind these governmental negotiations.

Chung : No, people don't realize it. But in order to stay calm and do the work rationally, you'd go through an emotional process. Of course I did cry like crazy in the UNHCR office and it was embarrassing. While I was watching the films on the Vietnamese refugee crisis, the staff would be discussing the Syrian crisis around me, and after holding it in for a while, my tears started to flow out uncontrollably [*laughs*].

Sano: You could overhear them even in the archives?

Chung : Not just in the archives but also in other units. Dealing with that kind of research, the emotions that come with it is required of the researcher. All the dry, hard data really come from a lot of emotions.



● On the Works

Cartographies: Their Sizes and Purposes

Sano: Moving briefly onto your cartographic works which you've been continuing since 2007. I'm curious about their size. If I remember correctly, the largest is about an arm span? How do you determine their sizes?

Chung : The largest map drawing to date is 1.8 meters, so yes, it's not tremendously big. But if you consider the meticulous process to cover the entire surface, it is *a lot* of work.

Sano: I can imagine; with all your microdots, beads, and layering of vellum and paper. Which is the 1.8 meter one?

Chung : The Tangier map.



Tiffany Chung, *Tangier 1943: the international zone, the French Capitulation in World War II, the Moroccan Communist Party, the Istiqlal Party and the call for independence of Morocco in 1944*, 2012, micropigment ink, gel ink, oil, and Copic marker on paper, 110.5 x 179.7 cm

Sano: How did it become to be that size?

Chung : Well, it involved a few different zones during the Moroccan independence, so I needed a larger surface area. In my monthly tracking of the Syrian refugee crisis, as the numbers quickly increase every week, I couldn't just do one large map. I needed a number of smaller ones to be able to track it. The size, to me, is not so important: It depends on the purpose of the mapping.

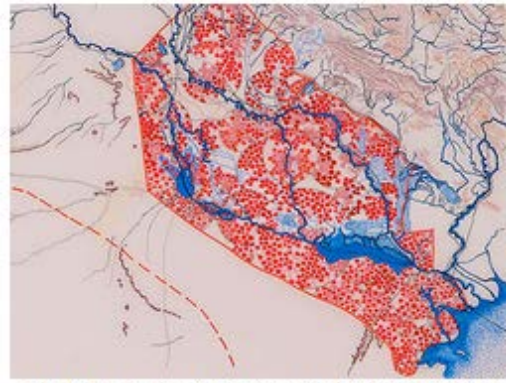


Tiffany Chung, *Syria Tracker: numbers of children killed in different governorates, March 2011–November 2014, 2014–2015*, oil and ink on vellum on paper, 23 x 30cm, 25.5 x 15.3 cm, 33 x 21 cm, 23 x 21 cm

Sano: I was always interested in their size especially because you can fold and unfold maps to navigate yourself from both close-up and bird's-eye views. And with *The Syria Project*, there is that dual perspective: having dozens of small canvases to follow the movement in close-up and also having the larger picture of the crisis.



Tiffany Chung, *The Syria Project*, 2014-ongoing, 56th International Art Exhibition—la Biennale di Venezia, *All the World's Futures* installation view, 2015



Tiffany Chung, *Straight Line carved and shaped the region: the secret deal of the 1916 Sykes & Picot Agreement* (detail), 2014, oil and ink on paper and vellum, 110 x 70cm

Chung : Yes, and it'd continue to grow, not just the number of maps but also the sizes of the dots.

Sano: You mentioned you'll be covering the entire globe with your new addition to *The Vietnam Exodus* project, so I assume it'll be pretty large.

Chung : Several of these maps are about 3 meters or larger. I need to have that size to show their escape routes and migration trajectories throughout the world.

Temporality in Maps, Videos, and Performance: Collapsing Time and Providing an Entry Point

Sano: How do you conceptualize temporality throughout the different mediums of your works? I mean, you also have several video works, one of which is *well-side gatherings: rice stories, the rioters, the speakers, and the voyeurs* (2011) which was based on your research of the *kome sodo* [rice riots]^{*3} in 1918 Japan, which you then made into a theater performance called *chronicles of a soundless dream* (2012).

With the maps, I understand different temporalities exist from the superimposition of layers or the juxtaposing of several canvases; with videos, duration is already an inherent component of the medium; and performance is a onetime, live occurrence, so to speak. So how do you think temporality plays in with the different mediums in your works?

^{*3} *Kome sodo* [rice riots] broke out in 1918 in Toyama Prefecture, Japan, perpetuated by the rapid rise in the prices of rice, a main staple in rural Japan. Newspapers gave national exposure to the riots in Toyama, which triggered similar riots throughout the country.

Chung : Well, one thing that you see throughout my works, in all the different mediums, is the collapse of time. When I layer the vellum or paper, there is already a collapse of the different time periods. With performance, too, the fact that I dig into history, pull out historical accounts of a nation or personal experiences, and have young dancers re-enact that moment, there is a collapse of time. Conceptually, it's about the collapsing of history between, for instance, Japan and Vietnam in *well-side gatherings* and *chronicles of a soundless dream. Japan during the war, and Vietnam after the war*: two different time periods, two different historical contexts. And on top of that, you have dancers, living *now*, who are trying to recapture the spirit of 1918. So while I dig into history, while I excavate lives and geopolitical or social contexts, I am layering time, thus collapsing it.

Sano: But your maps are very aesthetically pleasing, so what is your method of getting the audience to take a step further into the contexts or content of the maps?

Chung : Beauty and aesthetics draw the audience in before they realize they have just got punched in the guts with heavy subject matters. Titles, also, give an entry point into the works.

Sano: But still there is *so* much history, *so* much research condensed into your works.

Chung : What I avoid in all my works is to be didactic, to give answers, and to impose my ideas and beliefs on people. You can only give people a glimpse of history through an artwork, not a whole history lesson. I want to encourage questioning, and I want to provide an entry point into the history that the audience might not have known, so that they will take on the responsibility to study the history themselves. Furthermore, I often create a totally immersive experience through multi-sensory installations that include my mapping component, which by no means is the only medium I use. Unfortunately (or not), I'm mostly known for my cartographic practice.

Chung : I am currently trying to put together a lecture performance because, as you say, not everything can be shown in my maps. So a lecture performance on my process in length and exploring the issues that I have learnt through my projects may give the audience another entry point to understand what I go through in order to create such "beautiful" works [*smiles*].

The Beauty of Performance: Total Immersion in the (Hi)story

Chung : The thing about performance is that, as opposed to two-dimensional works, it is a very immersive experience. It's about tapping into all the different senses to immerse yourself in the (hi)story, to recall memories that might have otherwise been kept hidden in the subconscious. I think *that* is the beauty of performance which visual art alone might not be able to achieve.

Sano: Do you think you can play around a bit more with performance, then?

Chung : In a way. For instance, for *chronicles of a soundless dream*, I had one Japanese dancer whose job was to also read all the data on *kome sodo*.

Sano: You mean the key terms like, *onshi-mai* [imperial gift rice] and *nishoku-shugi* [two-meal-a-day-ism]?

Chung : Yes. He was also reading out the prefectures that participated in the revolt, the number of riots in each prefecture, and the different types of people that participated.

Sano: So it really becomes more than just a visual experience.

Chung : I think performance in particular has more of an advantage in tapping into people's emotions and memories. I really wanted to perform *chronicles of a soundless dream* in Vietnam. Although it was on Japanese history, the Vietnamese audiences who lived through a similar period of food shortages [with economic deprivation and strenuous political conditions] "got" it—they understood that I had subtly referred to the "subsidy" period in postwar Vietnam. I also used bricks which was the iconic object during this period as the main prop.

Sano: The bricks used to keep their places in line.



Tiffany Chung, *chronicles of a soundless dream* (still), 2011, single channel video, 35 minutes

Chung : Right. For the Vietnamese audience, the brick conjures up their collective memories. All the fragmentary elements in the performance give them flashbacks, and they realize they are familiar with what is going on onstage. It also makes the audiences breathless as tension was built up with intense choreography which was, at times, violent.

Sano: Keeping them on the hook, so to speak.

Chung : Exactly. I remember, when the 35-minute performance ended, there was a bit of a silence. It was as if the audience had held their breaths and finally quietly exhaled before they started clapping. It was a build-up of tension and its quiet release.

Panel Discussions: Resurfacing Issues, Policymakers Out of Hiding

Sano: Are there any new performances on the way that we can look forward to?

Chung : Well, I have always wanted to do more, but I haven't found the right moment to get back into it. But, one thing I am planning is to stage panel discussions. Visual art has its limitations but I want people to learn more about my research and findings. So I am planning to organize panel discussions. I have been invited to many, but now I am staging it as part of my practice.

Sano: You are *staging* panel discussions? With actors or...?

Chung : No, I am bringing back the past players during the Vietnamese refugee era; the policymakers, human rights lawyers and so on.

Sano: How do you find them?

Chung : Well, some actually found *me* [*smiles*]. A lot of people resurfaced because of my research that was materialized into *the unwanted population, The Vietnam Exodus—Hong Kong chapter, part 1: flotsam and jetsam (1975–2000)* exhibition^{*4} at Art Basel Hong Kong 2016; human rights lawyers, NPO staff, volunteers, and even policymakers. One gentleman who came challenged me on my work and said, "I helped drafting the 1982 closed camp policy in Hong Kong; one of the policies you discuss in your work." It's amazing just how all these ghosts of the past came out from the woodwork.

^{*4} This was the international debut of the first chapter of *The Vietnam Exodus* project, an installation of new works on Hong Kong's Vietnamese refugee community.

Sano: That's an entirely different entry point for the public, isn't it?

Chung : Truly. The human rights lawyers that worked on the Vietnamese refugees' cases in Hong Kong said that they had been waiting for this history to resurface to discuss how to improve the current situation. So I'm working to realize two panels: one on asylum policy where these lawyers and the former Vietnamese refugees will be in conversation with several current refugee organizations to elaborate on their experiences and related asylum policies; and the other panel will aim to reflect on "art in times of crisis."

Sano: It seems like your practice is no longer contained within just the art world.

Chung : You could say that [*smiles*].

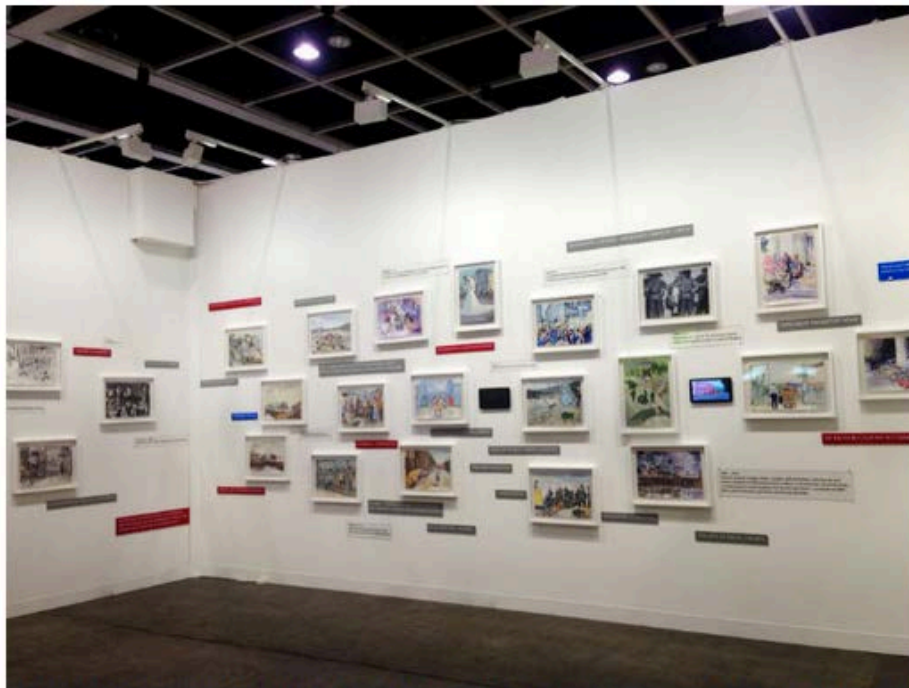
Nurturing Imaginations and Protesting from Within

Sano: I saw a clip of you in a classroom, teaching children. Where was that?

Chung : It was [a map-making workshop](#) for refugee students in Denmark—a collaboration between the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and a Danish Red Cross School. In fact, I'm returning to Europe to continue this [Travelling with Art program](#) for the young refugees at LMoMA and also in Vienna.

Sano: How do you make the time for *all* of this?!

Chung : I prioritize [*smiles*]. Not just teaching refugee students, but I've also mentored young Vietnamese artists and commissioned some of them to render into paintings the archival photographs I obtained from the UNHCR Archives and personal collections of former refugees. These became the installation, *flotsam and jetsam* (2015–2016). I fully credited the artists, of course.



Tiffany Chung, *flotsam and jetsam*, 2015–2016, watercolor, ink, acrylic, vinyl, plexiglass, video, and text, 28 works on paper, 40 text pieces on plexiglass panels, video and text on electronic tablets. Dimension of 28 paintings: 30 x 42 cm, dimension of 40 text pieces [on plexiglass] variable; dimension of tablets: 15 x 26 cm. *The Vietnam Exodus—Hong Kong chapter (1975–2000)* installation view, Art Basel Hong Kong 2016

Chung : That's how I'd like for them to learn this chapter of our history; by studying these particular photographs in detail. During the periodic critiques that I scheduled to monitor their progress, they asked questions that led to discussions about the historical contexts of the photographs.



Tiffany Chung, *flotsam and jetsam* (detail), 2015–2016

Chung : This politically driven historical amnesia is well embedded in the post-1975 population, and my work on the exodus history functions as a quiet protest against that amnesia from within.

Both projects [of the Vietnamese refugee history and the current refugee issues] unpack asylum policies and question current states of affairs from the refugee perspectives.

Sano: Thank you, Tiffany, for sharing with us your thoughts. I'm sure I was able to only scratch the surface, but I think I learned just how much of your dedication and hours of hard work are embodied in your nuanced works. I very much look forward to seeing the new addition to *The Vietnam Exodus* project and also your panel discussions.

Chung : Thank you for having me.

At Unklothespace Yokohama, on February 16, 2017

Plates: Courtesy of Tiffany Chung and Tyler Rollins Fine Art

Photo (Interview): Jouji Suzuki