

ARTFORUM

Another Form of Abstraction: Vietnamese Art Flexes Its Freedom

"RE:FORM - A glimpse of abstraction in Vietnam since Đổi Mới" at
galerie frank elbaz in Paris

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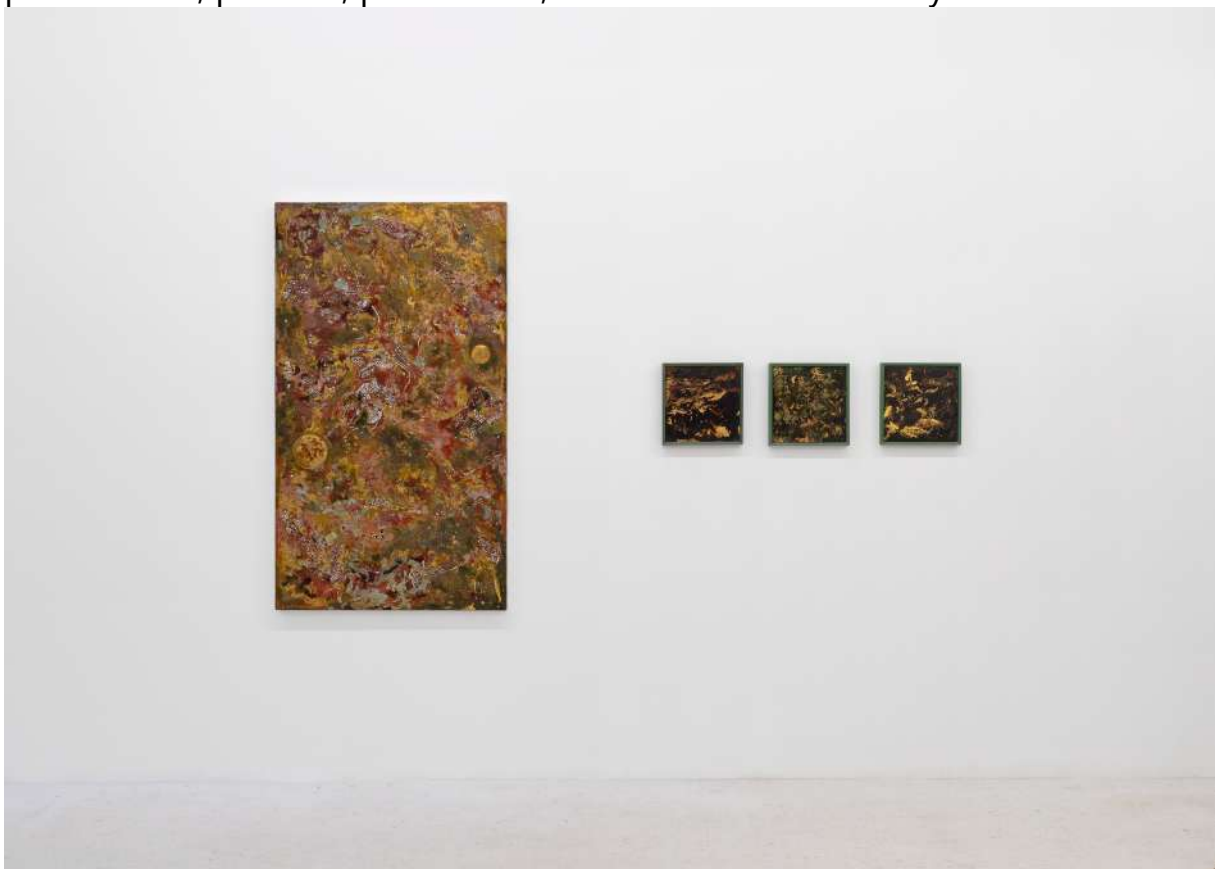
By Joe Fyfe



View of "RE:FORM - A glimpse of abstraction in Vietnam since Đổi Mới," 2026. Photo: Claire Dorn.

Through May 23, 2026—"Abstraction in the West is different from that in Asia," curator Lê Thiên-Bảo told me when I remarked that much of the art in "RE:FORM – A glimpse of abstraction in Vietnam since Đổi Mới," would be counted, according to most definitions, at least in the West, as figurative. "It

is much closer to extraction. . . . Painting without form did not exist before Đổi Mới"—the period after 1986 when the country opened to the West through a Socialist-oriented market economy. "Before then, Vietnam was under Russian influence; you were only allowed to make propaganda pictures." The exhibition traces the practices of five Vietnamese painters and sculptors who since that time have turned to abstraction, which here seems to mean an exploratory, stylistic freedom that could include representation. In the work of several of the artists here, formal experimentation coexists with reflection, through the choice of materials, on the history of their postcolonial, postwar, post-Soviet, neo-consumerist society.



View of "RE:FORM – A glimpse of abstraction in Vietnam since Đổi Mới," 2026. From left: Trương Công Tùng, *Day Wanes ... Night Waxes...* (Ngày tàn...Đêm lên), *Night*, 2025; Trương Công Tùng, *As Time Passes Through Shadows...* (no.07, no.04, no.08), 2023. Claire Dorn

Trương Công Tùng is the most important artist among them. His *Long Long Legacies*, 2021, is a netlike drape of wooden beads retrieved and modified from cut lumber and industrial materials that are waste products from the overdevelopment of Vietnam's Central Highlands. That area has a large indigenous population of more than thirty different ethnic groups whose

traditions and languages are under threat by state-sponsored relocations of some tribes and by commercial interests. Elsewhere, as in his 2023 exhibition at Sàn Art in Ho Chi Minh City, he has included such beads, always reconfigured as a central element in installations evoking the culture of the region's tribes by using plants, water, music, video imagery, and other elements.

Also on view here are four of Trương's nonfigurative paintings of swirling dark shapes and surface sparkles, made from lacquer on terra-cotta and recycled wood. This choice of materials harks back to the Indochina School of Fine Arts, founded in Hanoi in 1925. Its founding director, Victor Tardieu, promoted a form of narrative figuration utilizing a traditional form of lacquer painting combining gold and silver leaf, a technique until then used in only decorative arts and architecture. A very demanding process, this has been central to the whole development of recent Vietnamese painting.



Hà Mạnh Thắng, *The last splendid afternoons #2*, 2024, acrylic, acrylic medium, lacquer, charcoal, gold leaves and oil on canvas and silk, 74 3/4 × 43 1/4 × 2". Claire Dorn

Hà Mạnh Thắng explores another traditional technique, silk painting. In his series “The Ancient Monastery Walls,” 2024–25, the support is almost completely hidden under delicate layers of flakes, made from combinations of acrylic, lacquer, charcoal, silvery powder, and oil paint. Their faux-antique surfaces are dramatic, but their encasement in clunky, clear plastic robs them of immediacy.



Nguyễn Tấn Cương, *Untitled, from Outer Field*, 2024, jute, mixed media, and oil on canvas, 47 1/4 × 57 1/8 × 2". Claire Dorn

Vietnam has a remarkably robust industry of tourist painting. Nguyễn Tấn Cương makes personal fantasies of undersea life partially utilizing a painting vocabulary derived from such sources. Thảo Nguyên Phan combines watercolors depicting scenes based on historical photographs from the archives of missionary anthropologist Jacques Dournes. Along with slides of

additional watercolors, images of her source material are projected in an adjacent darkened gallery. Classifying this work as abstraction seems dubious, however. The same is true of Đỗ Hoàng Tường's paintings, heavily influenced by Francis Bacon. The violence in the English artist's work has evidently been quite relevant to Tường, who as a child in Huế lived through wartime atrocities.

The Đổi Mới era opened up a degree of artistic freedom in Vietnam, but for abstraction the date seems arbitrary. My favorite Vietnamese painter, Tran Trung Tin, whose work, according to this curator's definition, is loosely figurative, sometimes moved into complete abstraction. Tin made freely painterly works on found newspaper as American bombs dropped around him in Hanoi in the 1970s. To my knowledge, he has yet to be shown in the West. It's a shame that he wasn't included in this show, which is nonetheless an important one for many reasons. It introduces a dynamic art culture that remains energetic and optimistic under repressive circumstances and despite its artistic patrimony having been reduced to rubble by a United States that would still prefer not to think about it at all.

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