

ARTIST LIEN TRUONG OFFERS A CHANCE TO 'BANTER WITH THE DEVIL.'



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The piece: "... and still we banter with the Devil"

The artist: Lien Truong Where: In the group show "in(di) visible," Station Museum of Contemporary Art, through April 22

Why: In a revelatory, wide-ranging group show that examines the marginalization of Asian-Americans and their stereotyping as a "model minority," Truong's seductive, mixed-media painting asserts itself as a shocker partly because it is as unabashedly beautiful as it is conceptually powerful.

Part of a still-in-progress series called "Mutiny in the Garden,"

Truong's 6-by-8-foot canvas puts a contemporary Asian spin on themes the influential, early-19th-century artist Thomas Cole explored with a series of five romantic landscapes, "The Course of Empire."

Cole's paintings suggest the birth, growth and eventual decay of a city that is carved from a wild and primitive landscape. He was examining the promises of Manifest Destiny, the sociopolitical ideology that drove westward expansion across the U.S. in the 19th century. (One might think of it as the early-19th-century version of nationalism: The belief that the nation had a God-given right to tame and mold the entire American

continent in its democratic, capitalistic image.)

Truong's abstracted composition interprets a fractured landscape. She describes her works as "a frenetic amalgamation" of Western and Asian painting techniques and philosophies. She also culls from Asian silk traditions and the colors and compositions of antique Japanese war prints.

With this painting, she juxtaposes them all. It's as if her bold, painted gestures partially obscure a wall papered with many layers of finely detailed Asian textiles that now reveal themselves as jagged bits and pieces. Delicate gestures offset



Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle Lien Truong's mixed-media painting "... and still we banter with the Devil" is from a series that interprets the work of Thomas Cole.

bold ones, even in the materials, including gold thread that darts across the canvas and filmy strips of painted silk.

A series of much smaller, or-

nately framed canvases line the walls on either side of Truong's big piece. These are from a related project that explores how the U.S. has attempted to dominate other countries since



Station Museum of Contemporary Art

World War II with bombs.

Each painting depicts a lush landscape that's visible only through the narrow "window" of a single, unpainted swipe in the shape of a brushstroke. Truong borrowed the swoopy shapes from Roy Lichtenstein's 1960s series, "Brushstrokes," which nodded to Abstract Expressionism.

She can clearly pack a good art history lesson into even a small canvas.