

SLOT: Art from Hanoi

GEORGE BURCHETT 14 Dec 2014-10 Jan 2015

Hanoi born artist George Burchett was delivered into a world of experiences that have profoundly affected his world views¹, and in equal measure the way he makes and considers the function and purpose of art. Andre Vltchek, close friend and colleague of Burchett's wrote "those circumstances...convinced us that real art has to be engaged...and no matter what, it has to be about the people and for the people"²

I asked him about the genesis of the work displayed at SLOT, about the human figure in particular. He replied quite simply "this is my Father"³. In a further conversation he referred to his recent residency at the Muong Studio Art Centre, north of Hanoi.⁴ It was during one of his daily meals there with respected cultural historian and artist Phan Cam Thuong, when he was introduced to 1925-1945 historic drawings by Hanoi artists now in the private collection of Tira Vanichtheeranont.⁵ Appreciatively absorbing this publication, combined with having just accomplished an intense research project of his own, exhibiting his father's photographic works 1954-1966 at the esteemed Ho Chi Minh Museum⁶, suddenly unleashed into his sketchbooks (Burchett is a compulsive drawer) this 'figure in conical hat'. Prior to recent years, Burchett was not looking directly at his own family history in relation to his art making, but it was now all coming together. As he was quoted as saying in 2012 "Vietnam represents the history that my family shares..."⁷ It is clear to me that these histories are inextricable and that Burchett must explore these intertwined narratives, implications, and symbolisms to make sense of his own personal place and voice in amongst these intensely challenging and complex experiences.

On my final visit to his West Lake studio October 2014, he had just completed framing a new series of works on dzo paper⁸ using the above-mentioned figure in a conical hat, but also a straight shooting VC girl, and the finger of democracy (mis/spelt in Greek) – also included in SLOT. To me, this finger is represented as a violent and impertinent gesture and a symbol of tagging and monitoring, one of punishment and control...as Burchett explained "you know, the finger that gets inked". In these screen prints, sometimes in red, and again in white and black, the finger takes on various weighty intonations.

It was the rhythmic imperfections of the repeat patterning, and the obsessive nature of repetition that really excited me. Moreover, these screen printed images were not only presented as framed works but crept around his home including domestic and utilitarian surfaces – such as his wife's⁹ skirt, their sofa cushion covers...and stencilled, graffiti-like in the public laneway. Although a playful repeat patterning there is also a message of stubborn persistence and resistance, a kind of ironic play on propaganda to counter propaganda, but on a contradictory precipice of being commoditised (and why not). The repeat patterning functions like some kind of reminder, perhaps of our propensity to not learn from the past, or not even know the past - because of the hypocrisy and malfunctioning of democracy itself – and even in the present, to not know what we are looking at even when we are staring at it. The elemental form of the images tells me there is something basic I need to know, some missing key to a truth that will help explain the world.

There lingers an easy risk of the 'figure in conical hat' being read as 'just another figure in conical hat'. Perhaps Burchett is toying with this risk. It is arguably such an over exposed, vermin-like, exhausted stereotype...or but is it? What does it really stand for? How do we truly read a symbol across time, place, personal and cultural histories? Each viewer can only respond to it in a way loaded with their own personal history and perspectives. Unless we can usurp and overturn that – by sharing stories and experiences, by digging beneath the surface – we are condemned to our own blind spots. But most powerful of all to me perhaps is this, as I view it, memoriam to the life of his Father, a celebration of his love for “my people”¹⁰, and ultimately a testimony to intergenerational effects of war and conflict. It reminds me of Vltchek's more pointed statement describing Burchett's Father's case: a demonstration of “how ‘dangerous’ the truth is, how vindictive the Western regime is, and how powerful one single person can be, if armed with talent, courage and integrity”.¹¹

Mai Nguyen-Long

Bulli-based artist with a special interest in art from Hanoi

25 November 2014

Thank you to George Burchett for this privilege of exhibiting his work. I urge readers to refer to the two articles attached to gain further insight into the context of his practice (<http://www.georgeburchett.com/>). Thank you also to SLOT for their tremendous generosity and support in making this humble “Art from Hanoi” project possible (<http://slotgallery.blogspot.com.au/>).

¹ It would be impossible for me to do justice to these experiences in a small summary, and I therefore attach two relevant articles which better illustrate some of these details: (1) Time / Lines solo show exhibited a Mori Gallery Sydney 3-24 February 2010 text and images by George Burchett (2) Andre Vltchek, CounterPunch (online) Weekend Edition Dec 7-9 2012 “Burchett’s in Vietnam: ‘Enemies of Australian State’ and Hanoi”

² Andre Vltchek, CounterPunch (online) Weekend Edition Dec 7-9 2012 “Burchett’s in Vietnam: ‘Enemies of Australian State’ and Hanoi”

³ Image of George Burchett’s father: photo page 37 Viet Nam and Ho Chi Minh as seen by Journalist Wilfred Burchett © George Burchett and The Gioi Publishers 2011 <see late 50s / early 60s photo below>

⁴ Located in Hoa Binh, established by artist Vu Duc Hieu

⁵ Important and Priceless Works of Vietnamese Modern Arts as Historic Sketches, Political Comics and Drawings by Painters from Indochina School of Fine Arts, Hanoi 1925-1945 - from the Collection of Tira Vanichtheeranont; Authors: Phan Cam Thuong, Nguyen Anh Tuan, and Tira Vanichtheeranont; Nha Xuat Ban My Thuat 2010

⁶ Viet Nam and Ho Chi Minh as seen by Journalist Wilfred Burchett; © George Burchett and The Gioi Publishers 2011.; This publication accompanied an exhibition displaying a selection of 100 of Wilfred Burchett’s photographic works dating from 1954-1966.

⁷ Andre Vltchek 2012 CounterPunch

⁸ Dzo paper:

⁹ Burchett’s wife, Ilza Burchett is also an accomplished artist <http://www.ilzaburchett.com/>

¹⁰ Andre Vltchek 2012 in CounterPunch, George Burchett uses the words “my people” when referring to Vietnamese men and women

¹¹ Andre Vltchek 2012 CounterPunch

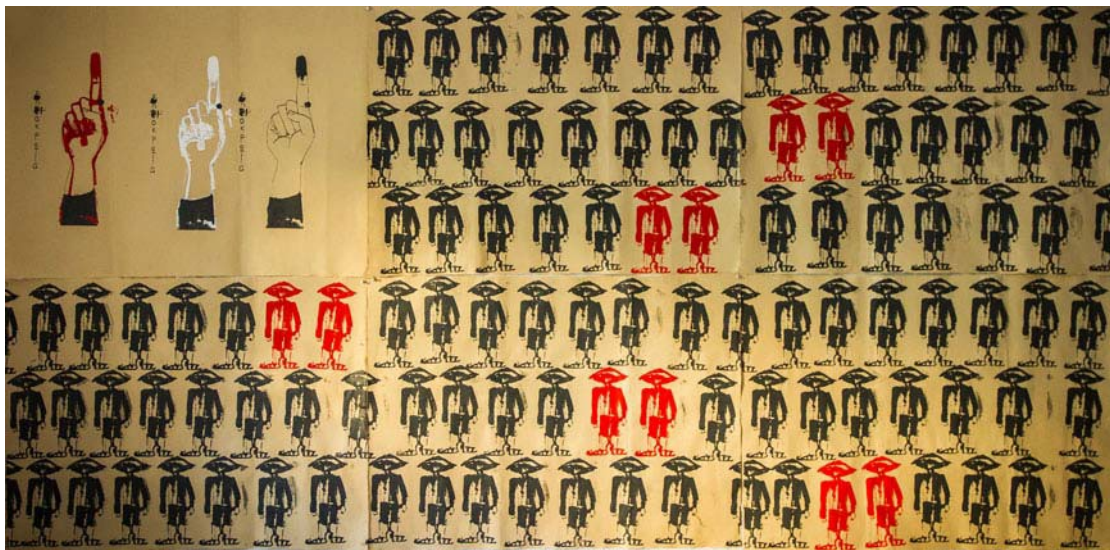


Image: Democracy, George Burchett 2014, screen print on dzo paper, 156 x 321 cm



Image: George Burchett’s Father: page 37 Viet Nam and Ho Chi Minh as seen by Journalist Wilfred Burchett © George Burchett and The Gioi Publishers 2011