

## Trong Nguyen's Signature

By Daria Brit Shapiro

Trong Nguyen is a prankster. The Vietnamese-American artist's conceptual paintings engage issues of ownership, identity and consumption, relying heavily on the interaction between the viewer and the artwork to reveal deeper forces at work. Though expertly painted, Nguyen's paintings should not be taken at face value, the importance lies in what's hidden beneath the surface.

In his *Signature* series, Nguyen acquires accomplished paintings from thrift shops and flea markets, then alters the found paintings utilizing one of three methods: "whiting out" the entirety of the canvas but leaving the original signature intact; executing a new painting in a similar style over the original work, while still retaining the original signature; erasing the signature completely by incorporating it into the landscape. Each of these three approaches questions the validity of the work based upon its authorship. Aside from identifying art as a commodity, Nguyen illuminates the powerlessness of the artist to control the "use" of their work once it has been acquired by a collector. Simultaneously, Nguyen's alterations reveal the "death of the author" inherent in the art-making process and consequently, proves that all art is quite subjective, regardless of its maker.



Trong G. Nguyen, *The Diabolical (First State: Mustard)*, 2002-present. Acrylic on canvas, paintings colored exactly the same as walls. Dimensions and arrangement variable.

In a similar questioning of identity and role-playing, Nguyen's *The Diabolical* dismantles the binary of spectator/spectacle by placing the viewer in a controlled environment, forcing an interaction with the work. *The Diabolical* is a series of monochromatic paintings depicting "height lines" that one would see in a mugshot or in a child's room. Painted impasto and in hues that match the wall, these works blend silently into the architecture and are installed at standard 60 inch museum hanging height, at which their vertical measurements are physically accurate. Upon entering the exhibition space, the spectator finds that their viewing process is engineered and manipulated by the artist. *The Diabolical* examines institutional procedure, placing the viewer in what

Nguyen would call an "incriminating space."

But perhaps Trong Nguyen's most powerfully executed series is *Art Hijack*. Collaborating with Elana Rubinfeld, Nguyen organized a viewing of collector Rick Haatj's private collection, by invitation only. Over the course of a week, Rubinfeld and Nguyen held swanky soirees in the penthouse of the Roger Smith Hotel, attended by a who's-who of the art world. Comprised of several major masterworks, Rick Haatj's collection includes such names as Reubens, Munch, Picasso, Corot, Van Gogh and even Duchamp. Attendees stood in awe before *The Scream*, which is widely known to be a stolen artwork, then slowly began to realize that each of the works represented in Haatj's collection were reputedly lost or stolen. Not only were the guests made to feel as accomplices to an illegal collection, but the most interesting twist: the "stolen" artworks on view were forgeries, collected by Haatj and painstakingly painted by Nguyen and Rubinfeld. "Rick Haatj" was an anagram of "Art Hijack" and the guests had been duped. Trong Nguyen leaves us wondering, are these paintings forgeries or contemporary revisions? And ultimately, what makes an artwork collectible?