

Sung Tieu: Civic Floor

April 4–July 16, 2023, Hayden Gallery



MIT List Visual
Arts Center

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Sung Tieu employs sculpture, drawing, sound, video, and installation to examine a wide range of subjects in which social or political power is articulated through sensory and psychological realms.

Through various media, Tieu crafts a spatial narrative in each of her exhibitions that reflects her research into bureaucratic systems and the psychological or emotional impact of their use of space. Many of the artist's works and past architectural interventions have served as evocative reconstructions of sites of control, surveillance, or bureaucracy—at times, subtly referencing her own lived experience with various administrative environments.

Perception is a key node in Tieu's work as she elaborates the often alienating effects of sound and our sensory experiences of architecture and design. In recent pieces, she has distorted a Wagnerian opera as an "orchestra" of office sounds (*Zugzwang* [2020]); reconstructed the acoustic attacks alleged to have caused Havana syndrome, capturing her own exposure to the sound via brain scans (*In Cold Print* [2020]); and drawn on US military psychological operations' audio recordings designed to destabilize the Vietnamese National Liberation Front (*No Gods, No Masters* [2017]).

In *Civic Floor*, visitors enter an artificially blank space, its floor brightened with white carpeting that adds a sense of isolation and placelessness. Central to the presentation is a suite of abstract steel sculptures, imposing in substance and weight, which reference architectural spaces designed for detention. Reflective stainless steel

plates suspended above them allow partial aerial views of their interiors, filled with soil. A new series of tablet-like plaster reliefs derived from the paperwork for US asylum petitions hangs on the gallery walls and offers a formal analysis of the bureaucratic forms themselves. In their abstract fields of lines and boxes, they illustrate the spatial parameters within which an asylum seeker's story might exist. In corresponding stainless steel plaques, the forms' narrow parameters (boxes, lines, cells) are quantified in square millimeters, allowing us to consider how these tightly apportioned spaces operate in tandem with the often casual hostility and incidental violence of administrative systems and their architectures. Three stainless steel stools, typical of immigration and detention spaces, are affixed to the gallery walls. Their displacement in the gallery alludes to how they have also been introduced as seating in restaurants, airports, playgrounds, and state offices—and how easily these public areas have taken up the security and control measures of carceral spaces.

With this suite of works, as well as in a new multichannel sound installation compelling visitors to traverse the gallery, Tieu invites us to consider space and its allowances in not only formal, sculptural terms that entreat the histories of Minimalism but also sociopolitical terms, which echo the title's invocation of citizenship and the rights it confers.



Above:
Installation view: *Civic Floor*, Mudam, Luxembourg, 2022. Photo: Mareike Tocha

Front cover:
Untitled (Civic Floor III), 2022. Digital drawing. Courtesy the artist



New Generation, Detail, 2022 (detail). Black steel, soil, 59 × 29½ × 39¾ in. (150 × 75 × 100 cm).
Photo: Mareike Tocha



Grid, Form I-602, 2022 (detail). Plaster, framed in linen on wood and Perspex, twelve parts: 16½ × 13¾ × 1¼ in. (41.9 × 33.38 × 3.17 cm) each. Photo: Mareike Tocha

Radial, Detail, 2022
Courtyard, Detail, 2022
Galleried, Detail, 2022
New Generation, Detail, 2022

Tieu's recently commissioned sculptures hold a central presence in the exhibition. Rendered in thin, black steel, their austere, rectilinear geometries punctuate the gallery at evenly spaced intervals. Each imposing volume sits on a high pedestal of the same material, and its overall height makes the work oddly inaccessible and difficult to view. Those able to peer over the top edge of these structures will discover that the interiors are not hollow but filled with earth. Others may, instead, find that the suspended stainless steel panels, cut to align with each sculpture's perimeter, offer a reflective surface for viewing this "ground" from above.

As objects, the works share certain features with Minimalism—such as considerations of space and volume, the use of industrial materials, and the primacy of the viewer's

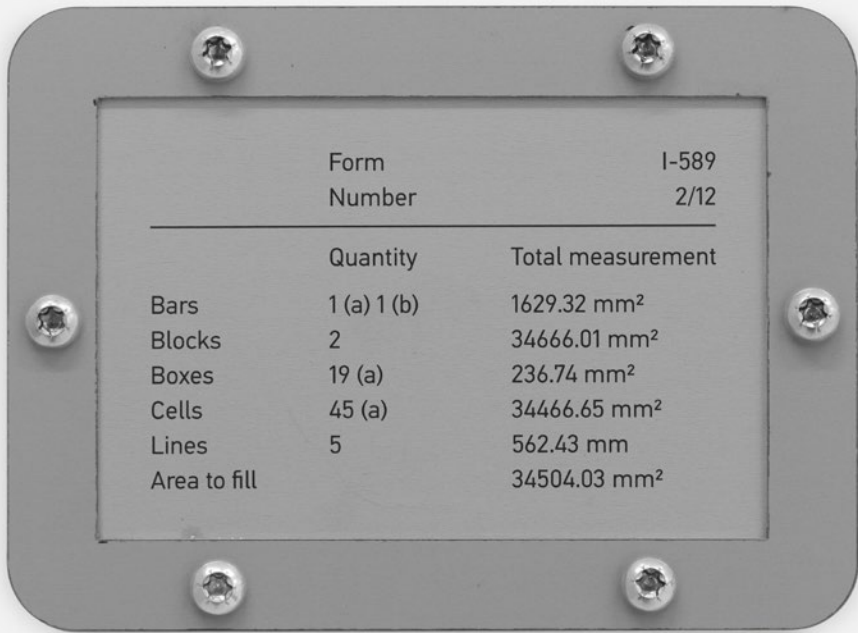
perceptual relationship. However, they also refer to specific models of spatial organization, which have far more significant impacts on the well-being and perceptual relationships of those implicated. The title of each sculpture references a common prison design, and each offers detailed views of the aforementioned plan (for example, *Radial, Detail* is modeled on one of the fans or spokes of a radial design). Peering into the artist's reproductions of these spaces urges us to consider the functions of these architectural designs: to intern and isolate, discourage communication, maximize capacity, facilitate surveillance, and restrict behavior. Tieu, who, in previous works, has highlighted the alienating features of Brutalist and Minimalist architecture, offers up these architectural forms as case studies for how space can be weaponized and design can have a dehumanizing effect.

Grid, Form I-589, 2022
Grid, Form I-602, 2022
Grid, Form I-881, 2022

Linking bureaucracy, spatial analysis, and architecture, Tieu's *Grid, Form* series offers a formal and conceptual bridge between her imposing steel sculptures and the engraved plaques (*Numeric Analysis* [2022]) on view. These tablet-like relief works in plaster (each roughly the size of a sheet of office paper) are scored and grooved with lines and boxes of varying lengths. Framed by a mat of white linen and encased in clear acrylic, they repeat with slight variations. Like the large sculptures, these works appear abstract and austere, but they are not "pure forms." As we learn from their subtitles, *I-589*, *I-602*, and *I-881*—which reference the numerals assigned to asylum and refugee applications in the US—the *Grid, Form* series traffics in a civic realm. The lines and boxes on each derive from these documents, which Tieu has subjected to formal analysis to reflect on the way space—even in something as banal as paperwork—determines what stories

can be told and, subsequently, shapes or confines human life. How can the intricacies of human experience, particularly those complicated by the need to seek political asylum, fit into these narrow spaces?

The words "form" and "grid"—both motifs and subjects of critique for Tieu in past works—surface in the title of these works, and both are apparatuses that, in the artist's view, share a false impartiality with Minimalism. Devoid of language, these works also feign neutrality (the application's design is meant to standardize and eliminate bias), yet Tieu's analysis of these forms reveals how, like architecture, their false objectivity has potential to harm. The artist's choice of plaster for these pieces, which nearly blend in with the gallery's white walls, also implicates the administrative function of architecture—how it not only encloses space but also governs the movement of bodies.



Numeric Analysis, Form I-589, 2022 (detail). Laser-engraved stainless steel plates, screws, twelve parts: 4¾ × 3½ × ⅜ in. (12 × 8.8 × 1 cm) each. Photo: Mareike Tocha

Numeric Analysis, Form I-589, 2022 ***Numeric Analysis, Form I-602, 2022*** ***Numeric Analysis, Form I-881, 2022***

Each of Tieu's *Numeric Analysis* works corresponds with the *Grid, Form* piece subtitled with the same number. Where the plaster works illustrate the blank space allotted in various US asylum applications (abstracted as enigmatic fields of lines and boxes), these etched steel plaques bluntly quantify, in square millimeters, the number of bars, blocks, boxes, cells, and lines on each form. The artist's use of small metal plates deliberately engages a mode of direct communication supposedly free of bias or interpretation—similar plaques often serve as information markers for artworks, monuments, or sites of interest. Much like the bureaucratic documents they analyze, these pieces have a remarkably impersonal

effect, yet they speak to how legal personhood—or the right to have rights—critically transpires in the spaces of these forms. The uniform bars, blocks, boxes, cells, and lines they evaluate effectively limit the extent to which complex, political subjects and identities can be forged through these applications. In material, these semi-reflective steel placards, with rounded edges and heavy-duty bolts, echo that of vandal-resistant mirrors found in prisons. The same reflective material is suspended above the exhibition's central sculptures, allowing partial aerial views into another world of disenfranchisement articulated below.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Sung Tieu (b. 1987, Hai Duong, Vietnam) lives and works in Berlin. She has had recent solo exhibitions at Mudam, Luxembourg (2022); Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany; Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig, Germany (2021); Nottingham Contemporary, UK; and Haus der Kunst, Munich (2020). Her work was included in the 34th São Paulo Biennial and the 2021 Kyiv Biennial and exhibited in group survey exhibitions at Museion, Bolzano, Italy; Kunsthalle Basel (2021); Museum Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt; GAMeC Museum, Bergamo, Italy; Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin (2020); and Kunsthaus Hamburg (2019). She received the 2021 Frieze Artist Award, the 2021 Ars Viva award, and the audience award of the 2021 Preis der Nationalgalerie, Hamburger Bahnhof.

Sung Tieu: Civic Floor is organized by Natalie Bell, Curator.

The exhibition is produced in partnership with Mudam Luxembourg—Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean and Southern Alberta Art Gallery Maansiksikaitapiitsinikssin.

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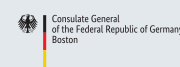
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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Gallery Talk: The Artist's Perspective, with Sung Tieu

Friday, April 14, 2023, 5–6 PM EST

In-person program

Gallery Talk: The Measure of Our Lives, with K. Anthony Jones

Wednesday, May 17, 2023

5:30–6:30 PM EST

Hybrid program (in-person with virtual available)

Graduate Student Talk: Jensen Johnson

Thursday, April 27, 2023, 5:30–6 PM EST

Hybrid program (in-person with virtual available)

Panel Discussion: Sung Tieu in Conversation with Keller Easterling and Eve Meltzer

Wednesday, May 24, 2023, 1–2 PM EST

Virtual program in collaboration with Amant, Brooklyn

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FREE DIGITAL GUIDE



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LEARN MORE

Balfour, Danny L., Guy B. Adams, and Ashley E. Nickels, eds. *Unmasking Administrative Evil* (5th Edition). London: Routledge, 2019.

Gündoğdu, Ayten. *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Knoblauch, Joy. *The Architecture of Good Behavior: Psychology and Modern Institutional Design in Postwar America*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020.

Meltzer, Eve. *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

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MIT List Visual Arts Center
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Cambridge, MA 02139
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