



**Sung Tieu: Civic Floor**

**LARGE PRINT  
BROCHURE**

April 5–July 30, 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.

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***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.

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## ***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.

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## 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.

## **MEMBERSHIP**

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This exhibition is accompanied by a visual description tour.

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## **SPONSORS**

Exhibitions at the List Center are made possible with the support of Fotene & Tom Coté, Audrey & James Foster, Idee German Schoenheimer, Joyce Linde, Cynthia & John Reed, and Sara-Ann & Robert Sanders. Additional support is provided by the Jacques and Natasha Gelman Foundation. This exhibition is also supported by generous donors to the 2020 McDermott Award Gala, hosted by the Council for the Arts at MIT. Special thanks to the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany Boston.

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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

### **Graduate Student Talk: Jensen Johnson**

Thursday, April 27, 2023, 5:30–6 pm est

Hybrid program (in-person with virtual available)

### **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)

### **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**



Learn more about the work on view and access a visual descriptor audio guide through the Bloomberg Connects mobile application.

## 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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