

## Proving his Mettle: Danh Vo Shakes Things Up at the Kitchen - Interviews



Visitors to the Kitchen should not be alarmed by the thunderous pounding that greets them as they enter the art and performance space in Manhattan's West Chelsea neighborhood. Not to be mistaken for noise from one of the area's interminable construction projects, the sound in fact issues from the show upstairs, a performance/installation conceived by Vietnamese-born, Basel-based artist [Danh Vo](#) and American experimental band [Xiu Xiu](#) and centered on the performance piece *Metal*.

The brainchild of singer-songwriter Jamie Stewart, who founded the group in San Jose, Calif., in 2000, Xiu Xiu is celebrated for its varied instrumentation—members use the harmonium, mandolin, brass bells and gongs, among others—and its lyrical deviance: Stewart has said that his influences include Korean folk music, contemporary classical music and gay dance music.

Vo and Stewart have worked together before; Vo submitted lyrics written by his father for the band's 2004 homoerotic ballad "Fabulous Muscles." For the current show, those lyrics have been written on the gallery's walls in calligraphic letters by Vo's father himself, providing a

provocative backdrop for the action. "Fabulous muscles, take my breath away," they read. "Cremate me after you cum on my lips."

*Metal* is anchored by daily performances (Tuesday-Saturday, 12-3 p.m., through Saturday, Oct. 18), during which the band's three members play along with a bass line created by a pair of Thai gold pounders whom Vo invited from Bangkok to beat nuggets into gold leaf. The musicians are active for all three hours, playing a makeshift gamelan, throwing cymbals like discuses and shooting candy at gongs with slingshots, while, seated in a corner, the metalworkers pound steadily away. The room thrums with a steady beat.

Vo talked to *A.i.A.* by phone recently about the importance of dissonance, investigating labor within the cultural context and his love affair with gold leaf.

**EMILY NATHAN** How did you conceive of the juxtaposition of the gold pounders and an experimental band?

**DANH VO** That was actually Xiu Xiu's idea. Tim [Griffin, Kitchen director] offered me the space to do whatever I want. I had met Xiu Xiu a while ago, when I had my father write the lyrics for "Fabulous Muscles." I asked Stewart please not to sue me if it was too far out—and he really liked it.

The collaboration came from the pure fact that we like each other. We agreed that we should just do what we're good at and see what happens. Somehow, when I showed Stewart a video of the gold pounders, he fell in love with it. He wanted to compose a whole music-making session in relationship with this labor, and I liked that idea. We didn't have any chance to rehearse it, so everything just came together at the Kitchen. Nobody had any idea how it would go.

**NATHAN** You often use gold leaf in your work. How and when did the material enter into your artistic vocabulary?

**VO** I had a very good Thai friend I studied with in Frankfurt who moved back to Thailand after we finished school. In order for us to see each other, I had to go to Thailand once a year. At a certain point, I began to be more and more busy, so both of us knew that if I wanted to keep spending time there, I needed to be doing some work at the same time.

We must have been drunk, because we wanted to find a material that was easy to get in Thailand, and somehow gold leaf came up. We were thinking of trying to use the gold leaf that they use in temples in Bangkok, and we wanted to combine it with a totally common thing—cardboard boxes. When we put them together, we really liked how they looked. So for me it was really important to learn about the process of making this material. Most industrial countries, of course, have machines to do this work, but in Thailand they still do it manually.

**NATHAN** Curation is an important part of your artistic practice, in which you often rearrange and organize objects, ideas and motifs that are loaded with cultural and political significance. In *Metal*, you bring a number of sensory experiences together in one room.

**VO** I never use the word "curate." I think events and human beings are equal with objects. I never believed that in order to make art, you have to make things. In life we are surrounded with all these differences and contradictions—so it has always made more sense for me to pick things out not because they *do* speak to each other, but maybe the contrary: because they do not. In my work, there are always elements that make no sense. I think that's much more interesting, putting these dissonant things together. The clash speaks better than putting gold with marble, for example.

**NATHAN** In *Metal*, there is a sort of harmony as well as a tension that is generated. Is this deliberate on your part, and what is it meant to reflect?

**VO** Both Xiu Xiu and I are very aware of the implications in working with labor within the cultural context—and that tension is something I think it's important to be confronted with and conscious of. For me, the work that I'm doing with my father is very much about that; that's also why the third element in the show is the lyric he wrote. In terms of the music, Xiu Xiu did a great job in emphasizing the discomfort: they've created a very violent piece, and I think it is a powerful one, frightening but also productive. It's like the pounding of the gold is shaking the entire space: it's a difficult experience, visual and physical as well.

**NATHAN** You've worked with your father before: how does his labor here relate to the rest of the installation?

**VO** In this exhibition, the lyrics on the wall from my father were an attempt at dissolving words and meaning. We are connected through work, not meaning: it's just a weird relationship. But it's life.

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