

ART | OCTOBER 13, 2014 ISSUE

FULL METAL RACKET

A conceptual artist strikes gold at the Kitchen.

BY ANDREA SCOTT

Danh Vo's "Metal" is art with a heartbeat: the very loud, steady sound of nuggets of gold being pounded into gold leaf. Five days a week, at the Kitchen, Nantapol and Pruan Panicharam, a Thai father and son, work for three hours straight, accompanied by the experimental musicians Jamie Stewart, Ches Smith, and Shayna Dunkelman, of the band Xiu Xiu. To the beat of rosewood-and-brass hammers, Xiu Xiu play a makeshift gamelan of metal instruments, including cymbals, bells, triangles, vibraphones, and the occasional whistle. The band's daily repertoire—thirty-six compositions of five minutes each—variously suggests John Cage, Philip Glass, and, when the musicians shoot candy at gongs with slingshots, a post-punk Willy Wonka. By incorporating intervals of non-musical action (sweeping up shattered candy, for instance), the band attunes itself to the task-based work of the father and son. At one point, Xiu Xiu "takes five" and does nothing; the hammerers continue to hammer. The band's performance is riveting; the relentlessness of the craftsmen verges on the ecstatic. The Kitchen's executive director, Tim Griffin, told me that he sees Vo "building on the legacy of minimalism, when something tedious becomes something gorgeous, when repetition opens into something else and time starts to operate differently."

ILLUSTRATION BY GLORIA PIZZILLI



In bringing two men across the world to complete an avant-garde art project, Vo evokes his own story. He was born in South Vietnam in 1975, the year of the fall of Saigon. Four years later, his family escaped in a boat—handmade by his father, who also helped build the structure on which the gold is being pounded—and were rescued by a freighter that brought them to Copenhagen, where Vo grew up. He now lives in Mexico City and speaks English with a German accent, acquired during time spent in

Frankfurt and Berlin. He is often pigeonholed as making art about identity politics, but which identity? When Vo won the Guggenheim's Hugo Boss Prize, in 2012, in lieu of exhibiting his own work he showed a collection owned by the late American artist Martin Wong and Wong's mother. Vo's insistence on collaboration dissolves the idea of the singular artist. For all his conceptual strategies, at the Kitchen Vo strikes a visceral chord—this is art that you can feel, and not just because it rings in your ears. ♦

ANDREA SCOTT
