

# To View a Plastic Flower

Gallery Guide

**Los  
Angeles  
Municipal  
Art  
Gallery**



# To View a Plastic Flower

It is a new year and the United States is in conflict. Global tensions and anxieties reflect yet another military engagement with the Middle East. This news is not new nor without historical precedence.<sup>1,2</sup> We are a country with a long history of intervention and military conflict to maintain global order. With upwards of \$6.4 trillion<sup>3</sup> allocated for a “War on Terror,” what societal devices help rationalize and legitimize such massive resource allocations, and what is our culpability?

This is the timeliest lens available, but not the only one, to preface this exhibition, one that features new video and multimedia installations that engage themes on interconnectivity, perspectivism, and the poetics (as well as politics) of conflict.

The development of this exhibition was inspired by Buddhist monk and anti-war activist Thich Nhat Hanh’s idea of “inter-being,” meaning nothing can exist by itself and everything has to “inter-be” with everything else. This is central to the exhibition’s overarching themes and inspiration for the title. The figure of the “flower” stems from one of Thich’s well-known sayings suggesting that by touching a flower one also touches the clouds and rain that were necessary to manifest the flower. Yet the descriptor of “plastic”—referencing both synthetic and natural materials and the ability to be molded or changed—alters the nature of the flower<sup>4</sup>. We can, then approach, a plastic flower as a multiplicity of perspectives that considers past and present modes of production through the consumption of mass media<sup>5</sup>.

In keeping with this approach, the exhibition presents three discrete installations that register the presence and absence of information, movement, and optics through each artist’s point of view set within the theater of military engagement.

Abigail Raphael Collins' experimental documentary and video installation, *Out of Play*, investigates the relationship between the entertainment industry and the U.S. military, how media is produced, and the fictions that are constructed in the absence of information. By utilizing media, Collins questions the role and accountability of its viewers, while elevating the perception of media as a powerful tool, beyond Hollywood entertainment.

T. Kim-Trang Tran's three-channel video installation, *Movements: Battles and Solidarity*, coalesces seemingly-disparate events during the early 1970s (high fashion, labor unrest, and the Vietnam War) by exploring the connections between women of color and their shared socio-political and physical "movements."

Samira Yamin's *Passing Obliquely From One Medium Into Another* series examines contemporary war photography by manipulating the viewership of mass media through carved optical glass. Yamin's obfuscation of images challenges viewers to invest in new ways of seeing in order to reassemble refracted and misaligned information. Yamin's latest work, *All the Skies Over Syria*, continues to interrogate viewership and the construction of images through an amalgamation and distillation of Syrian skylines through the passage of time.

These installations also offer an opportunity to consider and exercise site—whether within the civic space of the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery<sup>6</sup>, the image magic created by Hollywood, or the greater postmodern landscape of the United States—and the material aspects of viewing and being. Together, the works in the exhibition aim to provide a means for connecting with and understanding our seemingly peculiar socio- and geopolitical times.

Steven Wong  
Curator  
Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery

## Endnotes

1 Byrne, Malcolm (Editor), *CIA Confirms Role in 1953 Iran Coup. Documents Provide New Details on Mosaddeq Overthrow and Its Aftermath. National Security Archive Calls for Release of Remaining Classified Record.* National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 435. Posted August 19, 2013.

2 The U.S. historically dismantles and builds democracies, while the U.S. media tends to focus on the latter.

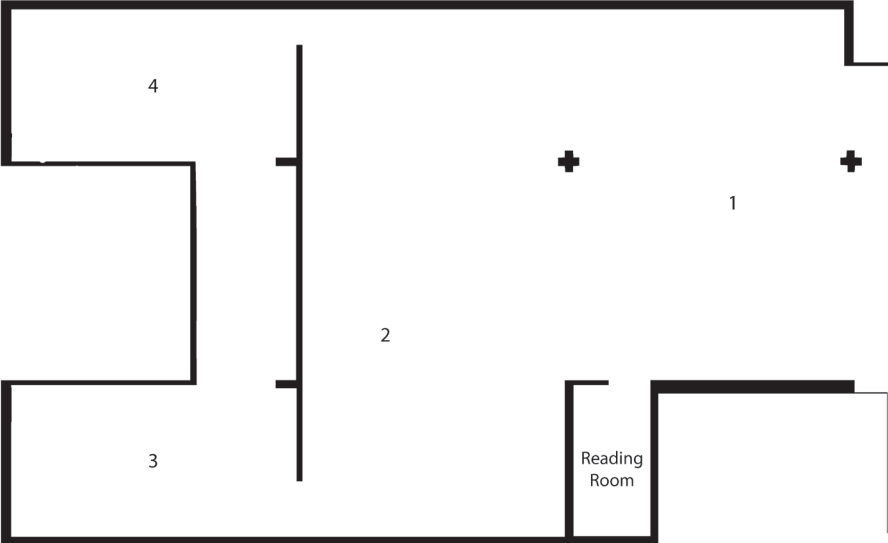
3 Crawford, Neta C. *U.S. Budgetary Costs and Obligations of Post-9/11 Wars through FY2020: \$6.4 Trillion.* November 13, 2019 <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2019/US%20Budgetary%20Costs%20of%20Wars%20November%202019.pdf>

4 The insertion of “Plastic” in the title alludes to the notion that plastics are often made from crude oil or feedstock that is derived from crude oil; and that crude oil comes from plants and animals that lived millions of years ago. Although not entirely accurate, plastics can be viewed as derivative of old dinosaurs wreaking havoc on today’s environment.

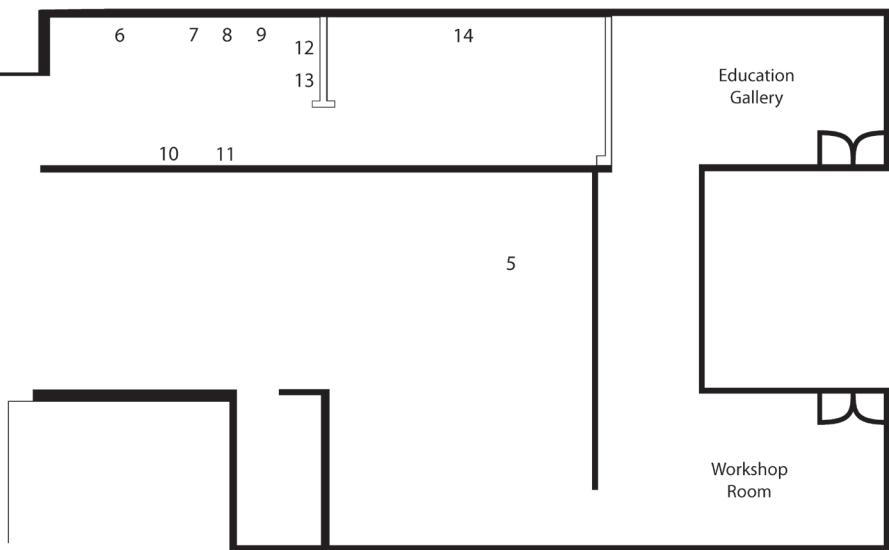
5 In Thich Nhat Hanh’s book *Being Peace* (Hanh, 1987, p. 83) he identifies the connection of a lack of mindfulness with our desires to be distracted and fill the void with politics and mass media: “In modern society most of us don’t want to be in touch with ourselves; we want to be in touch with other things like religion, sports, politics, a book—we want to forget ourselves. Anytime we have leisure, we want to invite something else to enter us, opening ourselves to the television and telling the television to come and colonize us.

6 Within sight of the Hollywood sign, the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery is situated in a park that was developed by Aline Barnsdall—a feminist and patron of the arts who inherited her wealth primarily through the acquisition of oil. Furthermore, the gallery represents a city historically known for its aerospace and defense industries, and its even longer history with the film and television industries. In this exhibition, artists and viewers are connected to all of these seemingly-disparate histories.

# The Exhibition



1 - 4 Abigail Raphael Collins



5 T. Kim-Trang Tran

6 - 14 Samira Yamin

**Abigail Raphael Collins**  
**(b. 1986, New York, NY)**

1. *Out of Play: In the Box*, Single channel HD video with sound, 13 minutes, 2019
2. *Out of Play: In Character*, Single channel HD video with sound, 10 minutes, 2019
3. *Out of Play: In-between Lines*, Single channel HD video with sound, 11 minutes, 2019
4. *Out of Play: In the Frame*, Single channel HD video with sound, 12 minutes, 2019

Credits:

Director of Photography: Abigail Raphael Collins, Dean Erdmann

Editor: Katrin Ebersohn

Sound Design: Katrin Ebersohn

Sound Mixer: Bruce Chianese

Sound Recording: Casey Minatrea (*Out of Play: In Frame*)

Special thanks: Shoghig Halajian, Johanna Breiding, Dylan Mira, Amanda Joy, Dean Erdmann, Ellen Raphael Collins and Paul Collins

Abigail Raphael Collins' experimental documentary and video installation, *Out of Play*, investigates the relationship between the entertainment industry and the U.S. military, how media is produced, and the fictions that are constructed in the absence of information. The alternative nature of this documentary is grounded in how the artist reveals her investigative processes; the third wall is broken,



seams are exposed, and we get a glimpse of how narratives are manipulated and polished to present a particular angle. The films' transparencies can at times seem unruly, and the physical presence of war simulation set walls—salvaged from a Hollywood fabricator who issues them for both military and entertainment industry use—adds an additional layer. *Out of Play's* non-sequential episodes prohibit us from passively viewing information from a fixed position. The documentary thus becomes an exercise of traveling through research, interviews, and the artist's personal determinations to render our own conclusions.

*Abigail Raphael Collins received her MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a BFA from Cooper Union, New York. Collins' work has been exhibited and screened nationally and internationally, including Rotterdam and Seoul. Collins currently lectures at the California Institute of the Arts and lives and works in Los Angeles.*

**T. Kim-Trang Tran**  
**(b. 1964, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam)**

5. *Movements: Battles and Solidarity*, Video and embroidered screen, 6 minutes 50 seconds, 2019

T. Kim-Trang Tran's three-channel video installation, *Movements: Battles and Solidarity*, blends seemingly disparate cultural events during the early 1970s in high fashion, labor unrest, and the Vietnam War by exploring the connections between women of color and their shared socio-political and physical "movements." The installation presents an array of historic visual references and archival soundscapes alongside projection screens holding key figures and events imprinted into its background. The still elements activate a fixing of iconic memories as moving elements continuously appear and vanish. As one moves through the sound, video, and physical components of the installation, links begin to reveal the critical correlations that contributed to the sea of changes accomplished in the face of such conflicts in the 1970s—offering a timely example of unity that can emerge in spite of chaotic circumstances.

*T. Kim-Trang Tran received her MFA from the California Institute of the Arts and a BFA from the University of Iowa. Tran's work has been exhibited and screened nationally and internationally, including at the Hammer Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art's Biennial in 2000. Tran is currently a Professor of Art at Scripps College in Claremont, CA and lives and works in Los Angeles.*

**Samira Yamin**  
**(b. 1983, Evanston, IL)**

6. (*Refractions*) August 6, 2012, Wheel-cut optical glass and *TIME* magazine page, mounted on Sintra, 2018

7. (*Refractions*) March 12, 2012, Wheel-cut optical glass and *TIME* magazine pages, mounted on Sintra, 2018

8. (*Refractions*) September 12, 2016, Wheel-cut optical glass and *TIME* magazine pages, mounted on Sintra, 2018

9. (*Refractions*) February 2, 2012, Wheel-cut optical glass and *TIME* magazine page, mounted on Sintra, 2018

10. (*Refractions*) September 21, 2015-II, Wheel-cut optical glass and *TIME* magazine page, mounted on Sintra, 2020  
This project was supported, in part, by Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant.

11. (*Refractions*) September 21, 2015, Wheel-cut optical glass and *TIME* magazine pages, mounted on Sintra, 2018

12. (*Refractions*) January 20, 2014, Wheel-cut optical glass and *TIME* magazine pages, mounted on Sintra, 2018

13. (*Refractions*) October 19, 2015, Wheel-cut optical glass and *TIME* magazine page, mounted on Sintra, 2018

14. *All the Skies Over Syria*, Hand-cut *TIME* magazine pages on cotton rag, 2020

Samira Yamin's *Passing Obliquely From One Medium Into Another* - (*Refractions*) series examines contemporary war photography by manipulating the viewership of mass media through carved optical glass. Yamin's obfuscation of images

challenges viewers to invest in new ways of seeing in order to reassemble refracted and misaligned information. Yamin's latest work, *All the Skies Over Syria*, continues to interrogate viewership and the construction of images through an amalgamation and distillation of Syrian skylscapes. The work is comprised of all the skies from all the photographs of Syria printed by *TIME* magazine since March 2011, the beginning of Syria's part in what was then the "Arab Spring", which the artist dissects and reconstitutes. While Yamin works exclusively with *TIME*—a publication notorious for its image manipulation—*All the Skies Over Syria* also points to the poetic nature of the magazine's own materiality: with aging and lack of light-fastness, all the grey skies will eventually turn blue.

*Samira Yamin received her MFA from the University of California, Irvine, and a dual BA in Sociology and Studio Art from the University of California, Los Angeles. Yamin's work has been exhibited nationally including solo exhibitions at the Santa Monica Museum of Art (now Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles) and PATRON Gallery in Chicago, and her work was recently acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Yamin currently lives and works in Los Angeles.*

# Programs

## **LAMAGLearn: Artist Talk**

**Sunday, February 23, 1:30 PM**

Join artist Samira Yamin for a talk on her work in the exhibition.

## **LAMAGLearn: Introduction to *Movements***

**Saturday, March 7, 1:30 PM**

Artist T. Kim-Trang Tran leads participants through the research, experimentation, and thinking behind her work in the exhibition.

## **LAMAGPlay: Bookbinding Workshop**

**Saturday, March 7, 2:30 PM**

Join LAMAG's Gallery Educator, Marissa Gonzalez Kuchek, for a workshop on binding simple handmade books.

## **LAMAGLearn: *Out of Play* Live Performance**

**Saturday, March 28, 1:30 PM**

In this performance, actors will do a live reading and interpretation of redacted transcripts and explore the ways in which Hollywood makes or constructs fiction in the absence of information.

## **LAMAGLearn: Closing Day Artist Walk-Throughs**

**Sunday, April 19, 1:30 PM**

Join artists Abigail Raphael Collins, T. Kim-Trang Tran, and Samira Yamin for walk-throughs of their individual and collective works in the exhibition.

# Extending Inter-being: Artists Respond

Central to the exhibition's overarching themes and inspiration for the title, *To View a Plastic Flower* invokes Buddhist monk and antiwar activist, Thich Nhat Hanh's idea of "inter-being"—meaning nothing can exist by itself and everything has to "inter-be" with everything else. The figure of the "flower" stems from one of Thich's well-known sayings, suggesting that by touching a flower one also touches the clouds and rain that were necessary to manifest the flower. "Inter-being" not only offers a philosophy, but a way to consider perspectives beyond individual experiences, past objectivity, towards a subversive empathy.

In the following text, exhibiting artists, Abigail Raphael Collins, T. Kim-Trang Tran, and Samira Yamin reflect on the concept of inter-being and its earnest deconstruction of the many perspectives and interpretations of conflict. Read how these artists negotiate multiple contexts while also sharing their own ethea and relationships to mass media, identity, and ever-pressing international issues.

# Abigail Raphael Collins

Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of inter-being also tugs on ideas about inter-viewing. When I ask someone to participate in an interview with me, I'm asking them to view the space between us to locate what neither of us could have seen on our own. Whether I'm speaking with someone I agree with or not, the act of interviewing is always the feeling of walking to the edge of what I think I may know and asking questions. It's never comfortable. The landscape of an interview for me is encountering this edge again and again.

Sometimes I interview people who might hold tight to a paradigm I want to dismantle, and I learn a lot from listening to how beliefs are internalized. This practice of navigating the space between us does not remove differences or disagreements. While I'm devoted to challenging the

**“Sometimes I interview people who might hold tight to a paradigm I want to dismantle...”**

optics of perspectives, conflict is inevitable. I don't think difference is something that should be feared, it doesn't need to be clarified or made transparent. As someone who asks questions and grapples with the edges of uncertainty and

the explained, philosopher Édouard Glissant's (Martinique, 1928-2011) idea of the right to “opacity” has helped me reflect on the importance of difference. Glissant writes, “...To feel in solidarity with him (the other) or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not

necessary to try to become the other, nor to ‘make’ him in my image.” Interviewing—or viewing the space between us—does not mean reaching the same views.

The *Out of Play* video installation echoes my research practice; it’s a process of looking closely at ties between the U.S. military and the entertainment industry and finding unexpected links. The physical installation itself is made of worn-out set

**Finding  
unexpected  
links...**

walls that are rented for both military simulations and Hollywood industry shoots. These walls form screening spaces for *Out of Play*’s four “episodes” which are

spread out for us to navigate through, watching in any order. The content of each episode connects back to the other ones, so queries in one video may be revealed in another. These movements push us to investigate our own questions—rather than passively view media angles from a distance.

To engage the phenomenon of distance that a lot of us experience in the U.S., I try to think through the various ways that these wars come home through media and investigate how that media is produced. Having the physical walls in the space—not just represented on the screen—helps ground us in the impact they have. Though these set pieces toggle between fictional and factual worlds, there’s no mistaking the tangible impact media has on the ongoing war in Iraq.

I was four when the Gulf War started, and U.S. led destruction in Iraq hasn’t stopped since. I think a lot about accountability, how to account for my part in the larger system: what does



it mean to have wars waged “on my behalf” that I experience only through someone else’s lens? What role are we cast in through viewership? How can we reshape that role?

## T. Kim-Trang Tran

The concept of interbeing encapsulates what I’m teasing out in *Movements: Battles and Solidarity*, a three-channel video installation on handmade screens that considers fashion, race, and class in significant events between the years 1972–74. In my research, I learned that the first successful iteration of war that capitalism enabled was for the west to gain supremacy in the global cotton trade in the 19th century. This led me to think about the impact of the fast fashion industry and its possible connections to the Vietnam War. In addition to the macro expense of securing these materials, I began to tease out connections with labor issues associated with the garment industry and locating pivotal moments where women reclaim their power in these roles of production and consumption. From the 1973 racially diverse American models in the Battle of Versailles fashion show; to the girls and women of the Vietnam War; to the female leaders of the labor movement in the garment industry throughout the long 70’s. The work

**The work explores connections—large and small—among women of color changing history...**

explores connections—large and small—among women of color changing history through their shared political and physical movements. Manifested agencies are juxtaposed in the catwalk, the run, and the march. Strikers marching down the street share a visual resemblance to cat-walking models and Kim-Phuc running away from napalm blasts. Intermittent archival footage from Edward Muybridge's motion studies play across all three screens and asks viewers to consider not only the physical similarities but also the shared revolutionary movements among these models, females of the Vietnam War, and militant garment workers towards the empowerment of diverse women.

As a woman of color and a Vietnam War refugee, I have many personal connections to the issues raised in my work. Some of my recent works, including the installation in this show, have been responding to true stories of girls of color at the age of 9, which was the age when I immigrated to America.

In July 1972, the flammable chemical agent, napalm, was dropped on a Vietnamese village in preparation for burning. Village children's singed skin replaced the clothes on their backs. With peeling skin flapping on her body, 9-year-old

**Perhaps archival  
footage belongs  
to all of us...**

Kim-Phuc Phan strides, seeking relief. Despite my simplified line drawing, many recognize this iconic image and attest to its continued power, yet there is a

generation of viewers who are unaware of this history. The challenge in using documentary images, for me, is to tap into

their power to comment and contextualize without trivializing or causing harm. I'm thinking particularly about the Pulitzer Prize winning Vietnam War image of "Napalm Girl" (1972) by Nick Ut. That there are newer global conflicts with their attendant images of suffering children is tragic, but these images continual effect on us points to why it's important to show the historical threads—the interbeing of these events—when attempting to stop endless wars. Perhaps archival footage belongs to all of us.

## Samira Yamin

A methodology of interbeing is a useful way to approach photography as it reveals the active possibilities behind what otherwise appears to be still. Like Thich Nhat Hanh's flower, which is at once: cloud, sun, soil, air, and all the "non-flower elements" without which there would be no flower—the photograph is at once: photographer, camera, frame, subject. Let's extend this to an example of holding a magazine page—we then can imagine our fingerprints touching the tree, the

**Interbeing carries  
with it an imperative  
to inter-act...**

printer, the editor, the layout designer, the writer, the photographer, the camera, the frame, the subject.

Seen through this lens, a photograph is not of a young girl in a van, but is the young girl and the van, the photographer and Syria, the tree and the ink, the viewer and the dentist's office. I think that to recognize

the image, the page, as interbeing is to see the meeting of image and viewer less as an intersection, but an interaction connecting both lives. Interbeing carries with it an imperative to inter-act with each other.

My practice is to sit deeply in my position as a consumer of images, and more specifically of the American construction of a nebulous Middle East through images of war. I do this by activating the magazine in ways that it is not meant to be read, such as through the simple gesture of taking out the staples, to see what wisdom can be gleaned from the object's making rather than its function of presenting narratives.

The foundational question of *Passing Obliquely From One Medium Into Another* is, how are we to engage the image in a critical and ethical manner, knowing that it is a construction? The works in this project present possibilities for interaction with photographic images through a reversal of photography itself. In the *Refractions* series, images are seen through carved optical glass, creating lenticular-like surfaces that require one to move about in order to see. One cannot simply receive the entirety of the image from any single vantage point. Viewership becomes a spectral experience of the image accessed through movements and moments.

**How are we to engage the image in a critical and ethical manner, knowing that it is a construction?**

Despite having worked exclusively with *TIME* magazine's

print edition for over ten years, by reading it in non-traditional ways, I am still surprised by it. *All the Skies Over Syria*, came to surprise me. This work is comprised of all the skies from all the photographs of Syria printed by *TIME* magazine since March 2011, the beginning of Syria's part in what was then the "Arab Spring." Each image of sky is cut down to small pieces and reconstituted into a single amalgam sky reflecting the general tone of representation over eighty years. When I viewed the small pieces of sky spread across the studio through the passage of time, I noticed the magazine's materiality assert itself. The pieces I was organizing into a color-field would not only fade, but would in fact come to change altogether. By nature of its exposure to light, *All the Skies Over Syria* will—in time—turn blue.

# Accessibility

It is the policy of the City of Los Angeles that all City-sponsored public meetings, programs, services, activities, and events are physically and programmatically accessible to individuals with disabilities in accordance with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended (ADA). The City of Los Angeles does not discriminate on the basis of disability and, upon request, will provide reasonable accommodation to ensure equal access to its programs, services, and activities.

Sign language interpreters, Communication Real-time Translation (CART) services, and other auxiliary aids and/or services may be provided upon request. Material in alternative formats and other accommodations are available. All requests must be made at least five (5) business days prior to the scheduled meeting.

Closed captioning, audio descriptions, and a Braille version of this guide are available with each exhibition.



# To View a Plastic Flower

February 13 — April 19, 2020

Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery

**@LAMAGBarnsdall**  
**#PlasticFloweratLAMAG**



**lamag.org**



**Barnsdall**  
ART PARK FOUNDATION

Cover Image: Abigail Raphael Collins, 2019