

# Sung Tieu

## *Civic Floor*

3 February – 1 June 2024

Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square

Text by Séamus Kealy

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## Oakville Galleries

Gairloch Gardens | 1306 Lakeshore Road East, Oakville ON L6J 1L6  
Centennial Square | 120 Navy Street, Oakville ON L6J 2Z4

### GALLERY HOURS

Tuesday – Saturday: 10:00 AM – 5:00 PM  
Closed Sundays and statutory holidays  
Monday (available by appointment)

Admission is always free.  
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Berlin-based artist Sung Tieu produces works of sculpture, drawing, text, video, and sound. Her work is often heavily based on research into methods of military and government control, imprisonment, exclusion, and surveillance. In recent artwork, Tieu has distorted a Wagnerian opera as an “orchestra” of office sounds (*Zugzwang*, 2020); she has 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 she has drawn on the audio recordings used by US military psychological operations, which were designed to destabilize the Vietnamese National Liberation Front (*No Gods, No Masters*, 2017).

In this exhibition, we encounter four large metal sculptures, a series of 37 framed wall-works, and a video installation in the left gallery.

At first glance this appears to be an exhibition of minimal art, which is sometimes associated with a dry conceptual approach or indeed a theatrical but cool presence, where industrial form takes a central stage as high art—and a reduced language of form that often makes reference to other minimal bodies of work. The reference is intentional in Tieu’s work, however encoded into the work is a persistent questioning of administrative and bureaucratic methods of control, surveillance and, indeed, punishment, as well as the geopolitical apparatuses and governments that harbour and perpetuate them. Her research ventures into the quiet violence of bureaucratic systems and how these systems

impact people psychologically and emotionally. Tieu's work thus quietly, but insistently, explores questions of governance, civic responsibility, human rights, and justice.

The audience's uncomfortable encounter with this uncanny exhibition is also implicated by the artist's deliberate emphasis on the importance of one's perception within this encounter, and therefore, in any kind of encounter. It is as if one's eyes are being invited to open a little bit more to see what was already in front of you; a hallucinatory effect of countless unseen bodies under management and containment. The work is shaped and crafted and elaborated so that the distortion and alienation experienced by individuals within administrative control, for example, is echoed here within the exhibition. The madness of state control is briefly glimpsed, as if it is a creature itself unleashed from its countless fluorescent-lit offices. The sound that ventures through the gallery, surrounding the sculptures and framed works, is key in delivering this effect.

We encounter four central steel sculptures which each make reference to prison architecture from "radial" prisons from the 1840s to newer prison architecture since the 1990s. These sculptures depict the brutal mechanisms of spatial organization and surveillance methods in prisons. Rendered in black steel, each imposing structure sits on a high pedestal of the same black steel, with their inner architecture opened up to be offered for viewing—albeit at an unfair height—making the work oddly inaccessible and difficult to see. Those able to peer over the top edge of these structures (we have provided a small step ladder for use if needed) will discover that the interiors are not hollow but filled with earth, referencing the locations where they come from.

The sculptures could be seen as sharing formal aspects with Minimal art. An emphasis on space and volume, and the use of industrial materials especially, impart this reference. However, the sculptures' clear reference to prison designs urges us to consider the cold, inhumane, and authoritarian functions that come together to consider how to intern and isolate, to break up social contact and discourage communication, to maximize human capacity, as well as to enable constant surveillance, and therefore restrict behaviour. Decisions were made and the implications are presented to us. Michel Foucault in analyzing the Panopticon prisons in his book *Discipline and Punish* reminds us how this constant sense of surveillance—the not knowing of being observed or not, but the possibility of it—manufactures a self-induced discipline and control, an inner surveillance so to speak. 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 to have a dehumanizing effect. We might consider or reconsider any form of architecture after encountering these works and discover that we are also within a space that has been instrumentalized—intentionally or not—to shape human behaviour and curb social encounters.

The sculptures are accompanied by framed wall-works based on different forms of American immigration documents. These are the ones that are used to assess individuals' eligibility for immigration and/or asylum, or those that act as appeals against deportation or for refugees to apply for a 'waiver of grounds of inadmissibility.' These tablet-like plaster reliefs are actually derived from the paperwork for US asylum seekers. In tandem with the sculptures, these works also emphasize a formal analysis of other bureaucratic forms of control. In their

abstract fields of lines and boxes, they illustrate the spatial parameters within which an asylum seeker's story might exist. This compression of space immediately places hard conditions upon the narratives of the asylum seekers, imposing hard limits within small boxes. Stories will simply not be told as language, identities and histories are all denied a proper space for reception.

Below these framed works are corresponding stainless steel plaques. The application forms' parameters (boxes, lines, cells) are quantified in square millimeters, thus quantifying the possible space for expressing life stories, as a machine would compress human experience into a metal box. We might ask, how can the intricacies of actual human experiences, particularly those expressed by people applying for political asylum, fit into these tight spaces? The words "form" and "grid"—which are motifs as well as subjects that Tieu has used for forms of critique in her past artworks—again appear in the title of these works. They also, again, make clear reference to Minimal art, acting as a cruel doppelganger of sorts.

In the left gallery, the video *Moving Target Shadow Detection* investigates the Havana Syndrome conundrum. In 2016, U.S. officials stationed in Cuba experienced headaches, dizziness, tinnitus, nausea, or visual disturbances. Intelligence services suspected powerful electromagnetic waves, such as sonic weapons. The video meticulously reconstructs all details as a 3D animation. Surveillance cameras and Nano drone footage lead us through the Hotel Nacional upstairs, to a room occupied by a CIA member, hearing news reports about Havana Syndrome attacks.

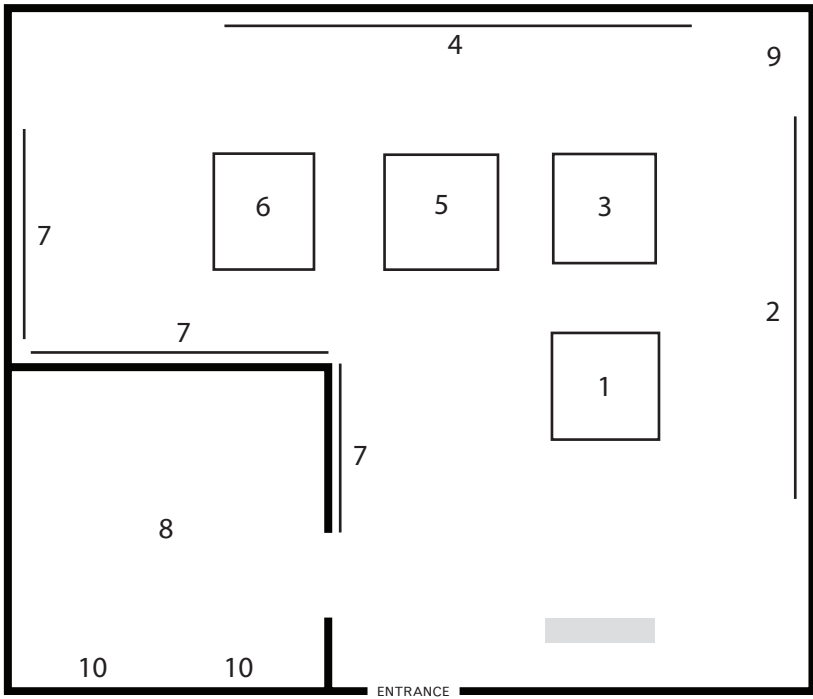
Affixed to the wall in the video room are two stainless steel stools, designed by Tieu and based on typical seating found in the waiting rooms of immigration and detention spaces. Their forms are so ubiquitous that one realizes they have also been introduced into restaurants, airports, playgrounds, and state offices—where methods of surveillance and control are utilized, also ubiquitously.

*Civic Floor* is produced in partnership with Luxembourg-Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, MIT List Visual Arts Center, and Southern Alberta Art Gallery Maansiksikaitapiitsinikssin (SAAG).

**Sung Tieu** (b.1987, Hai Duong, Vietnam) lives and works in Berlin. She has held solo exhibitions at Kunstmuseum Bonn; Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig (2021); Nottingham Contemporary; and Haus der Kunst, Munich (2020). Her work was included in the 34th Bienal de São Paulo and has been exhibited at Museion, Bolzano; Kunsthalle Basel (2021); Museum Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt; GAMeC Museum, Bergamo; and Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2020). Tieu is the recipient of the Frieze Artist Award 2021 and the 2021 ars viva Prize. She also received the audience award for the 2021 Preis der Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

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- 1 *Radial, Detail, 2022*  
Black steel, soil  
150 x 53 x 122 cm  
Courtesy the artist and Emalin, London
- 2 *Grid Form I-602, 2022*  
Plaster, linen, plexi glass  
In 10 parts, each 41.9 x 33.4 x 3.2 cm  
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin



- 3 *Galleried, Detail, 2022*  
Black steel, soil  
150 x 91 x 99 cm  
Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg
- 4 *Numeric Analysis, Form I-589, 2022*  
Engraving on stainless steel  
In 12 parts, each 41.9 x 33.4 x 3.2 cm  
Courtesy the artist and Emalin, London
- 5 *Courtyard, Detail, 2022*  
Black steel, soil  
150 x 90 x 90 cm  
Courtesy the artist and Emalin, London
- 6 *New Generation, 2022*  
Black steel, soil  
150 x 75 x 100 cm  
Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg
- 7 *Grid, Form I-881, 2022*  
Engraving on stainless steel  
In 15 parts, each 12 x 8.8 x 1 cm  
Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg
- 8 *Moving Target Shadow Detection, 2022*  
3D simulation video, color, sound  
18 min, 55 sec, loop  
Co-commissioned by Forma and Frieze, London  
Courtesy the artist; Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg / Beirut; and Emalin, London
- 9 *Civic Floor, 2022*  
21 min 44 sec, sound, loop  
Courtesy of the artist
- 10 *Untitled (Civic Floor), 2022*  
Wall mounted stainless steel stools  
47 x 51 x 36 cm  
Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg



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Oakville Galleries would like to thank the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation for the open conversation around truth and reconciliation.

