



17th Annual Orchard Lake Fine Art Show Features Gay Artist Don Tran



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Whether it's an embracing couple, a seaside view or a crane mid-flight, seeing any of Don Tran's textile pieces from afar, it's hard to imagine the hand-embroidered silk isn't the work of brush strokes. Step closer, and only then will the thousands of individually placed silk strands show the meticulous nature of Tran's work — especially on the pieces as tall as 50 inches. And as captivating as his art can be, Tran is just one of 150 selected artists set to be featured at the 17th Annual Orchard Lake Fine Art Show held through July 27 through 28.

Patty Narozny is the executive director of the juried show and the owner and operator of Hot Works, a fine art and fine craft show organization that puts on the Orchard Lake event. She said that this show provides a great opportunity for artists of a variety of mediums, both in and out of Michigan, to not only showcase their work but get recognized for excellence in their fields.

"Every year is unique with the Orchard Lake Fine Arts Show because we have a national outstanding reputation for high-quality juried fine arts and fine craft shows," Narozny said, adding that she attends each Hot Works show personally to meet all participants and see all submitted works. "We have an outside group of professionals and artists and owners of art organizations and the work is juried based on originality, technique execution and booth appearance."

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Those judges will award \$2,500 in prize money as well as other awards of recognition to the artists whose work stands out the most. “[There are] 18 professional artists awards: one \$1,000; two awards of merit, \$500; five awards of excellence, \$100 each; and 10 non-monetary awards of distinction to recognize additional great artists who are in the show,” Narozny said. The show provides a youth art competition as well.

Narozny said that along with general recognition in Michigan, the show offers a national pull that draws in many artists from across and out of state to showcase their work. Tran, who is based out of St. Louis, is the “perfect example” of someone pulled to Michigan for that very reason, she said. But he stands out in another way, too, as an openly gay man who is carrying on a traditional Vietnamese embroidery style that has been passed down for generations among his family. Ahead of the Orchard Lake Fine Art Show, BTL caught up with him to learn more about his work, his inspiration and his experience making his art. *“... Art is art, and it doesn’t distinguish between race or age or whatever,” he said. “There’s no limits.”*



About the Artist

Born in Vietnam, Tran comes from a long line of silk embroiderers and learned his skill at 12 years old. Now 49, Tran said that he didn’t always want to be an artist and that he even took a break to earn a master’s degree in human resources in 2004. But even while he was working at a well-paid corporate job, something was nagging at him to return to the creative process.

So, eight years in, he quit and became an artist full time. And now, to even discerning eyes, it might be apt to call him a master of his craft as he produces works every day. Larger or more complicated pieces, however, may take him months.

“The smaller pieces I create in a couple of days. If I say hourly, I would say 10 to 12 hours [per piece],” Tran said. “[In a year] I have two to four big pieces. This year, I just have one [completed] design for 2019 so far, [it took] eight months, ‘Traveling Merchant in Cairo.’” That piece is a tribute to the original done by Jean Leon Gerome in the 19th century and measures 32 inches by 27 inches. Along with traditional Vietnamese imagery, Tran said he’s frequently inspired by classical painted works and sets about embroidering them in his own style.

“That is westernized a little bit so that I can fit my customers’ desires in America,” he said, noting that though he mostly sticks to tradition he sometimes tries something new. “I designed my own skills and my own concepts about how I look at art and how I create that is based on what I like about nature and what my customers want from me. And so, there are two aspects there: traditional and following the desires of the customer,” Tran said. “If you order me to do whatever, like your own face or the feet of your baby, [I can do] what design, what color you want — anything. Abstract or non-abstract I can do that.”

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Yet despite his proven ability to embroider practically any design, Tran said that sometimes he still finds himself butting up against a stigma surrounding his sexuality and the fact that embroidery is still by some considered to be “women’s work.”

“People in general, deep inside, they still think that this kind of work is for females, not for men. So, when they are at the booth they just assume that the artist would be a female and sometimes they’re surprised. If they are professional or discreet they won’t say anything but sometimes people say, ‘Oh, you’re a man.’ I used to take it personal because it happened so much but I don’t anymore. [When they say,] ‘I haven’t seen a man do that,’ I tell them, ‘Well, now you’ve seen and opened your mind,’” he said with a laugh.

It’s in part that positive attitude that has allowed Tran to be recognized across the country as one of the foremost artists in his craft. In fact, he said he enjoys sharing his work in places like the upcoming Orchard Lake Fine Art Show because it helps to highlight that despite anyone’s preconceived notions, artistry shines through.

“When I’m creating the work [I don’t put] my gender or sexual orientation into the work because art is art, and it doesn’t distinguish between race or age or whatever,” he said. “There’s no limits.”

Find out more about the upcoming Orchard Lake Fine Art Show online at hotworks.org.