

SAM LEE | GALLERY

Jeannie R. Lee's Blog (www.womantalk.org)
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I grabbed a list of Chinatown galleries culled from ArtForum's Picks and Flavorpill's "Back-to-School Gallery Opening Guide" and hoofed it up to LA today, after first dropping Bella off at school, my brother-in-law at his friend's house, and my sister-in-law's suitcase off at her workplace. Whew.

I fortified myself with a strong cup of Earl Grey and headed into the north end of Hill Street, right up where cars are shooting off the 110 like mindless balls ricocheting in a pinball machine. Boy, it was worth it. I walked straight into two sweet little new galleries that have sprouted up over the summer: Sam Lee Gallery and David Salow Gallery. Lee and Salow may be brand new gallery owners, but they are not new to the game - they are both savvy insiders who have long worked as gallerists in San Francisco and are now making their timely nearly joint debut (Sam Lee has had three shows - DSG is on its first) and both bring a (small) stable of experienced and well-hooved artists to the area.

I spent some time gazing at Pipo Nguyen-duy's medium-large (ranging 30x40 to 45x60) photographs first. It was not immediately apparent to me whether the photos were staged, but I was struck by how Nguyen-duy had caught the glorious mid-morning light shining through star-like clusters of pine needles just over the creeping snipers' heads. It struck me then, that this - the quiet creeping through a beautiful forest, was part of what hunters craved and enjoyed about their sport. I tripped up against the word "hunter," realizing that "sniper" meant "hunter of people," and took pause. The best of Nguyen-duy's photos worked in this way: luscious natural beauty serving as a backdrop to a human-imposed uneasiness.

Ring Around (2004) foregrounds damp mounds of overgrown grass, slumps of glistening damp richness with purple thistle, just barely hiding the prone bodies of small children under a heavy clouded sky. Although I cannot make out the children clearly, I see enough to know that they are not dead, but lying quietly - just waiting. Strange. It is a combination of a sensation of surreal bated breath and intricate photographic detail that holds my attention for much longer than I expect. At this point, I've realized that these photos must be posed; however, I find I prefer the ones that don't jolt me out of my dreamy staring with their obviousness. Through Oct. 20 (Sam Lee Gallery, 990 N. Hill Street #190, 323-227-0275).