

Spring 2015

# Memories of the Vietnam- American War: Contemporary Vietnamese Perspectives on Its Legacy

Kimberly Snow  
*Skidmore College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/art\\_history\\_stu\\_schol](https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/art_history_stu_schol)

---

## Recommended Citation

Snow, Kimberly, "Memories of the Vietnam- American War: Contemporary Vietnamese Perspectives on Its Legacy" (2015). *Art History Honors Projects*. 1.  
[https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/art\\_history\\_stu\\_schol/1](https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/art_history_stu_schol/1)

This Restricted Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Art History at Creative Matter. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art History Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of Creative Matter. For more information, please contact [jluo@skidmore.edu](mailto:jluo@skidmore.edu).

Memories of the Vietnam-  
American War:

*Contemporary Vietnamese  
Perspectives on Its Legacy*

Kimberly Snow  
May 1, 2015  
Independent Study  
Professor Waraich

## Introductory Essay

“Life is a reflection that ripples with each memory” – Barbara Tran

This poignant quote comes from an interview with Barbara Tran, a Vietnamese woman who immigrated to the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975.<sup>1</sup> I use this quote to open the essay on this exhibition because, in less than ten words, this sentence highlights one of its central themes. Memory is a unique phenomenon that allows us to bring the past into the present, inevitably impacting the future. History is destined to repeat itself, and yet it is our capacity to remember and learn that leads to a ripple effect of change. It is sometimes easy to forget that memories are not stagnant and stuck in the past but evolve and operate in the present, shaping our decisions and outlook on life. The aim of this exhibition is to address the lingering impact of the Vietnam-American War (better known in the United States as the Vietnam War) through the perspective of Vietnamese artists.

As author Nathalie Nguyen has eloquently stated, “The act of remembering is a means of bringing the past alive and an imaginative way of dealing with loss.”<sup>2</sup> The Vietnam-American War resulted in the deaths of millions of lives and left a scar on the hearts and minds of many individuals living today. A source of inspiration for many narratives, the war has prompted Hollywood films, documentaries, and novels, which have shaped how the American public understands the history of the Vietnam-American war. The majority of the discourse on the Vietnam-American War has focused on the experience of American individuals. This exhibition seeks to provide another narrative for American audiences to consider in their memory of the war. The show includes 23 pieces by 14 contemporary Vietnamese artists living and working

---

<sup>1</sup> Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2009), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country*, 5.

either in the United States or Vietnam. The works encompass a variety of mediums, ranging from ink paintings to short films. Each piece included in this exhibition expresses the unique ways in which the artists engage with the continued legacy of the War and express how the memory of the war has persisted in contemporary Vietnam.

The presentation of an alternative narrative by no means diminishes the significance and validity of the stories already perpetuated in our cultural memory, but it does provide an alternative perspective to our understanding of the war and its ongoing legacy. It is unsurprising that people from opposing sides of the war have constructed different historical narratives.<sup>3</sup> I am not calling into question which narration is more correct or “true,” but rather asking what we can gain from the convergence of these narratives. In considering the Vietnamese perspective we allow for the merging of several memories, creating a much more holistic picture. Exposure to works by contemporary Vietnamese artist also serves to challenge and deconstruct the prevalent binary of Vietnam versus America, and may spark interest in revisiting our own historical memory. By examining how the legacy of the War is reflected in the work of contemporary Vietnamese artists, American viewers are forced to confront a counter narrative to their cultural memory and the reality of an alternative perspective.

Drawing From Edward Said’s revolutionary text, *Orientalism*, the concept of a power imbalance between “East” and “West” he introduces is relevant to this exhibition. Both in the context of the artists and the work they create as well as the manner in which audiences receive these works. Generally speaking, the relationship between Vietnam and the United States has, at its core, been one of imbalance. Beginning with American military aggression and continuing to the present with the powerhouse of American capitalism, the United States and Vietnam have

---

<sup>3</sup> Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 5.

never stood on equal footing. *Memories of the Vietnam-American War* seeks in part to address this issue of imbalance. It is difficult for artists around the world to gain a global platform, but I believe it is particularly difficult for contemporary non-western artists. They face the challenge of confronting a homogenizing western narrative that restricts reception of their work to a broader audience. This exhibition will hopefully serve as a platform for contemporary Vietnamese-American voices and place them on the artistic radar of the American public. By presenting viewers with a variety of artists and their works, which express a deep and continued engagement with the memory of the Vietnam-American war, this exhibition challenges the singular narrative currently in force.

As you may have noticed, I have referred to the 1975 conflict between the United States and Vietnam as the Vietnam-American War; in Vietnam, it is usually known as the American War and in the United States, it is typically known as the Vietnam War. The first time I came across these multiple references to war was the moment in which the constructed nature of historical narratives became explicitly clear to me. At the very basic level of assigning a name to something, there exists an inherent meaning embedded in that name which shapes how we approach and understand history. Calling the conflict the “Vietnam War” creates an unconscious association of blame with Vietnam and vice versa. In Vietnam the war is referred to as the American War, or as The American War of Aggression. For the purposes of this exhibition, I will here on out refer to the conflict as the “American War” in an effort to reflect the contemporary Vietnamese mindset. Names are important because they highlight contingency at the very rudimentary level of language, the ways in which events are remembered differently, and the importance of knowledge production. The art works in this exhibition are a visual representation of this phenomenon.

## Discussing Memory

Issues of memory and representation are at the heart of this exhibition, so before addressing how artists and works can engage with these ideas, we need to discuss what these concepts mean in the context of the American War. Memory has been the subject of much interdisciplinary scholarship because it speaks directly to human nature and how we process our understanding of the world around us. Anthropologists, psychologists, historians, artist, writers, philosophers and even scientists all turn to discussions on memory to examine the human condition.

Australian author, historian, and anthropologist Inga Clendinnen has done extensive work discussing how moments of historical tension continue to impact contemporary social issues. Her work on Aztec and Mayan cultures and the subsequent European invasions as well as the Holocaust have been recognized around the world. Recently, she has turned her attention to the historical relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In her powerful essay, “The History Question: Who Owns the Past,” Clendinnen drives at questions regarding how a nation should regard its own past. She states:

“Our only way of grasping our history – and by history I really mean what has happened to us, and what determines what we are now and where we are now – the only way of really coming to terms with that is by people’s entering into it in their imagination, not by the world of facts, but by being there. And the only thing really which puts you there in that kind of way is fiction... It’s when you have actually been there and become a character again in that world.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Inga Clendinnen, *The History Question: Who Owns the Past?* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2006), 21.

Clendinnen illuminates the ways in which history, myth and fiction differ from one another, and why the differences are important. In discussing historical narratives, Clendinnen acknowledges the human need for story telling but notes the distinctively critical role of the historian.

Perhaps even more relevant to this exhibition is her statement: “Memory is unreliable and reflects a continuous process of ‘retranslation.’”<sup>5</sup> Nathalie Nguyen, a prominent Vietnamese scholar, has similarly written: “Memory is flexible and adaptive, and its contradictions are inherent in its nature. We remember what we wish to remember, or what we need to remember, and our memories evolve with time and with our present circumstances.”<sup>6</sup> David Cross, author of *Lost Time: On remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture*, has noted, “In most acts of remembering there is much material from the present that is projected backwards and there is material that comes authentically and indisputably from the past itself.”<sup>7</sup>

These three quotes serve to illustrate that even in widespread subject matter, there are several common themes prevailing in the scholarship regarding memory: memory is subjective, memory is constantly changing, and memory is influenced by and influences the present. Returning to the focus of this exhibition, the works collected here aim to illustrate how memories of the American War are subject to change, depending on cultural context as well as individual experience. It is also important to keep in mind that memory is not a stagnant phenomenon. The ways in which the American War has been remembered in America and Vietnam have shifted over the decades, in tandem with changing socio-political agendas. To appreciate the pieces in this exhibition it is key to keep in mind how the artists interpret their memories of the American War and reflect that perspective onto contemporary Vietnamese society.

---

<sup>5</sup> Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country*, 6.

## **Displacement**

The works in this exhibition capture this fluid engagement with memory, exemplified in three overarching themes. One prominent subject in this exhibition is the issue of displacement. After the fall of Saigon in 1975 many Vietnamese, particularly those from the South, fled Vietnam fearing political persecution from the newly formed government. It was this moment of migration that created many of the Vietnamese diasporic communities that exist today. Every one of the artists included in this exhibition has been affected by the feelings of loss, exile and departure generated from the political fall out after the end of the war. Some artists included in this exhibition were born in Vietnam and still reside there today, but are continually confronted with the loss of family members and friends who were forced to flee. Other artists were born in Vietnam but immigrated to the United States and other countries, seeking refuge both with and without their families. This war shaped not only the individuals who sought escape but also the lives of the Vietnamese generations afterwards.

Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen is a Vietnamese scholar who has dedicated much of her work to capturing the voices of the Vietnamese diaspora, particularly those of women. In her work she writes: “Women’s memories reveal as much about the process of reflection in which they have engaged in relation to their lives as their actual recollection of the past. Their life stories reveal multiple truths.”<sup>8</sup> Drawing inspiration from Nguyen, we can better understand works in the current exhibition. As noted previously, no single perspective presents an objective truth; each artist visualizes their recollection of the past to provide interesting insights to cultural perspectives. Many these works register strong emotions of fear, panic, oppression, and even distance.

---

<sup>8</sup> Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country*, 7.



This is a remnant of the war the majority of Americans have not been confronted with, largely because it is a very personal experience that is hard to express and convey to others who have not been through it. When Vietnamese refugees first arrived in the United States nearly three decades ago, they were jokingly referred to as the “Boat People” by American newspapers and magazines. This term is the most the general American public likely knows of many such immigrants, and it does little to capture the harrowing journeys the refugees faced. Nearly two million individuals fled Vietnam from 1975 – 1995, seeking escape from political persecution. The number of “boat people” leaving Vietnam and arriving safely in another country only accounted for about 800,000 individuals. Many of the refugees failed to survive the passage, facing danger and hardship from pirates, over-crowded boats, and storms. Before crossing the Pacific to America, Vietnamese also sought refuge in other parts of Southeast Asia including Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines.

The mass flight of hundreds of thousands of people from Vietnam in 1978 and 1979 caused an international humanitarian crisis among Southeast Asian countries, which became increasingly unwilling to accept more refugees on their shores. After international negotiations, developed countries such as the United States and Great Britain agreed to accept responsibility for the refugees and assist in relocation. As this brief history highlights, the stories of these individuals represent more than just “boat people” who arrived on US shores. Art and artists are in the unique position of creating a visual manifestation of these experiences that help viewers to transcend barriers of cultural understanding. Looking at images by Ann Phong, Dong Phan, and Trinh Mai, emotions of fear, pain, and loss come through loud and clear, allowing us deeper understanding of others’ experiences.

## Historical Memory

Another major theme this exhibition involves historical memory of the American War within Vietnam. As noted earlier, several of the artists included in this exhibition continue to live and work in Vietnam today. The ways in which the Vietnamese government has previously and continues to frame the American War has significant ramifications upon the art produced by contemporary artists. It also reveals how the production of knowledge differs from one context to another. To understand both the works created and our own reception of the works it is important to familiarize ourselves with the context in which contemporary Vietnamese art is being created.

Contemporary Vietnamese artists have been greatly influenced by Vietnam's tumultuous historical past with foreign invaders. Chinese imperial dynasties ruled in Vietnam for more than 1,000 years, followed by French imperialism, Japanese occupation, and then American aggression. The period of French colonialism from 1887 until 1954 is particularly relevant to this exhibition because it is during this moment when many of Vietnam's artistic traditions developed. "Traditional" woodcuts, silk painting, and lacquer work draw from establish Asian traditions, as well as modern French styles. During their occupation of Vietnam, the French government set up several cultural institutions to facilitate the cultural dissemination of French rule in Vietnam, including the *École Supérieure des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine* (Indochina College of Arts), which was founded in Hanoi in 1925 by Victor Tardieu and his colleague Joseph Igiumberty.<sup>9</sup> The reshaping of Vietnamese art traditions was an important tool of the French colonialists, and the college continues to have an impact on cultural sentiments.

When Vietnamese party leader Ho Chi Minh created the League for the Independence of Vietnam in 1941 to resist French and Japanese presence in Vietnam, artists played an important

---

<sup>9</sup> Nora Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 27.

role in his campaign.<sup>10</sup> This early alliance between Vietnamese political parties and artists established a precedent for policies during and after the American War. Minh placed great emphasis on educating the masses about “traditional” Vietnamese history to create continuity between the past and present civilization of Vietnam. Artists were utilized to constructing this specified legacy of national traditions for Vietnam and propagate a rich and “pure” Vietnamese heritage.<sup>11</sup> Art in North Vietnam was often seen as a tool to fight American presence in Vietnam, to the extent that Northern artists were constrained from working in abstract and modernist European styles popular in South Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> In 1986 the Vietnamese Communist Party opened Vietnam to the world through a program called Doi Moi.<sup>13</sup> The term “Doi Moi” translates in English to as “renovation” or “new change” and is used as a direct reference to a series of economic reform policies that allowed socialist Vietnam to emerge as an increasingly globalized country. With this economic liberalization and emergence into global spheres Vietnamese art became increasingly known in the West, especially after the 1990s.<sup>14</sup>

Even after economic reforms and increased globalization, the Vietnamese government continues its powerful role in the art scene. The restrictions on artists have loosened but many still remember the heavy hand of the government and choose to address issues of cultural memory and manipulation in their work. To this day the Vietnamese army has institutionalized its role as a patron of arts, through exhibitions, prizes, purchases, and a special museum in Ho Chi Minh City called the Military Art Museum. The museum asserts there is no obligation to

---

<sup>10</sup> Sherry Buchanan, *Mekong Diaries: Viet Cong Drawings & Stories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi*, 82.

<sup>13</sup> Boitran Huynh-Beattie, “Art in the Age of Doi Moi,” Southeast Asia Digital Library. Accessed March 25, 2015 <[http://sea.lib.niu.edu/project/about\\_doi\\_moi](http://sea.lib.niu.edu/project/about_doi_moi)>

<sup>14</sup> Huynh-Beattie, “Art in the Age of Doi Moi.”

depict the war, and there are no exhibitions specifically dedicated to it.<sup>15</sup> This policy may sound altruistic, but I believe it is a strategic move to consciously ignore the events of the war and construct a new national culture. A similar agenda is reflected in many museums throughout Vietnam. Vietnamese citizens and the government regularly assert that Vietnam “has closed the past and looks to the future.”<sup>16</sup> While the intention may be to move on from past conflicts, scholars dealing with issues of memory continually assert that this is not truly possible. The past is continually being shaped by the frames of the present and the frames of the present continue to be influenced by the past.

Nicola King, a literature scholar, has argued: “Remembering the self, is not a case of restoring and original identity, but a continuous process of ‘re-remembering’, of putting together moment by moment, of provisional and partial reconstruction.”<sup>17</sup> If we use this philosophy to address memories of the American War in Vietnam, we can see how contemporary Vietnamese artists are key players in this “partial reconstruction”, each providing a different piece to the puzzle. Similarly, Christina Schwenkel explains that Vietnamese historical narrative and memorial practices have developed transnationally to create the emergence of more nuanced representations of the American war within Vietnam. It is within this transnational sphere that many artists operate, rearticulating historical memory. Schwenkel states, “The process of memory work may be regenerative and could lead to “a restoration of the disjuncture’s of the

---

<sup>15</sup> David Kunzel, “Two Different Wars,” in *As Seen By Both Sides: American and Vietnamese Artists Look at the War*, ed. C. David Thomas (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 25.

<sup>16</sup> Christina Schwenkel, “Recombinant History: Transnational Practices of Memory and Knowledge Production in Contemporary Vietnam,” *Cultural Anthropology* 21 (2006): 5.

<sup>17</sup> Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country*, 7.

past.”<sup>18</sup> The various reproductions of historical memory in Vietnam by both artists and citizens are part of an important process that is bringing to light new understandings.

### **“East” Meets “West” Through American Pop Culture**

The third major theme in this exhibition involves the integration of American popular culture into Vietnam and its impact on cultural memory of the American War. The powerhouse that is American capitalism has enabled the American account of the Vietnam War to prevail, not only in the United States but Vietnam as well. The pieces in this exhibition demonstrate numerous references to the Vietnam War from film, music, and other popular American media. Dinh Q. Lê in particular engages directly with Hollywood’s representations of Vietnam, confronting scenes from well-known war movies such as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Quiet American*.

Contemporary Vietnam engages with American pop culture not only through its artists, but at a commercial level as well. Tourist economies in Vietnam have been founded around exploiting historical memories of the war not only for foreigners but domestic consumers as well. The *Apocalypse Now* nightclub in Vietnam has multiple locations and is an extreme example of Vietnamese appropriation of American pop culture.<sup>19</sup> U.S wartime imagery is popular throughout Vietnam, more commonly providing inspiration for the names of hotels, restaurants, bars, and even signature cocktails. It is also important to note that this appropriation is not without re-signification and cultural negotiation. One example of such a concession is in the widely sold “Good Morning, Vietnam” t-shirts that replace the image of Robin Williams

---

<sup>18</sup> Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Christina Schwenkel, “Recombinant History,” 9.

against an American flag with the image of an elderly Vietnamese woman next to a Vietnamese flag. The image has come to signify the nation's cultural strength and historical reliance.<sup>20</sup>

This discussion of Vietnamese economy and other examples of Vietnamese engagement with Hollywood narratives reflects another facet of memory practices and knowledge production in contemporary Vietnam. The examples provided serve to illustrate the social environment that contemporary Vietnamese individuals exist in currently. While America's physical involvement in Vietnam ended in 1975, the globalized nature of today's world ensures that there is continued interaction between Vietnam and the United States. The artists in this exhibition are undoubtedly witnesses to this widespread engagement with the Hollywood narrative and express its cultural impact in various ways.

### **Contextualizing this Exhibit**

Other exhibitions of modern Vietnamese art have sought to address the issue of constructing a counter narrative to the American memory of the Vietnam War. The catalogue and exhibition, *As Seen by Both Sides: American and Vietnamese Artists Look at the War*, is a comprehensive collection of works by both American and Vietnamese artists that ran from 1990 – 1995, traveling through museums in both Vietnam and America. *As Seen by Both Sides* includes twenty Vietnamese and twenty American artists, many of which are veterans of the war. In total, the works number 68 in color and 14 in black and white images. The central idea of the exhibition was reconciliation. This was executed in both the physical act of collecting works from both countries and exhibiting the show in multiple museums throughout Vietnam and America. The works themselves speak to the profound impact of the war on both sides,

---

<sup>20</sup> Christina Schwenkel, "Recombinant History," 9.

illustrating the universality in emotional experience and the transcendence of suffering across nations and individuals.

The catalogue for *As Seen by Both Sides* also offers essays by American and Vietnamese scholars and critics, who explore the social, political, and aesthetic contexts of the works on display. This exhibition was significant because it represented the first time that a general American audience was exposed to work by Vietnamese artists capturing a Vietnamese perspective on the American war. It sought to unite the American and Vietnamese experience and find a way to foster shared understanding between the two nations. The essays and images included in the catalogue all strive to reconcile the experiences of the Vietnamese and American artists during the war by emphasizing the value of art in revealing cultural parallels and the universal trauma of war.

An emphasis on reconciliation highlights the inherent imbalance of power at the heart of the war in Vietnam. *As Seen by Both Sides* was a revolutionary exhibition that exposed American audiences to Vietnamese artists and did serve to bridge communication between the US and Vietnam. Yet, it is necessary to point out that the exhibition was instigated by an American curator and institution and carries with it the hope for redemption. With the emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation there is the inadvertent implication that all is now well and we are absolved of all blame. While idealist, this is a dangerous path to walk, for once something is resolved it is put in the past and eventually forgotten.

Another exhibition of note is Sherry Buchanan's collection of drawings and documents in the show, *Mekong Diaries: Viet Cong Drawings and Stories, 1964-1975*. This exhibition ran throughout 2008 and sought to present a counter narrative to the image of North Vietnamese soldiers perpetuated by the American government. Throughout the war the Viet Cong was

demonized as fanatical killers. Through a collection of never-before-published drawings, poems, letters, and oral histories by ten of the most distinguished Viet Cong war artists Buchanan aimed to offer a different view of the “savage” Vietnamese soldiers as guerilla artists. Rather than inhuman, vicious, warmongers, as was the stereotype, the *Mekong Diaries* portrayed moments of artistic contemplation and poetic artistry through hundreds of sketches, poems, and stories produced Vietnamese Viet Cong soldiers during the war. This exhibition confronted the “self-centeredness” of American accounts of Vietnam, and sought to fill the gap in the national memory of the war.

While these two exhibitions provided important perspectives of the Vietnamese experience during the Vietnam War, they did not touch upon the contemporary legacy of the war among Vietnamese artists. Although including works only from the wartime era is an effective strategy; this approach sends a message to viewers that the issues produced from the war are in the past. In order to “move on” and “make things right” all that needs to be done is to address the issues of the past. The present exhibition is different because it places a greater emphasis on contemporary art and confronts brings the relevance of cultural memory to the forefront.

### **Concluding Statements**

My exhibition takes its lead in part from *Changing Identity: Recent Works by Women Artists From Vietnam* (2007), which was organized by the International Art & Artists Foundation in Washington D.C. and curated by Nora A. Taylor. It was the first American exhibit to highlight contemporary female Vietnamese artists. *Changing Identities* addresses how contemporary female Vietnamese artists respond to the American portrayal of Vietnamese women. Even after more than three decades of peace, Vietnamese women remain casualties of dehumanizing



stereotypes left over from the war. From Hollywood movies mentioned earlier such as *Full Metal Jacket* to novels such as *The Bamboo Bed*, the women of Vietnam are largely portrayed as “slinky hookers, victimized villagers or deadly fighters in black pajamas.”<sup>21</sup> *Changing Identities* presents a broad spectrum of Vietnamese women's actual roles as matriarchs, preservers of tradition and artistic witnesses to the emergence of a new nation. Through a multi-media experience, American audiences are asked to remove self-imposed “Western blindfolds” about the lives and history of women and their roles in Vietnam.<sup>22</sup>

My exhibition, *Memories of the Vietnam-American War*, takes a similar strategy but delivers a different message. The focus of this exhibition on contemporary Vietnamese artists is aimed to complicate the singular storyline that has existed until recently. As made clear in this introductory essay, memories of the American War continue to resonate in present-day Vietnam. By focusing on works that engage with themes of exile, displacement, loss, and memory, I hope to convey to American audiences ways in which memories of the American War have been constructed elsewhere and how those memories continue to shape cultural narrative. While not accounting for every aspect of these artistic works, the three sub-themes presented in this essay will hopefully serve as frameworks for considering how the various works included in this exhibition relate to the overall goals of the exhibit. This exhibition aims to provide American audiences with a visual narrative for the ways in which contemporary Vietnamese artists continue to be influenced by memories of the American War. The Vietnamese perspectives provides an essential narrative to this historical moment which will undoubtedly benefit contemporary discourse.

---

<sup>21</sup> Chris Bergeron, “Exhibit shows women of Vietnam no longer casualties of war,” *The Register-Mail*, August 30, 2008, accessed February 3, 2015. <<http://www.galesburg.com/article/20080830/News/308309981>>

<sup>22</sup> Bergeron, “Exhibit shows women of Vietnam.”

Catherine Kholer Reissman states: “In a dynamic way, narrative constitutes past experiences at the same time it provides ways for individuals to make sense of the past. And stories must always be considered in context, for storytelling occurs at a historical moment with its circulating discourses and power relations.”<sup>23</sup> If we think of art as a method of storytelling, we can realize how important it is to expose ourselves to different perspectives and contexts. The discourse surrounding the Vietnam War in America has understandably been dominated by stories of the American experience. In looking at how the legacy of the American War is reflected in the work of contemporary Vietnamese artists, American audiences are exposed to the reality of an alternative perspective. *Memories of the Vietnam-American War* challenges prevailing narratives and seeks to explore how contemporary Vietnam and Vietnamese artists have dealt with memories of the American War.

---

<sup>23</sup> Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country*, 6.

## Bibliography

- Anderegg, Michael, Ed. *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.
- Auster, Albert., and Leonard Quart. *How the War Was Remembered: Hollywood & Vietnam*. New York: Prager, 1988.
- Bergeron, Chris. "Exhibit shows women of Vietnam no longer casualties of war." *The Register-Mail*, August 30, 2008. Accessed February 3, 2015. <<http://www.galesburg.com/article/20080830/News/308309981>>
- Buchanan, Sherry. *Mekong Diaries: Viet Cong Drawings & Stories*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Clendinnen, Inga. *The History Question: Who Owns the Past?*. Melbourne: Black Inc., 2006.
- Dong Phong Gallery. "An Overview on Vietnamese Art" <<http://dongphonggallery.com/articles/38-an-overview-on-vietnamese-art>> Date accessed November 23, 2014.
- Edward Said: *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.
- Hagopian, Patrick. *The Vietnamese War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009.
- Hue-Tam, H. "Representing the Past in Vietnamese Museums: Reconsidering a nation's past and whose narrative(s) a museum should represent." *Curator* 41 (1998): 187-200.
- Hunt, Michael H., Ed. *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History From American and Vietnamese Perspectives*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.
- Huynh-Beattie, Boitran. "Art in the Age of Doi Moi" Southeast Asia Digital Library. Accessed March 25, 2015 <[http://sea.lib.niu.edu/project/about\\_doi\\_moi](http://sea.lib.niu.edu/project/about_doi_moi)>
- Kieran, David. *Forever Vietnam: How a Derisive War Changed American Public Memory*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014.
- Kleinen, John. *Facing the Future, Reviving the Past: A study of Social Change in a Northern Vietnamese Village*. Pasir Panjang: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999.
- Kunzle, David. "Two Different Wars." In *As Seen By Both Sides: American and Vietnamese Artists Look at the War*. Ed. C. David Thomas. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991. 23- 31.
- Kwon, Heonik. *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

- Lippard, Lucy R. "The Meeting of Two Memories." *As Seen By Both Sides: American and Vietnamese Artists Look at the War*. Ed. C. David Thomas. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991. 20-22.
- Lippard, Lucy R. *A Different War: Vietnam in Art*. Seattle, WA: The Real Comet Press, 1990.
- Long, Lisa A. "Contemporary Women's Roles Through Hmong, Vietnamese, and American Eyes." *Frontiers* 29 (2008): 1 – 36.
- Nguyen, Nathalie Huynh Chau. *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora*. Santa Barbra: ABC-Clio, 2009.
- Rasmuseen, Mikkel Bolt. "Art, War, and Counter-Images." *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 44 – 45 (2012-2013: 91-108).
- Ray, Sibnarayan, Ed. *Vietnam Seen from East and West: An International Symposium*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1966.
- Schwenkel, Christina. *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.
- Schwenkel, Christina. "Recombinant History: Transnational Practices of Memory and Knowledge Production in Contemporary Vietnam." *Cultural Anthropology* 21 (2006): 3 – 30.
- Taylor, Nora A. *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009.
- Taylor, Nora A. "Orientalism/Occidentalism: The Founding of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Inochine and the Politics of Painting in Colonial Việt Nam, 1925-1945." *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 11 (1997): 1-33.
- Taylor, Nora A. "Vietnamese Anti-art and Anti-Vietnamese Artists: Experimental Performance Culture in Hà Nội's Alternative Exhibition Spaces." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2 (2007): 108-128.
- Taylor, Nora A. "Framing the National Spirit: Viewing and Reviewing Painting Under the Revolution." *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*. Ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001. 109-134.
- Taylor, Nora A. "Why Have There Been No Great Vietnamese Artists?" *Michigan Quarterly Review* 44, 1 (2005, Winter): 148-165.
- Willbanks, James H., Ed. *Vietnam War: The Essential Reference Guide*. Santa Barbra: ABC-Clio, 2013.

## Exhibition Catalogue Entries

### **1. Embedded Memory**

Nguyen Thi Chau Giang

*Natural color on silk*, 2010

90 cm. high x 80 cm. wide

Art Vietnam Gallery, Hanoi Vietnam



Nguyen Thi Chau Giang's body of work is aimed at addressing the many stereotypes of Vietnamese women as exotic sexualized ideals that have been presented and perpetuated in various American films and popular culture. Chau Giang was born in Hanoi in 1975 and graduated from the Ho Chi Minh City College of Fine Arts in 1998. Feminist theories that impact contemporary Vietnamese society play an important role in Chau Giang's works. She addresses subjects of the typical Vietnamese feminine archetypes both in and out of Vietnam.<sup>24</sup> Through her work Chau Giang seeks to resist the narratives that are commonly associated with Vietnamese women. Below are still images from the film *Full Metal Jacket* and the play *Miss Saigon* that illustrate the stereotypes that Chau Giang several other female Vietnamese artists are working against.



---

<sup>24</sup> Thavibu Gallery: Contemporary Art from Thailand, Vietnam and Burma, "Vietnamese Artists: Nguyen Thi Chau Giang," accessed February 3, 2015. <[http://www.thavibu.com/vietnam/nguyen\\_thi\\_chau\\_giang/VIE3300.htm](http://www.thavibu.com/vietnam/nguyen_thi_chau_giang/VIE3300.htm)>

Chau Giang draws from both classic and contemporary sources as inspiration. She works in the medium of Vietnamese silk painting, a tradition that developed during China's long rule in Vietnam. Silk painting implies a sense of seduction and poetic romance. Contemporary images she draws upon are also influenced by western depictions of Vietnamese. There are many dehumanizing stereotypes, which sprouted from remnants of the contentious war in Vietnam that exoticize and sexualize Vietnamese women to the American public. Chau Giang images seek to work against these ideas and present images of Vietnamese women in roles as matriarchs and preservers of tradition, fighting to present a new image for western audiences to engage with. Images of elderly women in Chau Giang's paintings serve to represent an earlier era in Vietnam's history of poverty and suffering.

The image *Embedded Memory* speaks specifically to this idea by incorporating the faces of both youthful and elderly woman, representing herself and her grandmother. Giang was born in Hanoi in 1975 and grew up in a post-war Vietnam.<sup>25</sup> Having grown up in a post-war Vietnam, *Embedded Memory* demonstrates what it means for Chau Giang to be a female artist in contemporary Vietnam, how she sees herself, and what influences her. The blending of these faces emphasizes the pain that early generations experienced during the Vietnam-American War and its influence on her contemporary identity.

---

<sup>25</sup> Nora A. Taylor, curator, *Changing Identity: Recent Works by Women Artists From Vietnam*. (Washington D.C: International Arts and Artists, 2007), 29.

## 2. How Can I Join Them

Nguyen Thi Chau Giang

*Natural color on silk*, 2010

80 cm. high x 120 cm. wide

Art Vietnam Gallery, Hanoi Vietnam



*How Can I Join Them* is a particularly striking image by Nguyen Thi Chau Giang that expresses the homogenization of Asian women both during and after the war. We often hear statements like “I can’t tell them apart” or “They all look the same” – made by individuals in reference to people from other ethnicities. In “How can I join them?” Nguyen Thi Chau Giang asks audiences to confront such sentiments.

Against a row of sterile and repetitive figures we see a portrait of Chau Giang standing defiantly with her arms crossed. She engages directly with the viewer, staring out from the center of the image, standing out against a row of blank and emotionless faces. She is dressed in a colorful patterned outfit that contrasts sharply with the bland black/grey robes of the individuals behind her. Her bold stance and steady gaze seem to say, “look at me and all my individuality,” *how can I join them?*

This question is not only addressed to Western audiences but contemporary Vietnamese citizens as well. The developing beauty standards in Vietnam (and Asia in general) have a very singular idea of beauty. White skin, red lips, and a sharp v-shaped jaw line are all seen as ideal features on women.<sup>26</sup> These features seen exaggerated on the figures behind her accentuate her darker skin and found face. Her rebellious gaze again asks viewers, weather this is truly beauty.

---

<sup>26</sup> C. N. Le, *The Society Pages: Social Science That Matters*, last modified June 4, 2014, “The Homogenization of Asian Beauty,” accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://thesocietypages.org/papers/homoeigenization-of-asian-beauty/>>

### 3. Worlds of Women

Dinh Thi Tham Poong's  
Work (drawings, watercolor, ect.) on handmade  
paper watercolor, 2013  
80 x 110 cm. (31.5 x 43.3 in.)  
Vietnamese Contemporary Fine Art Inventory  
Catalogue



Dinh Thi Tham Poong is another female Vietnamese artist who seeks to reconstruct the western understanding of contemporary Vietnamese women. She focuses her images on women of ethnic minorities within Vietnam, particularly the Tai, Hmong and Nung in the rural highlands of Vietnam. Born in 1970 in Lai Chau province, Tham Poong is of mixed Thai and Muong heritage, two of Vietnam's 54 ethnic minority groups. Her work is deeply influenced by her heritage and childhood experiences in the remote mountainous region of Vietnam. Her bright and often surreal paintings portray ethnic minority men and women, typically showing details of their daily life while placing them in fanciful imagined landscape. The figures are often dressed in their distinctive, colorful traditional clothing.<sup>27</sup> Tham Poong paints with watercolor on handmade paper to create her intricate images.

In *Worlds of Women* two figures, dressed authentically in traditional clothing, are positioned to indicate movement and activity, likely related to everyday life. Tham Poong aims to capture their essence without resorting to clichéd portraits of ethnic women that tend to idealize or romanticize them. Rather than creating an “exotic beauty” she is more interested in illustrating their creativity and adaptation to nature. Tham Poong aspires to highlight the deep connection between the lifestyle of these women and the communion with nature. The third

---

<sup>27</sup> The East Galley: Contemporary Asian Art, “Dinh Thi Tham Poong,” accessed February 3, 2015 <[http://theeastgallery.smugmug.com/Artists/Dinh-Thi-Tham-Poong/16685201\\_RrWCrR#!i=1254029809&k=jB82sQJ](http://theeastgallery.smugmug.com/Artists/Dinh-Thi-Tham-Poong/16685201_RrWCrR#!i=1254029809&k=jB82sQJ)>



silhouette though does address the idea of the “exotic beauty.” This figure is placed in a distinctively sexually suggestive pose and is filled in with a sky-patterned design. I believe this sky patterning signifies the more “transparent” understanding of women as a sexual object rather than an individual.

#### **4. Mother Nature, Mother Nurture**

Dinh Thi Tham Poong’s  
2008 Works on Paper (Drawings, Watercolors etc.),  
watercolor on handmade paper  
60 x 80 in. (152.4 x 203.2 cm.)  
Vietnamese Contemporary Fine Art Inventory Catalogue



Tham Poong’s work is particularly interesting because it addresses not only the depiction of Vietnamese women in Western culture but also their position within Vietnam. As previously mentioned, many portrayals of Vietnamese women in Post-War American pop culture sexualize and eroticize them. Interestingly, Tham Poong’s work is influenced by this phenomenon in a Vietnamese context. Her images depict Tai, Hmong and Nung women, who are minorities within Vietnam and have been subject to similar objectification by both foreign and domestic sources. Since the beginning of the Indochina wars with France and then the United States, Vietnamese artists have followed soldiers to the highlands and sketched portraits of ethnic women who often wore nothing but a skirt.<sup>28</sup> They fantasized about the primitive nature of these women, paralleling the general perspective of American soldiers on Vietnamese women.

As with the previous images, Tham Poong here aims to capture the connection between these women and the environment. She explains, “In the mountains, women live more closely

---

<sup>28</sup> Nora A. Taylor, *Changing Identity*, 25.

with nature. They gather herbs and vegetables, they cook on stoves that burn branches and twigs, their houses are made of bamboo and wood. They bathe in mountain streams and cure their ills with medicines found in the forests.”<sup>29</sup> To express this message her figures are often faceless, silhouetted against a background of trees and forests. In this particular piece, *Mother Nature*, *Mother Nurture*, three women with children on their backs are depicted. Abstract foliage in the background implies a lush landscape. Images of these women as mothers and caregivers to their children draw a parallel between women and nature, or Mother Nature, as the title indicates.

Minorities and indigenous peoples within Vietnam still face much discrimination and oppression even today. The general policy of the Vietnamese government towards most minorities, and especially those who were perceived as having sided with American forces, was aggressive and even in some cases brutal until the 1990s.<sup>30</sup> Tham Poong’s images aim to reach both American and Vietnamese audiences. For Vietnamese viewers her paintings confront the audience with subject matter that has been underrepresented at the same time and brings awareness to these minorities. For American audiences, her work can serve to remind us of the lingering social impact the American War has in Vietnam and how that aggression has impacted the lives of individuals hidden in the mountaintops of a world and landscape that is almost imaginary. Her artwork also presents American audiences with a portrait of Vietnamese women that does not conform to the image propagated by our media sources, intending to prompt critical thinking and re-evaluation.

---

<sup>29</sup> Nora A. Taylor, *Changing Identity*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, “Vietnam Overview,” accessed February 27, 2015. <<http://www.minorityrights.org/2318/vietnam/vietnam-overview.html>>

## 5. Made in Vietnam: Photograph Series (Self and Aunts)

Phuong M. Do  
1998, Silver gelatin print  
10in x 8in



Born in Vietnam but raised in the United States, Do's family was among the millions of South Vietnamese who left the country after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Phuong started taking pictures of herself when she first returned to Vietnam after nearly three decades in exile.<sup>31</sup> Her photos capture her unique experience as both an outsider in her home country and in the adopted country in which she was raised.

The medium of photography is a significant choice made by Do that speaks to the lingering legacy of the American War. Do has stated, "My experience with the notion of Vietnam, the idea of Vietnam, has always been elusive. I have always thought about photography as something that really defined the social, collective and historical memories of people in the US in terms of what Vietnam was."<sup>32</sup> Images played a crucial role during the war. For the first time in American history, images of combat and the horrors of war were presented widely to the public through television and printed media. These images fueled social and political change, but have also left a legacy of violence and poverty that contemporary Vietnam has to contend with.

Growing up in America, Do has been taught these images represent the truth about Vietnam. Do describes photography as a way "to explore the American perceptions of what

---

<sup>31</sup> Nora A. Taylor, *Changing Identity*, 62.

<sup>32</sup> "Made in Vietnam' Photography by Phuong M. Do," YouTube video, 4:14, posted by "nyusteinhardt," Oct 26, 2012. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wR35k33ZjvU>>

Vietnam means and what images it conjures up."<sup>33</sup> From this perspective, her work is especially poignant to American audiences because in a sense, she is coming from a similar experience. Along with using the medium of photography to subvert the historical narrative presented by American journalists, her startling composition captures the "the painful otherness" of a refugee like herself who's never entirely at home in her country of origin or adopted home.<sup>34</sup>

Do's image, *Self and Aunts*, clearly illustrates this sense of displacement. Do photographs herself sitting with four of her Vietnamese relatives. There is a casual sense of camaraderie among the other women that is in strong contrast to Do's placement in the photo. She engages directly with camera, displacing herself from the scene and creating an invisible barrier between herself and others. Do states "Vietnam was always abstract to me as it is to the American people [...] I went [to Vietnam] to really figure out what this word 'Vietnam' means to me."<sup>35</sup>

## 6. Self with Parents in Colorado

Phuong M. Do  
2002 Photograph: C-print  
10in x 8in



This self portrait was the result of a seven-year process, Phuong Do notes: "While a sense of disconnect from my relatives doesn't really go away, I have come to accept it for what it is...and that I will probably not ever feel familiar with them or they with me. Having known

---

<sup>33</sup> Chris Bergeron, "Exhibit shows women of Vietnam no longer casualties of war," *The Register-Mail*, August 30, 2008. Accessed February 3, 2015. <<http://www.galesburg.com/article/20080830/News/308309981>>

<sup>34</sup> Chris Bergeron, "Exhibit shows women of Vietnam."

<sup>35</sup> Chris Bergeron, "Exhibit shows women of Vietnam."

something about my family history—though fragmented—provides me context so that I can form my own sense of self.”<sup>36</sup> Whether with her family in the United States or Vietnam, Do always sticks out a bit, standing off center as the constant outsider.

In her image, *Self with Parents in Colorado*, we see this idea coming through clearly. In a space where one is supposed to feel completely at home and comfortable we are struck by the stark image of Do alone in the center of the composition. Her parents occupy the space behind her but they are not engaging with one another. This image carries the same sense of disconnect as the other (*Self with Aunts*).

## 7. Hide and Seek

Ann Phong  
1998, Acrylic on canvas  
60cm x 84cm



Ann Phong was born in 1958 in Saigon, Vietnam. Military aggression had a strong presence in Phong’s childhood but her first memory of extreme violence dates to the Tet offensive in 1968, which wrought monumental destruction upon Saigon, her home and South Vietnam's capital. At only 10 years old she was struck by the horrors of the war. In a 1995 interview Phong notes, "From that time on, I started to see fires and bombs, and helicopters flew all the time. I lived close to the airport and it got bombed, too, about 1974. It just got more and

---

<sup>36</sup> WAM News and Events Blog. “Phuong M. Do's Vietnam Re-imagined.” Last modified January 9, 2009. Accessed February 23, 2015. <[http://blog.lib.umn.edu/wampr/wamnewsmain/2009/01/phuong\\_m\\_dos\\_vietnam\\_reimagine.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/wampr/wamnewsmain/2009/01/phuong_m_dos_vietnam_reimagine.html)>

more intense.”<sup>37</sup> In 1981, Phong fled to the United States by boat, a move driven not only by political pressures but artistic ambitions as well.

After graduating from high school, Phong tried for three years to get into art school but was barred because neither she nor her family were Communist Party members. She was eventually accepted into a Saigon academy, but after a few years there she recalled, “As I matured, I didn't see any future for myself. I felt it was a dead end. So when I had a chance to escape, I went.”<sup>38</sup> Being an artist at this time in Vietnam was inextricably constrained by the government strictures.

Much of Phong's earlier works such as *Hide and Seek* invoke the war-ravaged country, including the fires, bombings, and darkness that occupied her childhood memories. The orange, yellows, and whites contrasted against dark blues and greens, create bright explosions of colors indicative of bombings and fires. The two outlined hands on the right side of the painting evoke the far-reaching hands of the Vietnamese government. The Vietnamese Communist regime used artists as instruments of propaganda both during and after the war and as an artist Phong strongly felt this constant pressure. Boats are a consistent theme in Phong's paintings and can be seen in various spaces in this image. Boats are a direct reference not only to her journey of refuge, but the label of “Boat people,” which American newspapers and magazines assigned to Vietnamese refugees escaping political persecution by fleeing on small boats.

---

<sup>37</sup> Dubin, Zan. “Freedom for Ann Phong--and Her Art.” *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1995. Accessed February 3, 2015. <[http://articles.latimes.com/1995-03-15/entertainment/ca-42966\\_1\\_graduate-art](http://articles.latimes.com/1995-03-15/entertainment/ca-42966_1_graduate-art).>

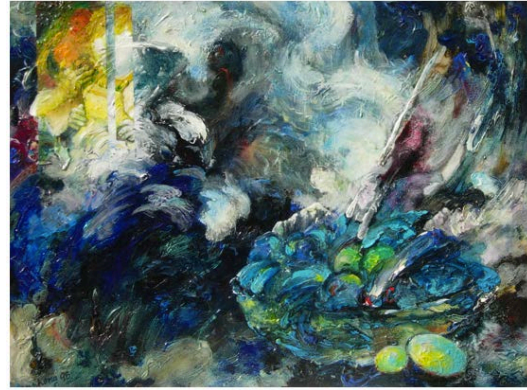
<sup>38</sup> Dubin, Zan. “Freedom for Ann Phong--and Her Art.”

## 8. Blue Ocean

Ann Phong

1998, Acrylic on canvas

36cm x 48cm



*Blue Ocean* is another early work of Phong's that addresses the traumatic experience of fleeing from Vietnam. This piece, while more abstract than *Hide and Seek*, evokes the same emotions in the viewer: dread, foreboding, and anxiety. The wispy strokes of white paint suggest billowing smoke and a burning village. Slightly to the left of the center of the image there is a dark human shaped shadow or silhouette. Similar to the reaching hands, this figure invokes a fearful and sinister atmosphere. The figure is likely a manifestation of the feelings of persecution Phong felt as she was escaping Vietnam.

In the top left section of the painting there are figures painted in warm yellows and oranges. The figures contrast greatly with the dark blue color palette in the rest of the painting, suggesting a space of calm and peace in midst of the turmoil. It is possible these figures represent Phong's family that she left behind when immigrating to the United States. The warm glow of the figures evokes warm emotions of love and affection, but they are trapped and corned in the top left section of the image.

## 9. Mending

Ann Phong

2003, Mixed media on canvas

60cm x 48cm



I think it can be said that there are two general phases or emotional frameworks to Phong's work. According to Phong, "I paint about the war and about the Vietnamese people and how I assimilated into American society. I present things in a Western way (artistically), but I use my Eastern thinking and culture in my paintings."<sup>39</sup> Her earlier pieces addressed her journey of escape and reflected on her memories of the war while her more recent pieces take on a more reflective tone.

Her piece, *Mending*, addresses the issue of coming to terms with her history and moving forward. The image of knitting hands invokes the act of tying together the threads of her past and present to create her identity and mend the heartache of her childhood. In the top right section of the painting we see a hand with pieces of red thread woven through it. The symbol of the red thread calls upon the popular Asian mythology of the thread of fate. Including this imagery perhaps suggests a coming to terms with her fate. The color palette of this painting is also noticeably distinct from her earlier images. The cool green and pale yellow tones radiate a sense of soothing and calm, congruent with her message of mending.

---

<sup>39</sup> Dubin, Zan. "Freedom for Ann Phong--and Her Art."



## 10. Yin and Yang (Reflection)

Dong Phan

Mixed Media on Canvas

48in x 60in



Dong Phan was born in Vietnam in 1968 and fled by boat in 1981 to the United States, along with many others refugees. Throughout his teen life as a refugee, Phan drew people's portraits in exchange for food.<sup>40</sup> He is now an established artist and many of his works are housed at the Evolving Art Gallery in San Francisco. Phan works with mixed media collages on canvas. His aesthetic aims to evoke images of debris and a wrecked landscape after wartime bombing. The work bears some similarities to art made by Italian artist Alberto Burri and others who lived through the devastation of World War II.<sup>41</sup> Other Vietnamese artists Toi Hoang and Viet Nguyen also pursue similar themes of decimation and ruin resulting from the America War in their work. Phan also works extensively with horse imagery. He states they are an emotional representation of a "never-ending pilgrimage towards self-actualization."<sup>42</sup>

*Yin and Yang or Reflection*, is a kind of self-portrait. Both horses are representative of him and his personal experience and history as a refugee. The horse on the left is unscathed and left smooth, while the horse on the right has been subject to ripping and weathering. The horse on the left can be interpreted as the self that found success and security in America while the horse on the right is the one trapped back in Vietnam during the war. The title of yin and yang

---

<sup>40</sup> Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network. "Dong Phan." Accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://www.dvanonline.com/bios/dong-phan/>>

<sup>41</sup> Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network

<sup>42</sup> Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network

suggests the notion that both these images are essential parts of him and there cannot be one without the other. This is a contemplative and retrospective look into himself and how his life has been shaped by the Vietnam War.

## 11. Go To Market

Nguyen Manh Hung  
Wood, plastic fruits, nylon bags, metal, cotton.  
200cm (h) x 60cm (w) x 400cm (d)



Born in 1976, a year after the American-Vietnam War ended, Nguyen grew up observing its lingering effects on daily life in Vietnam. Reflecting on that experience, Manh Hung's work incorporates a distinctive blend of surrealism, humor, and playfulness while addressing serious social and political concerns in contemporary Vietnam. Many of these issues have their roots in the American war and so either directly or indirectly his pieces address the persisting impact of the war.

He states, "Our lives are filled with conflicts - sometimes sad and sometimes humorous. My creative practice is an exploration of aspects of the national and cultural history of Vietnam, as well as personal and contemporary experiences."<sup>43</sup> Manh Hung's work often displays a combination of militaristic vehicles and material culture juxtaposed with elements of daily life.

---

<sup>43</sup> Nguyen Manh Hung. "2D Works: Paintings," accessed February 3, 2015.  
<<http://hung6776.com/web/index.php?id=25>>

This is a commentary on the social environment in post-war Vietnam in which remnants of militaristic aggression were a part of everyday life.

As a son of a fighter jet pilot Manh Hung incorporates planes in many of his pieces, including, *Go to Market*. This installation piece combines what is popularly understood as a symbol of destruction and war with objects associated with hope and prosperity.<sup>44</sup> The image of a fighter jet laden down with groceries bags arching nearly 6 feet is startling. The image speaks not only to the combination of these two elements in contemporary Vietnam but also presents a distinctively humorous and fanciful way of addressing this subject matter that makes it more digestible for audiences. A high tech war machine is called down and transformed into a playful sculpture that is a commentary on Vietnamese life today.

## 12. The Barricade

Nguyen Manh Hung

Wood, paper, plastic, metal, nylon, LED lighting system, sawdust, canvas bags, sand.

220cm (h) x 430cm (w) x 120cm (d)



*The Barricade* represents one of the more serious and direct of Nguyen Manh Hung's pieces. He states, "In this work, I use the images that are associated with Vietnamese such as apartment blocks and barricade to combine in one installation. It aims to present a perspective

---

<sup>44</sup> Nguyen Manh Hung. "About," accessed February 3, 2015.  
<<http://hung6776.com/web/index.php?id=2>>

about war in the language of art.”<sup>45</sup> In this installation piece Hung seeks to address the issues surrounding the living conditions of many Vietnamese people today. This standard of living is a legacy from the American war. The bombing and decimation of many villages in Vietnam left villagers with little choice but to move into standardized apartments assigned to multiple families.

While this image may evoke a sense of an urban setting, Hung notes, “Life in these buildings isn't life of the people in urban areas, but in the village. A high-rise village.”<sup>46</sup> He goes on to discuss how these cramped living conditions, lack of water, and difficult economics conditions present challenges that continue to shape the structure of the building, and to effect, the habits and lifestyle of people of Vietnam. While Vietnam has made great strides forward in the past few decades, there are still many situations in which people continue to struggle with the legacy of the American war.

**13. *Biển, Biển, Biên* (The Ocean, to Vanish, to Note)**

Trinh Mai

2013, Charcoal, acrylic, and joss paper on stone, coconut shells, burlap, tree bark, tree branches and rice sacks, Approximately 8 ½in (h) x 5 in (w) x 3 ¾in (d) each



Trinh Mai is a second generation Vietnamese American; she is one of the few American-born artists included in this exhibition. She was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1978, three

---

<sup>45</sup> Nguyen Manh Hung Blog. “2013 - One Planet - solo exhibition @ Galerie Quynh.” Last modified January 30, 2013. Accessed February 23, 2015 <<http://hung6776.blogspot.com/2013/01/one-planet-solo-exhibition-galerie-quynh.html>>

<sup>46</sup> Nguyen Manh Hung Blog. “2013 - One Planet.”

years after her family fled Vietnam during the fall of Saigon.<sup>47</sup> Mai's recent works embrace her heritage and aim to excavate her roots. As she states, "The path which my ancestors have paved to allow me to be where I am and who I am."<sup>48</sup> Through traditional imagery and symbolism, in both abstract and literal representations, Mai address their connection to her ancestors, Vietnam, and how this has influenced the way in which she interacts with the world around her.

In this project, *Biển, Biển, Biên* (*The Ocean, to Vanish, to Note*), Mai honors those who lost their lives while fleeing from Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. Mai explains that, "the title of the piece, 'Biển, Biển, Biên', translates to 'the ocean', which attempted to carry them across seas, 'to vanish', which so many did during this tumultuous time, and 'to not'", which I am doing as a visual documentation in order to share their stories."<sup>49</sup>

The piece, which memorializes individuals who lost their lives during the war, is drawn upon joss paper. Joss paper is burned in prayer for the ancestors in Buddhist tradition. The paper is applied over a smoothed and flat-topped stone. The stone references the idea that all will become part of the earth as the cycle of life, death, and history continues. The portraits are placed in makeshift boats of coconut shells, burlap, tree bark, tree branches and rice sacks.

Along with honoring the loss of life, memorializing these individuals has been part of the process to now move forward. Mai argues that by trying to understand the journey of these refugees through the creative process, she can continue on her journey with great gratitude. "I live this life of promise for which they themselves had hoped, had fought, and had died."<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Netowrk. "Trinh Mai," accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://www.dvanonline.com/interviews/trinh-mai/>>

<sup>48</sup> Trinh Mai, "Artist Statement," accessed March 25, 2015 <<http://trinhmai.com/artist-statement/>>

<sup>49</sup> Trinh Mai, "Projects: Biển, Biển, Biên," accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://trinhmai.com/bienbienbien-the-ocean-to-vanish-to-note/>>

<sup>50</sup> Trinh Mai, "Projects: Biển, Biển, Biên,"

Art has become a way for Mai to re-live the immigrant experience vicariously through her ancestors, and interpret these stories through her own ears, eyes and hands. In the process she presents to viewers a meaningful message that highlights the continued impact of the American war on a highly personal level.

#### **14. Lifted**

Trinh Mai

2014, Mixed media on acrylic, mylar, and paper

11 ½ in x 11 ½ in



*Lifted* is the first of an experimental series of three-dimensional paintings, which honors the resilience of the Boat People. It was inspired by photos taken in 1975 from the Bettmann/CORBIS photo archive. The boats are printed and cut from the scarf that Mai wore during her great-grandmother's funeral. The white scarf is a Vietnamese tradition used to differentiate between the generations that stem from the deceased.<sup>51</sup> The red thread used in this piece is from a garment her grandmother often wore. The layered themes in this image experiment with depth of field. Mai states, "In these pieces, I pushed these layers just a little further to create more depth, paralleling my need to always dig a little deeper to reveal the layers of history and self."<sup>52</sup> Mai's overlapping of images recalls the layers of time, and how it is our memory of many moments that come together to create an image of the present. The materials used in the work are also of great significance, carrying a similar message of how elements from the past can quite literally be used to create the future.

---

<sup>51</sup> Trinh Mai, "Projects: Fields of Depth," accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://trinhmai.com/fields-of-depth/>>

<sup>52</sup> Trinh Mai, "Projects: Fields of Depth."

### **15. Portrait of a Soldier After War**

Cao Ba Minh

1993, oil on canvas

31 in x 26.25 in



Cao Ba Minh is one of the oldest artists included in this exhibition. Born in Hai Duong, Vietnam in 1942 Ba Minh possesses vivid memories of the war. He served in the South Vietnamese Air Force before immigrating to the United States after the fall of Saigon. Ba Minh states, “My works are washed in the blood and tears of suffering, of annihilation, of brother killing brother—all the baggage of humanity's shame. In my youth I was drawn and woven into the fabric of Vietnam, into a history written in shame, not pride.” Ba Minh left his career as a writer and entered the world of painting because what “was compelled to say words will not satisfy.”

The image presented here is somewhat of a self-portrait. Ba Minh states, “This portrait, this face of monstrosities, is a vehicle to expose the kind of wickedness that the human soul can create and, in turn, suffer.” The intensely vivid red used immediately unsettles the viewer. It evokes feelings of aggression, violence and terror. The distorted facial features reflect both a sense of emotional and physical torture. As a veteran of the war Ba Minh serves as an example of the continued emotional trauma that affects individuals involved in the war. Nearly two decades after the end of the war Ba Minh is still driven to create images wrought with emotional turmoil.

**16. Untitled** (helicopter, Apocalypse Now, prayers)  
Dinh Q. Lê  
2000, Photographs, c-print & linen tape  
40 x 60 in. (101.6 x 152.4 cm.)



Dinh Q. Lê is one of the most famous artists featured in this exhibition. His works have been exhibited throughout the United States, Asia, and Australia and are housed in museum collections at the MOMA and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Lê was born in 1968 in Hà Tiên, a Vietnamese town near the Cambodian border. His family immigrated to Los Angeles after the war and eventually moved back to Vietnam in 1996. The distinction between “real” and “imagined” memory of the Vietnam War is a central theme to Lê’s work. As an eleven-year old when his family left Vietnam, Lê retains strong memories of the war. After arriving in the United State, he grew up surrounded by pop culture that referenced the war. It is this tension between his personal memories of the American War and the images presented by American media that create the conceptual framework for much of the art he produces.

While Lê works in a variety of media including installation, video, sculpture, and urban intervention, this exhibition features his work with photography. Lê creates “woven-photograph” images with type C prints (cibachrome photographs), weaving cut strips of photos together. The process is inspired by traditional Vietnamese basket weaving techniques taught to him by his aunt during childhood. The images he uses in his works are drawn from a range of sources including documentary shots from news archives, film stills from movies about the Vietnam



War, vintage photographs found in old bookstores in Saigon, personal family photos, and archived images.<sup>53</sup>

This weaving technique both metaphorically and physically merges together multiple memories of war in an effort to encounter a new perspective and way of approaching the memory. In the process of weaving together such images, Lê often merges dichotomies: fact and fiction, past and present, life and death, east and west. Lê work explicitly addresses Hollywood's depiction of the Vietnam War, contemporary Vietnam, the romanticism of Vietnam, and lingering wounds from the war.<sup>54</sup> The image depicted here is untitled but incorporates a still image from the film *Apocalypse Now* and Vietnamese individuals in prayer. Helicopters are a reoccurring image in many of Lê's works because for him they represent a quintessential aspect of American representation of the war. Yet, Lê himself recalls never having seen a helicopter in Vietnam. Lê notes, "Once, I visited my mum in California. At that time, there was a very big bush fire near her place. I recalled looking out at the sky and seeing helicopters dropping retardants to stop the fire. It was like a scene from the Vietnam War. But that was actually an image that came from Hollywood. I never did see helicopters when I was still in Vietnam during the war [...] it is important to recognize that my memory of the war has become so slippery."<sup>55</sup>

In this image Lê disrupts the American narrative, with his own memories, represented by the seemingly tranquil and solitary black and white figures woven into the image. The final result of this woven image creates an unclear narrative – it is hard to discern which one is the "real" or "true" image. This visual turmoil Lê creates is indicative of the internal emotional and

---

<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Leach Gallery, "Dinh Q. Lê: Waking Dreams," accessed March 25, 2015. <[http://www.elizabethleach.com/Exhibit\\_Detail.cfm?ShowsID=12](http://www.elizabethleach.com/Exhibit_Detail.cfm?ShowsID=12)>

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Leach Gallery, "Dinh Q. Lê: Waking Dreams."

<sup>55</sup> Zhuang Wubin Blog, "From Vietnam to Hollywood (2003 – 05) / Dinh Q. Le," last modified September 18, 2010, accessed February 3, 2015. <<https://zwubin.wordpress.com/2010/09/18/from-vietnam-to-hollywood-2003-05-dinh-q-le/>>

psychological turmoil he has dealt with as a Vietnamese individual living in America. This image invites views to embrace or experience a new perspective and confront the possibility of multiple memories and “truths.”

### 17. From Vietnam to Hollywood Series

Dinh Q. Lê  
2006, C-print, Linen tape  
100 cmx 170cm



The image depicted here is considered by many to be one of Dinh Q. Lê strongest works. The image contains four figures overlaid on one another. On the right is the cowgirl-costumed playboy bunny holding a toy pistol from *Apocalypse Now* intertwined with South Vietnamese General Nguyen Ngoc Loan<sup>56</sup>. The images on the right include an anonymous black and white photo of a woman from the 1960's woven into the leading actress in the Graham Greene film, *The Quiet American*.

The basic composition of this piece is drawn from Eddie Adam's famous image of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing Viet Cong suspect Bay Lop with a gunshot to the head. In this piece, Lê replaces the image of Bay Lop with the image of two beautiful women on the right. General Nguyen Ngoc Loan remains in the image on the left, but his figure is obscured with an overlaid image of a playboy girl dressed up as a cowboy. She holds a toy gun, which is held

---

<sup>56</sup> Photography-now. “Dinh Q. Lê: Photoweavings,” accessed March 25, 2015.  
<<http://www.photography-now.com/exhibition/20242>.>

similarly to the General's. Below are visual references for the photos that Le has woven together in this piece.



The viewer is taken in by the interesting composition, beautiful faces, and pleasing aesthetics of the image, but when the piece is observed more closely the image of General Loan emerges.<sup>57</sup> The suspenseful moment of latent violence stirs emotions of unease, and we are compelled to look even more closely at the image. This message of “looking closer” to see double memories and emerging realizations are central ideas within this exhibition.

**18. "Damaged Gene"**  
Dinh Q. Lê  
1998, baby dolls



Dinh Q. Lê's photo-weaving images are some of his best-known pieces, but his lesser-known work is just as powerful. Much of Lê's work addresses contemporary Vietnam, the

---

<sup>57</sup> Teresa Hanafin, “Weaving together his Vietnam,” *Boston.com*, March 4, 2009, accessed February 3, 2015. <[http://www.boston.com/community/photos/raw/2009/03/weaving\\_together\\_his\\_vietnam.html](http://www.boston.com/community/photos/raw/2009/03/weaving_together_his_vietnam.html)>

romanticism of Vietnam and the lingering wounds from the American War, but probably none so explicitly as his “Damaged Gene” project from 1998. In this series of works Lê addresses the high rate of birth defects, particularly the unusually high number of Siamese twins among Vietnamese people. The dramatic increase of birth defects in Vietnam is believed to be linked to the widespread use of defoliants and other chemicals by the United States military forces, particularly Agent Orange.

For this project, Lê produced a wide variety of works to address the terrible legacy left to contemporary Vietnam. He created infant clothing with double neck holes for two-headed children. After learning that Siamese twins were revered as magical beings in some underdeveloped areas, Lê created near-life-size painted sculptures of Siamese twin children, displayed on or among lotus blossoms like traditional deities. They resemble statues you might find in an old temple garden, though each has the label of a major American chemical company inconspicuously affixed to it.<sup>58</sup> The combination of benign traditionalism and contemporary horror makes these some of Lê’s most powerful works.

The work displayed here is of plastic baby dolls with conspicuous physical deformities. The dolls were sold in a booth in a public marketplace in Vietnam. The simple “everyday” nature of these material objects contradicts the horror of the reality they represent. This serves to highlight the manner in which contemporary Vietnam individuals, and society in general, have developed ways to mitigate the trauma of the American war. These disturbing figurines are startling to individuals not culturally conditioned to accept them. This makes Lê’s works particularly powerful to non-Vietnamese audiences.

---

<sup>58</sup> Ken Johnson, “Images of Vietnamese in the Generation Since the War,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 2005, accessed February 3, 2015. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/07/arts/design/07john.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/07/arts/design/07john.html?_r=1&)>

**19. Hue Citadel Landscape, No. 9 (Heaven is a Place series)**

Ha Manh Thang,  
2014, acrylic, acrylic medium,  
oil and charcoal on canvas  
100cm x 195cm



Ha Manh Thang was born in 1980 in the Thai Nguyen Province of Vietnam and currently lives and works in Hanoi. Thang was born after the official end of the American War, but much of his works examine Vietnam's historic past and its continual influence and interaction with contemporary Vietnamese society. Thang's *Heaven in a Place* series interrogates the connections between the buildings we construct and the ideals they embody. Thang looks at powerful and iconic monuments such as Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum, the Hue Citadel, Ben Thanh Market and Bitexco Financial Tower and reduces them to their basic forms with no visible details.<sup>59</sup> These reconstructions/deconstructions resemble rudimentary architectural drawings against anonymous backgrounds. The images depict silhouettes of the architectural pieces in a decontextualized space of faded background.

This particular piece depicts the Hue Citadel, which is a monumental structure inside the former imperial capital of Vietnam, Hue. This structure is significant because it is a reminder of a moment in Vietnam's history where Vietnamese Dynasties were in control. It has long been the agenda of the Vietnamese government to create the narrative of a cohesive and unified Vietnamese identity. The government values the imperial city and associated structures as

---

<sup>59</sup> Galerie Quynh, "Heaven is a Place," accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://galeriequynh.com/exhibition/heaven-is-a-place/>>

exemplars of this ideal past. The Ministry of Culture has approved \$61.4 million to restore the Hue royal citadel.<sup>60</sup> Below is a contemporary image of the Hue Citadel.



Not only does the Hue Citadel capture the idealized memory of Vietnam imperial past, it also recalls the violence of the American War. Many bullet holes left over from the war can be observed on the stonewall facades of the building. On January 31, 1968, as part of the Tet Offensive, Viet Cong soldiers launched an attack on Hue, seizing most of the city. During the initial phases of the Battle of Hue, due to Hue's religious and cultural status, Allied forces were ordered not to bomb or shell the city, for fear of destroying the historic structures; but as fighting escalated these restrictions were progressively lifted and the fighting caused substantial damage to the Imperial City.

And so the memories evoked by the structure of Hue Citadel are twofold; it embodies at once the majesty of an imperial Vietnam and the ravaged landscape of war. It is arguable that Thang draws upon both of these memories in his representation. In this image the structure illustrated has been stripped of its decorative elements and imposing stature. Contrasted against a sterile background the structure is left looking vulnerable and exposed, evoking the vulnerability of Vietnam after the American war. In contrast to this, the symbolic power of this building as an

---

<sup>60</sup> Vietnam Online, "Vietnam to spend 61 million dollars to restore Hue royal citadel," accessed April 17, 2015. <<http://www.vietnamonline.com/event/vietnam-to-spend-61-million-dollars-to-restore-hue-royal-citadel.html>.>

imperial structure is present and identifiable. Its identity as the Hue Citadel is undeniable. With this piece, Thang touches upon the idea that even in such a bare state, the monumental structure is still recognizable and cannot be stripped of its image and ideals that are embedded into the collective conscious of the Vietnamese people.<sup>61</sup>

## **20. Victory Days, No.1 (Not Memory Series)**

Ha Manh Thang  
2010, acrylic on canvas  
120cm x 300cm



Ha Manh Thang is best known for his bold and colorful painterly canvases that juxtapose Vietnam's past and its rich heritage with fashionable images of consumerist culture.<sup>62</sup> Thang is inspired by themes of memory, history, and cultural heritage, with a focus on bridging a connection between ideas of modernity and tradition. In his “Not Memory” series Ha Manh Thang examines Vietnam's culture and social history within the context of the dramatic changes the country has undergone since Doi Moi. He draws upon imagery ranging from rural village houses in Vietnam, ancient temples, royal costumes from Vietnam's Le and Trinh dynasties in the 17th century to contemporary brand symbols and general indicators of consumerist culture.

These satirical images comment on how Thang conceptualizes the current Vietnam in which he lives, a place where the past and present, “east” and “west”, modern and traditional intersect with one another. With vivid colors, Thang uses acrylic on paper and canvas to combine

---

<sup>61</sup> Galerie Quynh, “Heaven is a Place.”

<sup>62</sup> Ha Manh Thang. “About Me.” Accessed April 17, 2015. <<http://hamanhthang.com/about-me>>

the symbols and signs of both tradition and modernity. His paintings depict the “new Vietnam” after Doi Moi, when the opening up of economic policies brought to Vietnam progress as well as a new taste for branded goods from Western countries. Thang’s work also speaks to the widespread desire and need to preserve Vietnamese heritage and traditions.<sup>63</sup> Drawing on concepts from old photographs of Vietnam, artistic motifs from Japanese, artistic traditions from China and the West, and contemporary brand logos, he creates works that force his audiences to reexamine their understanding of contemporary Vietnamese society. The variety of painting techniques Thang employs adds another dimension to his work. He incorporates ancient Chinese and Japanese modes along sides of modern icons and symbols, expressing his desire to bridge modernity and traditions even in the technical process behind his work, not just the visual content.<sup>64</sup>

The painting featured here, *Victory Days*, is a prime example of Thang’s effort to create dialogue between Vietnamese collective memory and visual references from the West. In the foreground we see an individual in blue uniform, possibly a military personnel taking a “selfie” with the surrounding landscape. The figure holds a pink stuffed bear on his shoulder, an object that is recurrent in many of Thang’s paintings from his “Not Memory” series. Behind and to his left are three figures, two soldiers and Mickey Mouse. The soldiers hold guns and stand to attention behind the individual in blue. While the smallest in statue, Mickey Mouse emerges a dominant figure. His expression holds hints of a malicious intent, perhaps making commentary on the Disney Corporation and reaches in Vietnam.

---

<sup>63</sup> Ha Mang Thang, “Not Memory (Solo), The Bui Gallery, Hanoi, Vietnam,” accessed April 17, 2015. <<http://hamanhthang.com/about-me>>

<sup>64</sup> Ha Mang Thang, “Not Memory”



At first glance we see a mixed composition with seemingly playful nods to pop culture, consumer culture and the culture of memory. But on closer inspection, we can see something that is not playful, but rather a careful and deep consideration of a people's history, memory and identity. Of this *Not Memory* series, Thang has stated, "No doubt memory is like a thorn which pricks you when you think of it. Whether it is meaningful or meaningless depends on how we think the past and our collective memories have had an impact on us; but the past is over and cannot be changed now. Collective memory like ocean waves wash over from this generation to the next as we consider together each part of history. Finally, producing these compositions for *Not Memory* has made me realize that 'MEMORY IS NOT MEMORY' if we recognize its different impacts on each of our lives and our souls."<sup>65</sup> This quote speaks strongly to the overarching themes of this exhibition. His work reflects an attempt to cope with the constantly changing and shifting narratives memories create through continual "re-remembrance". Ha Manh Thang challenges us to do the same and think about the power that memories have over our lives and consider how memory is subject to constant change.

### **21. Oscilloscope III**

Le Quoc Viet

2008, Chinese ink on Xuan paper

69 cm. high x 132 cm. wide

Art Vietnam Gallery, Hanoi Vietnam



Le Quoc Viet works in Vietnam as both a painter and curator. Born in 1972 in Ha Tay province, Viet is part of a younger generation of Vietnamese artists who emerged in Doi Moi

---

<sup>65</sup> Thoa Nguyen, "'Not memory' exhibition opens Hanoi," *The Saigon Times*. April 8, 2010, accessed Aril 13 2015. <<http://english.thesaigontimes.vn/9640/%E2%80%98Not-memory%E2%80%99-exhibition-opens-Hanoi.html>>

period of economic and social renovation. Despite this, the past is an integral part of his works, even at the very basic level of technique. Viet works within the traditional graphic arts of printmaking, his medium of choice being handmade wood blocks.<sup>66</sup> Wood block printing is one of the oldest of traditional printmaking techniques. Viet's works draw from the rich intersection between printing and text in Vietnamese culture. Viet's works also navigate the tenuous space between past and present Vietnam, interrogating the tumultuous history of the nation, particularly through the medium of wood block prints. As Vietnam modernized, age-old traditions shaped by Buddhism were neglected and forgotten. Viet critiques the state of modern society in which the facade of progress hides the moral emptiness beneath.<sup>67</sup>

In this piece, "Oscilloscope III", Viet uses traditional materials of Chinese ink on Xuan paper to create a composition inspired by the traditional Nom (Chữ Nôm) script derived from Chinese characters and adapted to Vietnamese. Language is the primary site of struggle in many of Viet's works. The fading of language serves as a case example of the growing disconnect with the past that modern Vietnam faces. By combining language and the visual arts, he creates a link between the past and present Vietnam. His works attempt to navigate between past and present Vietnam, interrogating the tumultuous history of his native country.

In a perhaps more elusive manner than other works in this exhibition, this piece still speaks strongly to the experience of a contemporary Vietnamese artist, operating in the societal frameworks established after the American war. The American war served as an introduction to Vietnam of American pop culture and consumer culture, likely influencing later economic reforms. In an effort to "catch-up" and modernize with countries like America, there have been

---

<sup>66</sup> The Culture Trip, "Le Quoc Viet: An Artistic Soul In Modern Vietnam," accessed February 3, 2015. <<http://theculturetrip.com/asia/vietnam/articles/modern-art-in-vietnam-le-quoc-viet/>>

<sup>67</sup> The Culture Trip, "Le Quoc Viet."

casualties in the preservation of Vietnamese “traditions”. Viet’s works illustrate a broader example of how the American war has shaped Vietnamese awareness. Like many other artists included in this exhibition, Viet expresses a heightened awareness of cultural memory and how it has been shaped by past events.

## 22. Under the Clouds of War (Photo series)

An-My Le

Oct 27 — Jan 6, 2007



### RESCUE

1999–2002, gelatin silver print,  
66 × 95.3 cm.  
Murray Guy Gallery, New York.



### MORTAL IMPACT

2003-04, gelatin silver print  
66 x 95.3 cm  
Murray Guy Gallery, New York.

Le was born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1960 and came to the United States as a refugee in 1975. The photo series combines two past projects and puts them in juxtaposition to one another to create an innovative and meaningful commentary on contemporary political and past politics. Through these two photographic series An-My Le explores the conflicts that bracket the last half-century: the war in Vietnam and the war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

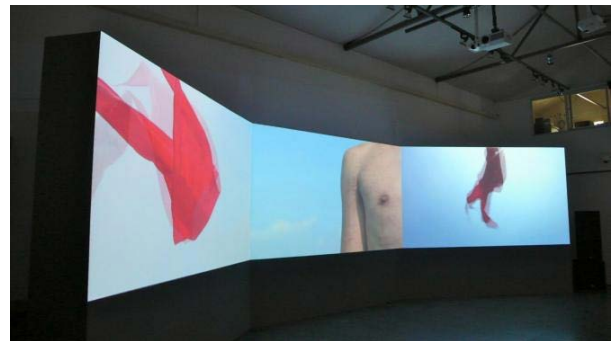
Her series *Small Wars* (1999-2002) depicts men who reenact battles from the war in Vietnam in the forests of Virginia on weekends. These images explore the idea of “the Vietnam

of the mind”; a conception of war that emerged from the vast collection of documentation, personal histories, and fictional interpretations confronting veterans, survivors, and subsequent generations. Her pictures present men, some of them veterans, others history buffs, simulating combat and war routines using detailed props such as grounded airplanes, tents, and uniforms.

Her current and ongoing series *29 Palms* (2003-present), documents the military base of the same name in the California desert where soldiers train before being deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.<sup>68</sup> The side-by-side presentation of these images serves to highlight the scarily constructed and manipulated nature of war. Both soldiers and the sentiments of the public are like pawns in larger political agendas. The images also serve to remind us how easy it is to accept something as truth. Both these photographs are images of simulations and recreations of battle, but to the unknowing eye they seem to represent the “real” events.

### 23. LậpLoè / Welts

Tran Luong,  
2008, Performance, three channel video  
installation,  
Guggenheim UBS Map Global Art Initiative  
Courtesy of Artist



Tran Luong was born in 1960 in Hanoi, Vietnam. He graduated from the Hanoi University of Fine Arts in 1983 and went on to form a collective with fellow painting graduates

---

<sup>68</sup> Museum of Contemporary Museum of Photography, “An-My Le: Small Wars Oct 27 — Jan 6, 2007,” accessed February 3, 2015. <<http://www.mocp.org/exhibitions/2006/10/an-my-le-small-wars.php>.>

that became known as the “Gang of Five” who were involved in leading major developments for contemporary art in Vietnam.<sup>69</sup> Luong is one of the first Vietnamese artists to have experimented with installations, performance art, and video art. He has been labeled as a “cultural activator”, responsible for promoting and stimulating artistic development, particularly in North Vietnam. Luong’s work has been exhibited worldwide and his latest performative video *Lap Løe*, (2012) is part of the Guggenheim UBS Map Global Art Initiative. *Lap Løe*, is exhibited through a three-channel color video with sound, lasting for about 9 min. and 47 seconds, looping on itself. Lap Loe translates roughly to “flickering.” The exhibition is also associated with the title, “Red Scarf/Welts.”

The content of this video is derived from a performance that Luong began in 2007. He invited audiences at his first performance in China to snap a red scarf against his body, as if play-fighting. The red scarf is an item of great historical and political significance in Vietnam. It is associated with communism, as well as being reminiscent of the red scarves worn by Vietnamese primary and secondary students.<sup>70</sup> The inspiration for this performance came when Luong saw his son returned home from school wearing the same red scarf he did as a child. This evoked memories of his childhood, when he and his friends played by slapping each other with the red scarf. This tender childhood memory is paired with memories of the misery and suffering of living through the American War.

---

<sup>69</sup> Guggenheim Collection Online. “Tran Luong.” Accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artists/bios/11652/Tran%20Luong>>

<sup>70</sup> The Voice of Vietnam, “‘Lap Loe’ video installation on display in Hanoi,” last modified March 1, 2013, accessed April 12, 2015. <<http://english.vov.vn/Culture/Lap-Loe-video-installation-on-display-in-Hanoi/255741.vov>>

As Luong invites audience members to “play fight” him with the scarf he recalls memories of playing with his friends. The whipping of the scarf against his body would sometimes leave welts, evoking for Luong the suffering of the Vietnamese people throughout the American war and decisions made by the government. Tran wanted to experience the pain of the small scars and wounds inflicted by the game to reflect the pain that was inflicted by outside forces during that politically troubled era.<sup>71</sup> As the performance was repeated at eleven other locations throughout Vietnam, Korea, Indonesia, and Singapore Luong noticed that audiences’ reactions differed widely from place to place as the scarf took on diverse significances, provoking a variety of reactions.

Luong’s video installation features the red scarf being waved in the air, floating downward, and being snapped against his body. The various movements of the scarf serve to evoke the Vietnamese nationalist struggle Luong experienced while living through the war. Luong uses the imagery in *Lập Lòe* to express his views about contemporary daily life in Vietnam and its intersection with historical matters. Tran Luong’s art video explores themes of history, politics, personal and collective memory and uses the symbol of the red scarf to reference them. His performance indicates not only the last impact of the war on Luong’s personal experience, but the experience of his son and future Vietnamese generations.

---

<sup>71</sup> The Culture Trip, “Vietnam’s 10 Best Contemporary Artists and Where to Find Them,” accessed February 3, 2015. <<http://theculturetrip.com/asia/vietnam/articles/vietnam-s-10-best-contemporary-artists-and-where-to-find-them/>>

## Bibliography

- Bergeron, Chris. "Exhibit shows women of Vietnam no longer casualties of war." *The Register-Mail*, August 30, 2008. Accessed February 3, 2015. <<http://www.galesburg.com/article/20080830/News/308309981>>
- Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Netowrk. "Dong Phan." Accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://www.dvanonline.com/bios/dong-phan/>>
- Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Netowrk. "Trinh Mai." Accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://www.dvanonline.com/interviews/trinh-mai/>>
- Dubin, Zan. "Freedom for Ann Phong--and Her Art." *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1995. Accessed February 3, 2015. <[http://articles.latimes.com/1995-03-15/entertainment/ca-42966\\_1\\_graduate-art](http://articles.latimes.com/1995-03-15/entertainment/ca-42966_1_graduate-art)>
- Elizabeth Leach Gallery. "Dinh Q. Lê: Waking Dreams." Accessed March 25, 2015. <[http://www.elizabethleach.com/Exhibit\\_Detail.cfm?ShowsID=12](http://www.elizabethleach.com/Exhibit_Detail.cfm?ShowsID=12)>
- Galerie Quynh. "Heaven is a Place." Accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://galeriequynh.com/exhibition/heaven-is-a-place/>>
- Guggenheim Collection Online. "Tran Luong." Accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artists/bios/11652/Tran%20Luong>>
- Hanafin, Teresa. "Weaving together his Vietnam." *Boston.com*, March 4, 2009. Accessed February 3, 2015. <[http://www.boston.com/community/photos/raw/2009/03/weaving\\_together\\_his\\_vietnam.html](http://www.boston.com/community/photos/raw/2009/03/weaving_together_his_vietnam.html)>
- Ha Mang Thang. "About Me." Accessed April 12, 2015. <<http://hamanhthang.com/about-me>>
- Ha Mang Thang. "Not Memory (Solo), The Bui Gallery, Hanoi, Vietnam." Accessed April 12, 2015. <<http://hamanhthang.com/about-me>>
- Johnson, Ken. "Images of Vietnamese in the Generation Since the War." *The New York Times*, October 7, 2005. Accessed February 3, 2015. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/07/arts/design/07john.html?\\_r=1&.>](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/07/arts/design/07john.html?_r=1&.>)
- Le, C. N., *The Society Pages: Social Science That Matters*. Last modified June 4, 2014. "The Homoegenization of Asian Beauty." Accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://thesocietypages.org/papers/homoegenization-of-asian-beauty/>>
- "'Made in Vietnam' Photography by Phuong M. Do," YouTube video, 4:14, posted by "nyusteinhardt," Oct 26, 2012. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wR35k33ZjvU>>
- Museum of Contemporary Museum of Photography. "An-My Le: Small Wars Oct 27 — Jan 6,

- 2007.” Accessed February 3, 2015. <<http://www.mocp.org/exhibitions/2006/10/an-my-le-small-wars.php>>
- Nguyen Manh Hung. “2D Works: Paintings.” Accessed February 3, 2015. <<http://hung6776.com/web/index.php?id=25>>
- Nguyen Manh Hung Blog. “2013 - One Planet - solo exhibition @ Galerie Quynh.” Last modified January 30, 2013. Accessed February 23, 2015 <<http://hung6776.blogspot.com/2013/01/one-planet-solo-exhibition-galerie-quynh.html>>
- Nguyen, Thoa. “‘Not memory’ exhibition opens Hanoi.” *The Saigon Times*. April 8, 2010. Accessed April 13 2015. <<http://english.thesaigontimes.vn/9640/%E2%80%98Not-memory%E2%80%99-exhibition-opens-Hanoi.html>>
- Photography-now. “Dinh Q. Le: Photoweavings.” Accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://www.photography-now.com/exhibition/20242>>
- Taylor, Nora A., curator. *Changing Identity: Recent Works by Women Artists From Vietnam*. Washington D.C: International Arts and Artists, 2007. <[http://www.saic.edu/media/saic/profiles/faculty/norataylor/Nora-Annesley-Taylor\\_Changing\\_Identity\\_.pdf](http://www.saic.edu/media/saic/profiles/faculty/norataylor/Nora-Annesley-Taylor_Changing_Identity_.pdf)>
- Thavibu Gallery: Contemporary Art from Thailand, Vietnam and Burma. “Vietnamese Artists: Nguyen Thi Chau Giang.” Accessed February 3, 2015. <[http://www.thavibu.com/vietnam/nguyen\\_thi\\_chau\\_giang/VIE3300.htm](http://www.thavibu.com/vietnam/nguyen_thi_chau_giang/VIE3300.htm)>
- The Culture Trip. “Le Quoc Viet: An Artistic Soul In Modern Vietnam.” Accessed February 3, 2015. <<http://theculturetrip.com/asia/vietnam/articles/modern-art-in-vietnam-le-quoc-viet/>>
- The Culture Trip. “Vietnam’s 10 Best Contemporary Artists and Where to Find Them.” Accessed February 3, 2015. <<http://theculturetrip.com/asia/vietnam/articles/vietnam-s-10-best-contemporary-artists-and-where-to-find-them/>>
- The East Gallery: Contemporary Asian Art. “Dinh Thi Tham Poong.” Accessed February 3, 2015 <[http://theeastgallery.smugmug.com/Artists/Dinh-Thi-ThamPoong/16685201\\_RrWCrR#!i=1254029809&k=jB82sQJ](http://theeastgallery.smugmug.com/Artists/Dinh-Thi-ThamPoong/16685201_RrWCrR#!i=1254029809&k=jB82sQJ)>
- The Voice of Vietnam. “‘Lap Loe’ video installation on display in Hanoi.” Last modified March 1, 2013. Accessed April 12, 2015. <<http://english.vov.vn/Culture/Lap-Loe-video-installation-on-display-in-Hanoi/255741.vov>>
- Trinh Mai, “Artist Statement,” accessed March 25, 2015 <<http://trinhmai.com/artist-statement/>>
- Trinh Mai. “Projects: Biển, Biển, Biên.” Accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://trinhmai.com/bienbienbien-the-ocean-to-vanish-to-note/>>



- Trinh Mai. "Projects: Fields of Depth." Accessed March 25, 2015. <<http://trinhmai.com/fields-of-depth/>>
- Vietnam Online. "Vietnam to spend 61 million dollars to restore Hue royal citadel." Accessed April 12, 2015. <<http://www.vietnamonline.com/event/vietnam-to-spend-61-million-dollars-to-restore-hue-royal-citadel.html>>
- WAM News and Events Blog. "Phuong M. Do's Vietnam Re-imagined." Last modified January 9, 2009. Accessed February 23, 2015. <[http://blog.lib.umn.edu/wampr/wamnewsmain/2009/01/phuong\\_m\\_dos\\_vietnam\\_reimagine.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/wampr/wamnewsmain/2009/01/phuong_m_dos_vietnam_reimagine.html)>
- World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples. "Vietnam Overview." Accessed February 27, 2015. <<http://www.minorityrights.org/2318/vietnam/vietnam-overview.html>>
- Zhuang Wubin Blog. "From Vietnam to Hollywood (2003 – 05) / Dinh Q. Le." Last modified September 18, 2010. Accessed February 3, 2015. <<https://zwubin.wordpress.com/2010/09/18/from-vietnam-to-hollywood-2003-05-dinh-q-le/>>

# Final Exhibition Images

*Memories of the Vietnam-American  
War: Contemporary*

*Vietnamese Perspectives on Its Legacy*



## 1. Embedded Memory

Nguyen Thi Chau Giang

*Natural color on silk*, 2010

90 cm. high x 80 cm. wide

Art Vietnam Gallery,

Hanoi Vietnam

# Embedded images in Catalogue Entry 1.



Still image from the 1987 film *Full Metal Jacket*



Still image from the play *Miss Saigon*



## 2. How Can I Join Them

Nguyen Thi Chau Giang

*Natural color on silk*, 2010

80 cm. high x 120 cm. wide

Art Vietnam Gallery, Hanoi Vietnam



### **3. Worlds of Women**

Dinh Thi Tham Poong's  
Work (drawings, watercolor, ect.) on  
handmade paper watercolor, 2013  
80 x 110 cm. (31.5 x 43.3 in.)



#### **4. Mother Nature, Mother Nurture**

Dinh Thi Tham Poong's  
2008 Works on Paper (Drawings, Watercolors etc.),  
watercolor on handmade paper  
60 x 80 in. (152.4 x 203.2 cm.)



**5. Made in Vietnam: Photograph Series  
(Self and Aunts)**

Phuong M. Do

1998, Silver gelatin print

10in x 8in





## 6. Self with Parents in Colorado

Phuong M. Do

2002 Photograph: C-print

10in x 8in



## 7. Hide and Seek

Ann Phong

1998, Acrylic on canvas

60cm x 84cm



## **8. Blue Ocean**

Ann Phong

1998, Acrylic on canvas

36cm x 48cm



## **9. Mending**

Ann Phong

2003, Mixed media on  
canvas

60cm x 48cm



## 10. Yin and Yang (Reflection)

Dong Phan

Mixed Media on Canvas

48in x 60in



## 11. Go To Market

Nguyen Manh Hung

Wood, plastic fruits, nylon bags, metal, cotton.

200cm (h) x 60cm (w) x 400cm (d)



## 12. The Barricade

Nguyen Manh Hung

Wood, paper, plastic, metal, nylon, LED  
lighting system, sawdust, canvas bags, sand.  
220cm (h) x 430cm (w) x 120cm (d)

# Closer look at **12. The Barricade**







**13. *Biển, Biển, Biên* (The Ocean, to Vanish, to Note)**

Trinh Mai

2013, Charcoal, acrylic, and joss paper on stone, coconut shells, burlap, tree bark, tree branches and rice sacks

Approximately 8 ½in (h) x 5 in (w) x 3 ¾in (d) each

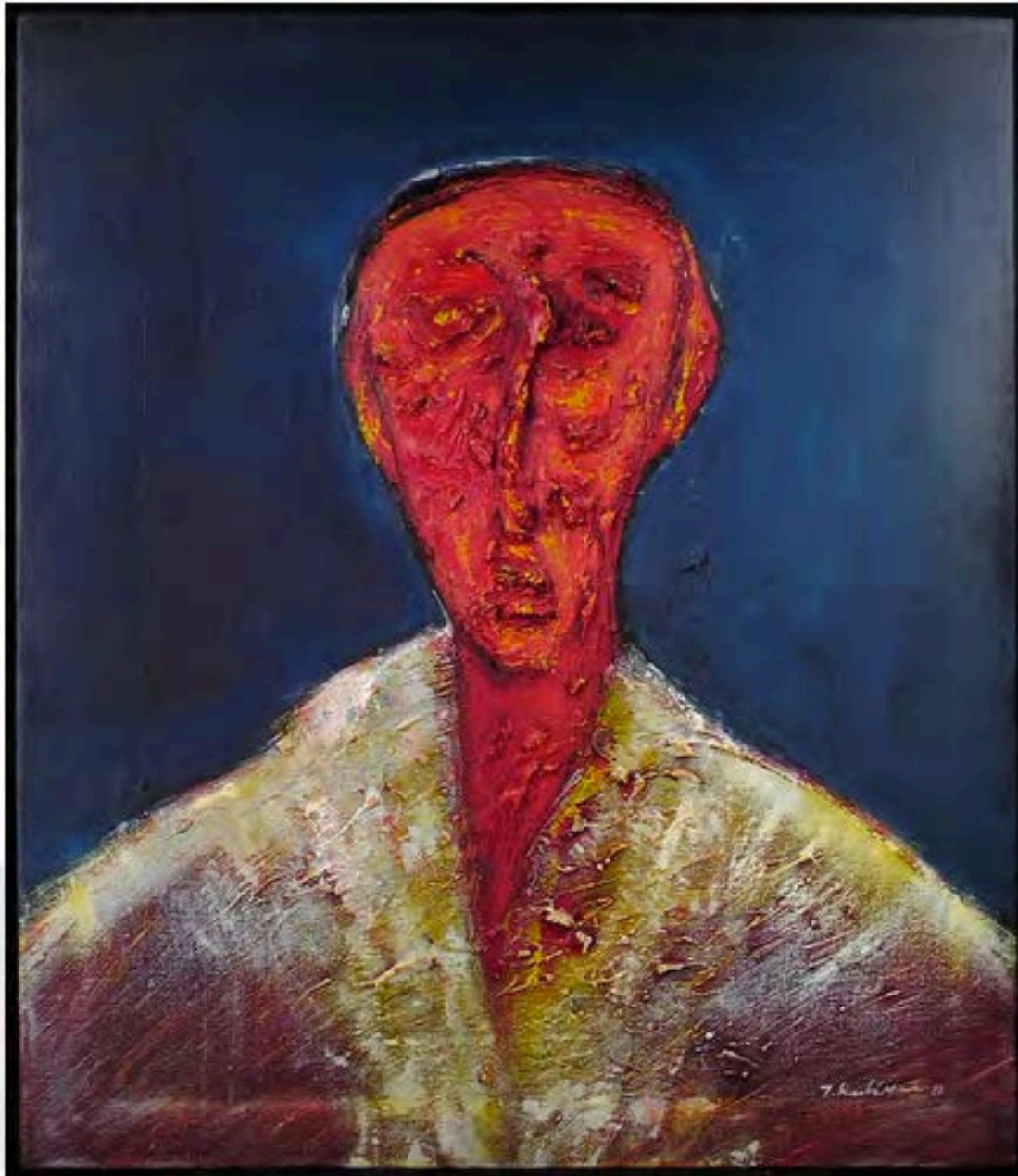


**14. Lifted**

Trinh Mai

2014, Mixed media on  
acrylic, mylar, and  
paper

11 ½ in x 11 ½ in



**15. Portrait of a Soldier  
After War**

Cao Ba Minh

1993, oil on canvas

31in x 26.25 in



**16. Untitled** (helicopter, Apocalypse Now, prayers)

Dinh Q. Lê

2000, Photographs, c-print & linen tape

40 x 60 in. (101.6 x 152.4 cm.)



## **17. From Vietnam to Hollywood Series**

Dinh Q. Lê

2006, C-print, Linen tape

100 cmx 170cm

# Embedded Images in Catalogue Entry 17.



**Top Left:** General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing Viet Cong suspect Bay Lop

**Top Right:** Playboy girl from *Apocalypse Now*

**Bottom Left:** Still from *The Quiet American*





**18. "Damaged Gene"**

Dinh Q. Lê

1998, baby dolls



**19. Hue Citadel Landscape, No. 9 (Heaven is a Place series)**

Ha Manh Thang,

2014, acrylic, acrylic medium, oil and charcoal on canvas

100cm x 195cm

Galerie Quynh



# Embedded Images in Catalogue Entry 19.



Contemporary image of the Hue Citadel.



## **20. Victory Days, No.1 (Not Memory Series)**

Ha Manh Thang

2010, acrylic on canvas

120cm x 300cm



## **21. Oscilloscope III**

Le Quoc Viet

2008, Chinese ink on Xuan paper

69 cm. x 132 cm.

Art Vietnam Gallery, Hanoi Vietnam

## 22. Under the Clouds of War (Photo series)

An-My Le: Oct 27 — Jan 6, 2007



### RESCUE

1999–2002, gelatin silver print,  
66 × 95.3 cm.

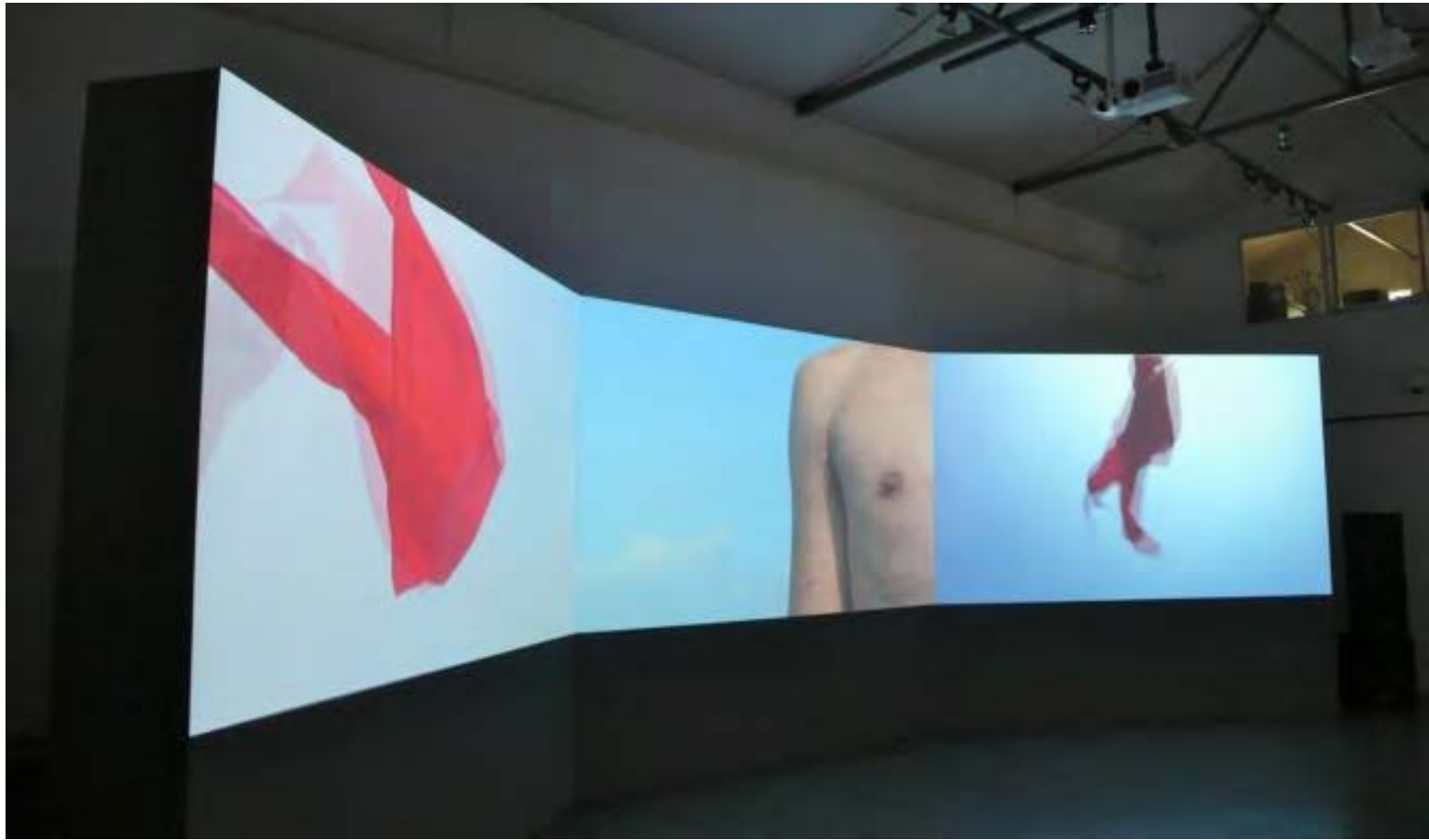
Murray Guy Gallery, New York.



### MORTAL IMPACT

2003-04, gelatin silver print  
66 x 95.3 cm

Murray Guy Gallery, New York.



### **23. LậpLoè / Welts**

Tran Luong,

2008, Performance, three channel video installation,

Guggenheim UBS Map Global Art Initiative

Courtesy of Artist

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=theWO-uSdUU>