

2024

artforum

“Truong Cong Tung”

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REVIEWS PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

Truong Cong Tung

Sa Sa Art Projects

By Hung Duong



View of “Trương Công Tùng: The disoriented garden . . . A breath of dream,” 2024. From left: *The lost landscape #1*, 2021–; *In the wind up the sky in the garden . . . Shadows out there #4*, 2023–; *The disoriented garden . . . A breath of dream*, 2023–. Photo: Ratha Raksa.

Trương Công Tùng’s recent exhibition “The disoriented garden . . . A breath of dream” conjured an evanescent biosphere as a site for unobtrusive speculations about the delicate state of relations between humans and nonhumans. Looming at the space’s entrance was the mixed-media installation—combining moving images with found objects—that gave the exhibition its title. In this ongoing work begun in 2023, Trương interlaced

footage shot in his hometown in Vietnam's Central Highlands to create a mix of oneiric bodies. An elephant's somber eye, a teardrop trickling down rugose bronze-colored skin, a disheveled figure wandering across scorched red hills, a duo of spectral orbs in a perpetual hide-and-seek: The video seemed to trigger subconscious memories of a forgotten land that exists solely within imaginative boundaries. Accompanying these fantastical scenes was a haunting soundtrack of music played on Indigenous instruments and sounds of nature. These sounds permeated the room to help pull viewers into a trancelike state, in which we might be prepared to encounter bygone ecological apparitions.

From the back of the video-projection screen, a profusion of matter unfurled wildly: brittle branches, swaths of plastic, strings of recycled wood beads, and water tubes from coffee and banana plantations. For Truong, who diligently gathered these materials, they bear witness to the swift waves of industrialization and development that have eroded the nature-oriented ways of life he remembers from the mountain home of his childhood. These materials swirled, writhed, and multiplied within the space, morphing into dispersed clusters that took shape as distinct installations across the floor. *The state of absence . . . Voices from outside*, 2020–, for instance, took the form of two raised beds on which the artist had constellated calabashes of various sizes, musical instruments, soil, water, and seeds. A series of tubes from a hidden pump kept water circulating within this microbiome, like blood pumping through our veins. Lowering our ears to the ground, we could hear the trickling murmur of flowing water reverberating within a calabash, occasionally triggering a forlorn note from the instruments—Truong's effort to retain the remnants of his homeland's papery breath before everything went silent.

Through a pinhole on the side of an elongated enclosed structure that resembled either a wooden coffin or a beehive box, viewers could see *The lost landscape #1*, 2021—. Looking back at us from within the white box's belly was a montage of animal eyes—close-up shots of taxidermied creatures that Truong captured at natural history museums around the world. Their intense yet soulless stare could easily put the viewer on edge, gnawing at our conscience and prompting us to question our viewpoint about our relationship with nonhuman entities. Suspended from the ceiling next to the box was a circular framed lacquer painting, *In the wind up the sky in the garden . . . Shadows out there #4*, 2023—, showcasing what seems to be a fragment of a fictive garden, where golden flames flickered their tongues across the ocher-toned land, exposing eggshell/bone forms. Engulfed in lacquered fire, the orb-shaped painting glowed like an omen, silently cautioning viewers about an impending catastrophic collapse.

Truong's intentional repetition of circular motifs—the peephole, the circular painting, a ring light in the video installation—is emblematic of his ecological and artistic thinking, in which all things can be rebirthed and repurposed as they move from one realm to another. Life will continue its cycle, and nature will find ways to rebuild itself. The question for the viewers is, can we maintain our inner gardens while remaining conscious and critical of the repercussions of our actions?

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