

Max Crosbie-Jones

Truong Cong Tung's “The Disoriented Garden... A Breath of Dream”

Across the highlands of Vietnam, gourds have stored water, made music, and inspired legends for centuries.¹ In his travelling solo show, Truong Cong Tung finds yet another use for these sinuous plants. *The state of absence... Voice from outside* (2020–ongoing) is an installation of soil boxes upon which dried, lacquered gourds of miscellaneous shapes and sizes appear to pump liquid through tangles of clear PVC piping. The illusion created by these crudely networked calabashes, a few of which overflow with seeds, burbling fluid or slowly expanding plumes of iridescent foam, is of a brittle, delicately balanced biosphere or microcosmos. Listening to its clicks and murmurs, I sense it's one that is operational yet tilting towards decline: the larger of Jim Thompson Art Center's two galleries also houses a video-projection screen wreathed with foraged detritus (twigs, a satellite dish, lengths of gauzy fabric, curtains of threaded wood beads, et cetera). Meanwhile, a dusky ochre glow and strong shadows evoke a state of autumnal decay.

Born in 1986, Tung majored in lacquer painting at Ho Chi Minh Fine Arts University but has since turned his attention to multidisciplinary work—sculptures and videos predominantly—centered on the morphing ecology, beliefs, and mythology of the Central Highlands. A 2019 article on the activities of Art Labor, the Ho Chi Minh-based collective of which he is a founding member (alongside artist Thao Nguyen Phan and writer-curator Arlette Quynh-Anh Tran), points out that Tung, while growing up in the highlands province of Gia Lai, “witnessed the precariousness of coffee farmers, including his own family.”² Although he belongs to the majority ethnicity in Vietnam, the Kinh, his interests have also been shaped by the belief systems, cosmologies, and craft traditions of the Jarai, an ethnic minority native to Gia Lai whose lifestyles have been upended by the advent of industrial farming practices.

These biographical details are relevant: not only does the surrealist landscaping of *The state of absence...* seem to owe a debt to coffee plantation irrigation techniques, the show at large lyrically signposts Tung's close, empathic bond with this terrain and members of its biotic community, both its human and non-human stakeholders.

The credits for the show's eponymous video work (2023–ongoing) lists its collaborators as “other humans, plants, light, darkness, soil, water, wind, rain and the spirits.” This isn't hyperbole: the lumbering, camo-clad male figure who spends much of its sixty-nine-minute runtime walking backwards, or loafing, around Gia Lai's despoiled landscapes whilst clutching a *đing nặm* (a woodwind instrument made from bamboo pipes and dried-out gourd), his face obscured by a long mane of hair, proves its least captivating presence. Woven together by slow dissolves, and set to mournful violin, *shō*, or ritual music, the work's spectral vignettes also capture firefly-like orbs of light careening near moonlit waterfalls,



Truong Cong Tung, *The state of absence... Voice from outside* (detail), 2020–ongoing. Gourds, water, soil, seeds, machinery, time, temperature, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. Image courtesy of Jim Thompson Art Center, Bangkok.

glowing embers, and the trembling forest during monsoon season, among other phenomena. Near the end, slow-motion archive footage of defoliant being sprayed during what the Vietnamese call the American War—a willful, and landmark, instance of ecocide known as Operation Trail Dust—offers a moment of literal, on-the-nose editorializing.³ Yet, taken as a whole, the film establishes Tung not as a documentarian but as a storyteller interested in deploying a formalism centered on ethereality, montage, and long takes to connote the region’s earthbound histories and spiritual width.

Writing about the show’s first iteration at Sàn Art in Ho Chi Minh, curator Mary Lou David described it as a “mutable archive” that continues to grow both aesthetically and theoretically. In his curatorial essay for this incarnation, Duong Manh Hung builds on this conceptual groundwork by likening its individual works to ancient papyrus shreds of Sapphic poetry, and by imploring viewers not to think reductively about their meanings. “I encourage you to take mental notes of the emotions, memories, and mirages that his fragments stir up inside you,” he writes.

However, there are moments when these entreaties fall flat. Hanging from the ceiling in the white cube next door is *Portrait of Absence* (2019–ongoing), a two-sided hanging mirror inscribed with the words of a Central Highlander, as recorded by French missionary-anthropologist Jacques Dournes (“I have heard people say: My eyes are deceiving, forgetting, not knowing the truth”, the text, in both English and Vietnamese, reads). Next to it stands a coffin-like box (*The lost landscape #1*, 2021–ongoing). If you look through its peephole, the frozen eyes of taxidermied animals on display in natural history museums stare back. Bluntly broaching the ethnographic gaze and anthropocentrism, these bite-sized works sit closer to stark messages or pointed remarks than evolving sensory stimuli; they concretize meanings, rather than stir them up.

They are overshadowed by Tung’s preternaturally somber twilight garden, moving images, and supplementary drawings. Covering the tall walls opposite are dozens of sketches on tracing paper, each possessing an earthiness and urgency that renders this study of his subject matter intimate and diaristic rather than taxonomic: depictions of

fauna and flora, from tapeworms to calabashes, as well as less-clearly identifiable apparitions, such as a panther with outstretched human limbs. As with the installation next door, these constellations are at once elegiac and generative, and function, in a metonymic sense, much like plant saplings or cuttings. Whether Tung's oneiric evocations of the pulsations and plight of the Central Highlands take hold, or wilt, is ultimately down to the receiver.

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1
Dang Nghiem Van, "The Flood Myth and the Origin of Ethnic Groups in Southeast Asia," *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 106, no. 421, (Summer 1993): 304–337.

2
Thi Nguyen, "Groundbreaking Saigon Art Project Unites History, Coffee and Rice," *Saigoneer* (October 11, 2019), <https://saigoneer.com/saigon-music-art/24000-groundbreaking-saigon-art-project-unites-history,-coffee-and-rice>.

3
David Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide: Agent Orange, Vietnam, and the Scientists Who Changed the Way We Think About the Environment* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011).