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“Trương Công Tùng: *Wake, mayfly...*”

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BROOKLYN RAIL

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ARTSEEN | MAY 2026

Trương Công Tùng: *Wake, mayfly...*

By Taeyi Kim



Installation view: *Trương Công Tùng: Wake, mayfly...*, Kiang Malingue, New York, 2026. Courtesy Kiang Malingue. Photo: Argenis Apolinario.

Trương Công Tùng's *Wake, mayfly...* at Kiang Malingue uses a poem by the same title written by the artist as its starting point. Through depictions of crumbling time, a sunken star, waning day, and waxing night, the poem evokes the ephemerality and circulation that underlie the exhibition. Bringing together four ongoing bodies of Trương's work, from installation and drawings to recent lacquer paintings, the show takes the shape of a hidden garden within the gallery's Chinatown neighborhood, where the quiet rhythms of the works meet the bustle of urban life.

For Trương, the garden is one of the main conceptual grounds of his practice: a space where care and labor take form, and where organic and inorganic matters, spiritual values, and historical residues float together to create a symbiosis. For *Wake, mayfly...*, the garden opens with *When Nothingness Becomes an Echo of Something and Something is an Echo of Nothing* (2025–), the sound-responsive installation originally commissioned for the 36th Bienal de São Paulo last year. Seven sculptural fragments installed across the gallery are threaded with wooden beads that carry traces of plantation economies and the altered ecology of Vietnam's Central Highlands, reshaped by modernization and extraction. Activated by hidden motion sensors, each fragment responds to subtle movement with faint buzzing, hissing, and clicking sounds. The viewer's presence awakens sound and the body folds into the garden's rhythm.



Installation view: *Trương Công Tùng: Wake, mayfly...*, Kiang Malingue, New York, 2026. Courtesy Kiang Malingue. Photo: Argenis Apolinario.

On a long white wall stretching across the gallery, 120 mylar paintings from *A Breath... A Dream...* (2021–), appear in varying sizes, forming a loose constellation of images in lacquer, chalk, and pigment. Breath and dreams—one bodily, and the other psychic—become metaphors for existence in its most fleeting forms. On translucent mylar, images spanning flora, insects, animals, war, and human anatomy drift along the wall as if in a “cosmological timestream.” While the geologic and planetary images in *A Breath... A Dream...* seem more immediately visible, the two bodies of lacquer paintings ask for a slower gaze. In Vietnamese lacquer on wood, embedded with white eggshells, silver, and gold, *In Search of the Present* (2025–) creates a blurred field of images across three panels. What seem like mythic figures, mountainscapes, and whirling winds fill the surfaces, clear enough to perceive, yet too elusive to be named. This delayed visibility emerges through the nature of *son ta*, Vietnamese lacquer resin, in which the processes of layering, drying, and sanding unfold through time, temperature, and humidity.

Another lacquer series, *In the Wind... (Trail Dust)* (2023–) brings this resistance to instant legibility into a more historical register. Three round paintings hang from the ceiling across the space, each applied with lacquer on one side and dark, reflective mica on the other. As they rotate with the air currents, their images never fully settle. The term “Trail Dust” refers to the codename for the US military’s aerial herbicide spraying program during the American War in Vietnam, whose toxic aftermath devastated forests and cultivated land. The circular forms draw attention back to the wooden beads of the sound-responsive installation, recalling the seed as Truong’s recurring motifs: a vessel carrying the histories of communities, beings, and the universe.



Installation view: *Truong Công Tùng: Wake, mayfly...*, Kiang Malingue, New York, 2026. Courtesy Kiang Malingue. Photo: Argenis Apolinario.

In his book *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*, anthropologist Heonik Kwon turns to Milan Kundera's phrase, "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting," as he traces how ghosts became a language of postwar memory in Vietnam. Born from violent death, missing bodies, interrupted mourning, and histories pressed beneath official accounts, these wandering spirits are neither fully past nor fully present. According to Kwon, they are "obliged to move between the periphery of this world and the fringe of another world," looking for a place where memory might rest.

Truong's exhibition seems to extend this wandering beyond the human figure. Ghostliness passes through dust, seeds, sounds, lacquered surfaces that rise and sink before they settle into form. These apparitions do not tell history as an engraved record, but as scattered residue. The exhibition's poetics, then, is neither merely lyrical nor decorative. Rather, its lyricism becomes a conscious, perhaps inevitable means of holding together fragments of memory that have never become a single story.

In a recent interview, Truong describes waking as a transition between the subconscious and the conscious. In *Wake, mayfly...*, however, that movement does not necessarily unfold in one direction toward clarity. As bodies provoke sensors and air sets paintings in motion, the visible world becomes porous to what remains buried, dreamed, or unseen. The mayfly, destined to live for a day or two, must still wake—not because it promises permanence, but because it allows a fleeting presence, however temporary, to be fully perceived and lived.

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