

2020 May/June

Artforum

“Thao Nguyen Phan”

Link: <https://www.artforum.com/events/thao-nguyen-phan-247141/>

REVIEWS BRUSSELS

Thao Nguyen Phan

WIELS Contemporary Art Centre

By Noemi Smolik ☞



Thao Nguyen Phan, *Tropical Siesta*, 2017, two-channel HD video, color, sound, 13 minutes 41 seconds.

Thao Nguyen Phan’s “moving images”—as she prefers to call her video projections—are gorgeous and profoundly disturbing at once. Dare to watch them with unguarded eyes, and they will worm themselves into the deepest recesses of your memory, rising up time and again as a reminder that beauty is sometimes inextricably alloyed with sorrow. Born in Vietnam in 1987 and based in Ho Chi Minh City, Phan was studying painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago when she started to experiment with film. An encounter with the work of Joan Jonas, who would later become her mentor, encouraged her to combine loosely connected streams of film and video with intervening illustrations and voice-overs, hybridizing documentary footage and firsthand accounts with fictional narratives and folktales. Proving the artist’s choice of terminology apt, Phan’s moving images unfold not so much as continuous shots, but rather as a series of individual pictures in often paradoxical conjunction with words or entire sentences. Consider her most recent video, *Becoming Alluvium*, 2019. A profession of love for the Mekong River, the film splices an associative assemblage of imagery with quotations

from the French writer Marguerite Duras and the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, whose name is bound up with his country's nascent resistance to colonial rule. Through this pastiche of sources, the artist infuses the colonial era with the magical aura of a Khmer legend, while also conveying a vivid sense of the devastation that economic development threatens to inflict on the river, an unrivaled natural treasure.

In addition to *Becoming Alluvium*, the exhibition "Monsoon Melody" showcased two other video projections alongside a selection of watercolor drawings on silk or found book pages. The two-channel color video *Tropical Siesta*, 2017, explores, through images that are as intoxicating as they are unsettling, a parafictional world inhabited only by children. In a nod to its title, the camera lingers on children napping, whether stiffly fitted atop their school desks, or smoothly nestled into the natural nooks of the fields and rice paddies. A series of shots follow the ritual of punishment of a young boy dressed in white with a wreath of flowers perched like a crown of thorns on his head. Later he is shown lying on the ground, his eyes closed, as other children toss handfuls of dirt upon him. Is he sleeping, dreaming, or maybe just pretending? Or is he really dead? Death, dreams, and games go together in this fairy tale. In the black-and-white, three-channel projection *Mute Grain*, 2019, young hands fondle fresh rice shoots to the sounds of the soft rustling of the wind and the chirping of birds. The caption reads NEXT THEY BEGAN TO SELL THEIR GIRLS. Such jarring juxtapositions allow Phan to tell the history of the catastrophic 1945 famine that killed almost two million people in Japanese-occupied Vietnam. How do you relate something so horrendous that it has been effectively effaced from historical memory? "For me," Phan says, "the magical, the irrational, and the imaginary have a way to reflect reality more profoundly than the restraints of facts and documents." And so she spins the fictional story of the siblings March and August. Footage of children standing in the fields at twilight, their bodies adorned with garlands of twinkling lights, is intercut with photographs of the emaciated bodies of other children, and the testimonies of survivors set against near-sublime scenes of natural beauty. And yet, to recognize that beauty fully, Phan seems to suggest, one must reckon with the presence of suffering.

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.