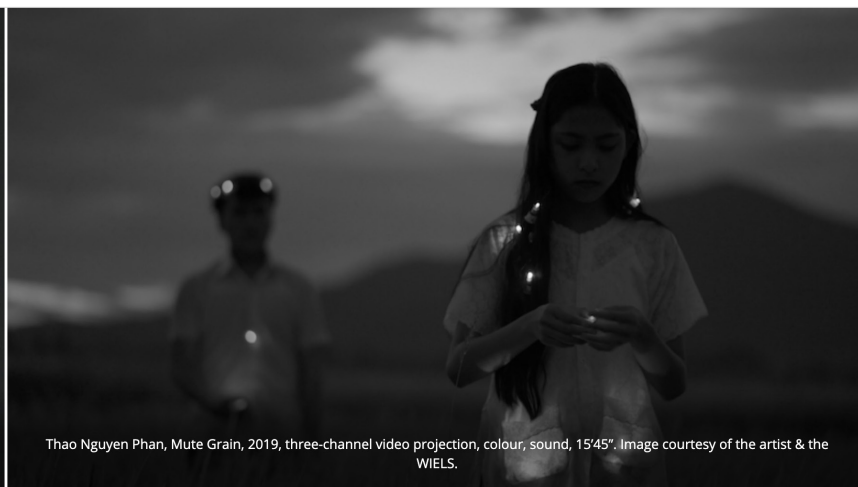


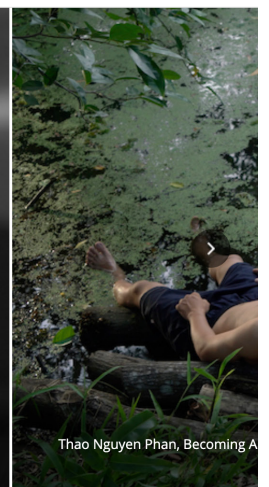
Link: <https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/phan-thao-nguyen-a-vietnamese-poetic-palimpsest/>

Installation View of Thao Nguyen Phan's "Monsoon Melody" at WIELS, 2020. Photography by Philippe DeGobert. Image courtesy of the artist & the WIELS.

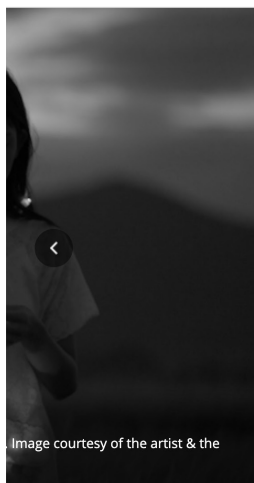
Thao Nguyen Phan, Mute Gra



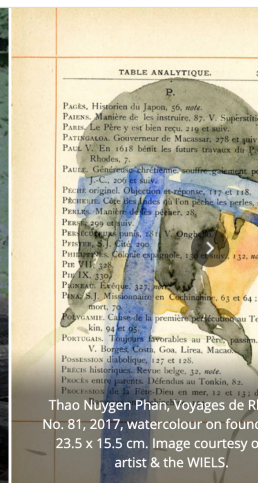
Thao Nguyen Phan, *Mute Grain*, 2019, three-channel video projection, colour, sound, 15'45". Image courtesy of the artist & the WIELS.

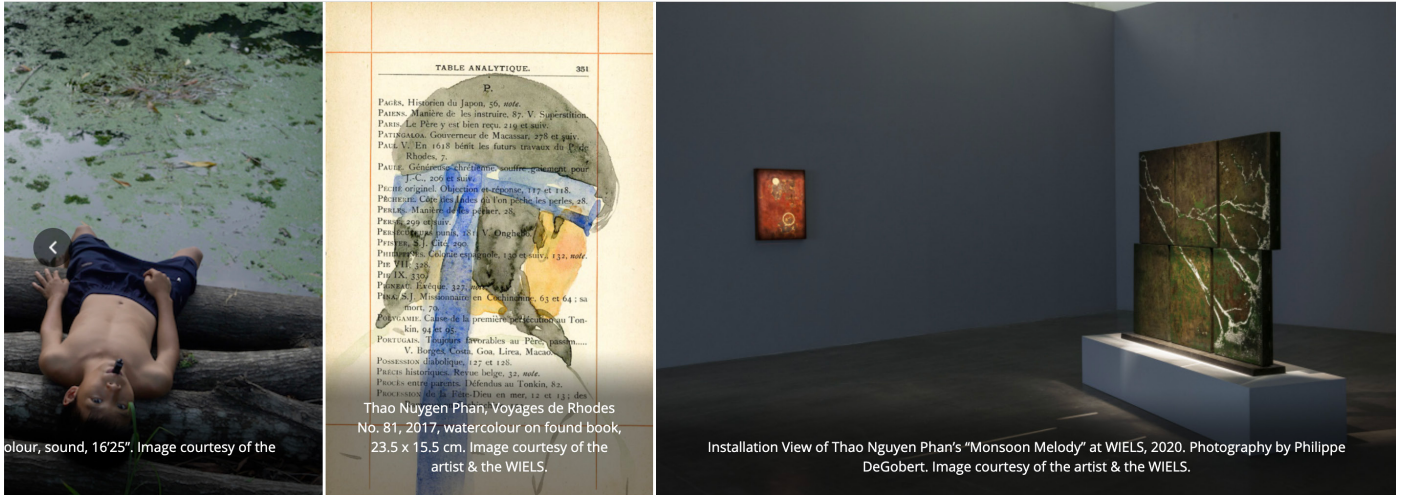


Thao Nguyen Phan, Becoming A



Thao Nguyen Phan, *Becoming Alluvium*, 2019, single channel video installation, colour, sound, 16'25". Image courtesy of the artist & the WIELS.





Featuring three important video installations that have never been exhibited together, and curated by Zoë Gray and Hilde Teerlinck, “Monsoon Melody” is Phan Thảo Nguyên’s first important solo show. The films and paintings dialogue aptly with each other, emphasizing the Vietnamese artist’s unique and multi-layered artistic language.

TEXT: Caroline Ha Thuc
 IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist & the WIELS

Phan’s work revolves mainly around two fundamental yet often neglected events that strongly marked Vietnamese history: the romanization of the written Vietnamese language by French Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes in the 16th century, and the Great Famine that occurred during the Japanese occupation in 1945. These episodes, haunted by the ghosts of the colonial past and of the revolution that led to the independence of the country, are seldom taught in Vietnam. The great famine of 1945, which might have caused the death of up to two million people, remains for instance a controversial period since it might have been reformulated to serve the communist propaganda while being on the contrary minimized by the French or Japanese authorities. Before her research, Phan acknowledges she knew nothing about it except the popular adage “Uproot Rice, Grow Jute” that served as a departure point for her series of works pertaining to the subject: at that time, the Japanese asked Northern Vietnamese farmers to cultivate jute instead of rice for military purpose.

Yet, as always, history involves complex layers of often contradictory narratives, and Phan does not directly aim at reclaiming any part of it—her poetical and fictional approach hints more at the construction, alteration and manipulation of history and therefore of personal and collective memory. In the three-channel video *Mute Grain* (2019), testimonies of the famine merge for instance with fairy tales, drawings extend archival footage, reality is entwined with fiction and hungry ghosts cohabit with survivors. The artist’s perspective is as sensuous as it is documentary, infused with the crunch of drought, the friction of lost grains and the void created by death. It also echoes today’s ecological concerns and could mirror, from the past, Phan’s most recent film *Becoming Alluvium* (2019) which opens this exhibition. A single channel and colour video, this new work focuses on the culture, beauty and degradation of the Vietnamese rural landscape and in particular on the Mekong River. Conceived as an allegory, it is also imbued with folktales yet addresses environmental and social changes in a more straightforward and slightly moralizing way.

Alongside these two recent video installations, the nerve centre of the show remains *Tropical Siesta* (2017), from where it seems that all depart. Installed in the middle of the gallery, the two-channel video takes place in a fictional village during an undefined time where abandoned farmer children are seen reorganising life around games found in the last remaining book of the school—Alexandre de Rhodes's travels and observations of Vietnam in the 16th century. Popular tales are mixed up with original and often cruel interpretations of these stories while schoolchildren's law and red scarfs echo various kinds of disciplinary education, from colonial rules to communist punishments. Simultaneously, Phan's images celebrate the magnificence of nature and outdoor farming works, revealing lush rice paddy fields and fresh rivers flowing under wide open skies. This unleashed beauty creates an ambivalent contrast between peculiar types of disciplines, children's-controlled games and games out of control. For this film, she followed kids from the native village of her husband and artist Truong Cong Tung, and said she was partly guided by their improvisations. Their freshness and false innocence infuse all of her following works, and children at play are dominant figures of Phan's universe. Just as they did for the artist in the village, they guide the viewers on their dreamlike and artistic journey. *Mute Grain*, for example, relates the story of siblings separated by death during the famine, and *Becoming Alluvium* unfolds according to various reincarnations of young siblings who died after the collapse of a dam on the Mekong River. All of them constantly reinvent reality and break its narrow framework with their beliefs, rituals and visions that transcend life. They create refuges and pockets of freedom but are also the first victims of human tragedies.

Children feature as well in most of the paintings of the exhibition, along with their recurring uniform clothes or attitudes and together with repetitive symbolic patterns such as books, corn cobs, cereals spikes and even escalators, which seem to constitute grammatical elements of Phan's specific visual language. In the series of watercolours *Voyages de Rhodes* (2014–17), the artist drew on found pages from de Rhodes's books, superimposing her motifs to the French text. The apparent candour of her style, the crudeness of some details that slowly emerge and the monotonous and distant descriptions of Vietnamese customs related by the Jesuit produce an insidious discomfort. This provocative gap is typical of Phan's language, based on a combination of popular and naïve iconography with research-based elements and contrasted material. For *Dream of March and August* (2018–) and *Perpetual Brightness* (2019–), she uses the delicacy of silk to paint dreamlike figures which seem as fragile and vulnerable as their physical backing. Each time, the pieces are exhibited so that the two sides of the paintings can be seen. In an earlier series, not exhibited at Wiels, Phan painted similar motifs on recycled x-ray, creating a physical and metaphorical *mise en abyme*.

Recently, Phan pushed further the material crystallisation of such palimpsests, combining watercolour on silk with Vietnamese lacquer on wood. *Perpetual Brightness* is the most original piece of the show and stands like a screen or a flat sculpture made from six juxtaposed panels: the first side of the piece resembles a marbled surface, where white lines evoke the Mekong River working its way through a mineral landscape. Phan returned here to the lacquer technique she learned as a student in Ho Chi Minh City and collaborated with her husband to create this remarkable texture. On the other side, she depicts a traditional Vietnamese ceremony of mourning a stranded whale. Familiar school children, insects and weird angels armed with pesticides surround the dead animal. The contrast between these watercolours and the abstraction of the lacquered side is almost disruptive. Phan refers to modernist Irish artist Eileen Gray who designed similarly structured screens but one could also interpret this format from a religious perspective as it reminds us of classical triptychs that were also painted on both sides in order to be folded back. They bring forth a sacred dimension to the work with the idea that what is revealed inside calls for respect and needs to be preserved. Ultimately, the piece offers promising perspectives on Phan's pluri-disciplinary artistic development.

Thao Nguyen Phan – Monsoon Melody

1 Feb – 26 April 2020

WIELS, Contemporary Art Centre**

**Due to the fast-changing situation with current measures taken regarding COVID-19, WIELS is temporarily closed to public. We highly recommend staying updated on gallery opening hours via their website and social media pages.