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Fondazione In Between Art Film

"Imprinting Parallel Histories. *Thao Nguyen Phan in conversation with Zoe Butt*"

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IMPRINTING PARALLEL HISTORIES

Thao Nguyen Phan in conversation with Zoe Butt

From daydreaming as a metaphorical and material strategy for resistance, to poetry as a crucial tool with which to give voice to historical trauma, Thao Nguyen Phan discusses her painting and filmic methodology with Zoe Butt.



Thao Nguyen Phan, *Becoming Alluvium*, 2019-ongoing. Video still. Single-channel video, color, 16:50 mins. Copyright Thao Nguyen Phan. Produced by Han Nefkens Foundation. Fondazione In Between Art Film Collection

Zoe Butt: I am sitting in my study and your paintings hang above my desk. In one, there are numerous bodies floating on a monochrome expanse in one. In another, a boy stands still as a statue as an arm appears through a hole in the wall, its hand resting on the child's head. The arm has no shadow. Your painted subjects are always children, as are the majority of your protagonists in what you refer to as your 'moving images.' Children are the vessels through which you narrativize repetitive histories—your characters reincarnate, meander as ghosts, or live in a collective state of amnesia—all of which you evoke as almost spiritual cycles of life that resonate in both human and non-human worlds. In *Becoming Alluvium* (2019-ongoing), the Irawaddy dolphin and the water hyacinth acknowledge their human past; in *Mute Grain* (2019), the dead child 'August' becomes a hungry ghost; in *Tropical Siesta* (2017), children playfully revere a single text, with no adult intervention. Why are children so central to your image-making? What do they represent for you? Was there a particular occurrence that prompted this recurring gaze? Why are so many in states of inertia—seemingly asleep, seemingly paralyzed, poised upon death?



Thao Nguyen Phan, *Becoming Alluvium*, 2019-ongoing. Video still. Single-channel video, color, 16:50 mins. Copyright Thao Nguyen Phan. Produced by Han Nefkens Foundation. Fondazione In Between Art Film Collection

Thao Nguyen Phan:

Come, see real
flowers
of this painful world.

— *Matsuo Bashō*

In my opinion, children are both vessels and signs. On one hand we are touched by the beauty and the poignant sentimentality of children, on the other hand we should be aware of the acute situation that the child is *perceived*; that is, their beauty is just appearance, and underneath the surface there might be trauma and loss. Therefore, in my work, I try to balance social criticism with an ode to what I consider ‘beautiful’; things in nature that are constantly changing, ephemeral and impermanent, and that can be perceived so well through the unguarded eyes of children.

Every summer since 2014 we have spent time in the small coffee farm of my husband’s family in Gia Lai, in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The village has had a complex migration history since the Viet (Kinh) ethnic group (the major ethnicity of the Vietnamese population) came to live among the indigenous community (the Jrai people). I became very close with the children in the village and visited the school many times. Its interior is exactly like my childhood classroom: a portrait of Ho Chi Minh above the blackboard, a statement glorifying the state below. Both the Jarai and the Viet people have a writing system that uses the Roman alphabet developed by missionaries. While Romanized Vietnamese is the official writing system of Vietnam, the Jarai written language is mainly taught in church (since most Jarai are now Protestant or Catholic). I was profoundly moved by this multilayered history and realized that no one could represent this complex narrative better than the schoolchildren, who are experiencing the first step of writing.

Vietnam is developing rapidly economically. This creates great environmental damage, and a huge gap between rich and poor (even if we are officially socialists). This social injustice must anger anyone with a soul. I am sad for the kind of education offered to these children, and admire their ability to be pure and happy in any situation. The children taught me to respect the poetics of the everyday, the preciousness of life. I cannot help but be thankful for that.

In my filmic and painting practices, which I prefer to be seen together, we see paintings that are almost like film stills and films that are themselves composed of painted stills. I am fascinated by the ability of the digital and the analog to flow, to merge into each other, like sediment that is dissolved into the countless particles of a river.

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The characters are not paralyzed or dead, but asleep, half-awake, daydreaming, a motif that first occurred in my video *Mekong Mechanical* (2012), which depicted a female factory worker standing rather absent-mindedly behind a never-ending conveyor belt of fish fillets. This semi-conscious state of the 'reverie' is a recurring motif in much of my work. Practically, it is easier for my children actors, who have never been through any acting training, to be at ease while just standing or laying still. Somehow, they become integrated into a part of the landscape, and when the foreground and the background can be merged without discrimination for a moment. I treasure this moment of napping or daydreaming. For me, it is a 'tropical condition,' a theme that has been a thread that runs through my moving image works *Becoming alluvium*, *Mute Grain* and *Tropical Siesta*; the following a quote from the ending of *Tropical Siesta*:

"The moment of midday, when the sun casts its erected shadow, is the moment of mythology and poetry."



Thao Nguyen Phan, *Mekong Mechanical*, 2012. Video still. Single-channel video, color (18:33 mins, color, sound) and artist book (watercolour on silk, photographs, fabric, silver leaf). Copyright Thao Nguyen Phan

ZB: I enjoy how your art challenges my perceptions. You point out that the children are not paralyzed or dead, but asleep, half awake, daydreaming. This has me also recall that much of your painterly imagery of the human figure suggests suspension (children seemingly hanging by their red school-tie) or disembodiment (headless princesses with teardrops of blood). Again, I feel the need to question my assumptions, and the macabre associations that I might lean towards. It reminds me of when I first visited Vietnam. I was struck by the idleness of people on busy streets. Over time I came to understand that this was not laziness, but a necessary focus of daily life. Here such 'idleness' is not associated with homelessness (as would perhaps be the case in the West) but a particular 'taking time' that is not relegated to class. I have since come to lament this lack of daydreaming in our increasingly technologically obsessed worlds, worlds that often fail to grasp the sensorial differences of our diverse cultures and contexts. To be suspended, half awake, poised on a threshold between differing spaces of tangibility and intangibility; this is what I now understand as the emotive space of the mythic. It is a necessary everyday reverence for what we cannot see.

The context of Vietnam, coupled with my learning with / from you (and so many artists across South East Asia), has allowed me to develop a deep respect for the intangible, for how metaphor and poetry act as crucial tools with which one can give voice to historical trauma. This intangibility is present in your art as a layered and fragmented historicity (evident in your appropriation of historical literature, archival photograph, drawing, prints), but also as a psychological patchwork of nostalgia, remorse, sympathy, anxiety, sorrow, love, and respect. It is your marrying of materiality with movement, language with worlding, and sound with color that conjures a particular quality of presence in your work. You speak of the necessity to show your moving images alongside their materiality (the paintings, sculpture, lacquer)—can you share more on why this is important to you? Here I think of other artists in our region, such as Tuan Andrew Nguyen or Kidlat Tahimik, who also have similarly spoken of the need to give presence to both, with Tuan referring to his sculptures that appear in his films as ‘testimonial objects’, and Kidlat equates his filmic props with family.



Thao Nguyen Phan, *Tropical Siesta*, 2017. Video still. Double-channel synchronised video installation, color, sound, HD, 13:41 mins. Copyright Thao Nguyen Phan

TNP: I very much agree with your observation of idleness when you first came to Vietnam—or as I would say, our city of Saigon. It is so dense, polluted, with a lack of breathing space, an endless rhizome of motorbikes, people covering themselves head to toe with face masks and sunlight protection. In this almost apocalyptic urban setting one can find in people the most relaxing behavior, ways of taking things at their own pace, respecting the daydreaming, the siesta, as a matter of survival, as a way to maintain dignity and a sense of poetry in this very hostile environment.

I like the idea of showing the moving images with their materiality, or conversely, I like to show the paintings and the sculptures with their moving images. Even though the video seems to be the main element (as it usually occupies projectors or bigger screens), I would prefer all elements to be considered non-hierarchical, to coexist in harmony. Such preference is my quiet resistance to my educational background as a lacquer artist in Vietnam, an education that had given me so much, but it was also very hierarchical in the way it privileged painting (which lacquer was considered a part of) and sculpture as the highest art forms. The discourse of new media such as video, installation, or performance art were, and remain, not taught in Vietnamese school curricula. Personally, I cannot really work on a film without working first on my paintings, as my mind thinks via the construction of images, similar to a poet with her prose. It is through painting and drawing that I can compose a loose script, as most of the time when I start filming, there is no script at all but a loose series of actions that could be improvised on the spot. Secondly, I like how other artists, such as my mentor Joan Jonas, move so effortlessly between performance, video, drawing and sculpture. I also think often of the way that Kidlat Tahimik edits his films: he would continue changing, editing, adding, and removing the content of the film, so that every screening is a new metamorphosis. In that sense the artwork is almost a living entity, like the way animism breathes souls into all sentient

and non-sentient existence on our earth, or how Buddhism values the idea of reincarnation. This living, evolving, animated project is a kind of freedom that I would like to achieve in my on-going and future works. It is a poetic situation where different kinds of materiality (or voices) can co-exist, not without its conflict, but possessing a poetic confusion, opening up the potential for seeking the tangible in the intangible, the real in the illusory and the illusory in the real.



Thao Nguyen Phan, *Tropical Siesta*, 2017. Video still. Double-channel synchronised video installation, color, sound, HD, 13:41 mins. Copyright Thao Nguyen Phan

ZB: Yes, the poetics in your work always leave an indelible imprint on me. As an aspiring writer, I am emotionally drawn to how literary prose and historical prints are featured in your chosen narratives, and by how you give image and sound to what is often the sharing of tragic historical events. These perspectives open up the reading of your art. Your quoting of other authors helps to draw parallels to nearby historicity, a gesture towards the fallibility of the human condition, that links your own context, your own story, to what has passed elsewhere, before.

Here I recall your three-channel video installation *Mute Grain* and your referencing Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Anandamath*, set during the Bengali famine of 1770, a book that became synonymous with India's struggle for independence from colonial rule—a pertinent analogy for *Mute Grain* which recalls the 1940s famine in Vietnam as a consequence of firstly French and then Japanese occupation.

In this piece, you also employ the fictional texts of Japanese writer Kawabata whose 1924 prose uncannily reads as if written by a Southern Vietnamese who has similarly endured his country being ideologically divided: "Sometimes I would sit for a long time in front of my grandfather staring into his face, wondering if he would turn to the north even once. But my grandfather would turn his head to the right every five minutes like an electric doll, looking only toward the south." In your single channel piece *Becoming Alluvium* the expanse of the Mekong is nostalgically recalled by Marguerite Duras' famous 1984 novel *The Lover*, as we hear a woman's voice in French overlay a present-day view of this river's current boat trade (which is preceded by the present realities of mass over-damming).

In this piece you also draw parallels between two seeming fantasies, the painterly animation of Lao and Khmer folktale over the colonial prints of Louis Delaporte and his imaging (exploiting?) of French Indochina (his collection of Khmer artifacts would become a prized possession of today's Guimet Museum).

All of these cross-references create an intersection of particular historical comparisons in your work, one that feels out of focus in our media-oriented recall of the past. Your practice creates differing maps with which to assess value, cause, and effect. I thus always learn differing tangents of relation as a consequence of delving into your work—an experience that I crave of

all art. Can you share more about your reading processes? Do you have particular passions or preoccupations within your literary/historical research? Was there a particular event or moment in your life that spurred this fascination with the voices of others?



hao Nguyen Phan, *Mute Grain*, 2019. Video still. Three-channel video, black and white, 15:45 mins (loop). Copyright Thao Nguyen Phan. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation

TNP: The way I read is intuitive, as I did not have any training in philosophy or writing. I like to provoke connections between seemingly unrelated narratives and writing styles, such as in my project *Mute Grain*, as I found a complete lack of local (Vietnamese) literature exploring the context of the famine in 1945. I found myself turning to parallel events that happened in Bengal in 1943 and discovered Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Anandamath* which was written in the 19th century. Then I realized that this condition of food insecurity was indeed universal, and that history was simply repeating itself in an endless cycle of death and rebirth. It felt uncanny to me that I could relate the events in Bengal, even though they seemed so distant. It felt so relevant to the issues in Indochina—for example, production of jute in British Bengal was interrupted so the Japanese could not import to aid their war efforts, thus they had to plant jute in occupied Vietnam—this minor historical detail is of significance to the grand narratives of Nation and Imperialism, and for me these histories also collide as 'minor' narratives, like the memory of lost children in the film.

In *Becoming Alluvium*, I again appropriate the writing of Duras, who is probably the most well-known writer who dealt with life in the Mekong Delta during French colonial time. Her work provokes an acute sense of nostalgia for the bygone glory of the colonies. In a way I sympathize with her memories, but at the same time I want to go against them. To borrow the memory of a French woman with her beautiful poetic voice that overshadows the memories and the history of local people, in a way this is my attempt to listen to the voices of others. In this case, it also attempts to recall an imaginative voice of the river.

When I first came to Gia Lai, the land captured my soul for its incredible magical beauty, but it also continues to provoke in me a naïve feeling of loss. I feel like the land, the river, the trees are all whispering to me in their own magical secret language. How can I transfer this experience when the land does not articulate itself in written text? I guess my reliance on the voices of others, in a way, is my own problematic, but it is an intriguing method that speaks to me, just as history is marked as cyclic, so perhaps also the perspectives of others too.