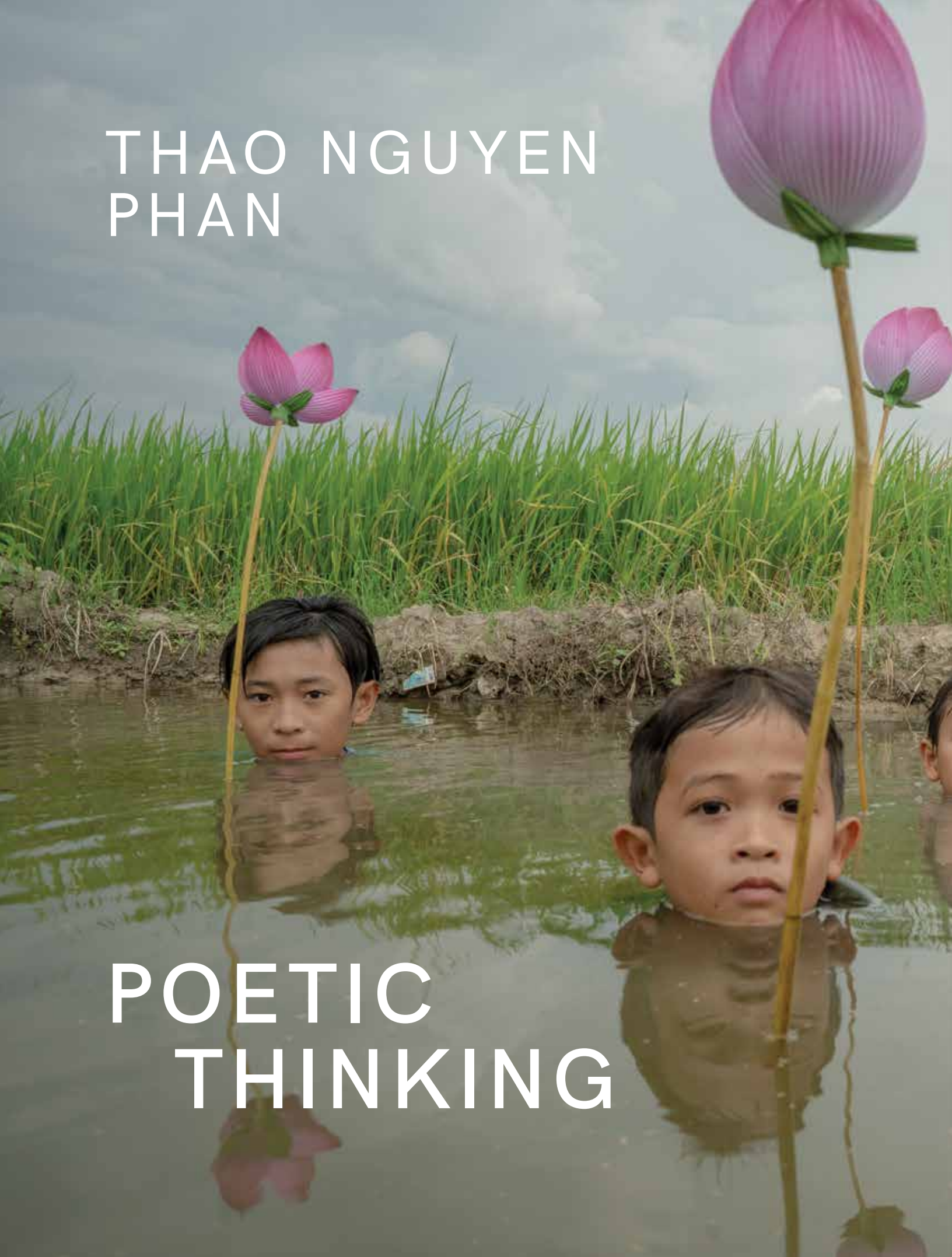




A photograph of two young children in a pond, holding lotus flower stalks. The child on the left is looking directly at the camera, while the child on the right is looking slightly away. The water is calm, reflecting the children and the flowers. In the background, there is a dense patch of green reeds or grass. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. The text 'THAO NGUYEN PHAN' is overlaid in the top left, and 'POETIC THINKING' is overlaid in the bottom left.

THAO NGUYEN
PHAN

POETIC
THINKING



BY PAMELA WONG

First Rain, Brise Soleil, 2021- , still from three-channel video with color and sound: 16 min 4 sec. Courtesy the artist.

Children are carefree and innocent, but in Thao Nguyen Phan's fantastical and dark depictions, their naivety and forgetfulness perpetuate collective violence. Often illustrated as headless figures, these children participate in cruel, bizarre activities, such as firing gunshots on a paddy field or using another child's body for rope skipping. In Phan's other stories, children are reincarnated into a dolphin and water hyacinths, becoming victims of the rapid economic development and environmental degradation of the Mekong region. Through these youthful figures, Phan invokes the dualities of human impulses—for creation and destruction, hope and despair, remembering and forgetting.

There is also a poetic urgency to Phan's multimedia projects, which combine unofficial historical facts and oral narratives. For instance, in *First Rain, Brise Soleil* (2021–), a video and a suite of paintings shown at her solo show at Tate St. Ives and “Milk of Dreams,” the international exhibition at the 59th Venice Biennale, she traces the evolution of the architecture around the Mekong and explores possibilities for a more harmonious relationship between modern development and nature. Shortly after she returned to Ho Chi Minh City from Europe, we discussed her interests in storytelling, the beauty and danger of forgetting, the Mekong's histories, as well as peaceful approaches toward today's pressing issues.

You studied traditional lacquer painting at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Arts but then transferred to Singapore's Lasalle College and eventually attained an MFA degree at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2014. How has your education in Vietnam affected your work?

I didn't finish the five-year undergraduate program in Vietnam. The art degrees in Vietnam mostly follow the curriculum of the École des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine, the colonial art school established in 1925 in Hanoi. They focus on paintings and sculptures, and you don't get to practice installation, video, or photography. During my foundation years, we focused on representational paintings and techniques, and drawing from life with models or on field trips. We traveled across the country, especially to the countryside, to observe the rituals and ways of living there, and depicted the farmers and ethnic groups in Vietnam. Those years of study were very conventional, but it gave me a strong technical ability to transcribe my ideas into visual forms. Aside from schools, I became very engaged with independent art spaces, especially ones that explore experimental art practices, such as installations, performances, or more critical art forms outside of the institution. One of those was Nhà Sàn Studio in Hanoi. I befriended them as a student and experimented with performances when I participated in some of their exhibitions and events.



On Illusion (2022), from the series *Solar Noon*, 2021–, watercolor, acrylic paint, graphite, and ink on silk in stainless steel frame, 226×75×8 cm. Courtesy the artist.



The Execution (2019), from the series *Dream of March and August* (2018-), watercolor and pigment on natural silk, 60×80cm. Courtesy the artist.

There is a quote by philosopher Édouard Glissant on your website: “The highest point of knowledge is always a poetics.” You seem to be a very well-read person. Is literature important in your practice?

I wouldn't say I'm very well read. Throughout my childhood in Vietnam, my access to fine arts was very limited. Before I went to university, the only contact I had with creative thinking was through literature. The publishing environment in Vietnam is heavy on censorship but we have good translations of Russian literature, such as the classics by Anton Chekhov and Fyodor Dostoevsky. I became very interested in fiction and I wanted to be a writer, but I feel like writing is a lonely job. I'm not so good with my words. I'm just a little bit better at painting so I decided that I would work with poetry or literature, but through visual arts.

Your projects are often based on or inspired by folktales, especially those from the Mekong region. What about folklore fascinates you the most?

I'm very interested in history in general, but in Vietnam, history is manipulated and shaped by certain ideologies or ways of thinking that are not democratic, so I have to turn my back on official history. I think folklores, oral histories, or just narratives in everyday life contain a higher level of truth. Even though they are full of fantasies, these are narratives in the collective consciousness of generations of people, unlike official histories, which are often written by a select few.

But the title of your first multipart project, *Poetic Amnesia* (2014–17), seems to be suggesting that there's beauty in forgetting.

Totally. I was born after the American War in Vietnam, and after Đổi Mới (renovations) began in 1986. Before these economic reformations, Vietnam was a closed country and everything was financially subsidized by the government. But suddenly there was free trade and possibilities for people to make a living. Many people became wealthier. I grew up in this optimistic era, when people had moved on from the horrors of the war. This kind of amnesia, the ability to forget, is a gift, but it's also dangerous. It erases many other things such as beauty and poetry, and as people forget quickly, violence and vulgarity can always return.



Tropical Siesta, 2017, still from double-channel synchronized video in loop with color and sound: 13 min 41 sec. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Zink Waldkirchen.

In *Poetic Amnesia*, you experimented with both fact and fiction related to the history of chữ quốc ngữ (Vietnam's romanized script), known to be developed by the French missionary Alexandre de Rhodes when he was traveling in Asia in the 17th century. For *Voyages de Rhodes* (2014–17) in particular, you used his book *Rhodes of Viet Nam*, disrupted the order of the pages, and painted on the texts watercolors of children engaging in surreal, brutal acts. How did you come up with this idea? Is this your attempt to decolonize the past and uncover forgotten violence?

Alexandre de Rhodes wrote his travel log in French. The book was printed several times throughout history and I purchased the edition printed in 1884. Even though I don't understand French, when I flip through the book, I recognize certain names and words that are related to the history of my country. I'm very intrigued by the myth of his contribution to the perfection of the romanized Vietnamese script. Before that, we used Chinese as our official script, for example, in government documents and examinations. People who speak local dialects also borrowed Chinese characters in their writing. But now, people like me will not be able to read the writing of our ancestors who used Chinese. I was thinking about how colonizers imposed their powers on the fate of our country, [including our language, writing systems, and knowledge heritage], and painted these pages with images of children and young people doing various activities [that distort the historical events recorded in de Rhodes's book]. Sometimes the content of the drawings accidentally correspond to the content on the pages. I also removed the pages from the spine and displayed them as an installation that doesn't have a beginning and an end. It's a way for me to depict my understandings and concerns about all of these ambiguities in history.

For *Poetic Amnesia*, you also produced the video *Tropical Siesta* (2017). With your background in painting, how did you get into creating films and videos?

During my time in Chicago, I became very interested in independent filmmaking and video art. Many of the video artists and filmmakers I discovered at that time, such as Yasujiro Ozu and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, really influenced my practice. I'm also a huge fan of the Taiwanese New Wave. Both Taiwanese and Hong Kong films were important to the pop culture of Vietnam during the renovation period. I found that there are certain ways of seeing from filmmaking that I can borrow in my work. The practice of painting can be limited in terms of its relationship to narratives and events. If you create a painting, it can easily become an illustration or a documentary, so I started using moving-image to explore stories that should be told. Even though I wasn't trained as a video artist, I'm using moving-image as a method to present my work in the fullest sense.



Installation view of *Voyages de Rhodes*, from the project *Poetic Amnesia*, 2014–17, watercolor on found books, dimensions variable, at "Monsoon Melody," WIELS – Centre for Contemporary Art, Brussels, 2020. Photo by Philippe De Gobert. Courtesy the artist.

In the story of *Tropical Siesta*, children reenact the historical events and folktales documented in *History of the Kingdom of Tonkin* (1651), another book by Alexandre de Rhodes, but in a playful way where they seem unconcerned about the real historical events. Some of the scenes appear to be based on your drawings in *Voyages de Rhodes* as well, such as the one where the children, playing prisoners, carry a ladder on their shoulders. To me, the more fun they have, the heavier the narrative feels. Do children carry a symbolic meaning in your work?

Not really. In *Poetic Amnesia*, I worked with children simply because they were there. I shot the video on my in-law's family-owned coffee farm in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Every summer, our family goes there, and it became a place I love because it's in nature and I come from a very urban place. When I was shooting *Tropical Siesta*, I focused on the children in the village. Some of the children were our cousins or nieces; some were villagers, who became our friends. I feel like the children don't care. They don't have any knowledge about the history that I was concerned with. Somehow their situation is similar to mine. With this ability of forgetting, you can happily move on, but there's also a burden that comes with the act of forgetting, which speaks volumes in itself. In the video, I also put into action some of the activities depicted in the drawings. For example, one scene features a group of boys walking around with ladders that shackle their heads. For them, it's just fun, but as adults, we have our own associations with the objects, so we derive meanings of violence or disruption from these actions.



Tropical Siesta, 2017, stills from double-channel synchronized video in loop with color and sound: 13 min 41 sec. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Zink Waldkirchen.



Tropical Siesta, 2017, still from double-channel synchronized video in loop with color and sound: 13 min 41 sec. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Zink Waldkirchen.

Most of your works are project-based, and each project includes multiple works of a range of mediums, including watercolors, oil, installations, and videos. How do you choose your mediums and how do you begin your projects?

The way I choose the medium is personal and intuitive. I was trained as a lacquer painter, but I haven't made a lacquer painting in a while because I am allergic to lacquer trees. I always begin my projects with drawings. Usually they are small sketches in watercolors, many of which are not used in the final work. When I have these drawings in mind, I connect them with a very loose narrative. I don't work with a script, but I select certain groups of drawings and translate them into moving images. For the images that don't have narrative-based content, they will become paintings. Most of my paintings used to be very representational.

Sometimes in your projects, you incorporate objects that you discover during your research or visits to other parts of Vietnam. For example, in *Mute Grain* (2019–), a project that explores the unofficial history of the Vietnam famine during the Japanese occupation of Indo-China in 1945, you utilize jute.

I collect objects or materials related to the narrative in the video. For *Mute Grain*, I got very interested in the material of jute. During the famine, there was the saying "Uproot Rice, Grow Jute." It is believed that farmers were forced to grow jute for military purposes. I used jute to create the interactive installation *No Jute Cloth for the Bones* (2016), where people had to pass through this massive installation to see the video works.

In the installation *Man Looking Towards Darkness* (2016), also part of *Mute Grain*, there's a certificate that marks your failure to borrow stones from a village for the work. What is the story behind this document? How did you, as an artist, approach this village and its history?

Man Looking Towards Darkness arose from my visits to Hung Yen, a province in the north of Vietnam in the Red River Delta. Hung Yen is famous for its longans, the fruit, but is also one of the places that was heavily affected by the famine. In the early 1990s, historian Van Tao visited the witnesses of the famine and recorded their stories. According to one interviewee, the Japanese ran a jute factory during the occupation, where they used stones—now placed under a Banyan tree in front of the village—to beat the jute to make the fiber softer. I came to this tree, which has somehow become a relic surrounded by stones. The villagers couldn't confirm whether the stones are related to history or not, because the stones have always been there and removing them is viewed as inappropriate. The stones have become part of the landscape and the history of the village. As an artist, I wanted to acknowledge my own experience in approaching fact and fiction. Many of the pieces later shown in the exhibition are parafictional. I like how artists have the freedom to research and invest in things that don't necessarily have to turn out to be a dissertation. Artists don't have the responsibility of being 100 percent truthful.



Do you experience the pressures of representation when examining these traumatic historical events such as the famine?

I would say yes and no. Sometimes the subject matter is huge in terms of its political and historical context, but I approach these topics purely with a personal curiosity, and without direct experience of the subject matter. For *Mute Grain* in particular, I was not born into that period, and my family did not go through the famine. My approach is similar to what American-Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha says about the concept of “speaking nearby,” instead of speaking for. The filmmaker is not the people, animals, or things that are directly involved in the event. As filmmakers, sometimes we approach subjects in a naive way and this can be dangerous. There shouldn’t be any misinterpretations that I represent Vietnam or all of Vietnam’s stories in any way, because these representations are totally personal.

***Becoming Alluvium* (2019–) focuses more on contemporary concerns related to the rapid economic development of Vietnam. The film begins with the death and reincarnation of two brothers due to the collapse of the hydroelectric dam in the Mekong River. How does the idea of reincarnation bring out revelations of our obsession with progress?**

The more I work with moving images, the more I feel like moving images, or art-making in general, has this ability to reincarnate. The concept of reincarnation in my work is mostly inspired by Buddhism, the most popular religion in Vietnam. In the first part of the short film *Becoming Alluvium*, one brother is reincarnated into water hyacinths in the Mekong Delta. These purple flowers were first brought over from South America by the French, I believe, and grew quickly when they arrived in the Mekong because the climate is suitable for them. The other boy became an Irrawaddy dolphin, an endangered species. These plants and animals are embedded in memories and history.

The final chapter connects their reincarnation with the metamorphosis of the Khmer Princess, who is known for her selfish wish to possess jewellery made from morning dew. She eventually realizes her wish is pointless, as it’s impossible to achieve, so she becomes a dew herself and evaporates into the Mekong. To me, this folk story is a metaphor for human greed and the longing for progress. The video is also my personal reflection on how my own country and our neighbors along the Mekong share the culture of Buddhism and the rich natural resources of this river. Now with the hydroelectric dams, we are all facing the environmental exploitation resulting from economic development. While hopes for a better life are normal, I’m skeptical about how people achieve this without regard for other living beings in the environment.



Top: Installation view of *No Jute Cloth for the Bones* from the project *Mute Grain*, 2019– , interactive site-specific installation, raw jute stalk, dimensions variable, at Tate St. Ives, 2022. Courtesy the artist. Bottom: Photograph of three stones that lie under an ancient banyan tree in the Phuong Thong village in the Tien Lu district of the Hung Yen city. Courtesy the artist.



Becoming Alluvium, 2019- , stills from single-channel video with color: 16 min 40 sec. Courtesy the artist; Han Nefkens Foundation; and Galerie Zink Waldkirchen.

In your latest project, *First Rain, Brise Soleil*, which comprises watercolor paintings and an animated video, the narrative is looser. The video begins with a construction worker telling his story of moving to Saigon in the mid-1960s and contributing to the infrastructure at the time, which was funded by the United States. You highlight *brise soleils*, the sun-blocking screens found in the modern architecture of both Vietnam and Cambodia. What did you uncover in your research for this work?

First Rain, Brise Soleil is an ongoing project. I was interested in the architecture in southern Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1960s and '70s. These two countries share a monsoon climate, with rainy and dry seasons. The *brise soleil* protects the inhabitants of a structure from rain while the interior remains cool. They are climate responsive. It is like a building that can breathe, and the breathing becomes part of the temperature, the weather, and the environment. These findings, together with the popularity of air-conditioners today, led me to reflect on my years in Singapore. Even though it is a developed country, people there live in closed buildings with no interactions with the trees that serve as tamed insertions of "nature" in the urban environment. The *brise soleil* is a lot simpler but is a more respectful way to reconfigure our interactions with nature. The architects use the *brise soleil* to express their style but it also became an element with symbolic meanings. Sometimes in Vietnam, we merge Chinese symbols, such as the one for longevity, into the *brise-soleil* block. These modernist buildings borrow a so-called Western way of construction [as they utilize concrete, which was brought into Vietnam by the Americans during the mid-1960s]. But the architects adapted the material for a local language. There's a certain poetic thinking about how to approach issues and how to solve them in non-discriminative, non-violent ways.

The *brise soleil* is the main element that runs through my video, but there are also discussions on the relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia, how the Mekong Delta used to be part of the Khmer Kingdom, and how fairytales examine these issues in a subtle way. *First Rain, Brise Soleil* is a combination of history, folktale, and formal elements related to architecture.

At what point do you feel like you've completed a project?

Many projects of mine, such as *Mute Grain* and *Becoming Alluvium*, are still ongoing, because they are like living organisms to me. They have a life and a future. Even when a project ends, an element of it will find its way to reincarnate into another being and become part of another work. This ongoing state is practical, like an excuse for me to keep working, but it's also the Buddhist way of working, which produces no results or goals to pursue.



First Rain, Brise Soleil, 2021- , stills from three-channel video with color and sound: 16 min 4 sec. Courtesy the artist.