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“Thao Nguyen Phan “The Sun Falls Silently” at Palais de Tokyo, Paris”

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Thao Nguyen Phan “The Sun Falls Silently” at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2025. Courtesy: Galerie Zink, Germany. Photo: Aurélien Mole

A fluid, uninterrupted weaving of literature and moving images envelops viewers of *The Sun Falls Silently*, Thao Nguyen Phan’s first solo exhibition in France, presented in the basement of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Upon descending into the rough and stripped-down space of the art deco building, one encounters a selection of new and recent works by Phan, together with works by other Vietnamese artists she has chosen as companions. Throughout the exhibition, Phan constructs a subtle dialogue between materiality and immateriality, and between Vietnam and France, in which archives and artistic artifacts become part of a universal story, told through the poetic distance she always brings to her subjects.

Phan’s corpus, whether in the form of video installations, sculptures, drawings, slideshows, or sonic and visual compositions, is constantly evolving. Her cinematic-painterly approach, as she explains in an interview with the show’s curator, Daria de Beauvais, “explores the intersection of fine art mediums with social sciences, demonstrating how various disciplines can converge to offer deeper insights into our history.”¹ Interdisciplinarity and cross-cultural practices are core to Phan’s distinctive artistic vocabulary. Foundational to her formation was her mentorship with Joan Jonas—who introduced her to fusions of video, painting, sculpture, and installation—as well as her academic studies in Singapore and Chicago, and the cofounding of Art Labor in 2012, a collective focused on projects bridging art, science, and social studies, formed with artist Truong Cong Tung and curator Arlette Quynh-Anh Tran. Truong is featured here with an in-situ installation titled

Transference (2023–ongoing), which reflects on life’s fragility and the passage of time through a thin sunbeam crossing a circular window.

There are multiple entry points to the presentation, the most immediate being its title. *The Sun Falls Silently* evokes a journey through past and present, rediscovered materials and reanimated archives. It is drawn from Phan’s favorite chapter in *Palm-of-the-Hand Stories* (1925) by Japanese Nobel laureate Yasunari Kawabata—a collection of sixty brief, lyrical narratives about love, loneliness, and the flow of time. From the outset, the exhibition connects to the book’s poetic approach to storytelling, underscoring the cultural entanglements that Kawabata’s work reveals, especially through its Surrealist influences. The story Phan draws from is not only rich in visual detail and cinematic rhythm—alternating slow and fast sequences, past and present—but also serves as a conduit to the imagery of Surrealism, a movement devoted in large part to recovering lost histories and suppressed memories. *Palm of the Hand* (2025–ongoing) is also the title of a new filmic work by Phan, shown here in its first two excerpts—*A Humble Cottage* and *Candide*, in whose nonlinear rhythms and overlapping scenes, humans and more-than-humans coexist.

The cultural interweaving of Vietnam and France at the heart of this work resonates throughout the exhibition. Phan explores it not through the lens of activism, but through poetry’s quiet strength. One such example is her homage to Diem Phung Thi, a pioneering Vietnamese modernist artist who remains largely unrecognized abroad. Though Phan never met Thi, she was introduced to her work through her father and a visit to her museum in Hue in 2010. Her admiration for Thi fuels her ongoing project *Reincarnations of Shadows*, at the core of her recent solo presentations at Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan (2023) and Kunsthal Charlottenborg in Copenhagen (2024).

In Paris, the tribute to Thi opens and closes the exhibition, affirming a circular vision of time and space that underpins both Phan’s work and her curatorial choices. It features a display of eighteen of Thi’s small to midsize sculptures from the 1960s and 1970s, arranged on a low platform. Made of marble, jade, wood, bronze, steel, and other metals, these works are based on a system of seven modular forms designed to be combined and recombined. Thi’s sculptural “alphabet” draws on natural materials and geometric codes to generate new forms that turn the invisible visible, allowing for interaction and (re)interpretation. Thi’s approach, combining simplicity with transformation, embodies a modernist aesthetic that, in her hands, becomes a language of spiritual and material resonance.

Positioned at the crossroads of the exhibition space before the sequence of galleries, Phan's large, circular *Sofa* (2025), covered in pleated silk, acts both as a quiet invitation to sit and rest and as a recognition of Thi's passion for natural materials. Next to it, the 2013 hanging sculpture *Untitled (Heads)* is a jute structure inspired by the Ma Mot totem tree, built for religious purposes by the Thai minority of North Vietnam, originally adorned with animal bones and amulets representing the deceased or evil spirits. Phan's richly textured video installations echo this lineage, bridging silk painting and design, rhythmically shaping the exhibition through interaction between presence and absence, solidity and fluidity.

Thi's life journey—resisting French colonial authority, living in exile in Paris in the late 1940s during the First Indochina War, and returning to Vietnam in the 1990s to establish her art foundation—is another conceptual anchor for the show. From this point onward, it expands to explore two crucial French figures entangled in colonial histories: the Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes (1591–1660) and the missionary, linguist, and ethnologist Jacques Dournes (1922–1993). Rhodes, who traveled through seventeenth-century Cochinchina and Tonkin, is known for authoring the first Romanesque translation of the Vietnamese language. Phan reflects on his travelogues through watercolors that seem to liquefy language itself, merging text and figure into a dense ecosystem that questions the very act of translation. Dournes lived among the Jarai people in Vietnam's Central Highlands from 1947 to 1968. Through his diaries, maps, and photographs—found by the artist in the archival collections of the Institut de recherche France-Asie/MEP and the Musée du quai Branly—he documented the region's Christianization and cultural transformations. In Phan's slideshow *Forêt, Femme, Folie* (2025–ongoing), based on Dournes's eponymous 1978 book, documentation becomes transformation, as she reimagines the archival material into a living, breathing constellation of bodies, animals, and nature, all part of a timeless, placeless spirit.

The exhibition stands as a manifesto for the centrality of artistic practices as grounded in technical mastery and traditional media—painting, drawing, lacquer, silk—yet it flows seamlessly into the brutalist framework of the Palais and dissolves into the digital language of contemporary moving image. This transition is embodied in *Perpetual Brightness* (2019–ongoing), a series of lacquer paintings arranged within a modernist grid inspired by Eileen Gray, and culminates in *Reincarnations of Shadows* (2025), a new five-channel video installation bringing together images from Thi's work and records that is an evolution of a previous 2023 video work.² Here, the small stories of individual lives merge with the larger arc of Vietnamese history, reincarnated through a dreamlike interplay of shadow and light. Central to

Phan's worldview, this notion of reincarnation is transformed into a hybrid monument to the complexity of Vietnam's colonial past, accompanied by the delicate sound of the *dan tranh*, a traditional stringed instrument—as if opening up a new possibility to counter silence.

at Palais de Tokyo, Paris
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