

Phan Thao Nguyen

Artist Statement and Biography

Artist Statement

Uproot Rice, Grow Jute is a literal translation of the Vietnamese phrase “Nho Lua, Trong Day”. This phrase is a historical reference to a campaign established during the Japanese occupation of Indochina during World War II. In Uproot Rice, Grow Jute, I deliberately juxtapose visual elements that are at first sight non-related and non-specific. By displaying the paintings and the installation together, I would like to explore the idea of fragmented information that cannot be comprehended totally, but can provoke a sensation and a space for thought. I am fascinated by the idea of fictionalizing and fabricating history. The information we perceive from recorded history and the everyday is significantly filtered for certain purposes. I do not seek an absolute truth but I am intrigued by how the process of fabrication takes place. In the artwork, I apply similar methods of narration and fictionalization as an attempt to depict the personal and public tragedy of our previous and current generation.

On 22 September 1940, the French signed an accord, which granted the Japanese troops the right to occupy Indochina. The occupation of Northern Indochina allowed the Japanese to block China from importing arms and fuel from French Indochina. The Japanese presence in Indochina lasted until the end of World War II. During the occupation, jute supplies from India were interrupted. Jute was used to make sacks as well as gunpowder, a crucial material for the war industry. Looking for new jute supplies, the Japanese authorities forced Vietnamese farmers to uproot rice and grow jute. This was one of the main reason for the horrific famine in north Vietnam in 1945, resulting in the deaths of 2 millions people.

The installation Untitled (Heads) is made from locally grown jute plant. The jute plant, a body that is both the cause and witness of a tragic event, is now reincarnated with poetic meaning inside the artwork. I dried the jute stalks, cut them into smaller modules and then manually combined them into a structure. The structure is similar to the shape of a chandelier but is actually inspired by the Ma Mot tree, a ritualistic tree constructed by Thai minorities in northern Vietnam for religious purposes. On the Ma Mot tree, object such as animal bones and amulets are hung on the tree, each object representing a dead or evil spirit. The purpose of this action is to cure illness.

In a previous installment at San Art, Untitled (Heads) was placed at the entrance of the gallery space. The audience was welcome to touch, play and rotate the piece. At the end of each branch was attached a small bronze head, which was a representational portrait of a farmer that I got to know during my research. The ideal place to install this piece is outdoors or on balconies, where nature can age the piece gradually.

30 days of Looking Down is a series of 30 small paintings on x-ray films depicting human figures looking down. Looking down is simply looking down, looking for something, or bowing. The inspiration for these paintings come from a visit to the memories at Old Ford Factory museum in Singapore, where the artist stayed for two years from 2008-2010. The picture of a woman bowing to Japanese soldiers when they passed her on the street has made a significant impact on my thinking about the meaning of the gesture and what it signified. From the initial photograph I developed a collection of painted gestures on old x-ray film with images taken from found resources: books, historical archives, the internet, etc. The figure is stripped of his or her background and represented in a timeless, non-specific space.

Artist Biography

Thao Nguyen Phan Vietnam

b. 1987 Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Education

2013 MFA in Painting and Drawing, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA
2009 Bachelor of Fine Arts with First Class honors, Lasalle College of Arts, Singapore
2005-2008 Ho Chi Minh University of Fine Arts, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2014 *Unconditional Belief*, San Art, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
NhaSan 15+, NhaSan Studio, Hanoi, Vietnam
- 2013 *Context and Constellation*, Bangkok Culture Centre, Bangkok, Thailand (catalog)
I-CAMP, Muong Ethnology museum, Hoa Binh, Vietnam
Right Fiction, San Art, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
MFA Thesis Exhibition, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, USA
New Work Show, Sullivan Galleries, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, USA
The Fifth Wall, Sullivan Galleries, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, USA
- 2012 *6, Recent Works by Artists of Vietnamese Heritage*, Basespace gallery, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, USA
RIAP International Performance Art Festival, Quebec, Canada
Riverscapes in Flux, a travelling exhibition to Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia and Philippines, organized by the Goethe Institute, Hanoi, Vietnam (catalog)
The Whitney (Houston) Biennale, Murdertown, Chicago
- 2011 *MFA Thesis Exhibition*, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Small(er) Works show, Manifest Exhibition, Chicago
'Open Edit' Mobile library, collaborated with Truong Gong Tung, San Art and Asia Art Archive, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
- 2010 *Naptime Noise*, L'usine gallery, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
- 2009 *Rieng Chung*, Ho Chi Minh Fine Arts Association, HCMC, Vietnam
Intersection Vietnam, new works form North and South, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore and Malaysia (catalog)
The Lasalle show'09, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore

- 2008 *Two Coats of Paint*, Praxis Space, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore
Ket Noi, Singapore Art Museum and Post Museum, Singapore
- 2007 *Young Artist Festival*, Hanoi, Vietnam (catalog)
NIPAF International Performance Art Festival, Tokyo, Nagano and Nagoya, Japan
(catalog)
- 2006 *Recovery*, Ho Chi Minh Fine Arts Association, Vietnam

Awards and Residencies

- 2013 San Art Laboratory Artist in Residency program, San Art, Ho Chi Minh City,
Vietnam
- 2012 Incentive Scholarship, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Nominated for the Dedalus foundation grant.
- 2011 Incentive Scholarship, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
First place, general category, Union League Civic & Arts foundation, Chicago
- 2010 Presidential Scholarship, School of the Art Institute of Chicago