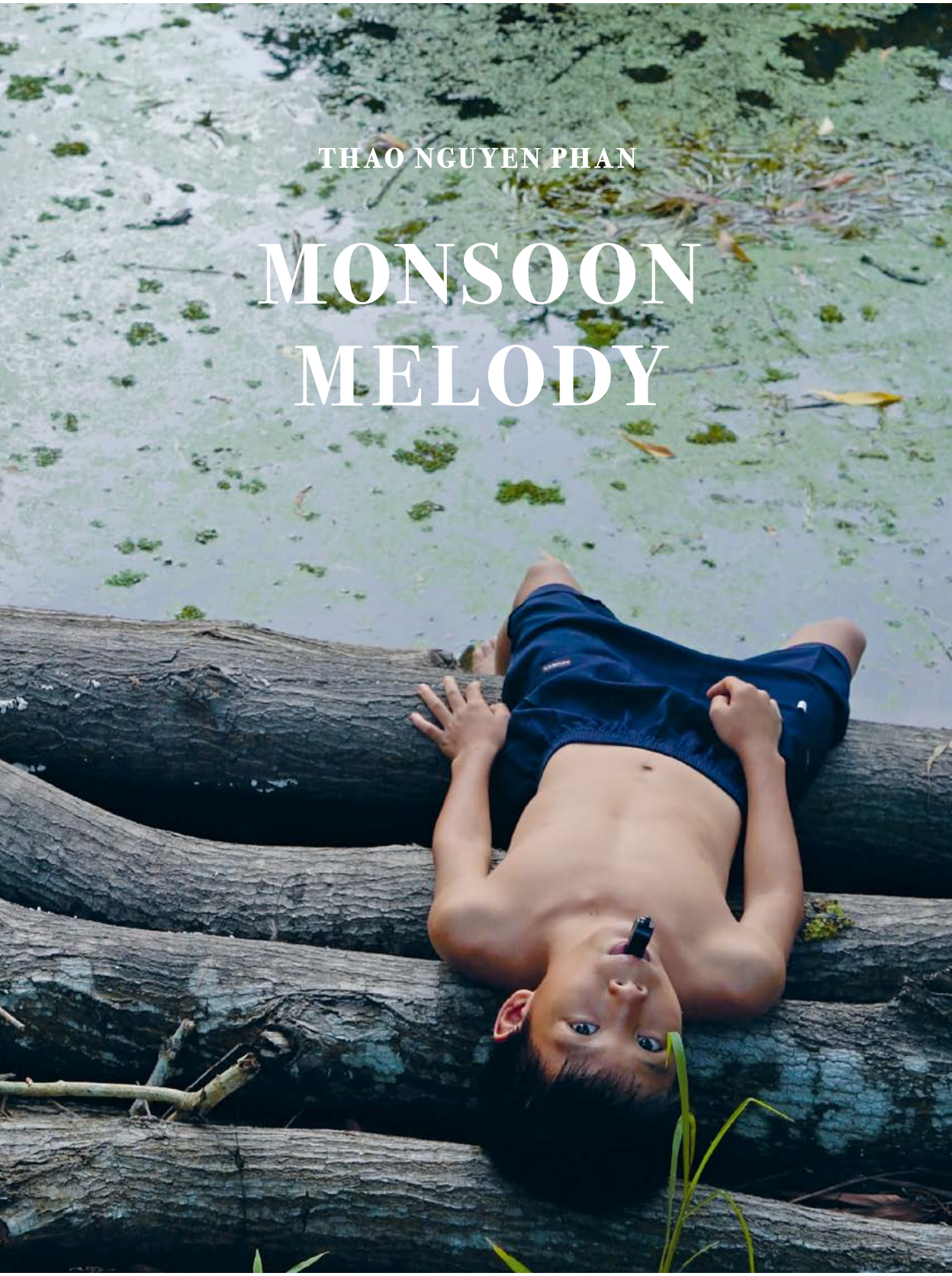
THAO NGUYEN PHAN
MONSOON
MELODY

Image cover: Thao Nguyen Phan, *Becoming Alluvium*, 2019, video still, produced and commissioned by the Han Nefkens Foundation in collaboration with: the Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona; WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels; and Chisenhale Gallery, London. In memory of Rcham Lik.

THAO NGUYEN PHAN

MONSOON MELODY

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NARRATIVE POETRY

A CONVERSATION
BETWEEN THAO NGUYEN PHAN
AND HILDE TEERLINCK

NARRATIVE POETRY

Sometimes reality is too complex.
Stories give it form.
JEAN-LUC GODARD

Thao Nguyen Phan won the Han Nefkens Foundation – LOOP Barcelona Video Art Production Award 2018, organized in collaboration with the Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona. It was a unanimous decision for the jury composed of international experts, for Phan's "heterogeneous, powerful works and their alluring narrative forms." Phan's recent productions are drawn on the history of her home country, and particularly on the agricultural, political, and social context of the Vietnamese countryside. In her work, she goes beyond a pure historical or political point of view, exploring current issues concerning food security and our ecological responsibility towards agricultural environments.

The artist does not attempt to identify the causes of this troubling situation but shifts the focus to the intrinsic questions and various levels of perception of the impact on nature and human lives. Through different levels of narrative perception that simultaneously speak of real and imaginary worlds, she proposes alternate versions of reality. Like a multi-layered fabric, different considerations overlap, forming a thrilling, aesthetically pleasing, poetic body of work. In a subtle way, through storytelling, fiction and facts, official and unofficial history, Phan reveals the forgotten and the forgettable.

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Hilde Teerlinck: I am interviewing you as the 2018 winner of the Han Nefkens Foundation – LOOP Barcelona Video Art Production Award. A distinguished international jury selected you from other emerging Asian artists, stating that they were enticed by your video works that incorporate complex, layered narratives and a personal form of storytelling. You communicate your storytelling through metaphors. In my opinion, it becomes particularly clear in the piece, *Tropical Siesta*, for example.

Thao Nguyen Phan: I started to make my first videos in 2012, when I was doing my MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). In the U.S., I discovered the world of independent film. SAIC usually has many good video exhibitions. The school also has a strong tradition of

experimental filmmaking. One of the most significant moments was when I encountered the work of Thai filmmaker, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, a SAIC alumni. There was a time when I avoided content associated with Vietnam, afraid that it would evoke nostalgia or trauma as most Americans only know of Vietnam because of the war. Weerasethakul taught me how to deal with this theme, one's own background and origin. He really made me change my approach. In my earlier video, *Mekong Mechanical* (2012), I shot a worker in a catfish factory daydreaming on her shift. In *Renal Calculus* (2013), I followed the journey of a kidney stone, travelling illegally from Vietnam to the U.S. However, it was not until 2017 when I finished *Tropical Siesta*, my first two-channel video, that I believed I had successfully combined my interest in local histories manifested in painting, filmmaking and sculpture as one body of work.

HT: You were also in contact with Joan Jonas. She is considered an international pioneer of performance and video art. In her work, she combines sculpture and drawing, and collaborates with musicians, actors and dancers. She often takes inspiration from mythological tales belonging to various cultures and fuses texts from the past with politically charged images from the present.

TNP: My meeting with Joan Jonas marked a pivotal year in my career since I was selected by Jonas herself to be her mentee under the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. The program gave me the luxury of becoming a full-time artist and allowed me to travel with Jonas to many of her exhibitions. It was a life-changing experience for me. *Tropical Siesta* marked the moment I gained the confidence to keep going and believe in my ability as an artist.

HT: Lou Andreas-Salomé said, "Poetry is something in-between the dream and its interpretation." Literature also plays an important role in your work.

TNP: My first approach to art is through literature. In Vietnam, when I was growing up, there were very few fine art exhibitions. The public had almost no access to visual art, unless you were within the artist circles. Literature was still heavily censored. Many books from the Soviet bloc were well translated and well circulated. In that context, I absorbed the world of the Russian Golden Age and the works of Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov. Chinese classics were also translated, local tales were told, and traditional rituals were still widely practiced. This was the prelude to the cultural invasion of globalization, before Hollywood overshadowed everything. Accordingly, I decided to search for a more personal narrative.

I developed an interest in a storytelling that intertwined various "classical" visual art forms such as painting and drawing. I also explored the possibilities of incorporating new media like video or installation. At the moment, I am attempting to use the intrinsic poetry I discovered to tell a complex story: the history of my home country, Vietnam.

Nonetheless, I still see it as a seed, an origin, the beginning. It has to continue to grow. At the same time, I lean towards the anxiety of historical amnesia.

HT: You affirm yourself as a child of your time. You sometimes use the term "ecological responsibility" to describe your positioning. How do you plan to develop this in the future?

TNP: When I refer to "ecological responsibility," I do not mean it as a way of treating nature, which should be a global concern, anyway. I see it as my own personal contemplation or attitude. It all started with my interest in agriculture and the topic of food security. I recently presented this in my video *Mute Grain* (2019). Vietnam has constantly suffered from food scarcity. In the 1990s, when the country began transforming economically and started using new farming technologies that relied heavily on pesticides, artificial fertilizers and high yielding crops, the government somehow managed to solve the problem of the empty stomachs of 90 million people and it rapidly became one of the largest exporters of rice on the global market. Another consequence of this was producing a broken body from the Mekong River, which to me is more than just a geographical phenomenon. I see it as a nurturing and caring mother figure, something that I am attached to. The establishment of hydropower dams in the upper region created droughts and floods, the blockage of waterways for extensive farming, and the subtraction and exportation of sand from the river bed to

Singapore, for example, completely changed the magical river's appearance. The damage was irreparable.

My projects with my art collective, Art Labor, co-founded with my husband and artist, Truong Cong Tung and curator Arlette Quynh-Anh Tran, brought me into contact with the indigenous culture of the Jrai people who live in Vietnam's Central Highlands. There, I learned about the indigenous ways of understanding nature and dealing with it. I really respect their approach. Unfortunately, their region suffered dramatically from forest loss and damage, and they were victims of the terrible coffee-pepper-rubber commercial triangle.

In my future works, I would like to revisit my piece *Mekong Mechanical* (2012) and develop new video and painting works that reflect on the radical changes of the Mekong River. I do not plan to come up with big theories like the Anthropocene – I imagine a more subtle, gentle gesture to this situation. I want to treat it in a human way.

HT: Your work, in particular the video installation *Mute Grain* is drawn on, as you said, "the complex historical context of Vietnam." For Europeans, your country is almost always linked to media images of war and conflict. When we think about Vietnamese people, we imagine the "victims" and "armed guerrilla fighters" from World Press photographs. Of course, this is an inaccurate view, influenced by both told and untold stories.

TNP: Yes, it reflects my curiosity about how historical events are interpreted. How can one event be glorified and another forgotten? *Mute Grain* weaves oral histories, research undertaken by historian Van Tao, who donated his oral recordings to the Vietnam Museum of Revolution in Hanoi, with magical elements borrowed from Vietnamese folk tales and chronicles. Told from the perspective of two adolescents, the work is expressed in a lyrical language inspired by Japanese post-war writer Yasunari Kawabata's *Palm-of-the-Hand Stories*. The narrative of *Mute Grain* relates the story of the unjustified death of a young woman named August, who is unable to move on to the next life, and thus becomes a hungry ghost. She maintains her human form, appearing between layers of time and space, across silk screens and cinematic frames, together with her brother, March, who floats anxiously, searching for her. The story of March and August reflects the poorest months of the lunar calendar, an unstable time when farmers once had to borrow money and find side jobs to sustain themselves.

HT: You mentioned that you are also part of the artist collective Art Labor that develops workshops, talks and other exchanges, also organizing exhibitions. What are its aims and your role in it?

TNP: Art Labor is an artist collective based in Ho Chi Minh City whose work is something in between visual arts and social and life sciences, in various public contexts and locales. We do not produce single artworks but develop

many-year-long journeys in which inspiration is a seed for cultivation. The seed grows, the inspiration expands, and it bears into a rhizome of projects and artworks. I have various roles in Art Labor. We are all at once artists, curators, writers, farmers, anthropologists, architects and much more. A notable project of ours is Jrai Dew. We collected the uprooted trees from coffee and rubber plantations – industrial crops that were cut off to grow a new plant – and gave them to our seven collaborators, Jrai artists, to make sculptures. We organized mobile exhibitions of the sculptures in the Jrai artist's villages. We also run a pop-up hammock café in many art institutions that serve Vietnamese Robusta coffee grown in Tung's village, as a platform for critical exchange.

HT: You produced the work *Becoming Alluvium* for the Award. The Mekong River is one of the longest rivers in Asia, flowing through six countries: China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and ending in Vietnam. It might have the largest freshwater fishery in the world, and its waters support rice agriculture in the delta in Vietnam. However, besides its environmental and economic significance, it has also taken on a cultural significance in each of the areas it touches and has inspired an array of ritualistic, musical and artistic expressions shaping the cultures of Southeast Asian countries. These are elements that, alongside environmental questions, will also be explored in your new work.

TNP: Like *Platero and I*, *Becoming Alluvium* is a work with many chapters. Each chapter is ephemeral, a fleeting

moment responding to the fragility of nature. The Mekong produces the soul and the spirit of South Vietnam. Southeast Asia is a region that culturally, religiously and economically would not exist without the generosity of this river. Before it meets the ocean, the river nurtures the land of South Vietnam with its alluvium, rich for rice cultivation. The river is also abundant in fish. Three centuries ago, people in the poor and overpopulated region of Northern and Central Vietnam, together with the Chinese from up north, migrated south, along with the Khmer that already settled in the delta, and created a harmonious community. During the colonial period, the French invested in the construction of railroads, canals and roads that also transformed the delta jungle into the rice storage of all of Indochina. Stories told in oral literature and vernacular music glorify the success of the human – and its hostile nature – who chased away the tiger, the elephant, the crocodile, as rice paddies replaced the melaleuca forests. However, the river having an abundance of resources is already a romantic past. I want to examine the river in its glory and sadness, through video and painting.

HT: *Platero and I* is a famous book by the Andalusian poet Juan Ramón Jiménez, who won the Nobel Prize in 1956. The book has been translated into many languages, including Vietnamese. It is a prose poem about the wanderings of a man and his donkey, written in different sequences of chapters. You take this book as a point of reference in the new work.

TNP: I first read *Platero and I* not in my childhood, but in my 20s. The book exudes a communal understanding for the countryside, the harmonious relationship of man – animal – environment, depicted in an unforgettable poignancy. The book was beautifully translated into Vietnamese. In *Becoming Alluvium*, I borrow the prose style of the book to depict the "chapters" in the video, each chapter responding to an element of nature. Unlike *Tropical Siesta* and *Mute Grain* which had a direct involvement with a literary source (Alexander de Rhodes and Kawabata Yasunari), *Becoming Alluvium* does not use Jiménez's prose directly, but as inspiration only.

HT: As you mentioned, you wish to examine and reflect on the river in all its splendor and magnificence and its decay and sadness through a mixture of painting and video. Do you choose to use these specific media because they allow you to unfold different types of narration? You refer to a local context, a clear geographic and time-based issue, yet you search to reach the viewer with multilayered answers to the questions that arise. Are these media that permit you to concurrently speak about a long forgotten but unforgettable past, the present, and even a possible future? Are these media that are at once subjective and objective?

TNP: Trained as a painter, I have always had an interest in both painting and the moving image. When I started my MFA in Chicago, I approached the resource of world cinema, video art and American experimental filmmaking for the first time. I feel that painting, which I love dearly,

sometimes lacks a direct involvement with life. It is not a snapshot or an unaltered transmission. It almost functions more metaphorically, as it allows you to mediate and think about the subject when executing the drawing. It is storytelling, but from a certain distance. The nostalgic "Once upon a time…" feeling, or aura, is characteristic of painting. Since I returned to Vietnam in 2014, my works have developed a more direct approach to the issues related to particular local narratives. I feel an urgent need to avoid, by any means necessary, the disappearance of these narratives, into a kind of state of collective amnesia. That is why I employ all media and devices that I know of, ranging from painting, printed matter, video to installation, to create a final environment of critical and poetic storytelling. I use the characters and the materials I find in my immediate surroundings and I take the local landscape as settings for my fiction. In fact, what I hope for, is to create a reality, a real story that longs for universal understanding.

A conversation with Thao Nguyen Phan
Hilde Teerlinck, July 2019

GRIEF WORK AND THE NEED FOR CONSOLATION ON *TROPICAL SIESTA* BY THAO NGUYEN PHAN

THOMAS D. TRUMMER

GRIEF WORK AND THE NEED FOR CONSOLATION ON *TROPICAL SIESTA* BY THAO NGUYEN PHAN

The camera moves slowly. It scans over a rice paddy that is muddy and fallow. There are clouds in the sky. Just a few. They are bright. Two projections are visible, placed next to one another. On the left, the horizon of the landscape is elevated. The green is brighter, terraces cut straightened plots in nature. On the right, with backlighting, the same fields glow like silver mirrors. The camera turns. Gradually, the lens slows its tracking. The shots soon seem like painted landscapes. On the right, there is a towering tree, located on the edge of the picture like a *repoussoir* in classical painting. On the left, decorative branches hang in the frame. They mark graphic shadows against the sun's center of light. Are different aesthetic intentions being quoted here? European classicism on the one hand and the lyrical art of drawing in the tropics on the other?

First, the title is faded in: *Viet Nam*. Then, a report begins: "After years of independence and self-imposed seclusion." In so doing, place and time are indicated. But both remain vague and uncertain. For the language indicates a time, more precisely a time span that has been. It speaks of a past, even two separate periods during that past. A time of independence and isolation and a time afterwards. Suddenly, the subject changes. In the landscape, individual figures can be seen; the clouds are dark and heavy. We see children standing on the edges of the terraces, immobile, like sculptures or soldiers. The views change. The high horizon with the vivid green moves left. The descending terraces are depicted on the right from the side. That the children are standing as if planted creates a magical, disturbing quiet. Their clothing glows like crystalline dots, their black pants and hair drill holes in the landscape. The camera turns patiently onward. It rotates with a regularity that recalls the non-involvement of a webcam. The text in the subtitles continues the political report. "Agriculture is central to a nation's economy," we are told. The sentence is a general declaration. Agriculture is the economic foundation. "Everyone is a farmer." The language insists on a historical present. Is this claim still valid? A girl can be viewed from close up. She is wearing a school uniform in a bright blue with a round collar. Wide, dark blue straps hold up her dress. The hair is carefully combed back. We see the girl on an angle from below, her gaze is directed off into the distance. With an immobile facial expression, the girl takes the future in her sights, like the heroine of a socialist state. In the image on the left, the wind

moves the lightest of the branches. A strand of hair flatters in the girl's face. She remains stoic. Now, the shot changes once again. We find ourselves in a different landscape. The area is flat and more suitable as farmland. On the left, we can see the irrigation supply for several fields, on the right a sandy access path that is intended for the maintenance of the rice paddies. The path leads straight into the depth of the image like a pier. While on the left the brackish water, several stalks and a small runlet are presented as an idyll, on the right there is the planimetric construction of the landscape and a nature that has been ordered according to the criteria of efficiency. "Time is frozen in endless tranquil rice paddies." Once again, time is addressed. This time, we are reminded of an unchanging time, an unhistorical, perhaps everlasting time. A time that is inherent to nature, that preserves and stores it. The next sentence that we see in the subtitles provides an explanation for the wordless appearance of the children. But it is surprising all the same: "Children live in communes and work in self-sufficient farming communities." Two boys can be seen. They are wearing bright shirts and carrying tools over their shoulders, one a rake, the other a harrow. They recall the division of labor. Mute, patient, confident, bound to the community and the general welfare. But can that be true? Are there actually communes that only consist of children? Can they insure their survival? As Anna Freud reported about the concentration camps? Is there a survival of the youngest that is based only on efficiency, community, and shared convictions? Where are their parents, what does the generational contract look like, why are they left to their

own devices? Can there be a childlike self-determination that never transforms into adulthood? All these questions remain. Yet the films rely on the mode of tranquil views in which heroic portraits and pastoral landscapes alternate. Contrasts like the opposition between politics and poetry lead to a third message, one that leaves room for consideration, reflection, and absorption. This is the magnificent art of Thao Nguyen Phan.

Cut: the camera shows two ochre-colored buildings. Single story structures, they are built at a right angle around a courtyard, in the midst of which a flag has been raised. Its red hangs down limply. The buildings fall in line. The perspective distorts the moldings, windows, and eaves. Above, the clouds are in turmoil. "In the commune there is a school named 'Alexander de Rhodes.'" The school-building is vacant. Alexandre de Rhodes lived in the 17th century. He came to Vietnam as a missionary. De Rhodes wrote several travelogues. He wandered through the country, then a province of China, from north to south. His perspective is that of an outsider. Characteristic here is the assessing gaze. De Rhodes is interested in framing and presentation. He is a Frenchman, and, if you will, a contemporary of Poussin. In Europe, landscape painting emerges only gradually and only when it becomes interesting in financial terms. At first, framed by a window and with a problem of integrating itself. For example, in the illuminated leaves from a book of hours like the *Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry* (The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry), then later in large depictions of

overviews, as if from a vantage point. Poussin arranges what he sees, his painting is more thought than seen. In China, in contrast, landscape depictions were already centuries old. In China, François Jullien writes, the evolution of painting is not a late inclusion, but landscape depiction is the same as the development of painting itself. [1] As an example, he introduces contrasts like mountains and bodies of water and other contrasts. A text by a Chinese scholar from the 11th century treats the subject. He separates the less or more refined motifs of paintings. The noble motifs include: "mountains, rocks, bamboo, trees, bodies of water, waves, vapors, clouds." Not the measured fields, property, the cities and the castles, yield or economic significance. Instead, phenomena that possess no fixed form. They transform and are only coherent for a short period of time. Their movements count, their forces and mutual interactions, their dynamism, but above all, their ephemeralness.

A classroom comes into view. The school benches are made of dark wood. Instead of a landscape, we see an interior. A green chalkboard is placed on the wall behind a lectern. A girl jumps rope. "With no adults around, the children design their own study curriculum." The parable of the children who organize their own lives continues. They attend school. There, they learn to work the fields, planting and harvesting, the use of a rake and harrow. Jumping rope is a metaphor for the repetitions of life. At the end, each movement of the body is calibrated with the swing of the rope. Jumping rope is also a metaphor for the film. The film hacks up what it records to allow a whole to emerge. It cuts up time to synthetically glue it back together. Jumping rope is also a metaphor for the passage to a different world. As in flight, this gate is constantly passed through anew, reincarnation and catharsis in a matter of seconds. Phan is aware of the many layers of meaning. They are subtly overlapped. Sometimes, new ones are added unexpectedly. A magical figure takes the stage. A girl lies down on one of the desks. She is painted. A dreamy illusion takes hold. Painting intervenes in its glaze and intimacy. In the "human locomotion" of the jumping rope, a watercolor, the art of tender, flowing contact, intrudes. The girl is rendered in pale-blue. Are visual traditions now being contrasted with one another? The art of classification, which is related to classicism in Europe, and the art of imagination, that owes something to the element of touch? It is difficult to say. In any case, with the brush a different diligence emerges, a physical proximity and immediacy. It has nothing in common with the lens and the objectivizing report. All of these contrasts come into movement: sleep and training, extending time and rhythm, horizontal and vertical, youth and wisdom, text and image. In addition, there is the beat of the rope hitting the tiled floor. It seems to pulsate like an acoustic unity on the neighboring projection. It is a physical impulse, that places an increasing number of sleeping girls in the image. One after the other appears in the condensing collage. The mounted watercolors multiply. They later befall the right projection as well, which shows flitting birds with red feathers.

1. François Julien, *Vivre de paysage ou l'impensé de la raison* (Living Off Landscape: or the Unthought-of in Reason), (Paris: Gallimard, 2014)

We learn that the children are reading the report of Alexandre de Rhodes, whose name decorates their school: "The children take stories from the *History of the Kingdom of Tonkin*, written in 1651." His observations are not retraced or examined, they are transformed, dreamed again, taken from memory or left there, to be stored. Just like the earth stores the work that has been done on it over the centuries. History is not what has been, but something lived inwardly. It comes from reading but grows like nature. Phan takes up the subject elsewhere as well. In *Dream of March and August*, two figures appear, a girl and a boy. It is a series painted on silk. It shows the same delicate glaze. Silk painting is a Chinese art that is frequently taught in Vietnam, also at the school where Phan studies. The pictures hang freely in the space. Sometimes the framed sheets move. The girl is depicted from many different aspects. She is holding a book in her hand. From its pale yellow pages, thin, delicate leaves sprout out. It is nature that emerges from culture, and not the other way around. The boy is also found in different perspectives. He squats in front of mirrors, holding them or finds them leaning against something. He is in search of the perfect image, his actual being. Probably in vain. The two are called March and August, like the calendar sheets of Duc de Berry. They are personifications of an austere life, for during these months the provisions tend to run out. The history refers to the time of the Japanese occupation of Vietnam. This is a time of dependence, in which the population was forced to plant jute for the war effort instead of rice. Poetry recalls politics.

The children, as we read in the subtitles of the films projected, would read no other books, only books by de Rhodes. This is also a political act. For they take the book, which is the other, the distant, as a kind of primal text of their own: "all other memories being locked away in a library." But can memories be locked away and stored in libraries? And is that constructive and worthwhile? To learn the report of a foreigner interested in missionization? Alongside her work on the film, Phan paints a series of watercolors on pages taken from an edition of de Rhodes' *Voyages et missions du père.* This book was published in French in 1884. In the 19th century, Vietnam, prompted by the colonial power, takes up the Roman alphabet. Chinese writing is forgotten gradually, but not the tradition of painting. Phan refers to this here. The watercolors lead a life of their own, almost like dreams. They encounter the texts, inscribe themselves, superimpose themselves, immerse themselves, allow us to see through, engage in obstinacy and intentional alienation. On some of the pages extracted from the book, motifs from the films surface, like the schoolroom. Other sheets show children carrying drums and flags. They sing, they dance, turning round. Their synchronized step is socialist. One sheet shows the girl jumping rope. She is depicted in a single moment of movement. The image is a study, but at the same time it imitates the unround temporality of the film, its origins in chronophotography.

The projections now feature music for the first time. A piano accompanies the close-ups of the sleeping children.

It sounds wooden and reverberates. The children are lying on the desks as if in a dormitory. The mode of learning is sleep. The accompanying text calls it "make believe." The lives of the children rest in a dreaming that adapts the world for their own understanding. "Make believe" is a reassurance that reveals in a space that cannot be traversed and in a time that refuses measurability. The dream forms like a cloud that emerges and dissipates, collapses or disperses. It does not allow for contours, fixation, or registration.

The children enter the image. They are carrying a ladder on their shoulders, their heads stuck in the spaces between the rungs. This part is called "About Crime and Punishment." The reenactment is horrific, de Rhodes' report disturbing. De Rhodes tells how boards are placed on the shoulders of prisoners, two others are placed in the front and back of their necks. The children imitate the shackles of this torture. Boys balance over narrow paths. They wade with their heads sunken, silent as if in a procession. The scene is depressing and debasing. Quite unlike the prior episode, with jumping rope and sleeping in the hall.[2] Sometimes the mood shifts. As they walk through the water, they urge themselves foreword. It is dark and damp in this tunnel, the sky but a slit, existence a painful path. Despite the eerie ditch, nature remains forgiving. Cicadas chirp, streams of water ripple along, birds flit about, leaves rustle. A frog waits on a dirt wall, soil soaked with water. He is an amphibian, a being that can only reproduce in the water, but also lives on land. Frogs live through several existences. Perhaps they

2. Some of the watercolors on the pages from the book have similar motifs, boys carrying a ladder and walking next to one another, as in a demonstration. They are carrying a huge poster with the words "white optimism" in all caps on a black background.

can remember earlier ones, just like the children think back to a time that they never experienced.

A second section follows. Yet there is no interruption. There are only transitions, new subjects, fantasies, dreams. It is called "Tale of the Water Goddess." A girl lies on a stout root. She is wearing a lemon-yellow dress. The leaves in the neighboring film sway in the wind. The water is a muddy green. The girl grants her body the figure of a fable. She tells of a Chinese princess: "due to her notorious lifestyle," she is drowned by her father. We see her lying there on the strong tree trunk. Recently, a time was mentioned, a time before, a time that no longer is, but continues to have an impact. And an incomplete childhood. This girl who leads her life capriciously and forfeits it, will not become an adult. Despite all her carelessness, she is an innocent being. Death returns her innocence. Her body was washed on shore at the harbor of Tonkin. In de Rhodes, there is a map of the Gulf of Tonkin. He marks the rivers as lines and the coast as its framing. Quite in the sense of European cartography. A man was found drowned in the same place. The girl, miming the princess, lies in a shallow brook, her hands folded over her chest. Her feet are bare. The hair flows in the current. Water trickles over her body. Phan interweaves images of mourning, tragedy, and the need for consolation. Later, the soles of feet can be seen sticking out of the water. They have gotten caught in a fish trap. A swimmer floats on his back in the water, a pipe in his mouth. We can hear piercing sounds. Harbors begin to pay homage to the princess. Other girls

take on the role of the harbor goddess, the Queen Gate. They play dead, lie with their eyes closed, while the pipe chirps on endlessly. A boy stands up on an island just a few centimeters wide. Abruptly, he disappears with a leap into the dammed river. He behaves like a diving animal. The frog comes to mind. He possesses a second life, like the princess who according to superstition, make believe, returns to life. Next to the circle of waves, there is an intense point of light, as if a magic treasure were glittering beneath the water surface. The pipes swell. Boys are perched in the trees like birds. Only near the end is the corpse again visible. A boy with a woven crown of flowers lies in state on the ladder that earlier served as an instrument of torture. The mourners dribble soil onto his death shroud. They then insert staffs into the reeds. This results in sounds like cylindrical drums. At the end, they kneel before a figure. The figure is posted like a still in a sparse forest. Suddenly, the mood changes. The bleak idyll becomes hectic activity. Back in the classroom, a boy stands wearing a gray hat and heavy coat. He is not being rendered homage, chalk is being thrown at him. He raises his index finger in a scolding fashion. Then he holds a book that has been opened. The children speed up their cultic stoning. The pieces of chalk look like small idols, that hit the chalkboard and the victim. The reenactment is pain and play. The picture in the book that the shrouded figure holds up has a Baroque touch. We can see a priest converting several "primitives" to his faith. It is Alexandre de Rhodes presenting his catechism to the Vietnamese. The children's act of pillorying is belated vengeance for this act of hubris.

It is a liberating reverse of hierarchy, a playful revolt against paternalism, against colonialism and being robbed of tradition. The children celebrate their success and clap their hands, "white" with chalk dust.

"Siesta is a strange habit of the tropical inhabitants." With this line of text, the third and last part begins. Two girls can be seen, they have placed their heads in their hands. The projections are reflected. On the left there is a portrait in black and white, clayey and supple. The portrait is clearly taken from a film. The image is a still. Phan is attracted to the poetic cinema of her homeland. It tells of the female heroines and the types that the Vietnamese cinema borrows from the Soviet film industry.[3] The one on the right takes up the model, appropriating it, just like the report of the missionary. De Rhodes tells of how the children relax on the shores of the rivers and under shady trees: "The children here grow up daydreaming." Dreaming is suspicious to de Rhodes. For Phan, it is the actual subject. The title of her trilogy is *Tropical Siesta*. The pictures, as in a coda, show sites that are familiar. The edge of the rice field, the classroom, the sandy road. A boy lets himself roll down the hill. His body is subjected to centrifugal force. Another, lying on a small soil border between the paddies, turns to the side and sinks into the flooded field. The children are in a trance. De Rhodes explains: "when the sun is at its highest, this is the moment of mythology and poetry." The camera films the children sleeping in their school uniforms, zooms in on the hands and feet, because these are the body parts that

3. From a conversation with the artist, May 10, 2019 in Venice.

we expect to stir in movement. Perhaps we expect legible gestures, a wordless language that says more than inscribed knowledge. But they remain still. In dreaming, the children find states of clouds, fog and water, the changing manifestations of exquisite painting. A poetry penetrates and cares for them. Large petalled blossoms populate the space. This is followed by beams of light drawn with chalk that meet on the ground. White splashes of paint drizzle in the room. The children begin to spin their blossoms, they glow yellow and white on the edges. The boy staggering in the sand turns away. Circulation is a paradoxical intervention. It animates the past, repeats what has been. Almost like jumping rope and the film's spooling technique. Phan designs this last part as a reprise. Prior motifs and already heard sounds are taken up once again. Ultimately, the piping youth is shown. He breathes in deeply to force a sound through his reed. He is decorated with branches, an exotic divinity, an indigenous medicine man, who speaks of and to nature now and again. He is sitting on a tree trunk and tries, despite the awkward position, to remain still. For it is only as a sculpture that he resists temporality. Only as a figure can he become an emblem. Only as a still life does his movement remain strange. Next to him, on the left against a black background, the names of the children roll down in the credits. The real ones are here named, who in the film play those that transform in dream of others.

Thomas D. Trummer, Bregenz, July 29, 2019
Translated from German by Brian Currid

STRANGE GAMES AND MOVING IMAGES: THAO NGUYEN PHAN'S STORIES FROM VIETNAM

PAMELA N. COREY

STRANGE GAMES AND MOVING IMAGES: THAO NGUYEN PHAN'S STORIES FROM VIETNAM

In the opening sequence of *Mekong Mechanical* (2012), a procession of fish slowly traverses the screen, filling the visual plane in an orderly arrangement that appears without end. Against this movement is a woman's voice-over, distinctively southern in her Vietnamese-language enunciation, whose animated responses to a quiet interlocutor roll through the space with metallic reverberations. This filmic passage offers a different story of the lush riverine setting of the Mekong, so often featured in postcard images of Vietnam and used to promote tourism in the southern delta, often characterized as the "bread basket" of Vietnam. The fish in motion are fillets on a stainless-steel conveyor belt, routinely arranged by a factory worker who stands sentry over the procession, her stillness punctuated by quick interventions when the fillets need to be unrolled and flattened. The woman speaking is a manager describing desirable and undesirable personality traits in the workers who process the fillets for export in the factory where this passage takes place.

Mekong Mechanical displaces the romance of the eponymous river with the aesthetic of industry rather than that of nature. If we use the structure of a book to metaphorize the film, the recurring scene with the fillets and the singular figure of the anonymous female worker (her identity cloaked by her factory uniform and face mask) serves as a kind of spine for the pages of an abstract narrative conceptualized by the filmmaker as the worker's daydreams. In the film, and the accompanying artist's book, the oneiric quality of the imagery – captured within such settings as the factory, a night club, a fish tank, a floating house, and natural foliage – offers a subtly critical vantage point onto the Mekong as a milieu for agribusiness, environmental degradation, and personal and collective pipe dreams.

This is a different metaphoric construction that builds on the river's historical invocations and cultural imaginaries.[1] The Vietnamese name for the southern section of the river means "nine dragons" (Cửu Long), conjuring origin myths and magical tales of transformation. In the colonial period, when what is now Vietnam was administered as three regions (Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina) that, alongside Cambodia and Laos, constituted French Indochina, colonial officers and researchers established a global imaginary of the river and its region through mapping

1. I have written more extensively about the use of the Mekong as a geographical metaphor in regional curatorial projects in "Metaphor as Method: Curating Regionalism in Mainland Southeast Asia," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 2 (2014): 72-84.

expeditions to explore possible routes to link commercial ports with sites of resource production and extraction. In the late 20th century the Mekong River and the delta region provided foreboding settings for cinematic representations of the Vietnam War, for example, through the Heart of Darkness allegory. In 1992, the river formed the basis for the naming of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), a transnational economic and ecological development project sponsored by the Asia Development Bank, officializing a regional zone comprising the six states of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Yunnan Province of China.

This earlier work served as grounds for extending the research and narrative dimensions for *Becoming Alluvium* (2019), a body of work that includes a filmic component and a series of lacquer and silk paintings (*Perpetual Brightness*). In *Mekong Mechanical* and even more so in *Becoming Alluvium*, Thao Nguyen Phan offers an alternative portrait of place hinting at the magical realism or even surrealism that Nora A. Taylor has used to describe her work.[2] However, given Phan's recognition of the eager consumption of "Vietnam" as metaphor (for the Vietnam War), her decision to focus on local and historical narratives at the core of her research-based practice did not come easily.[3] While striving to defer the above-mentioned metaphoric associations, such artistic devices may instead appear at risk of lending themselves to the atmospheric and dream-like evocations that can too easily succumb to nostalgic and exoticized appropriations.

2. Nora A. Taylor, "(Tran)scribed History: Thao Nguyen Phan's Palimpsest Visions of Colonialism and Conversion," *Afterall* 47 (Spring/Summer 2019): 37.
3. Thao Nguyen Phan's interview with Hilde Teerlinck, courtesy of the artist.

For Phan, cultural tropes have been a challenge to both acknowledge and side-step. In this endeavor, the films of Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul have been an important source of inspiration for the artist. Both artists make highly specific work about locality attentive to the deliberate blind spots of national historiography, and in some instances, a state-orchestrated amnesiac historical consciousness. Both source historical form – whether through narrative structure, artistic tradition or genealogy, or archival materials – to firmly stake their work in the social.[4] As curator and writer David Teh notes with respect to Apichatpong's practice, critical neglect of these historical specificities in his artistic work "obscure what is perhaps his most valuable contribution to Thai public culture: an attentive appropriation of old media forms, repurposed not for the sake of nostalgia but for their richly multivalent chaneling of social reality and collective memory."[5]

In a similar way, Phan destabilizes such metaphors without losing feeling, that aspect of metaphor that lends it such rich appeal. Her broader practice avails itself of metaphors – her projects described as poems or lullabies – while resisting quick categorizations such as eco-art or topics such as the Anthropocene.[6] In recent years she has steadily developed an intermedial and intertextual approach

4. Phan's work with her Ho Chi Minh City-based collective Art Labor (with curator/writer Arlette Quynh-Anh Tran and Phan's partner, artist Truong Cong Tung) directly engages present-day social issues with public projects grounded in fieldwork among such milieus and communities as farmers in the central highlands of Vietnam to indigenous Jrai villages.
5. David Teh, "Itinerant Cinema: The Social Surrealism of Apichatpong Weerasethakul," *Third Text* 25, no. 5 (September 2011): 596.
6. Thao Nguyen Phan's interview with Hilde Teerlinck.

to storytelling through the combination of historical and fictional narrative elements, and through the use of painting as filmic, textual, and material substance.[7] These passages across mediums and texts yield a way to commit to historical representation while disallowing fetishization, often through the use of disconcerting imagery, such as the strange games and role-playing enacted by children in *Tropical Siesta* (2017) and *Mute Grain* (2019), and their vegetal appendages in *Voyages de Rhodes* (2014-17). Rather than conveying truthful ambiguities through parafiction, her historiographical play is transparent, inviting further spaces for sociopolitical inquiry across temporal milieus.

Both the artist and the Vietnamese state take deep interests in national historiography and the liberal use of historical materials, their respective approaches divergent yet oddly interrelated, as though on opposite sides of the looking glass. If Phan's strategies incorporate fictional and fantasy elements to impart historical feeling, or the uncertain truths of emotion, the Vietnamese state institutionalized historical construction as integral to the revolutionary project, itself a nation-building enterprise dependent on emotional address. According to historian Patricia Pelley, while the practice of history in Vietnam dates to its dynastic periods, as early as the 13th century, new paradigms and revisionist constructions of the national past took form as part of a Marxist postcolonial project most prominently after the Viet Minh victory over the French in 1954.[8] Officially launched as the Research Committee in 1953, and later named the Institute

7. *Ibid.*

of History, the task for Party scholars was to compose a new general history of Vietnam, and effectively, a new collective memory of Vietnam's past (and origins) and accompanying rituals of state.[9] In this new history, the problems of foreign occupation, historical Vietnamese imperialist projects (against the Chams and the Khmer), and the inclusion of ethnic minorities within a Viet-centric narrative, were accounted for within a Marxist teleology that emphasized the boons of cyclical revolutionary activity. However, other episodes, such as the 1945 famine that inspired Phan's project *Mute Grain*, remain absent from the national narrative, only lingering in fragments and impressions through such forms as literature and oral histories.

Phan describes herself first and foremost as a painter, having received her undergraduate degree from the Lasalle College of the Arts (Singapore) and subsequently her MFA in Painting and Drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC).[10] Phan's multimedia practice may foreground painting, but it is its intersection with other mediums that, for the artist, may connect it more directly with real life: "[Painting] almost functions more metaphorically as it allows you to mediate and think about the subject when executing the drawing. It is storytelling, but from a distance. The nostalgic 'Once upon a time…' feeling, or aura, is characteristic

8. Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002), 17-18. Pelley describes how "To construct new interpretations, postcolonial writers relied upon new kinds of evidence, used familiar data in unfamiliar ways, and approached the past according to new paradigms, even though traditional motifs often reemerged." (19)
9. *Ibid.*, 20.
10. Thao Nguyen Phan's interview with Hilde Teerlinck.

of painting."[11] Her desire to give substance to poetry as a visual form through intermedial and intertextual means finds expression in her self-described "moving images," in which figural painting, in particular, creates pathways across book pages, filmic frames, and silk screens.[12] In this way she destabilizes a preconception of the painted (figural) image as bounded in time and space by its frame, as art historian Norman Bryson cites: "Paintings stay still; they don't move around the walls; their figures don't slip out of the frame and gambol about when no one is looking. Sometimes a cult of ideal form aspires to a shedding of time's contingencies, so that the forms we see in painting are taken out of the temporal flux."[13] For it is exactly this kind of slippage that drives the poetic force of Phan's paintings as they wander into the medium of the moving image or the pages of a printed book. In the latter instance, her affinity for literature as a creative catalyst and for the physical handling of textual materials finds expression in her use of the book as a literal support for painterly intervention. But here the notion of her painted illustrations as supplement in the Derridean sense may better illuminate her treatment of the book as object. If the supplement is that which effectively defines the essence of the work to which it appears additional or of which it appears to represent, Phan's painted figures across the pages of *Voyages de Rhodes* or as painterly animation in *Tropical Siesta* draw out the nature of their supporting mediums by alerting the viewer to the dissolution of their constituent frames.

11. *Ibid.*
12. "About – Thao Nguyen Phan," http://www.thaonguyenphan.com/about
13. Norman Bryson, "Intertextuality and Visual Poetics," *Style* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 184.

While the narrative construction of Phan's works often draw upon literary and archival sources (including Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes' travelogue, Yasunari Kawabata's *Palm-of-the-Hand Stories*, and Juan Ramón Jiménez's *Platero and I*), such a dissolution is that which establishes an image's intertextuality, according to Bryson, while the combination of the mediums of painting, the moving image, and the book collide spatial and temporal models.[14] The temporal flux to which Bryson refers – and to which Phan alludes in her description of painting as auratic – has to do with painting's intrinsic intertextuality, the fact that a painted image cannot be perceived as isolated from the history of the medium or from its place within painting's movement (progress) through historical time.[15] Such an account refutes the imposition of the frame of painting as a stilling device, as in André Bazin's theorizing of the picture frame as driving its contained image inwards (or geologically) in time and space, as opposed to the frame of the moving image, which operates centrifugally, projecting its content outwards into the world around it.[16] A similar collision may be theorized with regards to Phan's treatment of the printed book, in which its own spatio-temporal frames, such as that of the paratext and the margins, situate the book as, in the words of artist and theorist Daisy Leite Turrer, "a finite object whose function is to contain, disseminate, and spread the written word, and the book, an infinite object that houses the experience

14. *Ibid.*, 187.
15. *Ibid.*, 186.
16. See Andre Bazin, "Painting and Cinema," in *What Is Cinema?* 2nd ed. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2004), 164-72.

of writing, runs backwards, always before and beyond the book."[17]

If the book expresses its authority by symbolizing the ultimate achievement of knowledge, Phan's direct engagement with books as artistic object, ideological or ontological support, or as metaphoric reference or inspiration, relays back to the desire to produce alternative historical forms. Histories that have fallen outside of books may be captured as flitting substances, such as through the voices of those recounting the past, or through routines and movements ingrained as muscle memory, which appear throughout her work in elusive or unexpected ways. Phan's careful selection of artistic means through which to research historical gaps and give them representation is finely attuned to the feeling of old and new technologies, whether the handwritten book "whose model is orality and its flux,"[18] or the moving image, with its manifold counter-narrative possibilities. The dialogues she creates by mobilizing these forms and through giving mobility to the image, leaves the viewer with the feeling of having experienced new realities, ones that the artist hopes will impress both a sense of awareness and a desire to know more.

Pamela N. Corey, August 2019

17. Daisy Turrer, "A Study on the Paratextual Space in Artists' Books," *Journal of Artists Books* 29 (Spring 2011): 27-28.
18. *Ibid*., 28.

A SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION: PLAY IN THE FILMS OF THAO NGUYEN PHAN

ZOË GRAY

A SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION: PLAY IN THE FILMS OF THAO NGUYEN PHAN

"All play means something," declared Johan Huizinga in the opening chapter of *Homo ludens*.[1] Written in 1938, when much of the world was focused on seemingly more serious matters than playing, Huizinga insisted, "Play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play."[2] Play takes center-stage in the very serious work of Thao Nguyen Phan. Her films and watercolors exhibit a childlike sense of wonder while tackling complex questions such as ecology, colonialism and political amnesia. In *Tropical Siesta* (2017) and *Mute Grain* (2019), the key protagonists are playing children. When I asked her why, she replied, "It is natural for me to work with children, because I am a mother, and because my childhood dream was to become an animator for children. I did not know then that being a painter, or a visual artist was even a possibility."[3] Phan had the idea for *Tropical Siesta* for a while and it started to take shape in 2016. "Our little family would spend a few months every summer in my husband's hometown Gia Lai, a remote village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. This village, which seemed so peaceful, was experiencing political upheaval and environmental damage, suffering from deforestation, poverty and intensive, unsustainable rubber, coffee and pepper farming. It made me wonder how what we do as adults will affect the future for the next generation, both for humans and animals. This was when the idea of working with children arose."

Tropical Siesta is a two-channel color film, located – as its opening shot declares – in "Vietnam: The Present." The first subtitles function as the preface to a play: "After years of independence and performing seclusion policy, the government has successfully realized agriculture as central to the nation's economy. Everyone is a farmer." We see children standing motionless in the paddy fields, a close-up of a girl looking earnestly across the landscape. Shot slightly from below, her head is framed by the cloudy sky in the trope of heroic worker typical to socialist-realism. "Children live in communes and work in self-sufficient farming communities," continue the subtitles. "In the commune there is a school named 'Alexander de Rhodes.' With no adults around, the children design their own study curriculum." As discussed elsewhere in this publication, Phan uses de Rhodes' *History of the Kingdom of Tonkin* (1651) as a lens through which to

1. Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens: a study of the play element in culture*. First published 1944. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 1.
2. *Ibid*., 3.

3. All quotes of Phan come from a previously unpublished conversation with the author, July 2019.

explore the colonization and depiction of Vietnam. In the group exhibition *Unconditional Belief* (2014) at Sàn Art (Ho Chi Minh City), she had displayed de Rhodes' book alongside a series of oil paintings on X-ray film depicting children in subversive schooling activities. Visiting the school in her husband's village gave her further ideas for this material. "The village has a complex migration history," she explains, "since the Viet (Kinh) ethnic group (the major ethnicity of the Vietnamese population) came and lived 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 Jrai and the Viet people have a writing system using the Roman alphabet developed by missionaries. While romanized Vietnamese is the official writing system of Vietnam, the Jrai written language is only taught in church (since most Jrai are now Protestant or Catholic). I was profoundly moved by this multi-layered history and realized that no one could represent this complex narrative better than the schoolchildren, who are experiencing the first step of writing."

As the camera pans across the classroom's interior on one screen, watercolor figures begin to appear on the other. They are paintings of children, lying on their desks either dead or asleep, enjoying the "tropical siesta" of the work's title, or what Shakespeare's Macbeth longingly called "the death of each day's life." [4] Their red neckties float upwards,

4. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1606): "the innocent sleep, / Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care, /The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath, /Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course, / Chief nourisher in life's feast." Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 46-51.

like the ascending spirits of Christian painting, but also with a gory, blood-like association. The image is paired with a shot of real children – dressed identically to their painted counterparts – also playing dead. "De Rhodes' books are the only texts the children study," recount the subtitles. "The children transform and manipulate the content of the stories for their own interest. For them, this make-believe is something that brightens up their agricultural daily life." The children demonstrate the games of this make-believe: A boy falls backwards with a satisfying 'splat' into the mud. Two groups of boys walk in single file through the rice fields and across a tree-trunk bridge. At first, we see only their feet but gradually it is revealed that they are carrying a ladder placed horizontally across their shoulders, encircling their necks. The subtitles switch to de Rhodes' description of a 17th-century punishment using shackles. A sense of the shame is evoked in his memoirs, a feeling amplified by the film's rather mournful soundtrack of a solo piano.[5] However, a hint of humor is introduced when groups of younger children also wearing such shackles tiptoe across the frame: the humor triggered when small children attempt to be very serious.

In the subsequent filmic sequence, we hear the chatter of the children's voices for the first time, as they scamper along a narrow, water-logged ditch. This is followed by a short vignette of a boy lying in the hollowed-out trunk of a tree, held tightly as if in a coffin. A recumbent girl in yellow appears at the start of a sequence titled "Make-believe 2:

5. The music in both *Tropical Siesta* and *Mute Grain* is by Nguyen Hong Nhung.

Tale of the Water Goddess," which recounts the tale of a Chinese princess, drowned by her father. After several beatific shots of this Ophelia-like figure, the subtitles tell us "A local man by accident also drowned," and we see a pair of feet caught in a fishing line, followed by a boy's naked body, half-submerged in the murky water. As if to offer light relief, Phan presents a brief sequence of the children splashing each other in the river, while the text quotes de Rhodes and his pious hope that all the temples worshipping this "licentious princess" will be converted to temples in honor of the Virgin Mary. The children then make music using reed flutes, with a duet escalating to an atonal yet charming cacophony.

The next game played by the children is a mock execution: a boy crowned with flowers and wearing the ladder/shackle kneels surrounded by a group of other boys who shoot at him, popping sounds emerging from their bamboo canes. While the scene conjures up the murderous characters of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), these children (fortunately) seem slightly bored, one protagonist "beating" the prisoner in lackluster fashion. What follows is a mock burial, after which we see the boy resurrected and standing in prayer – whether Christian or Buddhist, one cannot say – surrounded now by kneeling worshippers. On the left-hand screen, the camera scrolls down a page of de Rhodes' manuscript, while on the right-hand screen, the resurrected boy closes his eyes. Is he choosing not to read? Or not to see us, his viewers? After such solemn symbolism, the film switches mood, cutting to a raucous scene in the schoolroom,

in which the children hurl chalk. Their joy is infectious, until we realize that the sound we hear is the chalk hitting not only the blackboard, but also one of their classmates. Dressed in a grey blanket cape and hat – the timeless sign of the dunce, but which since the War on Terror conjures the images of humiliation taken in Abu Ghraib prison – he stands on a chair, holding open a copy of de Rhodes' book. Its engraved frontispiece depicts Christian enlightenment arriving in Cochinchine (nowadays South Vietnam). The poor boy is pilloried with chalk, which his classmates throw with gusto, before clapping the chalk dust from their hands. The tension diminishes with this dusty applause and the film returns to the somnolent children on their desks and a skipping girl who appeared briefly near the start of the film. She is then depicted seated, leaning her head on her hand as she slowly falls asleep, in a shot mirrored by black and white footage of a slightly older actress nodding off in the same pose.[6] It is the only section in which other filmstock appears and the effect is disconcerting for its juxtaposition of different eras.

For the film's penultimate sequence, Phan returns to shots of the children snoozing, this time outside in the sun. "The moment of midday, when the sun casts its erected shadow, is the moment of mythology and poetry," read the subtitles, suggesting an Aristotelian triptych of *theoria*, *poiesis* and *praxis*. The children's bodies dotted across the earth, however, evoke far more sinister images of war, of the naked bodies of children burnt by napalm during the carpet

6. The scene is from the 1962 film *The White Eyed Bird* by Nguyen Van Thong.

bombing of Vietnam. When one boy rolls nonchalantly off a muddy bank to land face-down in the water, we cannot help but remember the images of drowned children that populate our news feeds with alarming frequency.[7] In the subsequent scene, the napping children on their desks look like bodies laid out in the morgue, but then the film enacts another surprising twist. As if inspired by a sunflower patch sewn onto one of the pupil's trousers, Phan replaces the somnolent children by glowing sunflowers, who shoot beams of light up to the ceiling. The image suddenly deteriorates and fuses into a scene in which the real children dance in the dark with LED-encircled sunflowers, like carnival-goers lost in the wilderness. The filmmaker only offers a small taste of this seductive footage before switching back to daytime, to kids rolling across the reddish earth, a game played across the world. The final shot features a puckish boy decorated with a crown of flowers, with large leaves as wings, sitting by a river on a tree-stump looking like a slightly bored water sprite.

Mute Grain is a three-screen, black and white film. While maintaining the poetry of Phan's filmic language and using much of the same crew, music and editing style, it differs considerably from *Tropical Siesta* and seems slightly

7. Alan Kurdi, a Syrian 3-year-old photographed dead on a Turkish beach after his family's failed attempt to cross the Mediterranean in September 2015. The photograph caused much soul searching about immigration policies in Europe and Canada – where the family had sought asylum – although changed very little in reality. In June 2019, a photograph of Salvadoran migrant Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez and his 2-year-old daughter, Valeria, drowned on the bank of the Rio Grande in Mexico also caused public outcry but has done little to change US immigration policies.

more polished. "While *Tropical Siesta* is a more direct political and social commentary, *Mute Grain* is like a lullaby dedicated to the loss of lives, to the separations of the living and the dead, unable to reconcile due to the tragedies of war and famine," explains Phan. "However," she continues, "I am never keen on creating something overtly critical or too bold a statement. My visual inheritance is from Soviet animation, such as *Tales of Tales* (1979) by Yuri Norstein, reflections on environmental catastrophe through the child-like view of the Japanese Studio Ghibli, or the films of Satyajit Ray, Yasujiro Ozu and Mikio Naruse." There are also similarities between Phan's and Francis Alÿs' work, as both take a poetic, metaphorical and playful approach to highly politicized situations and painful realities. The most obvious example in Alÿs' *œuvre* would be his ongoing series of videos titled *Children's games* (1999-), but I am also thinking of his project *Don't cross the bridge before you get to the river* (2008), which translates migrants' dangerous attempts to cross the Strait of Gibraltar into two lines of children holding toy boats and reaching out to sea from the Spanish and the Moroccan shores, in the hope of meeting at the horizon.[8]

"For *Mute Grain*," recounts Phan, "I realized that all the witnesses of the tragic 1945 famine are now dying, and nothing could represent that forgetting tragedy better than

8. The narrative structure of Alÿs' work is totally different, however. As he says of this piece, "There is no introduction, no development, no climax: there is only movement. The sea is portrayed as the force always dragging the kids back to the shore, the kids are the heroes trying to cheat destiny, the ebb and flow of the waves dictate the kids' progress and regress." Russell Ferguson, Jean Fisher, Cuauhtémoc Medina, Michael T. Taussig, eds., *Francis Alÿs - Revised and Expanded* (London: Phaidon, 2019).

the ghost, particularly the child ghost, who lost their innocent life in that faded memory." From its opening scene, the film gets straight to the heart of its subject: a famine caused by war, a precise case-study with which Phan examines broader questions of food insecurity and man-made scarcity. While the subtitles are brutally matter of fact about the effects of the famine – "First people began to live by begging. Next they began to sell their girls. After that they began to sell their boys. After that they began to sell their wives" – the images are ones of plenty. We see close-ups of hands weaving a traditional hat, eating a bowl of rice, stroking a cow's hide, brushing an ear of corn. The only sound comes from these actions and textures, a sensuous counterpart to a stark tale.

Phan intercuts historical photographic footage with the images she has filmed, and then adds another layer of narrative by drawing whimsical, well-fed children over the harsh imagery of young, emaciated bodies. Sleepy, smiling children are painted over photographs of carts piled high with corpses. The film moves from the general to the specific with its dedication: "Inspired by memories of March and August, children who were abandoned in time of famine." The narrator (March) recounts how he accidentally killed his sister (August) while we see footage of the siblings cutting sugar cane, then riding a moped and bike covered in flickering fairy-lights through the twilight landscape. The film moves seamlessly between different eras, between a specific historical moment, an abstract dream time, and today. The melodious solo piano is joined by a percussion

performed by the children, using cooking utensils and a bicycle bell. The soundtrack then switches to the first-person account of a famine survivor, recounting how the occupying Japanese forces obliged the villagers to uproot rice and corn to grow cash crops, with catastrophic results. As he continues to explain how successive invaders used food deprivation to subdue the population, we see footage of children in a parched landscape, pressing rice grains into balls of mud (again looking mildly bored), rolling across the cracked earth wrapped in woven rugs, being covered in hay, or pretending to eat a meal. Their playing continues as the film cuts to children catching glow worms – undisguised LED lamps – before cutting back to footage of burning fields (some recent, some archival, some painted). The final story-within-the-story is told by March, still searching for his sister, who sees a group of children on an insect chase: "The bobbing lanterns, the coming together of children on this lonely slope, surely it was a scene from a fairy tale." [9] Phan chooses to end her film with a smile, with a moment of wonderment at holding a cricket in one's hand.

When I asked how she had directed both films, Phan revealed that at least half of the script was improvised on the spot, "because children are not so good at being directed." She had explained her project to them as a series of games, suggesting, for example: "pretend you are fireflies," "pretend to have a family meal." As Huizinga writes, and as we witness in watching the players in Phan's films, "the consciousness of play being 'only pretend' does not by any

9. The narrated text is based on *Anandamath* (1882) by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, 'The Grasshopper and the Bell Cricket' and 'A Sunny Place' from the *Palm-of-the-Hand-stories* by Yasunari Kawabata (1920-72).

means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome 'only' feeling. […] The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid. […] Play turns to seriousness and seriousness turns to play. Play may rise to heights of beauty and sublimity that leave seriousness far beneath." [10]

Phan's familiarity with the children helped to create an environment in which her actors felt at ease. "I cast my cousins and the children of neighboring families. The shooting atmosphere became like a family, since these children are already friends and had played together before. They guided me to many of their play spots and I developed the script following their daily activities. Sometime I just followed them and that was when the magic occurred."

Like her mentor Joan Jonas, Phan allows herself a great freedom to play in her work. This is something one rarely sees in younger artists' work, particularly younger women, for fear of being dismissed as naïve or – a far worse accusation in the contemporary art world – sentimental. Phan, however, embraces sentimentality in its original meaning as the reliance on feelings as a guide to truth. "Working with children is not only significant in term of my art, it also changed me as a person. When I studied in Saigon and Chicago, my personal art world was the world of form, color, and style, it was purely visual. Only when I met the village children in Gia Lai, did my social perception change.

10. Huizinga, op. cit., note 1, 8.

Vietnam is developing rapidly economically. That 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. I am sad that in the development of the country, people forget the people in the countryside, and for me the beautiful landscape of the Vietnamese countryside is a landscape of hidden trauma. The children taught me to respect the poetics of everyday, the preciousness of life. I cannot help but be thankful for that."

Zoë Gray, September 2019

THE ETERNAL FLOW OF THAO NGUYEN PHAN'S IMAGES

HAN NEFKENS

THE ETERNAL FLOW OF THAO NGUYEN PHAN'S IMAGES

Art is vital to me because just like traveling, it awakens my curiosity. It is an adventure into an often unknown world while at the same time it offers an escape from my own reality. When an artist tells an imaginary story in order to unveil a truth I both lose and find myself when looking at art. That is exactly what happens when I see the work of Thao. It absorbs me, I become part of the video and the paintings. I can practically smell the Mekong, I feel the humidity of that part of the world. I float along the river like a barge laden with precious cargo, I am the boy with goggles who embraces the dolphin and shares secrets with him. I walk in the sky with a backpack just like the men in the paintings. Do their backpacks hold a miraculous potion that clears the air, or is it a toxic pesticide? I roll through the fields with multiple arms and heads and

I am one of the boys who pours a glass of red wine onto the dolphin. Or do the boys pour the blood?

I dream away with these images as if I were there in person. The fantasy world Thao creates appears sweet and innocent but we should not be deceived by its playfulness. Thao shows us the urgent truth of how we are destroying precisely what we need to survive. Why did the flower fade? I pressed it to my heart with anxious love. Why did the stream dry up? I built a dam across it to have it for my use. She cleverly allows the images of life upon and around the Mekong fade into animations of folk tales with the same message; we are blinded by our vain demands and may therefore lose what nourishes us.

Above all, Thao tells us, in her sensitive and poetic way, that we are all one. The Irrawaddy dolphin and the water hyacinth that were human in a former life, the lotus flower, vulnerable yet strong, the ferries laden with cars, bicycles and numerous members of a single family on one motor bike, the mountains of trash discarded by the ravenous city, the children of the flooded villages and the river itself, slow, steady, incessant.

We are all one in the flow of this work and that makes *Becoming Alluvium* a truly moving image.

Han Nefkens, October 2019

THAO NGUYEN PHAN

WORKS

TROPICAL SIESTA

AS PART OF POETIC AMNESIA

I

DOUBLE-CHANNEL HD
VIDEO PROJECTION, COLOR
–
Year: 2017
Duration: 13'41"
with English subtitles

TROPICAL SIESTA

Thao Nguyen Phan's two-channel video installation *Tropical Siesta* is loosely based on accounts from two works by Alexandre de Rhodes: *History of the Kingdom of Tonkin* (1650) and *Rhodes of Viet Nam: The Travels and Missions of Father Alexandre de Rhodes in China and other Kingdoms of the Orient* (1653). Set in "Vietnam. The Present," *Tropical Siesta* postulates a state where agriculture is central, and people live in self-sufficient farming and fishing communes. The main protagonists are children, who, in the absence of adults, have invented their own curriculum based on tales from the de Rhodes texts, representing them through movement and action in ways that suggest how the authority of received wisdom might be disrupted by the possibilities of free play. Re-enacting stories titled "About Crime and Punishment," "The Water Goddess" and another tale about a young Vietnamese martyr, the children perform these and other make-believe lives, with tools and toys such as bamboo ladders, twig whistles and chalk, amidst the rural setting of a village school and rice fields, and natural landscapes of hills, gullies, and rivers.

Alexandre de Rhodes was a French Jesuit priest who traveled and proselytized in and around what is known as present-day Vietnam between 1620 to 1646. The works he authored were part of the earliest wave of European publications about life in the Indochina region, but he is best known for his contribution to the perfection of romanized Vietnamese script, or *quốc ngữ*, codifying it in his Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary *Dictionarium Annamiticum Lusitanum et Latinum*, published in Rome in 1651. The choice of de Rhodes as source text is intriguing for the way the stories of its time offer parallels to other more recent moments in Vietnamese history. In the 1600s, the territory was divided between the Trinh lords of the north and the Nguyen lords of the south and center. In 1627, war broke out between the two dynasties, which was to last until 1673. At the same time, Indochina and Europe were engaging in trade and commerce, but also creating systems of knowledge through cartography, published accounts and discourses, and cultural and artistic exchanges, with movements of information and influence flowing in both directions. French colonialism was to come later, by the 1880s. With this broad view of time, ascent and decline, or division and unification are but part of the cycle of historical change.

While *Tropical Siesta* is seemingly located in the present day of a country we seem to know, the parameters set by its narrative are not completely familiar, and the world it depicts is not wholly dystopic, utopic, or fabulist, but containing elements of each. This strange confluence of times is a strategy of typical dystopic fictions where the narrative might speculate a kind of future as a way to critically examine the present. *Tropical Siesta,* however, is hardly a straightforward "future history." Inspired by parochial sources from the past, contextualized with actual historical events, and leavened with imaginative elements drawn from cultural myth and the artist's rich personal lore, the work invites the viewer to actively engage with these complex temporal fragments to reconstruct, infer and predict. Untethered from the strictures of historical legacy, the re-imagined narratives in this work are at once a personal vision of the country's complex histories and as-yet evolving future, but also a space where one might imagine ways the present might otherwise be.

Excerpt from curatorial essay by Sam I-shan for *Relics*,
January-April 2018, Esplanade Singapore

Vietnam
The Present.

After years of independence and performing seclusion policy,
the government has successfully realized agriculture as central to the nation's economy.
Everyone is a farmer.
Time is frozen in endless tranquil rice paddies.
Children live in communes and work in self-sufficient farming communities.
In the commune there is a school named "Alexander de Rhodes."
With no adults around, the children design their own study curriculum.
The children take stories from the *History of the Kingdom of Tonkin*, written in 1651, to reenact a make-believe game.
Rhode's books are the only texts the children study.
All other memories are locked away in a library, hidden in a hexagonal maze, its key and location lost.
The children transform and manipulate the content of the stories for their own interest.
For them, this make-believe is something that brightens up their agricultural daily life.

Make-believe 1: About Crime and Punishment
The soldier takes the prisoner to the cell.
There are no metal shackles, but a wooden one.
The shackle is made of two long wooden planks, tied tightly together like a ladder, balancing on the prisoner's shoulder.
Another two wooden planks are placed around the prisoner's neck, which cannot be loosened.
This shackle is extremely inconvenient.
The prisoner has to carry it night and day, even in the cell.
The prisoner, who has no material means to continue living in the prison, wearing this shameful device, is allowed to beg for alms in the market place, to survive in the prison.

Make-believe 2: Tale of the Water Goddess
A Chinese princess, due to her notorious lifestyle was punished by her father by drowning in the sea.
Her corpse floated and drifted to a port in Tonkin.
A local man, by accident, also drowned, his body found floating beside her.
The villagers carefully buried them.
They worship the port as a protective goddess.
Nowadays, the locals name this seaport the 'Queen Gate'.
This superstition quickly spread all over An Nam, all harbors across this nation have temples that glorify this decadent woman.
All merchants and sailors give offerings to this sea goddess, and the other ocean gods.
One day, God will show, as we hope,
the pagan temples worshipping this degenerate, licentious princess,
will be dedicated to the virgin of our heavenly kingdom, the true ocean star,
who will guide, bless and save our mortals.

Siesta is a strange habit of the tropical inhabitants.
After a morning working in the rice paddies, the children lie on its banks,
under the shade of an old tree
or after study, they rest on their desks,
taking a siesta.
The children here grow up daydreaming.
The moment of midday, when the sun casts its erected shadow,
is the moment of mythology and poetry.

VOYAGES DE RHODES

AS A PART OF POETIC AMNESIA PROJECT

II

WATERCOLOR ON FOUND BOOKS

–

Year: 2017

23.5 cm x 31 cm (51 drawings)

23.5 cm x 15.5 cm (75 drawings)

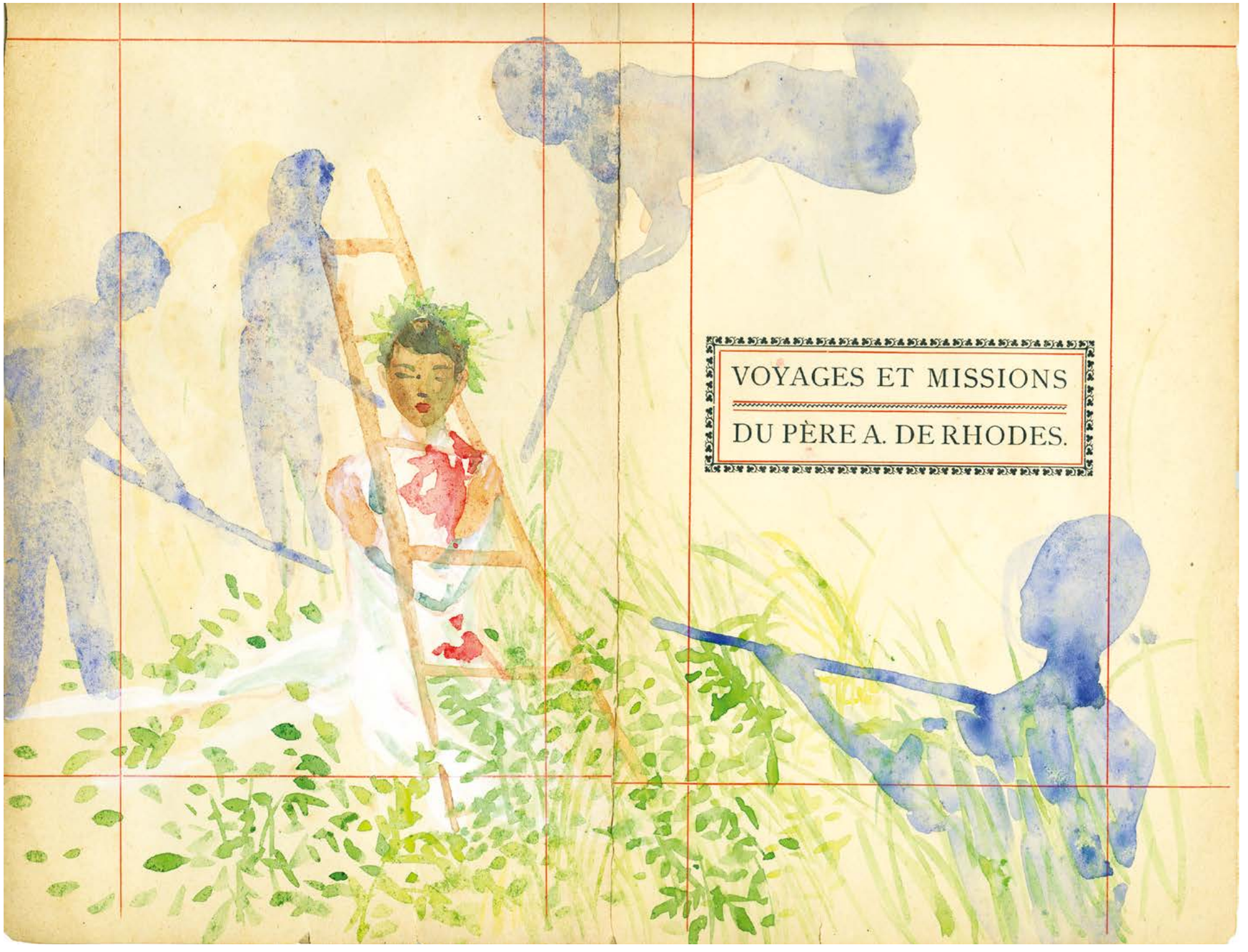
Voyages et Missions du Père A. de Rhodes, S. J.,

EN LA CHINE ET AUTRES ROYAUMES DE L'ORIENT, AVEC SON RETOUR EN EUROPE PAR LA PERSE ET L'ARMÉNIE.

Nouvelle édition, conforme à la première de 1653, annotée par le Père H. GOURDIN, de la même Compagnie, et ornée d'une carte de tous les voyages de l'auteur.

COLLECTION DES VOYAGES.

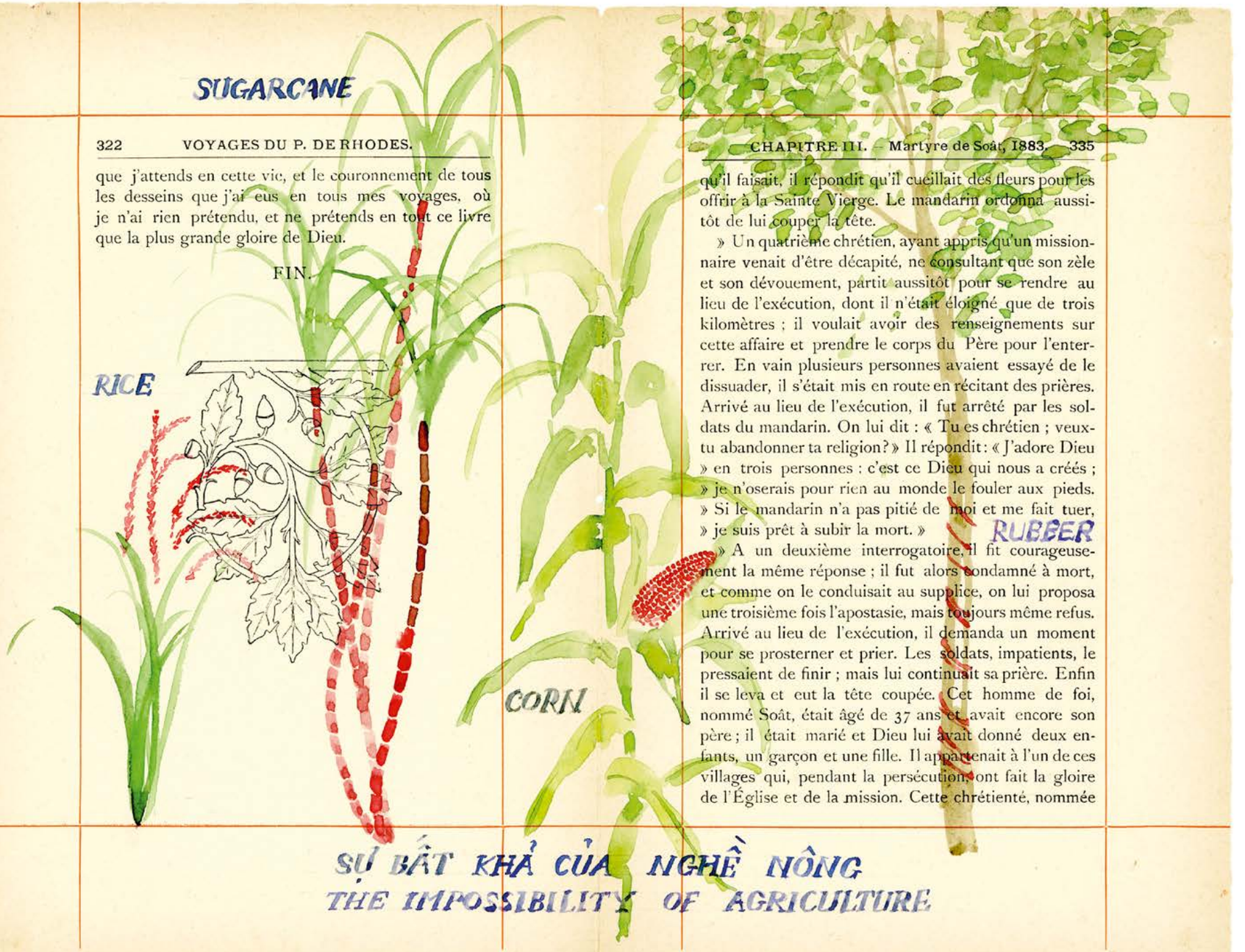
Société de Saint-Augustin,
Desclée, De Brouwer et Cie,
Imprimeurs des Facultés catholiques de Lille. 1884.



VOYAGES ET MISSIONS
DU PÈRE A. DE RHODES.

que j'attends en cette vie, et le couronnement de tous les desseins que j'ai eus en tous mes voyages, où je n'ai rien prétendu, et ne prétends en tout ce livre que la plus grande gloire de Dieu.

FIN.

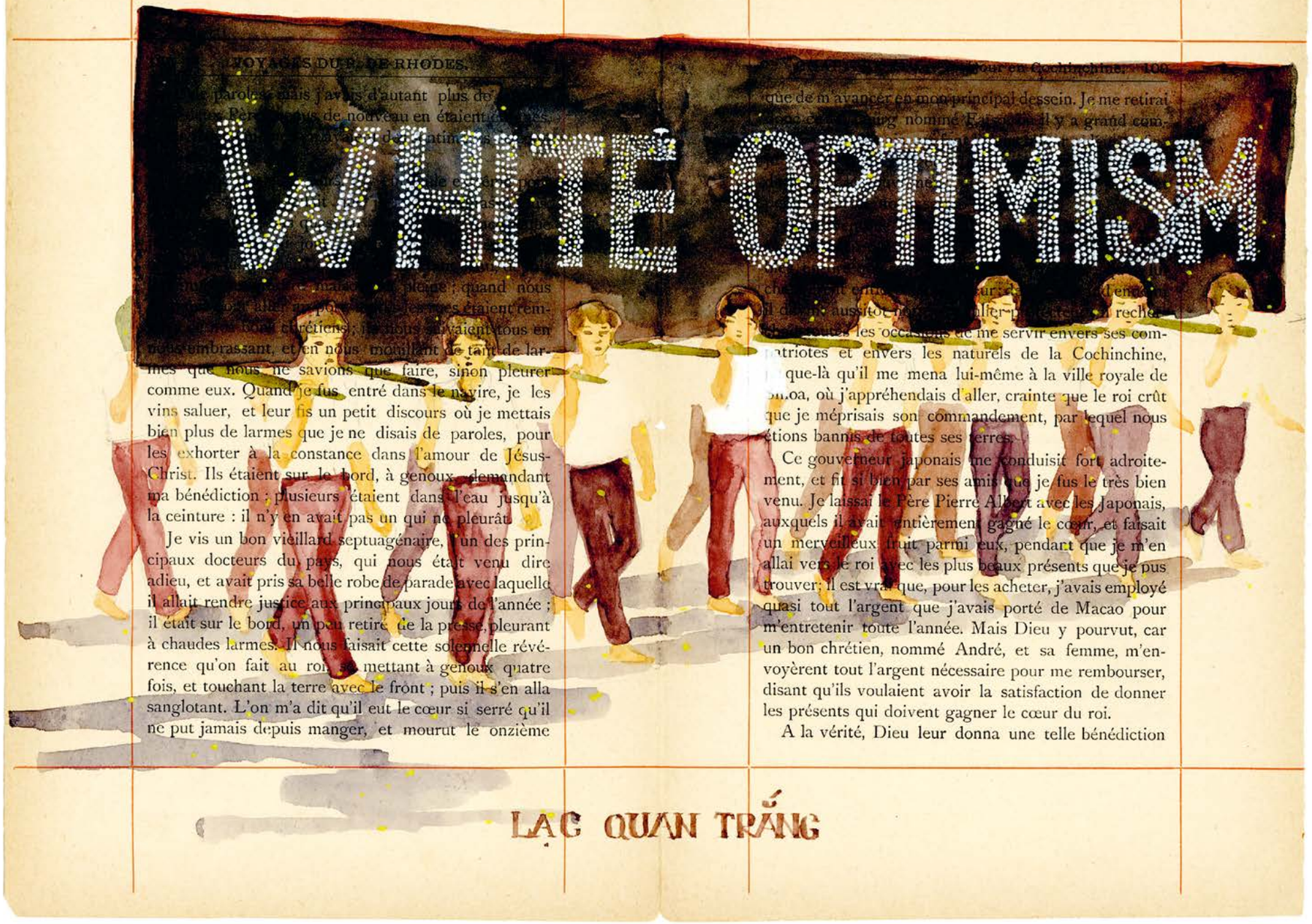


SỰ BẤT KHẢ CỦA NGHỀ NÔNG
THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF AGRICULTURE

qu'il faisait, il répondit qu'il cueillait des fleurs pour les offrir à la Sainte Vierge. Le mandarin ordonna aussitôt de lui couper la tête.

» Un quatrième chrétien, ayant appris qu'un missionnaire venait d'être décapité, ne consultant que son zèle et son dévouement, partit aussitôt pour se rendre au lieu de l'exécution, dont il n'était éloigné que de trois kilomètres ; il voulait avoir des renseignements sur cette affaire et prendre le corps du Père pour l'enterrer. En vain plusieurs personnes avaient essayé de le dissuader, il s'était mis en route en récitant des prières. Arrivé au lieu de l'exécution, il fut arrêté par les soldats du mandarin. On lui dit : « Tu es chrétien ; veux-tu abandonner ta religion? » Il répondit: « J'adore Dieu » en trois personnes : c'est ce Dieu qui nous a créés ; » je n'oserais pour rien au monde le fouler aux pieds. » Si le mandarin n'a pas pitié de moi et me fait tuer, » je suis prêt à subir la mort. »

» A un deuxième interrogatoire, il fit courageusement la même réponse ; il fut alors condamné à mort, et comme on le conduisait au supplice, on lui proposa une troisième fois l'apostasie, mais toujours même refus. Arrivé au lieu de l'exécution, il demanda un moment pour se prosterner et prier. Les soldats, impatients, le pressaient de finir ; mais lui continuait sa prière. Enfin il se leva et eut la tête coupée. Cet homme de foi, nommé Soât, était âgé de 37 ans et avait encore son père ; il était marié et Dieu lui avait donné deux enfants, un garçon et une fille. Il appartenait à l'un de ces villages qui, pendant la persécution, ont fait la gloire de l'Église et de la mission. Cette chrétienté, nommée



paroles, mais j'avais d'autant plus de
Père nous de nouveau en étaient émues,
j'avais de la tendresse
pleure ; quand nous
étaient rem-
chrétiens, ils nous suivaient tous en
nous embrassant, et en nous mouillant de tant de lar-
mes que nous ne savions que faire, sinon pleurer
comme eux. Quand je fus entré dans le navire, je les
vins saluer, et leur fis un petit discours où je mettais
bien plus de larmes que je ne disais de paroles, pour
les exhorter à la constance dans l'amour de Jésus-
Christ. Ils étaient sur le bord, à genoux, demandant
ma bénédiction ; plusieurs étaient dans l'eau jusqu'à
la ceinture : il n'y en avait pas un qui ne pleurât.

Je vis un bon vieillard septuagénaire, l'un des prin-
cipaux docteurs du pays, qui nous était venu dire
adieu, et avait pris sa belle robe de parade avec laquelle
il allait rendre justice aux principaux jours de l'année ;
il était sur le bord, un peu retiré de la presse, pleurant
à chaudes larmes. Il nous faisait cette solennelle révé-
rence qu'on fait au roi, se mettant à genoux quatre
fois, et touchant la terre avec le front ; puis il s'en alla
sanglotant. L'on m'a dit qu'il eut le cœur si serré qu'il
ne put jamais depuis manger, et mourut le onzième

ger en Cochinchine, lor-
que de m'avancer en mon principal dessein. Je me retirai
nung nommé Ea
il y a grand com-
aussitôt
reche.
les occasions de me servir envers ses com-
patriotes et envers les naturels de la Cochinchine,
que-là qu'il me mena lui-même à la ville royale de
Oüa, où j'appréhendais d'aller, crainte que le roi crût
que je méprisais son commandement, par lequel nous
étions bannis de toutes ses terres.

Ce gouverneur japonais me conduisit fort adroite-
ment, et fit si bien par ses amis que je fus le très bien
venu. Je laissai le Père Pierre Albert avec les Japonais,
auxquels il avait entièrement gagné le cœur, et faisait
un merveilleux fruit parmi eux, pendant que je m'en
allai vers le roi avec les plus beaux présents que je pus
trouver; il est vrai que, pour les acheter, j'avais employé
quasi tout l'argent que j'avais porté de Macao pour
m'entretenir toute l'année. Mais Dieu y pourvut, car
un bon chrétien, nommé André, et sa femme, m'en-
voyèrent tout l'argent nécessaire pour me rembourser,
disant qu'ils voulaient avoir la satisfaction de donner
les présents qui doivent gagner le cœur du roi.

A la vérité, Dieu leur donna une telle bénédiction

LẠC QUAN TRẮNG

et s'enrichissait en trafiquant ; il avait quitté, depuis quelque temps, sa légitime femme pour en avoir une autre, qu'il tenait avec grand scandale des chrétiens et des païens. Je l'avais souvent averti, et quelquefois repris aigrement du grand crime qu'il commettait, et menacé de la colère de Dieu, qui ne souffrirait pas qu'il fût impuni.

Mes avertissements et mes menaces étaient inutiles : cet obstiné ne pouvait pas se résoudre à quitter cette malheureuse femme. Dieu y mit la main, en lui envoyant une grande maladie ; mais encore fut-il assez opiniâtre pour lui résister : il me fit appeler, dans le fort de son mal, et me dit qu'il se voulait réconcilier à Dieu et à l'Église par la confession, de laquelle il avait été privé si longtemps. Je lui fis instance qu'à moins qu'il chassât de sa maison la personne qui l'avait séparé de Dieu, il ne pourrait jamais revenir à lui, ni recevoir l'absolution de tous ses grands péchés.

Il me promit de le faire, tant qu'il crut de ne pouvoir échapper la mort ; mais il délayait (1) toujours, jusqu'à ce que, se trouvant soulagé de son mal, il se moqua de Dieu, duquel il croyait n'avoir plus besoin ; mais certes Dieu se moqua de lui. Une grande tempête se leva dans toute la mer et la terre de la Cochinchine : elle fit un si grand dégât que plusieurs vaisseaux furent submergés en mer, et plusieurs maisons en la terre ferme furent abattues ; partout il y eut bien des personnes, partie noyées dans l'eau, partie accablées sous les ruines des maisons. Par la grâce de Dieu, au-

(1) « *Délaier*, verbe (très employé dans l'ancien français ; il signifiait *faire délai*, et vient de *dilatare*. » (Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*).

CHAPITRE VINGT-QUATRIÈME.

Mon cinquième et dernier voyage en la Cochinchine, et les grandes conversions arrivées à la cour.

Pendant que mes dix catéchistes couraient si utilement toutes les provinces de la Cochinchine, je m'étais retiré à Macao par le conseil des Portugais. En passant cette grande mer de la Chine, nous eûmes une tempête si violente que l'eau de la mer, ayant rempli notre navire, corrompit toute l'eau douce qui nous restait, parce que les tonneaux où elle était ne se trouvèrent pas bien bouchés. Ce fut bien pour lors que nous nous crûmes perdus sans ressource, si Dieu ne faisait un coup de sa main pour nous délivrer. Nous étions au milieu d'une grande mer, ne voyant aucune terre où nous pussions aborder, et nous n'avions du tout point d'eau douce pour nous soulager.

Dans ce désespoir de tout secours humain, nous recourûmes à celui de Dieu ; tous ceux qui étaient dans le vaisseau se mirent à genoux, et nous fîmes vœu à Dieu que si nous échappions ce danger, nous irions, au sortir du navire, en dévotion à une belle église de Notre-Dame, qui est sur une montagne proche de Macao que l'on appelle Benha de França, c'est-à-dire Notre Dame de la Roche Française, et que nous porterions sur nos épaules la grande voile du navire. Ce vœu fut si agréable à Dieu qu'un bon vent se leva soudain, et nous porta si bien que le lendemain nous commençâmes


CHAPITRE HUITIÈME.
Comme nous allâmes au royaume de Macassar, et le séjour que nous y
CĂN HỘ
THE APARTMENT

violente, que nous perdions espérance de passer outre. Et en effet, un de nos vaisseaux fut contraint de rebrousser vers le port, parce que le vent lui avait brisé le mât; l'autre nous quitta étant emporté par les vents, qui lui firent tenir une autre route. Nous restâmes seuls, et Dieu voulut qu'enfin la tempête s'apaisât, et nous allâmes gaiement, sous la conduite de nos bons anges, sur cette mer éloignée de la terre de plusieurs centaines de lieues, ne voyant rien que le ciel qui nous guidait, et l'eau sur laquelle nous allions.

Notre principal soin fut de procurer que Dieu fût servi dans le navire et que le péché en fût banni. Tous les jours au moins un de nous disait la messe, pourvu qu'il n'y eût point de tempête qui nous en empêchât. Après le dîner, nous faisions toujours un long catéchisme où tous assistaient, et même le capitaine du vaisseau, François de Lirea, personnage de grande condition et fort puissant dans le Portugal, était le premier, et prenait grand soin que personne ne s'en dispensât, s'il n'était fort occupé ailleurs. Nous tâchions de nous faire aimer de toute cette grande troupe de quatre cents personnes, en servant chacun amiablement. Nous les soulagions dans leurs maladies et les assistions dans toutes leurs nécessités.

Notre vaisseau semblait être un monastère flottant, et Dieu nous faisait la grâce que tout y était réglé; l'on n'y entendait ni jurement, ni querelle, ni parole dissolue; plusieurs s'y confessaient souvent, et dans le voyage de six mois nous fîmes cinq fois la communion générale de ceux qui étaient avec nous, aux principales fêtes qui se rencontrèrent. Le jour de la Fête-Dieu, nous

DEUXIÈME PARTIE.

Missions dans le Tonkin et la Cochinchine.

mière beauté. Notre âme est comme une perle fort précieuse : elle sort fort nette des mains de Dieu, mais elle tombe dans un corps où elle est salie, parce que ce n'est plus une âme seule, mais un homme qui vient d'Adam. C'est là qu'elle se salit ; mais, quand elle est lavée des eaux du baptême, toutes ces ordures la quittent ; elle devient nette et belle comme le soleil. » Cette comparaison contenta toute cette compagnie qui m'écoutait.

Je rencontrai dans le même lieu une très honorable dame, nommée Agathe, laquelle, depuis longtemps, avait été fort éprouvée par diverses afflictions, qui sont l'héritage ordinaire des enfants de Dieu ; mais celui qui lui avait donné la constance pour les souffrir, lui voulut faire connaître qu'elle ne les souffrirait pas longtemps. Un jour qu'elle fondait en larmes pour les maux qu'on lui faisait, elle vit distinctement dans les ténèbres de sa chambre une belle croix tout environnée de lumières, qui dissipèrent toutes les ténèbres de son esprit et toute l'affliction de son cœur.


TABLE ANALYTIQUE
SỰ RA ĐỜI CỦA SỐT RÉT
THE INVENTION OF MALARIA

MUTE GRAIN

III

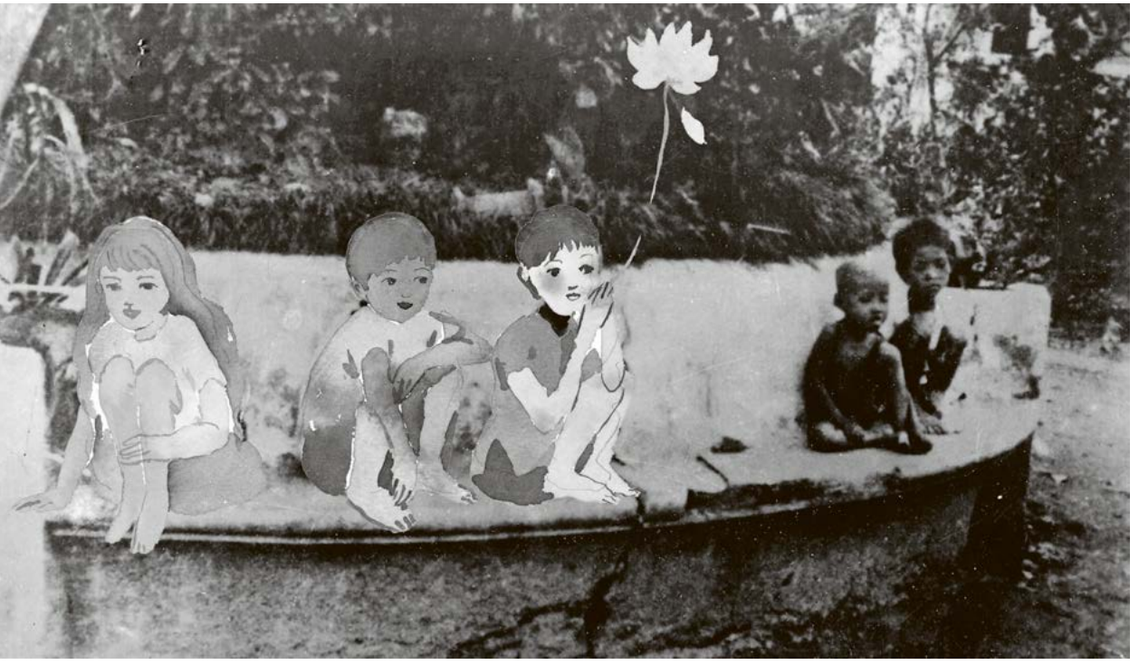
THREE-CHANNEL, 4K
VIDEO PROJECTION, BLACK AND WHITE
–
Year: 2019
Duration: 15'45"
Audio in Vietnamese with English subtitles

MUTE GRAIN

Mute Grain uses the medium of moving image and painting to assemble a poetic and romanticized, or stylized, setting, wherein the 3-channel video and a series of silk painting couplets weave a narrative that is simultaneously fictional and documentary. *Mute Grain* is a personal interpretation of the sparsely discussed 1945 famine in Vietnam. Taking place during the Japanese occupation of French Indochina, the famine is believed to have caused the death of over two million Vietnamese in the Red River Delta. Individual artworks in *Mute Grain* are narrated through the point of view of two adolescents, its storyline based on oral recordings of famine witnesses amalgamated with magical elements borrowed from Vietnamese folk tales and chronicles, expressed in a succinct and delicate visual language inspired by Yasunari Kawabata's *Palm-of-the-Hand Stories*.

Initial inspirations for *Mute Grain* graced me years ago when I read a short prose titled *Starved* by To Hoai, a writer who had made his mark with the classic children book *Adventures of a Cricket*. Printed along with many vignettes of its kind in the volume *Old Stories from Hanoi*, the humble four-pager was how I first learnt of the Vietnamese famine of 1945. I was still an adolescent then. The agony of such severe catastrophe, compressed in a few printed pages, had ingrained in me a lasting impression. I started to nurture a curiosity for how historical events are treated: how is one glorified when another is forgotten? However, due to my lack of knowledge and experience at the time, it took me years, until I could gain a firmer grasp of my own artistic practice and worldview, to start to decode that astonishing, biting first encounter. Penning visual art through the use of paintings and moving image, I seek to comprehend irremediable social traumas, to express my take on the famine, and food security with the most tolerant and objective perspective to the best of my ability, and at the same time, to affix some speckles of optimism to the bleak picture, in an ode to the ephemerality of our – the plant, the animal, the human – conditions.

Upon entering the exhibition space, spectators are to observe silk painting couplets of varied dimensions in the series *Dream of March and August*. The name is derived from the Vietnamese idiom, as simple and direct as it is: "March and August." In the lunar calendar, these are the poorest months of the year, when the new harvest is not ready, and the rice and other food saved from previous



seasons has already ran out. March and August are tenuous times in which farmers have to borrow money, rice and find other work to sustain their living. Vietnam, even though it is mainly an agricultural society, never produces quite enough food to sustain its population and it was not until the open-door policy in 1986, where trade and agriculture experienced a rapid development and industrialization. March (*Ba* in Vietnamese) and August (*Tám* in Vietnamese) are also the names of the protagonists in the paintings and the video.

Silk is also a new challenge in terms of medium for me, given that I have experimented with many other mediums for my paintings such as x-ray films or pages from old books, etc. I went on a quest along the dike systems of the Red River in search of evidence for the once widely circulated dictum in the Japanese occupation period, "Uproot rice, grow jute," when the Japan administration forced local farmers to grow jute instead of rice to aid the escalation of war, one of the main causes of the devastating famine. Further and further along the journey, I found my hope dwindled as no jute plant ever came to sight, perhaps the growing of jute along Red River stopbanks had disappeared into oblivion in the same way the memories of the famine had done. As luck would have it, the futile search brought me to the house of an artisan silk weaver in Ha Nam province, whose expertise lay in making silk for painters. I fell for the charm of the delicate material, which was woven in a family of farmers in a traditional village.

The strip of silk born bared semblance to the strip of the main river that had been nurturing the whole northern delta and its civilizations for thousands of years. The paintings in *Dream of March and August* do not exist as singular pieces but rather are paired in "couplets," similar to its literary namesake, each half the counterpoint to the other: disagreeing while supporting each other. The paintings depict the parallel worlds of March and August, the main protagonists in this para-fictional environment. March and August are siblings, however, August died during the famine time, and became a hungry ghost. While March looks in vain for the memories of his sister, they somehow meet in a dream-like world impossible to reconcile in reality.

The series of silk paintings are exhibited as a sculptural installation, creating layered passages to lure spectators to a room in the back that houses a three-channel video installation, also titled *Mute Grain*. The video *Mute Grain* spirals around three main components: an adolescent boy, an adolescent girl, and the inanimate components (landscape, architectures, nature), represented on three corresponding channels. *Mute Grain* takes place in a multitude of settings, time, and space with the account of the Vietnamese famine as a common thread suturing all the fragments.

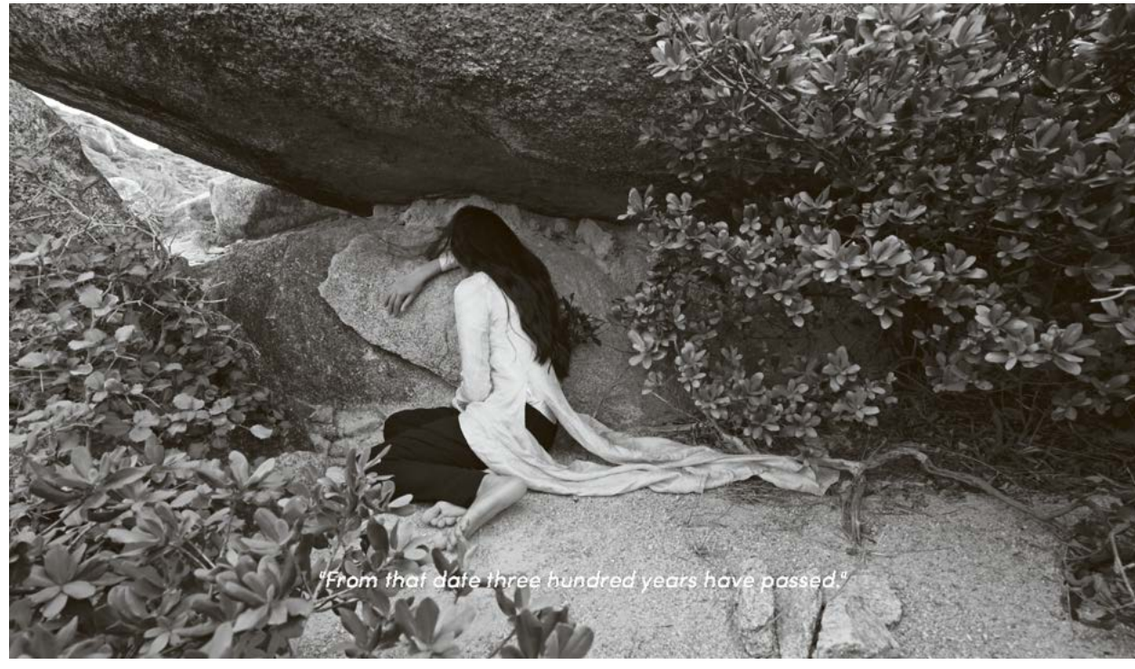
The middle screen fixates its gaze on the architectural and landscape components whereas the left and right screen relay the adventures of the two young siblings alternately. The story centers around the brother and sister who stay

behind in the village (among other children), while their parents go to the city to look for work and food. *Mute Grain* opens with a detail borrowed from the Vietnamese folktale *Legend of the Waiting Statue* reinstated in the setting of famine. One day the brother, March, finds a sugar cane stick. Overjoyed with the thought that the sweetness of this the sugar cane might ease their gnawing hunger, March starts to chop and carve the outer bark off of the cane. Unfortunately, the knife slips and hits the sister, August, on the head, causing her immediate death. From here, we embark on a floating journey through the brother's memories and recollections: carrying regrets, guilt, and longing for his sister. The young boy survives many upheavals of history including the famine and numerous political turmoils, as an aged, blind man he silently yearns for a faraway realm of light, for his lost sister. At the very least, she did not die in starvation.

Mute Grain turns to the motif of an unjustified death of a young female whether directly or indirectly caused by war or social injustice, a prevalent motif in medieval Vietnamese, and to a larger extent East Asian, folk tales. Unable to move on to the next life, the sister becomes a hungry ghost. She still maintains her human form, appears in, beyond and in between, layers of time and space, silk screens and cinematic frames, together with her brother floating amidst bittersweet memories. Entwined in the video is a web of eclectic references, each with their own parallel antithesis. On one hand, we have historical documents that are factual, brutal, and apathetic like the famine photos

taken by Vo An Ninh or audio records of famine survivor accounts that the artist collected from the collection of Professor Van Tao; on the other hand, we have folk literature blooming with magical and surreal elements like the *Legend of the Waiting Statue* or the cautionary *Tale of Tu Thuc*. The work also draws from modern literature, taking inspiration from the figures and sentiments raised by the Japanese writers who had experienced the post-war period, among them the notable influences are *Palm-of-the-Hand Stories* by Yasunari Kawabata and *Floating Clouds* by Fumiko Hayashi which discuss the falling apart of a post-war Japan through the love story of a Japanese couple in Japan-occupied Indochina. The final thread of references comes from cinema: *Ugetsu* which is a film inspired by Uena Adakari's *Tales of Rain and the Moon*, the animation film *Night of the Full Moon* produced by North Vietnam state-run animation studio during the Vietnam War, and Satyajit Ray's *Sudden Thunder*, a film on the Bengal famine of 1943.

As I studied the Vietnamese famine and the period of Japanese occupation of Vietnam, I was disappointed by the lack of available materials on both topics and started to branch out my research to other countries in East and Southeast Asia during the same time period e.g. Singapore, Bengal, the Philippines, etc. to find out how atrocity spread across borders and became symbolized in popular culture and collective memories. The Bengal famine of 1943 became a critical point of reference as I observed that the Bengal tragedy shared many similarities with the



Vietnamese famine of 1945: both were precursors for the fall of colonialism, redistribution of world power, and the partition of each respective country.

Food as an element, expressed here through the notable figure of the rice plant symbolizing food and agriculture civilization, is introduced in the setting of an essentially agricultural village through footage filmed in Binh Dinh, Central Vietnam, and Red River Delta, a strategy to absolve the story of a specific setting (the northern delta) to paint a more extensive, inclusive picture of the Vietnamese countryside. One can observe that the work is similar to a collage comprised of asymmetrical components (food, architecture, people, victims, witnesses, social realism, poetic surrealism) that utilizes montage to construe a fragmented yet fluid flow of silk screens and cinematic frame.

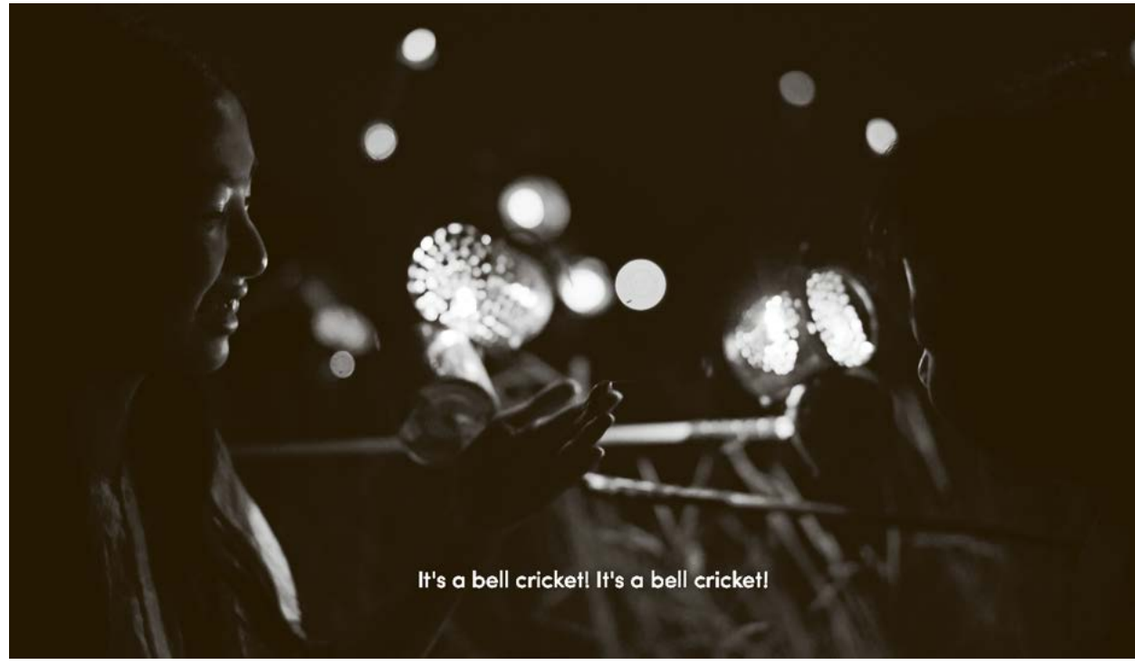
Emphasis is placed on the synthesis of cinema and painting, when moving image borrows the still frame of paintings and paintings borrow the montage technique to represent diverse understandings of the discussed phenomenon. When people, animals, plants and landscapes are deprived or bereft of written or verbal language to relay their experience, the work can still articulate how the events are perceived and remembered through the language of visual expression and mixed media. I hope that through *Mute Grain*, new perspective on history, narrations, and also the art medium can propose a more nuanced approach to personal and historical tragedies. There were times when I

doubted the significance of rummaging through the past. Nonetheless, the more I learn and the more I practice, the clearer it becomes to me that food security is, and has always been, a never-ending episodic tragicomedy, the final act that robs one of one's own humanity and corrodes both culture and nature. In today's political context, with a famine still raging in different parts of the world, the story of the *Mute Grain*, for me, is of exigency. In *Mute Grain*, there is no plethora of historical evidence or numbers, on the contrary, I strive to poeticize, to fictionalize, to make absurd my expressions. For me, the magical, the irrational and the imaginary have a way to reflect reality and more profoundly than the restraints of facts and documents.

Thao Nguyen Phan, December 2018
Translated from Vietnamese by Nguyen Hoang Thien Ngan


that the children had made themselves with love and care.


Next they began to sell their girls,


It's a bell cricket! It's a bell cricket!

First, people started to survive by begging, but afterwards, who could give alms?
They began to fast.
Next, they fell into the clutch of disease.
The cows were sold, the ploughs and yokes were sold, the rice seeds were eaten, home and hearth were sold, land and goods were sold.
Next, they began to sell their girls.
After that, they began to sell their boys.
After that, they began to sell their wives.
The next girl, boy or wife, who would they buy?
Purchasers - there were none, only sellers.
For want of food, men began to eat the leaves off the trees,
they began to eat grass, they began to eat weeds…
Many fled, but those who fled, only reached some foreign land to die of starvation.
Those who remained, ate inedible food or subsisted without food until disease took hold of them and they died.

OPENING CREDITS
Mute Grain (in Vietnamese and English)

A moving image by Phan Thao Nguyen.
Inspired by the memory of March and August,
children who were abandoned in the time of famine.
During the famine, March and August were left in the village, among other children, while their parents drifted to the cities to seek work and food.

One day, I found sugarcane.
Overjoyed with the thought that the sweetness of the sugarcane might ease our gnawing hunger,
I started to chop and carve the outer bark off the cane.
Unfortunately, the knife slipped and hit August on the head,
causing her immediate death.
August became a hungry ghost.
I still met the lingering soul of my sister who probably could not reincarnate and wandered.
At least she did not die of hunger.

March survived the famine.
Years later, a group of writers came to his village and asked many old people about the famine.

March was among them.

First, the father passed away,
left his wife and three young children.
When the mother soon passed away on her deathbed,
her long hair fell out, her body full of lice,
her children crawled around her body, still trying to suck her breasts.

We were cultivating the rice, the corn was almost ready to harvest,
if the Japanese did not force us to uproot,
we would still have those crops to feed the hunger,
the famine would not be as bad.
But they forced us to uproot rice to grow jute and castor.
The whole village had no crops.
We starved.

In 1946, people harvested the winter-summer season rice.
Nobody could bear the hunger any longer.
People harvested earlier and ate the young rice.
People ate too much rice, drank too much water that the body could not handle it.
They died of dyspepsia due to overeating.

When the French and the Japanese fought,
they bought and collected all of our rice,
but threw it all into the river, the Cau Do river in my village.
I ate the rice that I picked up from the river myself.
I made rice cakes from that rotten rice.

On the night of December 23 in the lunar calendar, 1944, my mother died.
My wife, Nguyen Thi Nhung and I have a three-year-old son.
On New Year's Eve, he died.
A few days later, my wife followed.
After the Lunar New Year, on January 12, my brother died.
No medicine at all.
When I touched him, he was hot like fire, his body was soft like a melon.
No money to even buy a coffin.

<Old woman reading folk poem>

The Year of the Rooster 1945 was a turbulent time.
The Japanese arrived at Hai Phong, a port city in French Indochina.
The World War was at its peak. The Imperial Army spread in the Far East.
On March 27, the Japanese overthrew the French.
Victim of powerful nations, our country suffered.
The allies gave orders to the Japanese to give up their arms.
The Chinese came and confiscated the Japanese weapons.
Ho Chi Minh led the Revolution under the red flag with the yellow star of the young nation.
The Viet-Minh practiced hard, determined to liberate the nation.
The youth were unified, the study of the Roman alphabet was popularized.
Let's celebrate the recovery of our wounded nation, finally on the path to happiness.
People lived in harmony and peace in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.
Remembrance of the tragic famine.
The invaders took all the rice, uprooted crops in high paddies to grow jute.
All corns, peas were destroyed, nothing left to rely on.
Furniture sold, houses sold, land and paddies sold daily to seek food.
60 dong a medium-sized rice sack, 30 dong per a dozen of cotton.
Each bowl of rice was 1 dong, but there was no money left.
The body was ghost-like,
clothing tattered, all edible leaves consumed.
Banana roots with salt, anything to cease the starving soul.
Fertilizers substituted rice, cattle bran became porridge.
People withered, all of society perished.
Human meat was cooked, pretending it was dog's meat,
people consumed without knowing.
Children were abandoned in the market, people could not support each other.
Since the beginning of humanity,
this is was the peak of human suffering.

My grandfather was known as March.

After my parents died, I lived alone with my grandfather
for almost ten years in a house in the country.
Grandfather March was blind.
For years he sat in the same room, in the same spot, facing the east.
Occasionally he would turn his head towards the south, but he never faced the north.
Once, I became aware of my grandfather's habit of turning to face only one direction,
I became terribly concerned.

Sometimes, I would sit in front of my grandfather, staring into his face for a long time,
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 towards the south.
It gave me a sad feeling.
It seemed uncanny.
But the south was a sunny place;
I wondered if the south felt ever so slightly lighter, even to a blind person?

In a blink of an eye, I was back in my village.
The mountain, the rivers, the village bamboos were still the same.
I came to a small river bend, where I used to swim as a kid.
Nonetheless, looking carefully, I had a strange feeling.
How different it was, only in the last few weeks!
I did not see anyone familiar in the village.
I asked people about my name. One old man said:
"When I was a boy, I heard from my ancestors that in my family, there was a man named March.
One day, he got lost in a cave.
From that date, three hundred years have passed."

In this cave, I had encountered August's spirit,
who shared a bowl of rice with me,
that saved me.

Extremely sad, I went back to the mountain,
hoping to return to the magical cave.
But the wilderness had taken over, deleted its path.
I could no longer find the entrance.

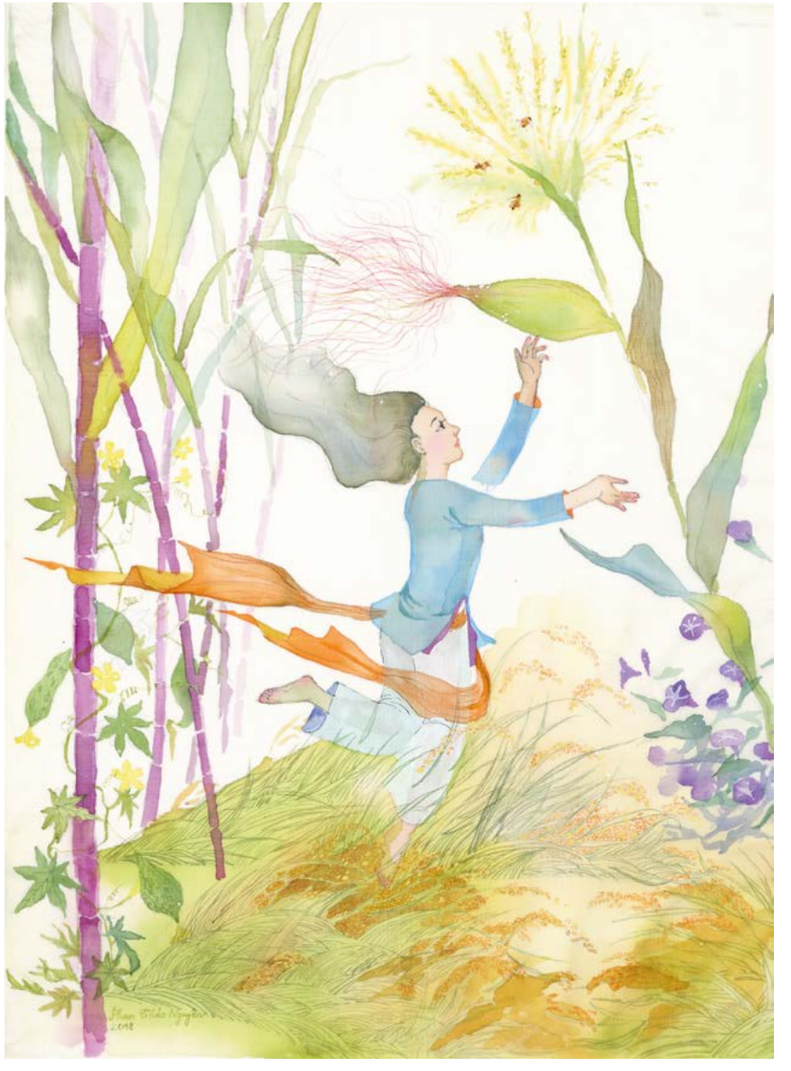
At the base of the embankment, there was a bobbing cluster of beautiful varicolored lanterns,
such as one might see at a festival in a remote country village.
I knew that it was a group of children on an insect chase by the bushes of the embankment.
There were about twenty lanterns
that the children had made themselves with love and care.
The bobbing lanterns, the coming together of children on this lonely slope,
surely it was a scene from a fairy tale?

It's a bell cricket! Its's a bell cricket!

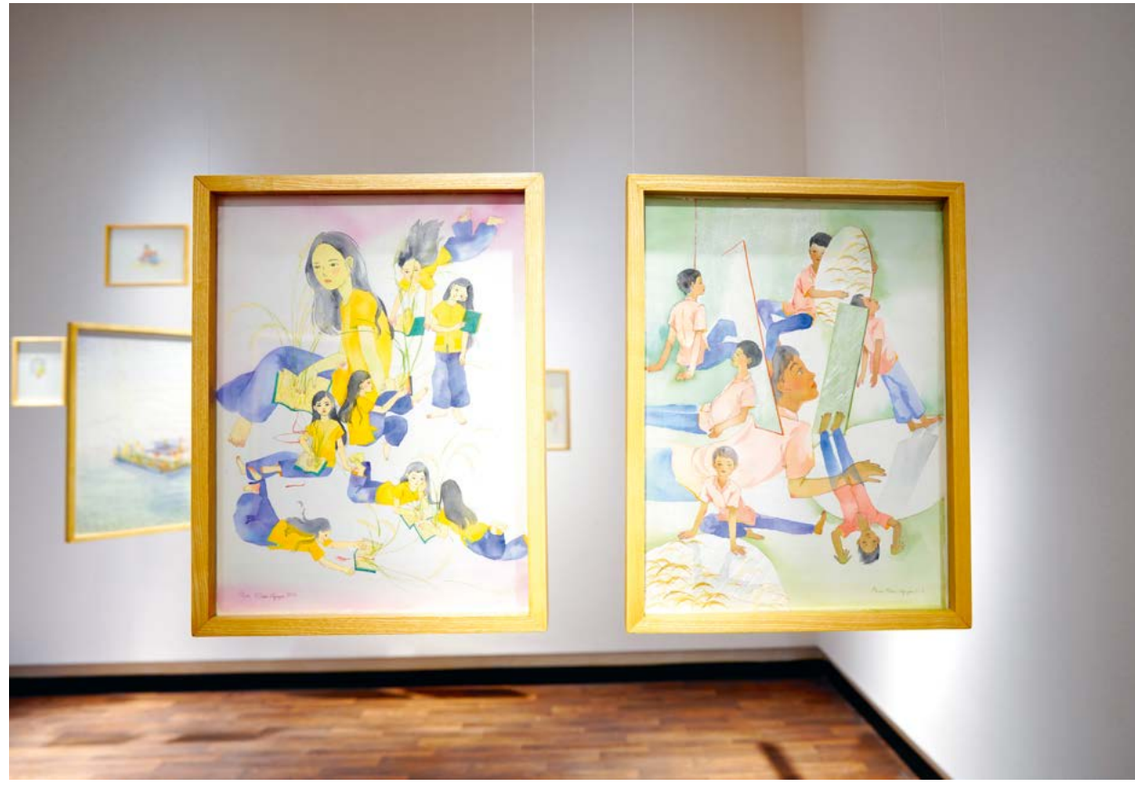
DREAM OF MARCH AND AUGUST

IV

WATERCOLOR ON SILK
–
Year: 2018 on-going
Dimension variable: 27 x 31cm, 43.6 x 33.6cm,
63.6 x 43.6cm, 63.6 x 83.6cm




Khoa Thac Nguyen 2018



BECOMING ALLUVIUM

V

SINGLE CHANNEL 4K
VIDEO PROJECTION, COLOR
–
Year: 2019
Duration: 16'28"
with some voice-overs in French with English subtitles,
produced by the Han Nefkens Foundation

BECOMING ALLUVIUM

Why did the lamp go out?
I sheltered it with my cloak to save it from the wind,
that is why the lamp went out.
Why did the flower fade?
I pressed it to my heart with anxious love,
that is why the flower faded.
Why did the stream dry up?
I built a dam across it to have it for my use,
that is why the stream dried up.
Why did the harp-string break?
I tried to force a note that was beyond its power,
that is why the harp-string broke.

EXCERPT FROM *THE GARDENER*
RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Becoming Alluvium is currently composed of two elements, a video with the same title, and *Perpetual Brightness*, a series of Vietnamese lacquer and silk paintings, structured in the form of detachable folded screens.

The video manifests my belief in the moving image as a cascade of reincarnations. That is, reincarnations in the metaphoric and literal form[1]. The plot follows the aftermath of the collapse of a dam on the Mekong, a dam considered modest in scale, yet it caused the death of many people in the village downstream, a banal, remote farming village. The event was not significant enough to make the headlines however. Two adolescent siblings lost their lives in that unfortunate moment. They reconcile in their next life in which the older brother reincarnates into the Irrawaddy dolphin, and the little brother into the water hyacinth. Both are iconic, the Irrawaddy dolphin being a beloved fish of the Mekong, the water hyacinth being a notorious invasive plant. Together, they share memories of their past lives as a writer, a ferry driver, a rat, a princess. Whichever reincarnations they inherit, the Irrawaddy dolphin and the water hyacinth still linger around the Mekong, their maternal mother, also their greatest enemy[2].

1. A direct reference to the work of my art school influencer, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and his film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, and also my upbringing in a traditional Vietnamese family, whose spiritual beliefs are based on the coexistence of the trilogy of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, not to mention the local deities.

2. This is inspired by a Lao folklore tale about the origin of the Irrawady dolphin (in Lao the Pakha fish), and the accident of the collapse of the Saddle Dam D in 2018.

Becoming Alluvium attempts to structure itself like a humanistic and animistic memory. Memories are not recalled in chronological order; instead, they are recalled by the association of one thing with another. The video is thus made up of a series of related sequences whose scenes are interspersed between each other. *Becoming Alluvium* is my second video, after *Mekong Mechanical* (2012), of a series of moving images that I offer to the glory and sadness of the Mekong River.

Perpetual Brightness is a painting series, the current instalment featuring a folded screen of six detachable panels and one separate painting. The structure of the folded screen references the lacquered screen of modernist figure Eileen Gray, which is a continuation of my interest in female modernists[3]. The number of panels, seven in total, reference the number of branches of the Cuu Long River, literally meaning the River of Nine Dragons, part of the Mekong that flows through South Vietnam. It is believed to split into nine branches before it meets the Pacific Ocean, although two have dried up, reducing the total number of branches to seven. Unlike the purism of Gray's lacquered screens, *Perpetual Brightness* is full of allegory, both in terms of its subject matter and its execution. The screens are double-sided, one side is a fragmented map of the Nine Dragons river, executed in an abstract manner, using the Vietnamese lacquer painting technique, made in collaboration with artist Truong Cong Tung. The flow of the river is inlaid and eggshell, with lacquered pigment like the alluvium. Lacquer painting was

3. This begins with my tribute to modernist sculptor Diem Phung Thi in my previous work, *Magical Bow*.

my major when I studied at Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Arts, before my MFA education in Chicago opened up the horizon to other mediums such as installation and video. The concept that surrounds the use of lacquer in my work is best described in Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*:

> *"Darkness is an indispensable element of the beauty of lacquerware.*
>
> *(…)*
>
> *[T]he lacquerer of the past was finished in black, brown, or red, colors built up of countless layers of darkness, the inevitable product of the darkness in which life was lived.*
>
> *(…)*
>
> *Lacquerware decorated in gold (…) should be left in the dark, a part here and a part there picked up by a faint light. Its florid patterns recede into the darkness, conjuring in their stead an inexpressible aura of depth and mystery, of overtones but party suggested. The sheen of the lacquer, set out in the night, reflects the wavering candlelight, announcing the drafts that find their way from time to time into the quiet room, luring one into a state of reverie."*

On the other side of the screen, silk panels depict a ceremony of mourning and the worshipping of the spirits

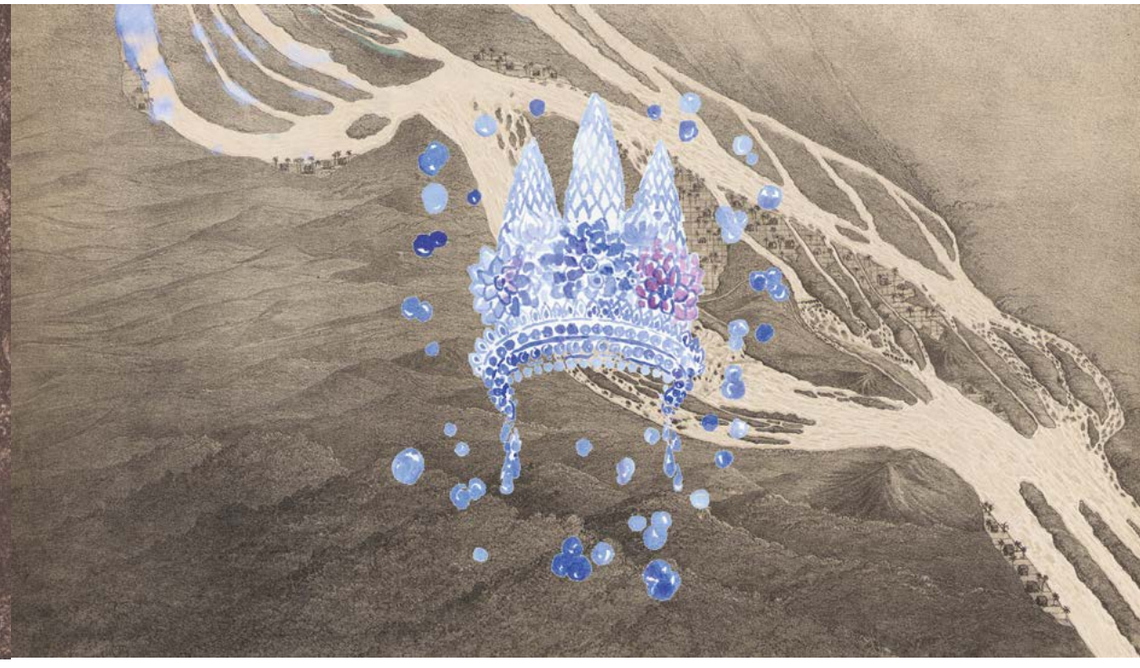
of the stranded whales, a ritual that has been practiced by fishermen across the coast of Vietnam for generations, one which I once witnessed in Can Gio, a town at the tail of the Mekong before it reaches the Ocean.

Perpetual Brightness criticizes the desire for a physical brightness, the brightness from electricity consumption and the brightness of the dollar bill, manifested in the accelerated speed of dam building on the Mekong. Lacquer and silk painting, unlike its counterpart, oil painting, require water to exist as a medium. Lacquer paint can only dry in a relatively humid atmosphere, then the paint is sanded away under running water in order to reveal the layering of paint underneath. Each lacquer panel is indeed an archaeological site. In the same way, paint pigment on silk is absorbed by the method of washing away each layer of painting. The lacquer palette is entirely a natural material: soil, stone, lacquer tree sap, gold and silver leaf, and eggshell. This is a similar process to that of the Mekong River that brings alluvium and sediment to the delta and washes away the impurities from chemicals and industrial activities. *Becoming Alluvium* is my contemplation on the glory and the tragedy of the Mekong River and the civilization of the nations that are nurtured by it. The Mekong civilization can be summarized in terms of materiality: the river of wet rice civilization, and in terms of spirituality: the river of Buddhism. Originating in Tibet, the Mekong goes through China, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and ends in Vietnam. Through its journey, it witnesses the flourishment

of Tibetan Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. However, unlike the teachings of compassion and mindfulness that are taught by the Buddha, in reality, the land that the Mekong flows through experiences extreme turbulence and conflict, on a human scale and a biological scale. In recent decades, human intervention on the river body has been so violent that it has forever transformed the nature of its flow and the fate of its habitat. Through painting and moving images, *Becoming Alluvium* is my humble *Gitanjali* to the tragic allegory of this grand river, my attempt to collect testimonies for the captured sediments and the variety of species that are sacrificed for human's constant seeking of perpetual brightness.

Thao Nguyen Phan, September 2019


TRẠM BƠM BÌNH PHAN
TỊCH VĨ ĐẠI SỐNG MÃI TRONG SỰ NGHIỆP CỦA CHÚNG TA




No wind but that in the water.


DƯƠNG

Background: downstream Mekong folk music

"Why did the lamp go out?
I sheltered it with my cloak to save it from the wind,
that is why the lamp went out.
Why did the flower fade?
I pressed it to my heart with anxious love,
that is why the flower faded.
Why did the stream dry up?
I put a dam across it to have it for my use,
that is why the stream dried up.
Why did the harp-string break?
I tried to force a note that was beyond its power,
that is why the harp-string is broke."

Excerpt from the Gardener
Rabindranath Tagore

TITLE: Becoming Alluvium

A moving image by Thao Nguyen Phan

Inspired by
The beauty and
the suffering of
the Mekong

(content based on the Laos Saddle Dam D collapse in 2018 and a traditional Lao folktale)

Once upon a time, there was a peaceful country downstream of the Mekong River.
The wrongful path of irrigation and electricity consumption
caused the break of a massive hydroelectric dam
and the death sentence of many residents in the villages downstream.
These siblings did not escape that tragic fate.
The river commemorates the poor souls of its children
with a cascade of reincarnations.
The older brother reincarnated into the Irrawaddy dolphin;
the younger brother into the water hyacinth.
When sky and earth were again at peace,
the Irrawaddy dolphin and the water hyacinth spoke to each other:
The water hyacinth: *I was human in my past life,*
so, I would never harm any person in this life.
The Irrawaddy: Me too. I was also human in my past life,
thus, I will try my best to save more sentient beings in this life.
The Irrawaddy and the water hyacinth shared stories about their past lives.
Whichever reincarnations they had,
it always lingers around this river,
their maternal mother
and their greatest enemy.

FIRST REINCARNATION

(content excerpt from L'Amant (The Lover) by Marguerite Duras, with voice-over by Truong Que Chi)

Never in my whole life shall I ever again see rivers
as beautiful and big and wild as these,
the Mekong and its tributaries going down to the sea,
the great regions of water soon to disappear into the caves of the ocean.
In the surrounding flatness stretching as far as the eye can see,
the rivers flow as fast as if the earth sloped downward.

A ferry crosses the Mekong River.
The image lasts all the way across.
There are no seasons in that part of the world.
We have just the one season, hot, monotonous.

We are in the long hot girdle of the earth,
with no spring, no renewal.
In the misty sun of the river, the sun of the hot season,
the banks have faded away, the river seems to reach the horizon.
It flows quietly, without a sound, like blood in the body.
No wind but that in the water.
The engine of the ferry is the only sound, a rickety old engine with burned-out rods.
From time to time, in faint bursts, there is the sound of voices.

(switch to the ferry driver)

These are my last trips driving this ferry.
I have been doing so for the last 25 years.
Tomorrow is the inauguration of the new bridge.
The bridge is the young beautiful concubine;
the ferry the old, sagged first wife.
I cannot help but being sentimental,
yet I am glad to be part of this epic process,
wishing more bridges to be built
that would bring wealth and prosperity to this delta.

SECOND REINCARNATION

(content excerpt from Le città invisibili (Invisible Cities) by Italo Calvino p114-6)

It is not so much by the things that, each day, are manufactured, sold, brought,
but rather by the things that, each day, are thrown out to make room for the new.
So you begin to wonder if the city's true passion is really
the enjoyment of new and different things,
and not, instead, the joy of expelling, discarding,
cleansing itself of a recurrent impurity.
Nobody wonders where, each day, we carry their load of refuse.
Outside the city, surely, but each year the city expands
and the street cleaners have to fall farther back.
Besides, the more the city's talent for aiming new materials excels,
the more the rubbish improves in quality,
resists time, the elements, fermentations, combustions.
A fortress of indestructible leftovers surrounds the city,
dominating it from every side, like a chain of mountains.
This is the result: the more the city expels goods,
the more it accumulates them,
the scales of its past are soldered into a cuirass that cannot be removed.
As the city is renewed each day,
it preserves all of itself in its only definitive form-
yesterday's sweepings piled up on the sweepings of the day before yesterday,
and of all its days and years and decades.
Perhaps the whole world, beyond this city's boundaries,
is covered by craters of rubbish,
each surrounding a metropolis in constant eruption.
Perhaps a cataclysm will flatten this sordid mountain range,
canceling every trace of the metropolis, always dressed in new clothes.

THE NEXT REINCARNATION
LAST REINCARNATION

(content based on a Khmer folktale)

When the kingdom was divided into many territories,
there was a beautiful princess in one of the monarchies along the Mekong.
On a persistently rainy day in the Southern monsoon,
the princess felt an infinite sadness.
By the time the rain finished, the sunlight shone on
and the princess still stood dazed in her garden,
daydreaming of the last drops of water dripping from the leaves of the trees,
falling into the blooming orchids creating a sparkling, colorful dew.
Suddenly, the princess sparked with joy.
She ran to find her father, the emperor,
kneeling down with an urging request:
My Lord, my father, I would like to beg, father,
for a precious jewelry made of the monsoon dew, to wear on my wedding day!
The emperor was surprised,
Dear daughter! How could that be done? Could you give me jewelry that no one else had and could not even imagine?
The emperor was moved by his beloved daughter bold request.
He ordered the best goldsmiths in the region to make the dew jewelry within a month,
otherwise they would be beheaded.
The news shattered the whole kingdom.
The goldsmiths hurried to submit the most beautiful jewelry
made out of the most precious material,
but none that pleased the princess.
The last day had passed, and still, no dew jewelry had been made.
The goldsmiths lamented, all on their way to be executed.
Amidst the confusion, a monk entered the palace
to offer a headdress made from the monsoon dew.
Your Majesty, I have a way of transforming the monsoon dew
into the most beautiful jewelry on earth,
I only ask the princess to collect some drops of dew and bring them to me,
I will start the construction immediately.
At first, the princess was delighted,
and hoped to take the dew from the roof of the temple
but to no avail,
all the drops were mixed into a stagnant water.
Only then, the princess awoke to her vain demand.
Ashamed of her wrongful clinging,
the princess had metamorphozed into the dew itself
and evaporated itself, into the vast Mekong.

BECOMING ALLUVIUM – SUBTITLES

PERPETUAL BRIGHTNESS

AS PART OF BECOMING ALLUVIUM PROJECT

VI

WATERCOLOR ON SILK,
VIETNAMESE LACQUER ON WOOD
(pigment, lacquer, eggshell and silver leaf)
lacquer paintings are made in collaboration with
artist Truong Cong Tung
–
Year: 2019-ongoing
Dimension: 180 x 150 cm x 25 cm (combined)
53 x 73 x 12cm (individual)

APPENDIX

•

ALPHABET
LILA MATSUMOTO

Alphabet

This is the story of a madness, a delirium, a wildness.
Rage, revelry, and wantonness.

1.

Memory of sounds:

Peashooter
Reed flute
Fist and palm drum

2.

Born in chaos
Ever shall this house hold you

A symmetry begins to emerge –

Bird
Tufted plant
Fish
Field of flowers
Grey piglet

We possess them all

3.

Human or not, it centers me
Teaches me not to be rash
My head bent ever so slightly
I acknowledge the pendent hand of the alphabet

4.

A book so bright bringing changes

Child

Country: created fabric

Fed Fled Footed

Habit haunted by images

Kingdom: Life & Light

Logic & Love

Maker of palaces pictures

Reading scenery as
sequence

Sleep spells state

tide travel wish

5.

Small is the water
Large the afternoon
In the fold of silence and order
We were ready to march together

Sky
Instrument of our childhood

We could see
the shore of the country
wind
in water

We hurried
along fields of corn
and soft turf

Weeds encroaching –
to rise above them
shrugging off our responsibilities

Pamela N. Corey researches and teaches modern and contemporary art history, with a focus on Southeast Asia within broader transnational Asian and global contexts. She received her BA (Studio Art) from the University of California, Irvine, and her PhD (History of Art and Visual Studies) from Cornell University, after which she took up post as lecturer in South East Asian Art at SOAS University of London in 2015. Her first book manuscript is titled *The City in Time: Contemporary Art and Urban Form in Vietnam and Cambodia*, and her writing is featured in numerous academic journals, exhibition catalogues, and platforms for artistic and cultural commentary.

Zoë Gray has been senior curator at WIELS in Brussels since 2015. She will co-curate Thao Nguyen Phan's solo show in early 2020. Her recent exhibitions at WIELS include Gabriel Kuri (2019), Koenraad Dedobbeleer (2018), Saâdane Afif (2018), Rita McBride (2017), Sven 't Jolle (2017), Erik van Lieshout (2016), Simon Denny (2016) and Klara Lidén (2015). She was previously the artistic director of *PLAYTIME*, the Rennes Biennale in 2014. She worked as project manager in Arles and Zurich for the LUMA Foundation (2012-2014). From 2006 to 2012, Gray was curator at Witte de With in Rotterdam. She is a member of IKT and on the acquisition committee of the Frac des Pays de la Loire.

Lila Matsumoto is a poet and researcher. Matsumoto's publications include *Urn & Drum* (Shearsman), *Soft Troika* (If a Leaf Falls Press), and *Allegories from my kitchen* (Sad Press). Other writings have appeared in *Poetry London*, BBC Radio 3's *The Essay, Zarf, Tripwire, datableed, Jacket, Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, and elsewhere. She frequently creates work in the context of other art forms and in collaboration with artists, and has presented her poetry at galleries, music festivals, and on record. She teaches creative writing at the University of Nottingham, and co-edits the poetry and art journal *Front Horse*.

Han Nefkens is a Dutch writer, art collector, and founder of the Han Nefkens Foundation. Born in Rotterdam, Nefkens studied journalism in France and the United States. Nefkens' books include: *Borrowed Time: Notes on a Recovered Life* (2008); *Two Empty Chairs* (2005); *Blood Brothers* (1995). He also often contributes with short stories in special editions and publications. He began collecting art in 2000, already aware that he did so in order to share with others the things that moved him most profoundly. In 2009, he set up the Han Nefkens Foundation in Barcelona, the city in which he resides, in order to support emerging artists worldwide. In 2016, Nefkens decided to focus exclusively on helping emerging video artists, the objective being to give these artists the push they need in order to advance in their careers. The Han Nefkens Foundation now supports emerging international video artists through awards, production grants and mentorship grants, always adjusting to the needs of the artists and the institutions they work with, making each collaboration unique.

Hilde Teerlinck was born in Bruges, Belgium and currently lives and works in Barcelona as curator and CEO – general director for the Han Nefkens Foundation. She has been coordinator of the Fundació Mies van der Rohe in Barcelona, director of the Center Rhénan d'Art Contemporain (CRAC Alsace) in Altkirch and director of the FRAC (Fonds régional d'art contemporain) Nord-Pas-de-Calais where she developed a new building with the architects Lacaton & Vassal. She has curated a large amount of exhibitions worldwide and was part of the curatorial team for the Beaufort Biennial 2016, Palais de Tokyo at the Lyon Biennale 2015 and Play Kortrijk 2018, amongst others. She is an advisor and board member for several international museums and foundations.

Thomas D. Trummer has been the director of Kunsthaus Bregenz since 2015. Since then, he has organised solo exhibitions with as Ed Atkins, Miriam Cahn, Theaster Gates, Mika Rottenberg, Susan Philipsz, Thomas Schütte and Lawrence Weiner, amongst others. Between 2012 and 2015, he was the director of Kunsthalle Mainz. In 2006-7, Trummer was appointed the first Hall Curatorial Fellow at Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut. He had previously been the curator of Contemporary Art at Belvedere in Vienna for ten years, where he established Atelier Augarten. From 2007 to 2012, he developed exhibitions and collaborative projects for the Siemens Arts Program based in Munich, including ones with museums in Belgrade, Kiev, Detroit, Chicago, Brussels, Budapest, Buenos Aires, and Zürich. Between 2011 and 2012 he collaborated with Kasper König on his last show at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Vor dem Gesetz (Before the Law). Since 2013, he has been a member of the art advisory board for the EVN Collection in Vienna. In addition, he is the author and editor of numerous publications, such as *Joan Mitchell* (2015), *Artistic Research* (2013); *Vor dem Gesetz (Before the Law)* (2012); *Displaced Fractures* (2011), and *Ulysses* (2004). Trummer publishes a monthly blog at www.artmagazine.cc.

Monsoon Melody
Thao Nguyen Phan

This book is published on the occasion of the Han Nekfens – LOOP Barcelona Video Art Production Award 2018 in collaboration with the Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, WIELS, Brussels and Chisenhale Gallery, London.

Exhibitions
Becoming Alluvium
Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona
November 16, 2019 to January 6, 2020
—
Monsoon Melody
WIELS, Brussels
February 1, 2020 to April 26, 2020
—
Becoming Alluvium
Chisenhale Gallery, London
June 26, 2020 to August 30, 2020

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The Han Nefkens Foundation is a private, non-profit organization set up in Barcelona in 2009. It focuses on the production of video art, with the aim of connecting people through art across the world, collaborating with renowned international art institutions. The Foundation's founding values have defined it from the beginning as an innovative and forward-thinking model: a production hub that oversees and promotes contemporary creation from the very first moments until the final presentation. Positioned as a platform for video artists to advance in their careers, its main activity is commisioning new works through its awards and grants on an international level.

The approach of the Foundation is both personal and personalized in an effort to give artists the most precious commodity it has: its time.

Han Nefkens Foundation – LOOP Barcelona Video Art Production Award *in collaboration with the Fundació Joan Miró*
Established by the Han Nefkens Foundation, the LOOP Barcelona and the Fundació Joan Miró annual Award aims to increase contemporary artistic production in the video art field by supporting artists of Asian origin or nationality.

JURY STATEMENT
Thao Nguyen Phan (1987, Vietnam) has unanimously been chosen as the winner of the Han Nefkens Foundation – LOOP Barcelona Video Art Production Award 2018 in collaboration with Fundació Joan Miró. She has a strong eye and, remarkably, for an artist of her age, Thao Nguyen Phan has found a voice that is both unique and incisive. Her diverse practice includes complex, layered narratives, which create a form of storytelling that is at once grounded in her local landscape and in the communities she works with, while at the same time referring to fictional texts. She manages to fuse the universal and the local in a poetic and visually powerful way. She is a great storyteller who executes her work in a highly professional manner. The jury feels that, at this moment in her professional life, Thao Nguyen Phan will be able to take full advantage of this opportunity by producing a new work that will without doubt further her career.

JURY
Thao Nguyen Phan has been selected by a judging panel chaired by Han Nefkens, founder of the Han Nefkens Foundation, joined by Emilio Álvarez, founding co-director of LOOP Barcelona, Marko Daniel, director of the Fundació Joan Miró, Hans Ulrich Obrist, co-director of the Serpentine Galleries, and Barbara London, author, curator and professor.

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THAO NGUYEN PHAN

Through literature, philosophy and daily life, Thao Nguyen Phan observes ambiguous issues in social convention, history and tradition. An honors graduate from Singapore's LASALLE College of the Arts in 2009, Phan received an MFA in Painting and Drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in 2013. Today, in addition to Phan's work as a multimedia artist, she has joined forces with artist Truong Cong Tung and curator Arlette Quynh-Anh Tran to form Art Labor. This collective explores cross-disciplinary practices and develops art projects that benefit the local community. She is currently expanding her "theatrical fields," including what she calls performance gesture and moving images. Phan has exhibited widely in Southeast Asia and is a 2016-2017 Rolex Protégée, mentored by internationally acclaimed, New York-based, performance and video artist, Joan Jonas.

Han Nefkens Foundation

LOOP BCN

Fundació Joan Miró Barcelona

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CHISENHALE GALLERY

ISBN 978-88-6749-397-5

Monsoon Melody features a trilogy of recent videos by the Vietnamese artist Thao Nguyen Phan, drawing on the history of Phan's home country, and particularly on the agricultural, political, and social context of the Vietnamese countryside. In her work, she goes beyond a purely historical or political point of view, exploring such current questions and tangible issues as food security and our ecological responsibility towards agricultural environments.

Thao Nguyen Phan has been awarded with the Han Nefkens Foundation – LOOP Barcelona Video Art Production Award 2018 in collaboration with the Fundació Joan Miró. This book is published on the occasion of the exhibitions held in the context of the Award at the Fundació Joan Miró (Barcelona), WIELS (Brussels) and Chisenhale Gallery (London).

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