TUAN ANDREW NGUYEN
INTRODUCTION

Esther Schipper

Tuan Andrew Nguyen

Tuan Andrew Nguyen was born in 1976 in Saigon, Viet Nam. In 1999, Nguyen graduated from the Fine Arts program at the University of California, Irvine, and completed a Master of Fine Arts in 2004 at the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia. The artist lives and works in in Ho Chi Minh City.

Nguyen has received numerous awards, including the 2025 MacArthur Fellowship, the 2025 Trellis Art Fund Milestone Grant, and the 2023 Joan Miró Prize.

Nguyen's work explores the critical impact of storytelling across media including video, sculpture, and installation. Based in sustained community engagement and extensive research, his practice engages with oral history, object biographies, genealogies that span continents, and the lingering stronghold of colonial politics. Brushing the vestiges of colonialism against the grain, his works unearth counter-histories sedimented in cultural artifacts, routes of migration, or the fantasies produced by life in exile.

The relationship between narrative and object informs Nguyen's video works. Interweaving fiction and fact, their storylines borrow from animist cosmologies and translate material memory into tangible encounters. With their speculative scenarios, his video works hold injury and solace in tension. Their protagonists address complex inheritances, as they tackle well-established notions of belonging, displacement, and redress. His films engender a haunted, sincere, and resistant subtext.

Nguyen's sculptural practice is deeply attached to material anchors of remembrance and repression. He frequently crafts sculptural works from undetonated explosives. Following the paradoxical nature of this gesture, these sculptures reanimate the past and assume a new life. Situated in the overlap of beauty and terror, Nguyen's practice draws on, as he put it, "the power to take something that was meant for destruction, harm, and change it to something that has the possibility to heal."

Nguyen co-founded and previously served on the board of Sàn Art. In 2006, Nguyen was also a founding member of The Propeller Group, a hybrid entity operating between a fictional advertising agency and an art collective. The group's work has received international recognition, including the top prize at the 2015 Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur and a Creative Capital award, among other distinctions.

Nguyen's major solo presentations include: **Tuan Andrew Nguyen: We Were Lost in Our Country**, Art Institute Chicago, Chicago (2025); **When Water Embraces Empty Space**, The Joan and Martin Goldfarb Gallery of York University, Toronto (2025), and Edith Russ Haus, Oldenburg (2024); **The Other Side of Now**, Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town (2024); **The Island**, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington (2024); **Our Ghosts Live in the Future**, Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona (2024); **Tuan Andrew Nguyen: Radiant Remembrance**, The New Museum, New York (2023); **All That We Are Is What We Hold In Our Outstretched Hands**, Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow (2023); **Tuan Andrew Nguyen: The Boat People**, Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Wichita (2023), The Contemporary Dayton, Dayton (2021), and Chrysler Museum, Richmond (2021).

His work is included in the permanent collections of institutions including the Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts, Little Rock; Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn; Carré d'Art – Musée d'art contemporain de Nîmes, Nimes; Centre national des arts plastiques, Paris; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas; Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines; Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi; Honolulu Museum of Art, Honolulu; Kadist Art Foundation, San Francisco; Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum MACAN, Jakarta; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City; Nevada Museum of Art, Reno; Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia; Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton; Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane; Singapore Art Museum, Singapore; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Taguchi Art Collection, Takahashi City; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester.

Cover image, Exhibition view: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, **Temple**, National Gallery Singapore (2025-26)

Video: Tuan Andrew Nguyen in **"Between Worlds"** – Season 12 | Art21

Video: Tuan Andrew Nguyen | **2025 MacArthur Fellow**

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Exhibition view: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, **The Other Side of Now**, Zeitz MoCAA, Cape Town (2024 - 25)

TEMPLE
NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE (2025 - 26)

National Gallery Singapore presents **Temple** by Tuan Andrew Nguyen, a multi-sensorial installation which fuses personal memory and material histories of the Vietnam War. Featuring percussive instruments crafted from defused unexploded ordnance (UXO) carefully removed from the landscape of Quảng Trị in central Vietnam, the installation invites visitors to strike the suspended shells, gongs, and chimes to generate a meditative soundscape.

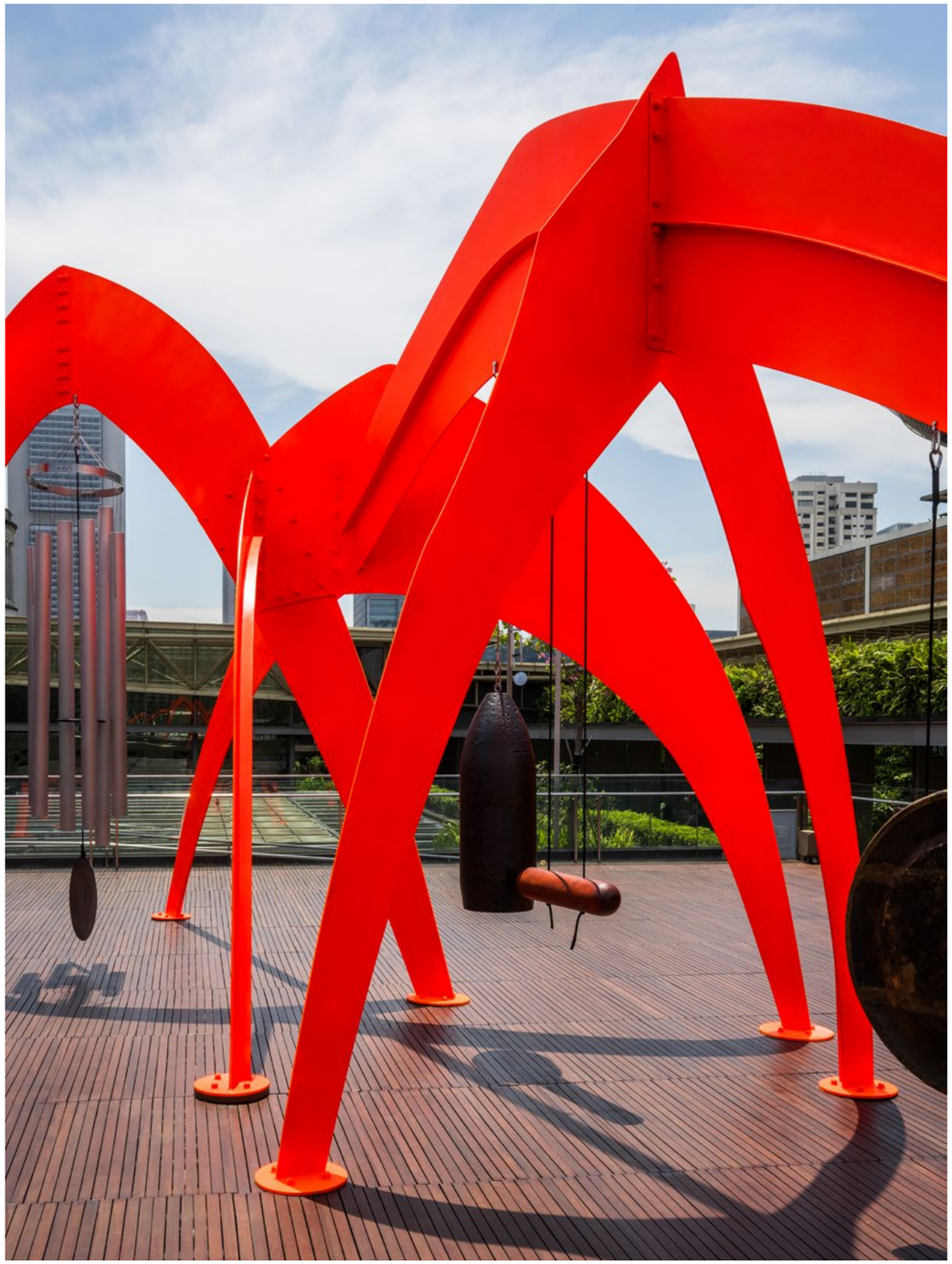
Temple is the Gallery's first rooftop installation to integrate participative motion and sound. When struck, the percussive elements produce carefully tuned frequencies designed to complement one another. The MK82 bell, for instance, has been tuned to 432Hz – a frequency believed to be a ‚universal frequency' of healing. Between 1963 and 1975, intensive bombing in Vietnam left over 1.5 million tonnes of UXO buried across the country. As visitors engage with **Temple**, they are invited to reflect on land, history and conflict.

While **Temple**'s "day-glo safety orange" saturation recalls the American sculptor Alexander Calder's modernist stabiles, it is also a colour commonly used to demarcate unsafe areas contaminated by UXO in Vietnam's landscape. The installation's sculptural form draws from the limestone hills surrounding Chùa Hương, known as the Perfume Pagoda, a historic Buddhist pilgrimage site between Hanoi and Huế where the artist's grandmother Đặng Thị Lạc, a poet and former newspaper editor, once sought shelter. This interplay of form and colour underscores how **Temple** transforms remnants of conflict into tools connected to the possibility of healing and recuperation.

Artist Tuan Andrew Nguyen says, "I am grateful for the opportunity to present **Temple** at National Gallery Singapore on the occasion of the 8th Ng Teng Fong Roof Garden Commission. With this installation, I wanted to bring to light the effects and the surplus of UXO in Vietnam's central region, specifically Quảng Trị, and how they continue to affect the community today. The residual effects of war carry on for several generations after wars end and I hope that through their interactions with **Temple**, visitors will pause to reflect and contemplate the great of potential of generating compassion, how ideas of reincarnation could open up space for empathy, and the healing possibilities generated through material transformation."

Dr Seng Yu Jin, Project Director of **Temple** says, "As the leading institution for art in Southeast Asia, we are committed to presenting thoughtful experiences that invite audiences to reimagine the region and its art through new lenses in ways relevant to our contemporary socio-cultural and historical contexts. Working with contemporary artists like Tuan Andrew Nguyen enables our audiences to interact with the installation and engage with global issues, utilising art as a critical touchpoint for contemplation, reflection and the transformative power of art in envisioning a better future."

In addition to visitors' interactions with the percussive elements, water hyacinth mats are provided to encourage them to sit within the installation, complementing their experience with **Temple**'s meditative soundscape and creating space for moments of reflection.



Exhibition view: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, **Temple**, National Gallery Singapore (2025 - 26)

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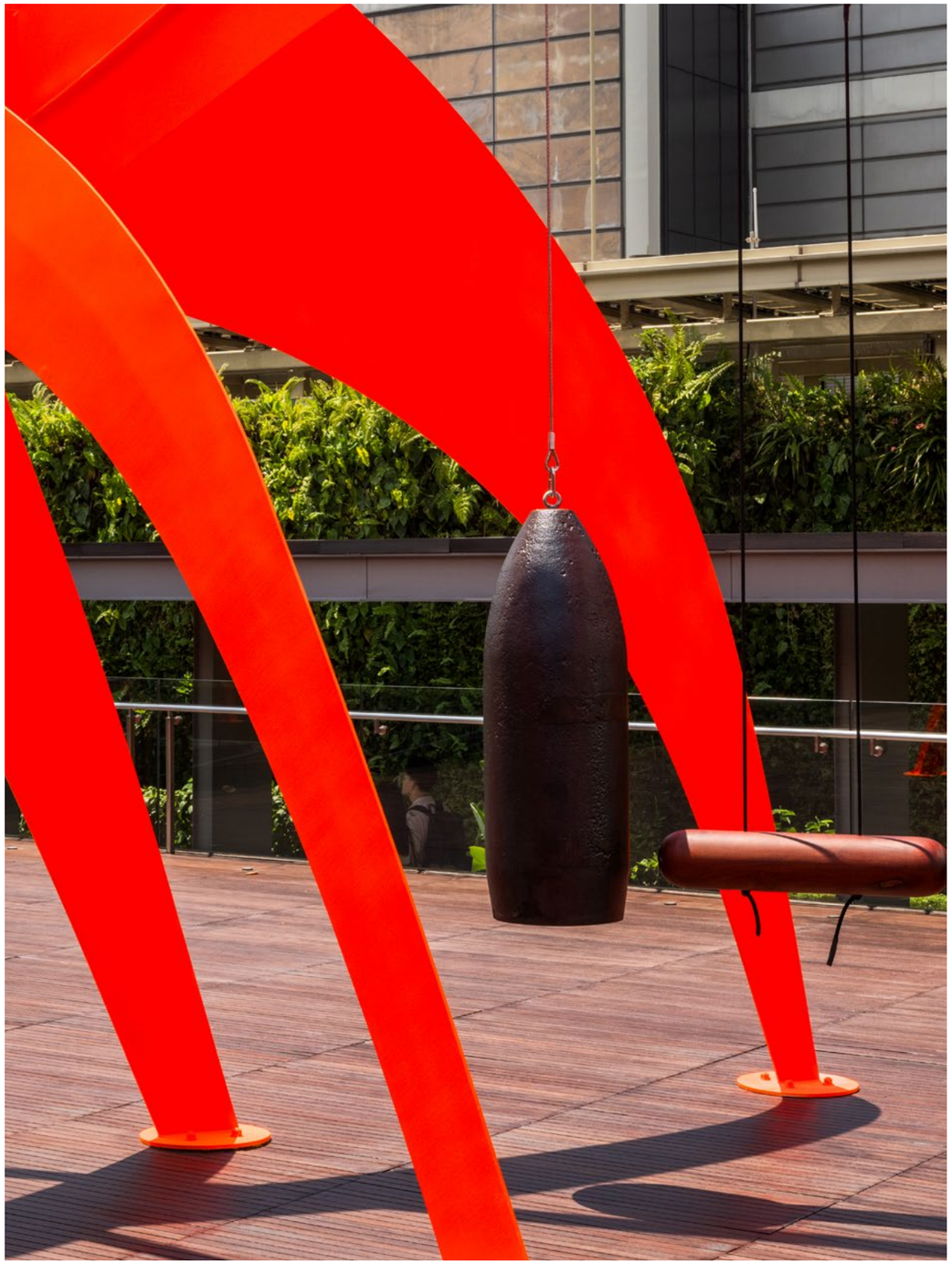

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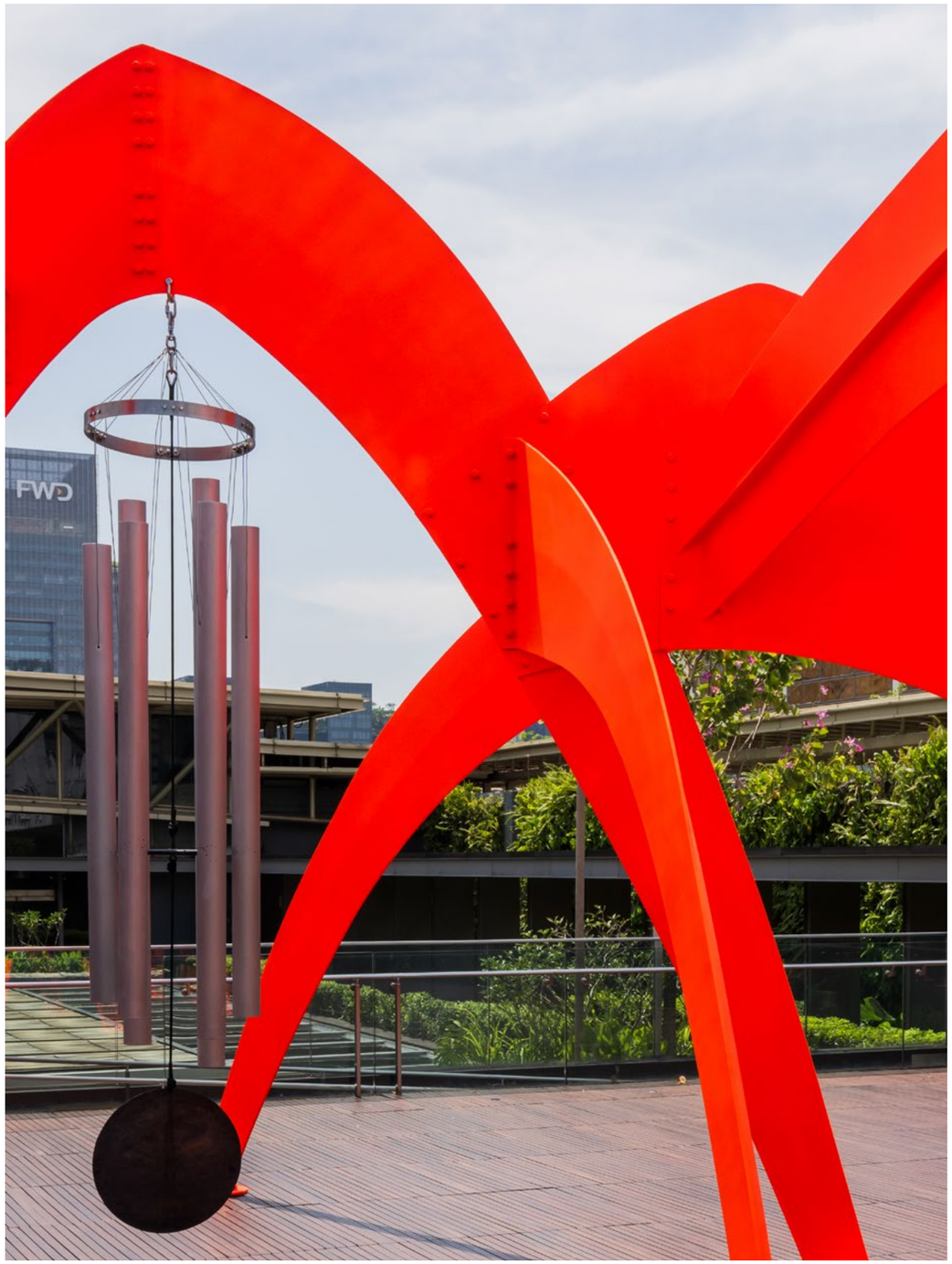


Exhibition view: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, **Temple**, National Gallery Singapore (2025-26)

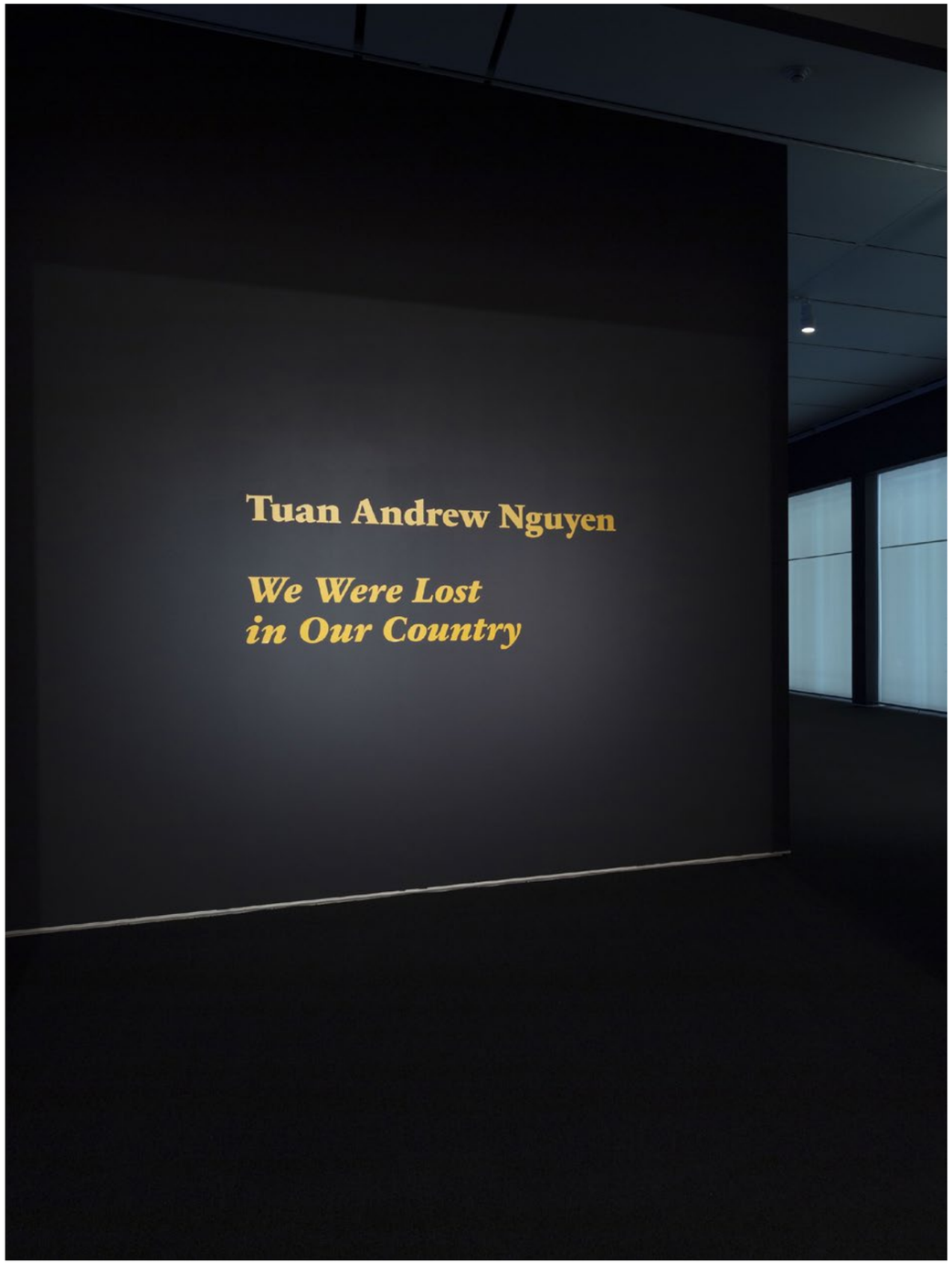
WE WERE LOST IN OUR COUNTRY
ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO (2025-26)

For the Ngurrara people of Western Australia, Country is not just a place.

The word also signifies kinship with the lands, waters, and skies of the Great Sandy Desert, which the Aboriginal communities of the Walmajarri, Wangkajunga, Mangala, and Juwaliny language groups have stewarded for millennia. Tuan Andrew Nguyen's film **We Were Lost in Our Country** explores how these communities established legal rights to their ancestral land by creating the monumental painting **Ngurrara Canvas II** in 1997.

Painted entirely from memory and intergenerational knowledge, **Ngurrara Canvas II** maps the environmental features of 29,000 square miles of the Great Sandy Desert. Created by 44 Ngurrara artists, it is more than a cartographic representation of territory. It was conceived and produced as evidence of Indigenous connections to Country, securing the land—and the spiritual worldview it embodies—for future generations.

Nguyen's film brings together archival and new footage, including interviews with surviving map artists and younger community members who were raised outside of the desert, disconnected from Country. It meditates on dispossession and inherited trauma, as well as on ways of knowing and belonging. In **We Were Lost in Our Country**, Nguyen shows how collective memory heals and engenders solidarity and how storytelling and art making are forms of political resistance.



Exhibition view: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, **We Were Lost in Our Country**, Art Institute of Chicago (2025-26)

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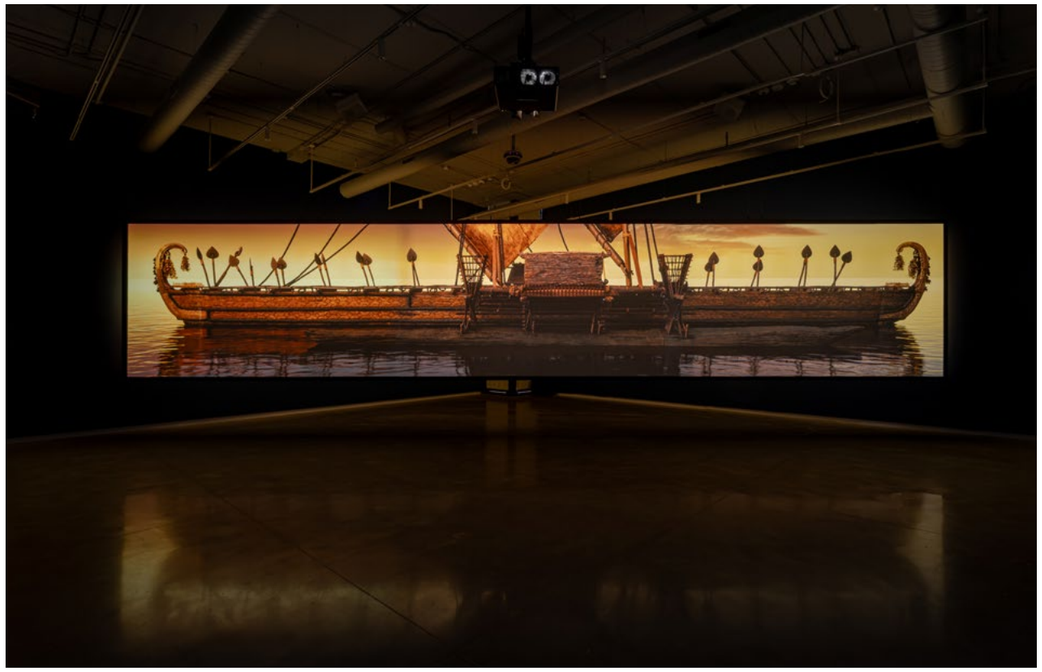
WHEN WATER EMBRACES EMPTY SPACE
THE GOLDFARB GALLERY, NORTH YORK (2025)

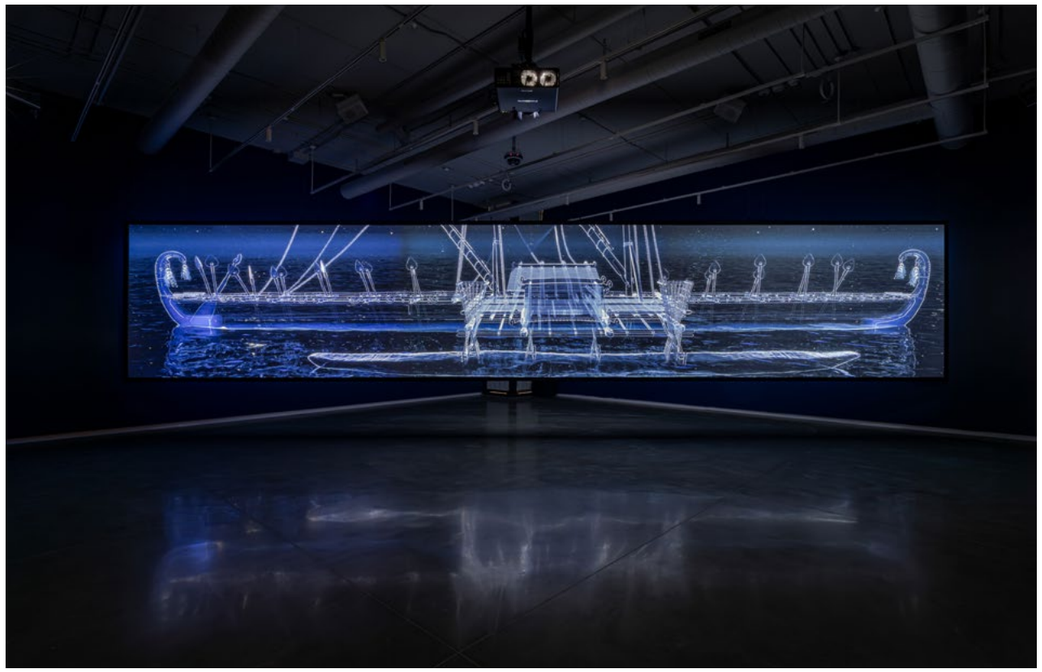
The poetic refrain in Tuan Andrew Nguyen's title **When Water Embraces Empty Space** calls for a perceptual shift to imagine beyond the possibility of how water flows, fills, and occupies space. It suggests something more than just a passive filling, implying an intentionality, that a relationship and harmony between water and space exists. In relation to this body of artwork, the title imagines an embrace as affecting a reckoning, a rewriting, and a re-introduction. It is a title fitting of an epic tale, one that Nguyen unfolds through a series of videos, animations with accompanying photographs, and sculptures that recount a story that begins with an over-century old canoe from Luf Island in Papua New Guinea.

The elaborately crafted canoe is an impressive 15 metres long, intricately decorated with both carved and painted motifs. A bold pattern of diagonal lines folding into spirals originally painted in red, white, and black repeats across the main body of the canoe symbolizing fish, with other reoccurring graphics of turtles, stars, and human figures appearing throughout the boat's ornamentation. The massive sails are woven from strips of palm leaves stretching 15 metres at their longest point. The Humboldt Forum in Berlin where the canoe currently resides cites it as "the last boat of its kind." The museum's didactic panel suggests it is a war boat intended for battling neighboring peoples, but the people of Luf were unable to launch it because of a dwindling population due to disease, famine, and the result of "a punitive expedition by the German navy" in the late 1800s. But we learn from Stanley Inum, in his telling of the history of the canoe in the video The Encounter, 2024, that the canoe was actually made for the ceremonial burial of a tribal chief. Also, in contrast to the Humboldt Forum's public messaging which implies a German trading company purchased the boat, Inum asserts that it was stolen from its inland boat house.

Stanley Inum is from Manus, Papua New Guinea, and one of the descendants of the canoe's makers. Meeting Inum and his community is the substance of When Water Embraces Empty Space, and central to Nguyen's artistic process which draws from the histories and stories of colonialized and diasporic peoples. Nguyen often uses objects as a connecting point and, for this body of work, reuniting the descendants of the original canoe makers with the boat was the germinating seed from which the exhibition grew, capturing three generations of people of Luf—Inum, his son Fordy, and nephew Enoch Lun—first physical experience of the canoe. The Encounter is a 72-minute video document of the descendants entering the Humboldt Forum, formally meeting three members of the curatorial staff, and walking through the museum's large Oceanic collection which holds hundreds of cultural objects from Papua New Guinea, leading to an emotional encounter with the canoe, capturing the tension of Inum's first touch and their concerning comments regarding the sails which, they whisper, are positioned incorrectly, imagining those with knowledge of sailing thinking poorly of their community's seafaring skills. A final, scripted scene in the video depicts their at times perplexed recounting of their experience at the museum, its staff, and of the canoe itself, deliberating on how to bring it back home.

A central element in Nguyen's exhibition is the ethereal video installation **Above the Sea, Against the Sky**, 2024, a three-channel CGI animation of the to-scale Luf canoe floating in an illusory space, transforming and spinning, glowing and burning. This piece imagines the canoe's intended purposes: to float out to sea, to spark into flames and embers that disintegrate into ocean. The collective and dedicated act of crafting such an elaborate canoe is as ritualistic as its burning, asserting values that defy colonial notions of utility, possession, and permanence. It is a passage between worlds, a vessel to enter the spirit world as a connection to ancestors. It is a demonstration of abundance, skilled craftsmanship, and a relationship to the material world that is transferred into the spiritual, ephemeral, and infinite in its meaning, in stark contrast to impulses to collect, classify, and control.





Exhibition view: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, **When Water Embraces Empty Space**, The Goldfarb Gallery, North York (2025)

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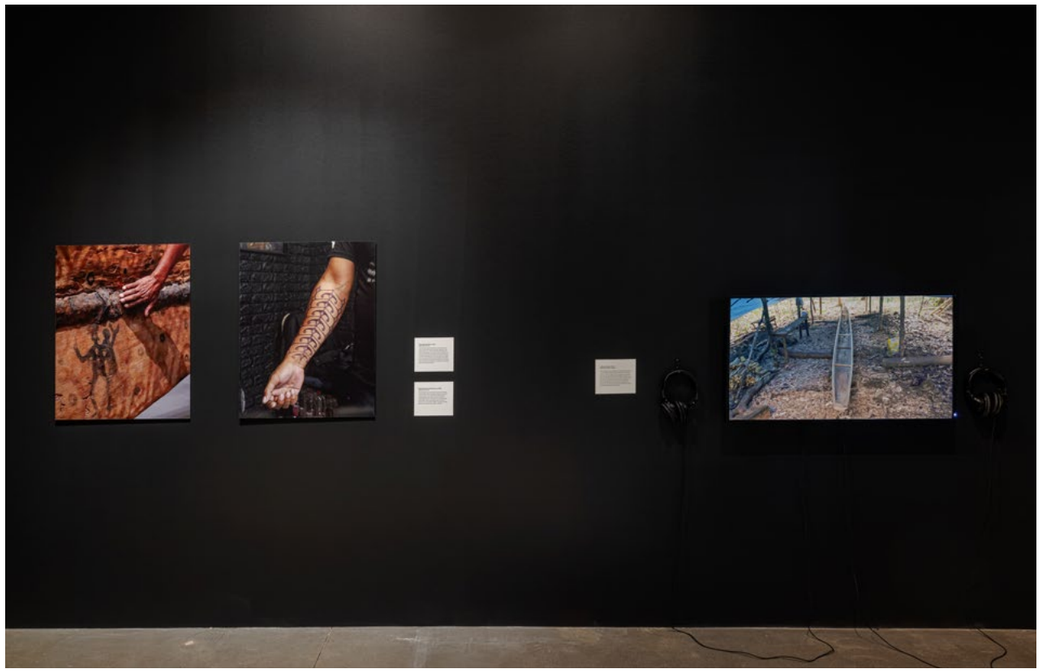

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THE OTHER SIDE OF NOW
ZEITZ MOCAA, CAPE TOWN (2024 - 25)

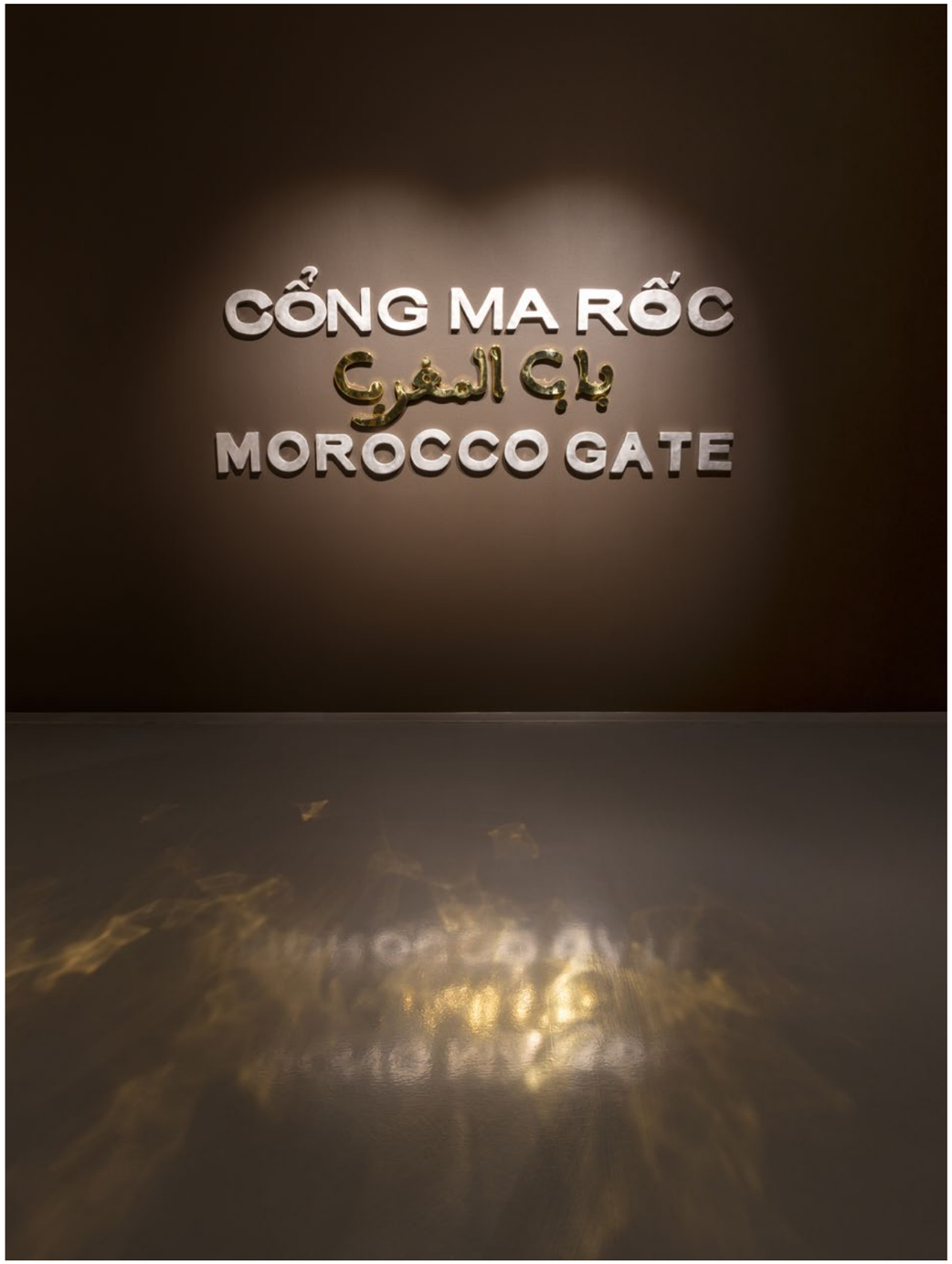
Nguyen's films move along spectrums of fact and fiction, past and present, memory and forgetting. He uses the power of storytelling to create speculative visions of painful histories. He opens a doorway for empathy and healing for both the subject and viewer. In letters to a lost family member, imagined conversations between generations, or reincarnation as a means of healing from physical trauma, his work looks at hard pasts to realise healed futures.

The exhibition presents three film works: **Because No One Living Will Listen / Nguoi Song Chang Ai Nghe** (2023), **The Specter of Ancestors Becoming** (2019), and **The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon** (2022). All three films are connected by the period 1954 to 1972; between the end of the First Indochina War and the conclusion of the American War in Vietnam. One chapter considers Moroccan soldiers who defected from the colonial army only for their return home to be hindered by the outbreak of the American War. Another tells the story of Senegalese-Vietnamese children and their disrupted connections to family and origin. This affirms a deep engagement with migration narratives stories and charting diasporic experiences in Asia, Africa and beyond.

Nguyen creates sculptural objects that materialize his cinematic worlds, placing viewers face to face with relics that carry the weight of generations. These include tangible remnants of war in the five **Singing Bowls** (2022), constructed from leftover brass artillery shells; delicate embroidered tapestries of **Viet Minh propaganda leaflets in A Breach** (2024); and intimate family photographs in **Solidarities Between the Reincarnated** (2019).

The exhibition title highlights the shifts in and between time that are ever present within the artist's work. What is the other side of 'now'? Is it 'then'? And when was 'then'? And what waits to be revealed when we arrive on the other side? Through narration, Nguyen's work probes history to bring to light lost stories that are intertwined with an unclear reality. These might be the same inherited stories that have been told over and over, but in time, there comes a longing to know more, a need to address the questions that were never asked and in turn, never answered. Is it possible to get to the other side and find a different ending? Can we reroute and rewrite histories that are personal and shared with the hope of one day arriving at a place of solace and closure?

The Other Side of Now forms part of an ongoing series of in-depth, research-based solo exhibitions by Zeitz MOCAA that bring into focus and contextualises the practices of important artists from Africa and the Diaspora, and those whose work focuses on seminal topics in African history. In the spirit of radical solidarity, our programme looks beyond the continent's borders, attending to new and old entanglements that implicate the world in Africa and Africa in the world.



Exhibition view: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, **The Other Side of Now**, Zeitz MoCAA, Cape Town (2024 - 25)

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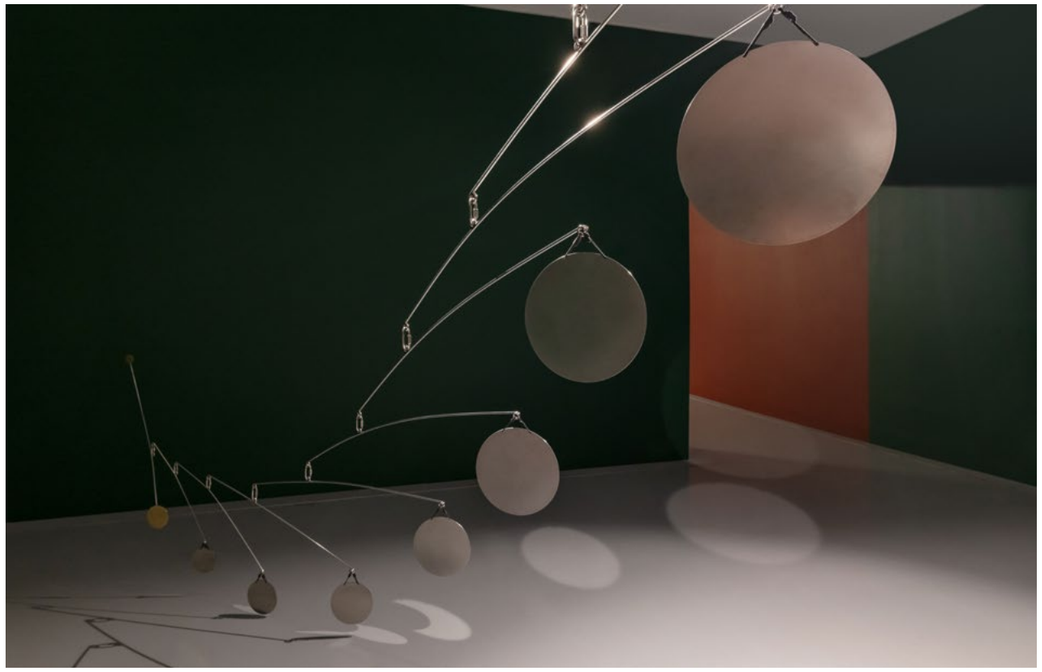


Exhibition view: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, **The Other Side of Now**, Zeitz MoCAA, Cape Town (2024 - 25)

WHEN WATER EMBRACES EMPTY SPACE
EDITH-RUSS-HAUS, OLDENBURG (2024 - 25)

The sixteen-meter-long outrigger sailboat in question is called the Luf boat, named after the Papua New Guinean island from which it originates. The local and ancient knowledge in the region, of both plants and the ocean, required to build such a boat is nothing short of remarkable. Generations who grew up in Berlin know the magnificent object from school excursions to the Ethnological Museum in Dahlem. Since 2020, part of the museum's collection has been housed in the Humboldt Forum; here, the Luf boat is presented as the institution's crown jewel.

According to the historian Götz Aly in his book **The Magnificent Boat**, the arrival of the Luf boat to the Berlin collection has a dark and troubling history. The object is connected to the sustained violence that the Imperial German Navy and German traders perpetrated on the people of Papua New Guinea. The islands' forest and natural resources were destroyed and replaced with plantations, which the Papuans were forced to work on, and the colonizers raped local women. When the islanders resisted these atrocities, the Imperial Crown ordered their massacre through so-called punishment expeditions – as happened on Luf.

In 2021, the Humboldt Forum commissioned a video interview with descendants of the few Luf inhabitants who survived this colonial aggression. They expressed their wish to see the boat, mourned their community's lost knowledge of how to produce this type of watercraft, and expressed a hope to reconnect with it.

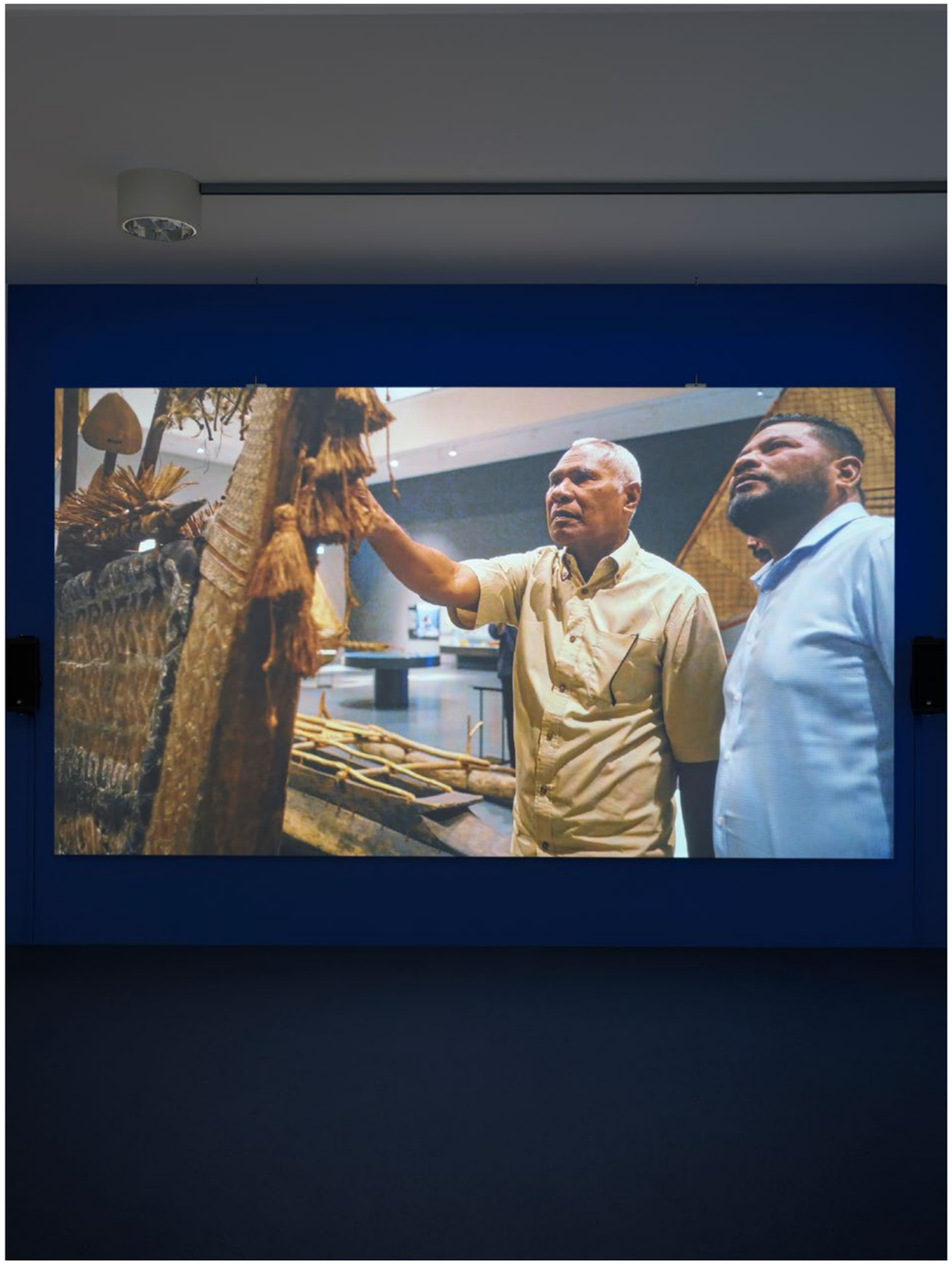
Tuan Andrew Nguyen's exploration started from this juncture: his goal became to fulfill this wish and make the meeting possible. The artist believes that the Luf boat is a bridge between the past and the future, between the dominant narrative of German colonialism and the erased stories of the people of Papua New Guinea. It is a bridge between fact and fiction, testimony and resilience.

The exhibition's series of multichannel film installations together present a narrative built from conversations between the Luf boat builders' descendants, – Stanley Inum, Fordy Stanley and Enoch Lun – and the Humboldt Forum team as well as documentation of the islanders' long-awaited meeting with the boat. Other videos present footage of the Luf community's attempt to rebuild the boat. The aim is to create an object that would resolve the relationship between object and narrative, between maker and keeper, and between trauma and healing.

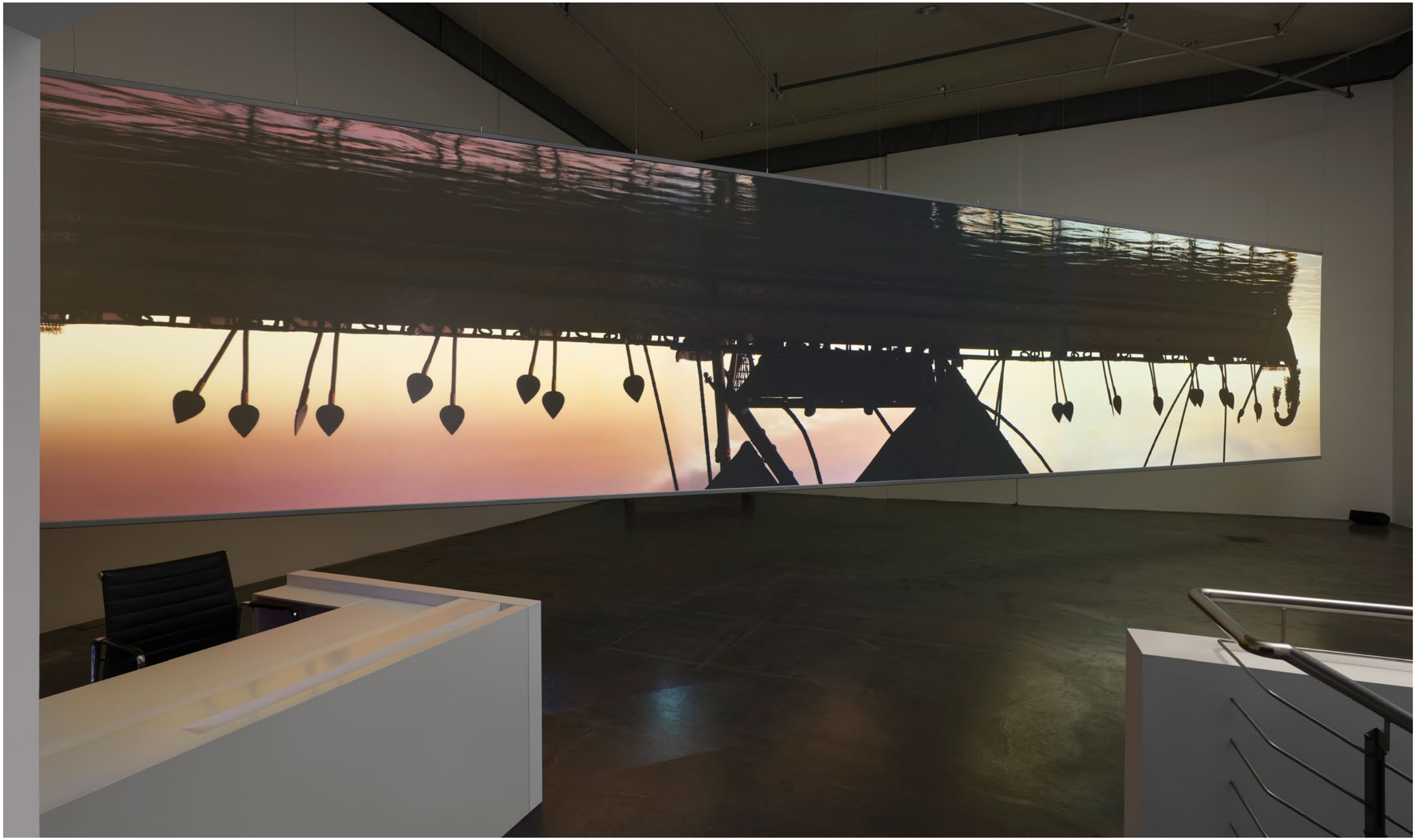
Colonialism destroys and controls memory. In the wake of all this destruction, what strategies do we have to recuperate memory? Can fiction fill in the gaps, give agency, and act as a tool of healing inside the voids that remain?

Maybe the boat needs to float out of the museum, where it is being displayed, and disappear in the oceans as it was meant to be – a sea burial for the chief of Luf or for a larger more metaphorical burial, one of the continuation of colonial ideals in our current times.

Tuan Andrew Nguyan's practice explores the power of memory and its potential to act as a form of political resistance. The Vietnamese/US artists' practice is fuelled by research and a commitment to communities that have faced traumas caused by colonialism, war, and displacement. Through his continuous attempts to engage with vanishing or vanquished historical memory, Nguyen investigates the erasures that the colonial project has brought to bear on certain parts of the world. Through this collaborative practice, he explores memory as a form of resistance and empowerment, emphasizing the power of storytelling as a means for healing, empathy and solidarity.



Exhibition view: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, **When Water Embraces Empty Space**, Edith-Russ-Haus, Oldenburg (2024 - 25)



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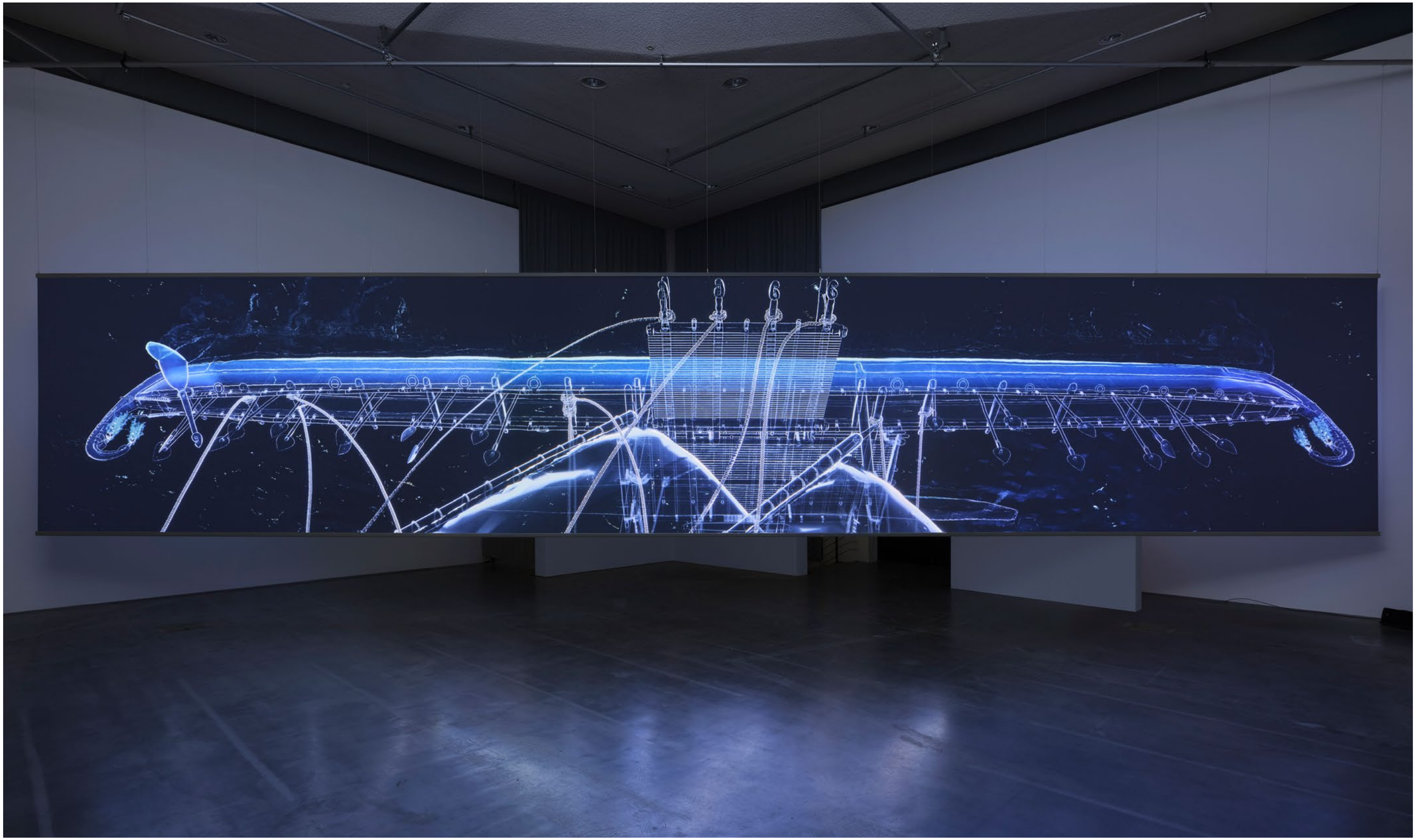

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OUR GHOSTS LIVE IN THE FUTURE
FUNDACIÓ JOAN MIRÓ, BARCELONA (2024)

The exhibition not only included projects that revolved around the human and material consequences of the two Vietnam wars, led by France and the United States, but it also established a dialogue between Joan Miró and Alexander Calder, both proponents of Western art of the Cold War era. That dialogue is voiced by both the characters in Nguyen‘s films and installations, and the artworks and objects featured in these projects: Calder reincarnates in the body of a Vietnamese woman; an unexploded bomb talks of its fate as it is buried and detonated; letters written and read to estranged or deceased parents have the power to evoke and pierce family legacies.

Exhibition view: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, **Our Ghosts Live in the Future**, Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona (2024)

Video: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, **Our Ghosts Live in the Future**, Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona

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TUAN ANDREW NGUYEN: RADIANT REMEMBRANCE
THE NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK (2023)

Developing projects through collaborative community engagement and extensive archival research, Tuan Andrew Nguyen (b. 1976, Saigon, Vietnam; lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City) utilizes strategies of remembrance to highlight unofficial and suppressed histories. Interweaving the factual and the speculative and often employing mythologies of otherworldly realms, Nguyen's films re-work dominant narratives into stories that propose creative forms of healing the intergenerational traumas of colonialism, war, and displacement. Through his interest in animism and material memory, the affective and historical charge embedded into objects, Nguyen's installations and sculptural practice coincide with and expand on the themes explored in his films.

Installed in the New Museum's Third Floor galleries, **Tuan Andrew Nguyen: Radiant Remembrance** was the artist's first US solo museum exhibition, showcasing a new film and two recent video projects, **The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon** (2022) and **The Specter of Ancestors Becoming** (2019), alongside works from the artist's broader practice. Drawing together conceptual threads from across the Global South via the interconnected histories of Vietnam, Senegal, Morocco, France, and the United States, Radiant Remembrance sparked a dialogue on inherited memory and testimony as forms of resistance and empowerment.

Tuan Andrew Nguyen: Radiant Remembrance was curated by Vivian Crockett, Curator, with Ian Wallace, Curatorial Assistant, and is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue published by the New Museum. The catalogue included a conversation between the artist and Vivian Crockett and texts by Zoe Butt, Eungie Joo, Catherine Quan Damman, and Christopher Myers.

Exhibition view: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, **Tuan Andrew Nguyen: Radiant Remembrance**, The New Museum, New York (2023)

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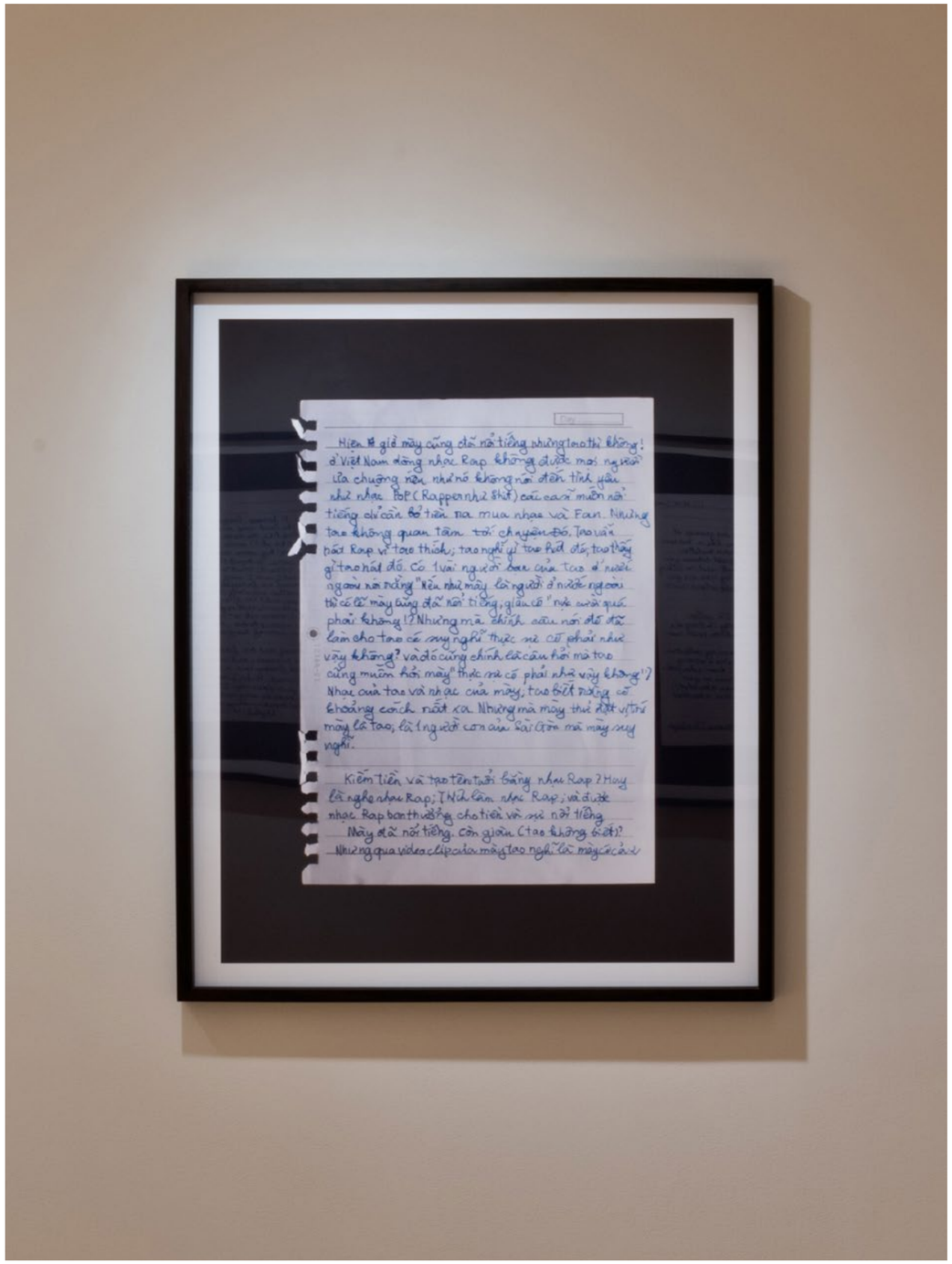
FROM SAIGON TO SAIGON
ASIA SOCIETY, NEW YORK (2019)

This exhibition showcased a recently acquired series of nine photographs by Tuan Andrew Nguyen (b. 1976 in Saigon, Vietnam) titled **From Saigon to Saigon**. The photographs document the handwritten correspondence from a young Vietnamese rapper based in Ho Chi Minh City to an African American rapper, who adopted the stage moniker ‚Saigon' after reading Wallace Terry's Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War, detailing the discriminatory experiences African Americans endured during the American-Vietnam War. The photographs illuminate the interaction of history, politics, and popular culture in the rapidly shifting landscape of contemporary Vietnamese society.



Exhibition view: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, **From Saigon to Saigon**, Asia Society, New York (2019)

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October 27, 2025

ArtAsiaPacific

Sculptural Reincarnation: Interview with Tuan Andrew Nguyen

Ahead of the unveiling of his first public permanent sculpture at the new Princeton University Art Museum, the Vietnamese American artist spoke to ArtAsiaPacific about reincarnation, material memory, mythology, and storytelling.

Drawing on the concepts of reincarnation, material memory, mythology, and storytelling, Vietnamese American artist Tuan Andrew Nguyen works across sculpture, film, installation, and more to explore the lingering shadow of the Vietnam War (also referred to as the American War in Vietnam). In anticipation of his first public permanent sculpture—which will be unveiled in late October at the new Princeton University Art Museum—*ArtAsiaPacific* spoke with Nguyen in Los Angeles, where the Ho Chi Minh City-based artist is currently spending part of his time to develop further projects. Building upon his series of Calder-esque mobiles made from unexploded ordnance (UXO) leftover from the war, the site-specific commission, titled *Naga* (2025), will hang permanently in a double-height gallery within the institution.

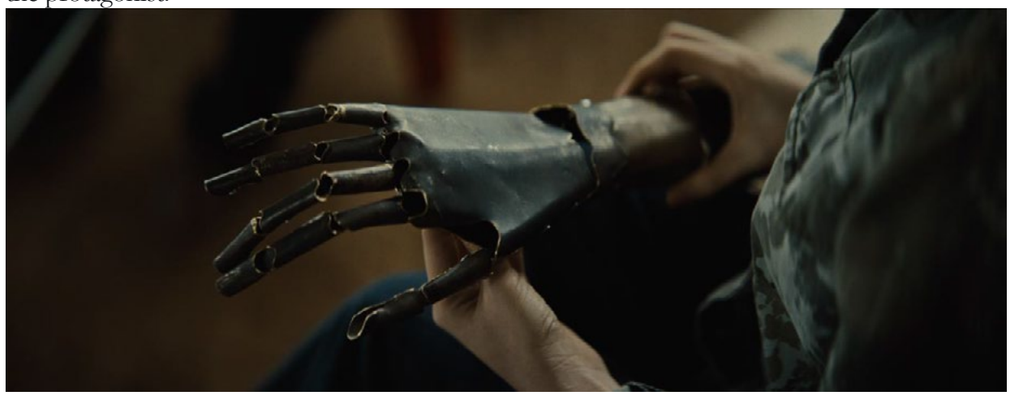
According to government sources in the US and Vietnam, roughly 20 percent of Vietnam's land is still littered with UXO. Since the end of the war in 1975, UXO left behind by American military forces has been responsible for more than 40,000 deaths and 60,000 injuries. Our conversation with Nguyen delved into the legacy of the conflict, both physically and spiritually, as embodied in the reverberations of this material that can still be found in various sites across Vietnam, deeply embedded in both the land and cultural memory.

In your film *The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon* (2022), the contemporary protagonist, Nguyệt, uses UXO to create these Calder-esque mobiles. At first, she's not familiar with Calder; then one day, she discovers his work in an old magazine and becomes convinced she is his reincarnation. As it happens, she was also born 49 days after Calder's death—the Buddhist timeframe for rebirth. How did the idiosyncratic idea for this poignant film come about?

I wanted to create something in parallel with this idea of material reincarnation. In Vietnam's Quảng Trị province, these unexploded bombs are everywhere, being reused as planters in coffee shops or people's gardens and backyards. One of the ways that people made a living after the war was to forage and sell this material as scrap.
The film is fictional, but it interweaves the many true stories that we gathered of people who have been affected by UXO, directly and indirectly. Around 2020, we reached out to several NGOs that were involved in demining work, and I had the opportunity to follow one on a big mission where they unearthed a one-ton bomb from a hillside. That experience, and our documenting of it, became *The Sounds of Cannons, Familiar Like Sad Refrains / Đại Bác Nghe Quen Như Câu Dạo Buồn* (2021), a two-channel video paired with archival footage from the US Navy Seventh Fleet, which is notorious for having fired massive amounts of munitions into the land.

In some ways, *The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon* is a follow-up, portraying certain characters that still deal with these enduring after-effects of war.

For instance, the character Lai—an amputee who works at the Quảng Trị Mine Action Center, teaching kids how to spot and avoid UXO—is based on a real person by the same name. He was playing with his cousins when he detonated a cluster that took his legs and his arms, and his cousins were killed. He helped me write the dialogue between his character in the film and the protagonist.



The Calder-inspired mobiles, with their arms and branches, in some ways call to mind a family tree, speaking to familial connections, origins, and lineage. Can you tell us more about the genesis of these mobiles and the meanings you've derived or discovered along the way?

In *The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon*, there's a dinner scene where the main character discusses her sculptures with her mother, and whether or not they remind her of the air raids and bombings from the war. In these mobiles, pieces fall, and even the smaller particles appear to be bursting.

The dainty brass rods connecting each piece in the mobiles symbolize the points between people. Suspended in space, the mobiles are also about unearthing things—whether it's figural in terms of generations and trauma, or literal in terms of the buried UXO.

I like all of those connections, but materially, the work is also about balance. It took me a long time to understand the mechanics of how to construct a mobile in the vein of Calder. In the beginning, we would make a sketch that ultimately didn't work. Now the process has become almost intuitive in that I understand the material, as well as the weights and balances of the medium. This delicate equilibrium serves as a strong metaphor that exists in every single piece of the work.

What about your own familial connections? What kinds of things did you—or did you not—talk about with your mother, your father, your grandmother?
It's in the very title of the film: *The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon*, which denotes potential catastrophes that arise when you begin to touch upon these traumas. These UXOs are a poignant metaphor for the psychological and emotional trauma that we carry in our bodies.

Alongside this metaphor, the film addresses the physical reality of these buried metals, investigating these highly complicated relationships with the land and this material. We have relationships with each other, but we're situated on the land, and therefore we have a relationship to the materiality around us.

My father seemed quite different from other men who had served in the war, such as his friends and my uncles. Most of the men from that generation tend to remain silent about the conflict, and are also very strict with their children about not bringing it up. My father only revealed some elements of it, but never told me about his personal experiences.
Growing up in the US during this particular time, I always wished I had an older sister who could explain things to me. Even though my parents were both only 20 years old when they had me, there was a large cultural gap between us. It seemed like they were always trying very hard to move on and assemble their new lives in the US without looking back. So, a big part of my move back to Vietnam was a desire to understand what I felt was a missing chunk of my

family history and ethnic heritage. But in doing so, I think I also became a sort of bridge to younger artists or the younger generation, like the older sibling I had always longed for.

What else can you tell us about your new sculpture at the Princeton University Art Museum? What other projects are you currently working on?

We finished installing the mobile a few months ago. We were among the first to enter the empty new building and install art in the galleries.
As for upcoming projects, I'm actually working on my first feature film; we're currently in the research and writing stage. The film will build on my previous work *The Specter of Ancestors Becoming* (2019), which focuses on a Vietnamese Senegalese community in Senegal. It will be based on a very particular person, and similarly comes out of that topic of migration.

Is this why you moved to Los Angeles for the time being—Hollywood!—to make your first feature film?

I'll go back and forth to Los Angeles more often, but I'll never say I'm moving back to the US!

That reaction prompts this final question. You and your family came to the US as refugees when you were two years old, but after graduate school, you decided to return to Vietnam to be with your 95-year-old grandmother. How much of that was a political act?

While the choice to be with my grandmother was based on emotional and familial ties, it was also political. When you are in the perceived minority, archiving family history is an inherently political endeavor.

In the mid-2000s, when I was in grad school, the US was involved in a lot of things I didn't agree with, such as the Iraq War—similar to many things that are happening now across the globe. It all feels cyclical. Right after graduating, I decided, "I'm out of here."

I've been living in Vietnam for two decades now. The first few years were plagued with an overwhelming feeling of loss—you think you're returning to a place that will offer you a sense of home. And when it doesn't, because you've been away for so long, there's disappointment. I feel very much liberated from the idea of home now; I no longer feel the need to belong to any specific place in the world. It's a very Buddhist notion, to feel at home everywhere and nowhere.

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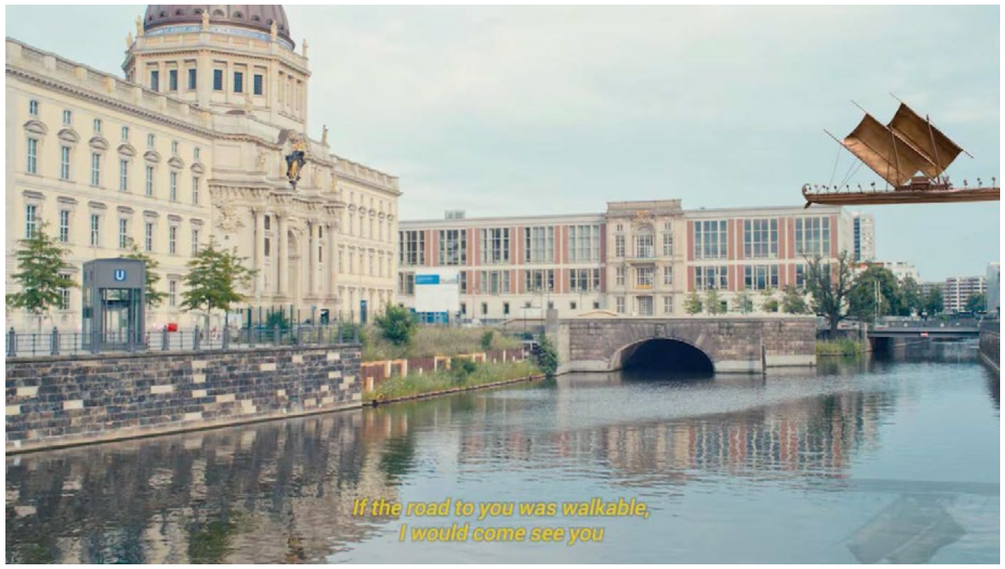
THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Tuan Andrew Nguyen's first Canadian exhibition looks at colonial trauma through the story of a stolen Luf canoe



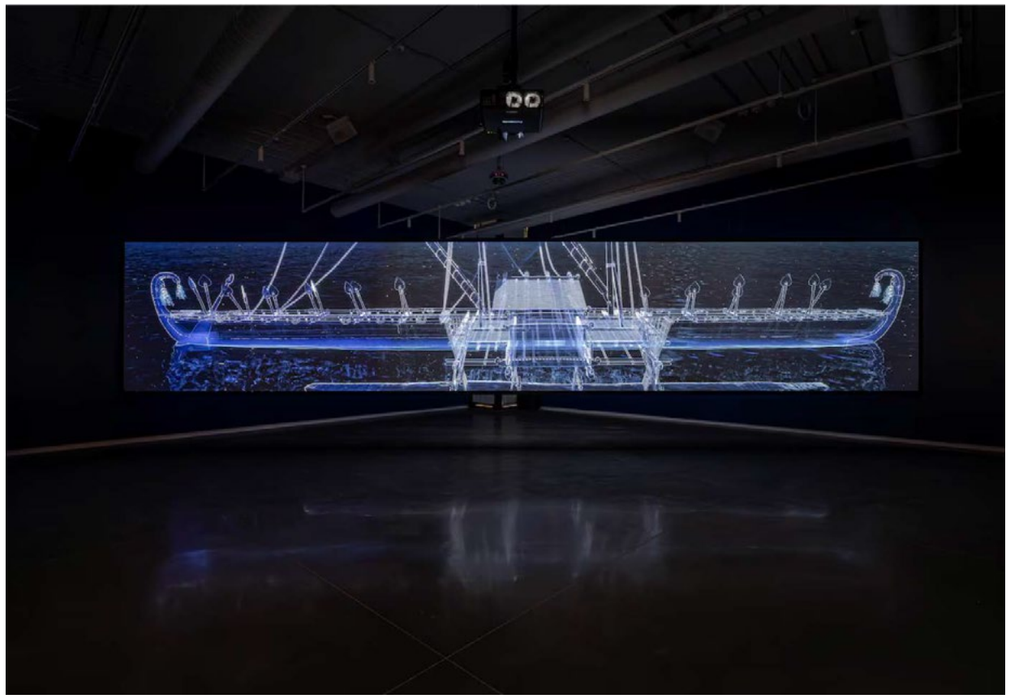
A 19th-century boat from the South Seas is now sailing virtual waters, all the way from Papua New Guinea to Toronto through Berlin.

The 16-metre dugout canoe with two sails and an outrigger was made on the Island of Luf around 1890, intended as the funerary vessel for a chief. Taken by German colonialists soon after it was built, the impressive craft now sits in Berlin's Humboldt Forum, which houses Germany's ethnological and Asian art museums.

The boat is the largest artifact in the collection. When the Humboldt was reconstructed from the old Berlin Palace in the 2010s, the new museum was built around the boat, which was placed inside a half-finished gallery before a wall was completed. Museum officials are in contact with the descendants of the Luf islanders who built the boat, but for now, the physical object, fragile and damaged by termites, is bricked into a gallery and not going anywhere.

Yet in the imagination of Vietnamese-American artist Tuan Andrew Nguyen, the Luf boat will escape this prison and sail home. Using CGI, he has created a fantastical video in which the boat breaks through the walls, floats through the Humboldt galleries and finally sails out the classical front entrance into the sky.

When Water Embraces Empty Space is now showing at the Goldfarb Gallery at York University, part of an exhibition devoted to Nguyen's work about the Luf boat. In a second video, titled Above the Sea, Against the Sky, which is projected on a horizontal screen the size of the boat, Nguyen designs both watery blueprints and physical representations, imagining the craft from all sides, including from underwater.



In the end, the boat is set on fire, as it was intended as a water-borne funeral pyre for the chief.

Connecting Luf islanders with the boat at the Humboldt was Nguyen's idea.

"It was a very simple gesture: to connect descendants to an object stolen by the German navy," he said at the show's opening, the first exhibition of his work in Canada. "When it comes to colonial trauma, it's hard to fill that void. Sometimes repair is not an option but imagination can fill the space."

Nguyen's work, featuring suites of videos and installations, has dealt with issues of colonialism, displacement and diasporas. Previously, he had considered the situation of the Senegalese soldiers who had fought for the French in what is now Vietnam. But he has always been interested in boats.

"I was called a boat person growing up," he notes, referring to the refugees who came to North America at the end of the Vietnam war.

Having seen this boat in Berlin, Nguyen set out to locate the Luf islanders. He made contact with Stanley Inum, a fourth-generation descendant of one of the boat builders. The German museum has sometimes represented the boat as a war canoe, and the information on its website of what happened on Luf varies from the account Inum makes in a documentary that Nguyen also shot and which is showing at the Goldfarb.

Inum tells the story, handed down through the generations, of how the Luf islanders retaliated against German sailors – who had arrived to trade but raped Luf women – by boarding their ship and murdering them. When the Germans eventually discovered why the merchant ship and all hands had disappeared, the Imperial German Navy intervened and killed most of the islanders. The survivors intermarried with people from other islands and Papua New Guinea mainlanders, but the Luf language and culture, including boatbuilding skills, were lost.

Today, Inum, his son, Fordy Stanley, and nephew, Enoch Lun, are part of a team building a new boat based on the measurements and photographs they took during a visit to Berlin. Nguyen's documentary footage shows the emotional moments when they are welcomed to the Humboldt to see the boat. A museum official explains that Germans had believed all the Luf islanders were wiped out, so they are delighted to welcome these descendants.

The curators in charge of the boat note it is very fragile and has been treated with pesticides because of termite damage, before the islanders are then permitted to examine it. (The boat has both sails and paddles, and the islanders refer to it as a canoe. Nguyen has also filmed them back home felling a tree and painstakingly hollowing it out to build the new boat.)

Inum, Stanley and Lun all attended the opening at York, where the show also includes a few samples of paddles and decorations for the new boat, making the connection physical. The exhibition was co-commissioned by Edith-Russ-Haus in Oldenburg, Germany and The Showroom in London, but Goldfarb director Jenifer Papararo felt it was a particularly good fit for her gallery in Toronto because it is also the custodian of a collection of 39 objects from Papua New Guinea.

Those are historic masks, figures and shields donated to York by University of Toronto architectural historian Thomas Howarth in the 1970s and intended as a teaching collection. Today, the Goldfarb is left with the puzzling question of how to curate these objects unrelated to its collection of Canadian art, but is currently showing them as an open-vault display to accompany Nguyen's work.

The story of the Luf boat, also told by German historian Götz Aly in The Magnificent Boat: The Colonial Theft of a South Seas Cultural Treasure, is not yet a story of repatriation. In Nguyen's documentary, Inum, Stanley and Lun hold a fascinating discussion about what might come next. They wonder: Would the Humboldt accept the new boat as a trade? If the islanders were given the old boat, how would they care for it?

Stanley suggests they would set it alight and push it out to sea. After all, it was always intended to be burnt.

When Water Embraces Empty Space continues at the Goldfarb Gallery at York University until Aug. 2.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

TUAN ANDREW NGUYEN with Quyên Nguyễn-Hoàng

Tuan Andrew Nguyen was born in 1976 in Sài Gòn, Việt Nam before his family moved to the United States. His work explores the multifaceted qualities of memory, be they historical, social, personal, and how those qualities inform our present moment. On the occasion of Nguyen's exhibition, *Lullaby of Cannons for the Night*, he spoke with poet and translator Quyên Nguyễn-Hoàng about his kinetic sculptures crafted from bomb fragments, the two-channel video installation which makes use of the song lyrics of Vietnamese poet and musician Trịnh Công Sơn, and the unsettling relationship of idolization and extinction.

Quyên Nguyễn-Hoàng (Rail): Tuan, since your work is made of materials transmitted from the past—memories, legacies, hauntings—let's begin with ancestry, shall we? Can you tell me some stories about your parents and their upbringing?

Tuan Andrew Nguyen: That's an interesting first question. My father was born in Hanoi and my mother was born in Hải Phòng. They grew up in Saigon in the late fifties, sixties, all the way to the end of the seventies—1979. So they grew up during this period of what we know as the Vietnam War, or the American War, depending on which perspective one takes. I think for the most part, growing up in Saigon in the sixties and seventies was a fun time. It was cosmopolitan. There was a lot of influx of Western pop culture. There was a big rock scene. There was a big cha cha scene. My parents were big cha cha dancers. They loved to dance. My father was, I guess, a romantic. He played the classical guitar, had long hair, was kind of a hippie, tried to avoid the war as much as he could, got drafted in the last six months of the war. My mother came from a very large family of eight children. I don't know much about the intricacies of my parents' growing up, but I know that they had lots of fun. There was a lot of chaos, but they didn't talk about that.

Rail: I like that they remembered dancing. Amidst all that chaos, the first thing they, and you, recalled is that they had fun.

Nguyen: Isn't that funny? One of the first memories I have in the US is—I don't know how many years we had been here—but there was a big dance party. A lot of the people who immigrated were probably in their mid-twenties, and I remember seeing lots of cha cha and rumba and bolero at this party. I was really young, but remembered this feeling of swaying in an ocean of movement, hips and legs, bodies twirling.

Rail: Besides the dance parties, what was your childhood like?

Nguyen: Besides the dance parties, I was a very confused child. I've been trying to put myself in my children's shoes lately, to try to kind of understand this. When you're young, everything seems so big.

Time feels so slow, right? So elongated. So for me, looking at my daughter, from the time she was born to now—she just turned seven—things feel so fast for me, but for her, it must feel like a lifetime. And it has been a lifetime for her, literally. So my childhood felt so long. So much happened. But I think that's the way we as children perceive the events that happen to us. Even the smallest events seem so big.

Rail: You know, in your films, time often feels slowed down. So it's interesting that you think of your childhood also in terms of that temporal elongation.

Nguyen: Time is malleable, right?

Rail: Are there certain books or texts that have influenced your philosophy of malleable time?

Nguyen: I think all of the Buddhist texts that my father had in our house have been quite meaningful. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* is one of them. I know it's a controversial text written by a controversial person. But it came at a time where I was dealing with my father's passing and transitioning, and it helped me understand a lot about dying and living. Another book which might seem distant from this, but to me is very much in the same realm, is Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. These two books are not very far apart in my mind, you know. *Kindred* was about a woman who was going to the past, visiting a previous life. She was helping her ancestors survive so that she could actually be who she was.

Rail: *Kindred*'s ending reminds me of the bodhisattva's arms in your work. Did that image come from *Kindred*? Or am I making up this connection?

Nguyen: Dana's lost arm… That is an amazing connection. You know, when I thought about *Kindred*, that didn't even come to mind. I came to the image via a person named Hồ Văn Lai, who appears in my film *The Unburies Sounds of a Troubled Horizon* (2022). Hồ Văn Lai plays himself, and he was a victim of a cluster bomb when he was ten years old and he lost both arms. And then I was drawing from a kind of mythology of Avalokiteshvara, who grew one thousand arms to help alleviate the suffering of the world. And then I was thinking about mudras in Buddhism and the powers they have on the practitioner. So it's making these connections around prosthetics. *Kindred* will probably now be another connection, with Dana's left arm.

Rail: Let's continue this literary vein by way of swerving back to one of your elders. Could you share a bit about your grandmother, who was a poet?

Nguyen: I think writing poetry was her way of hiding her points of view through, you know, things like flowers or the autumn sky. She was a romantic but I think she was also quite political. As a woman growing up in the thirties, forties, fifties, she wasn't encouraged to be outspoken or to put her ideas and perspectives out there. Poetry was her act of resistance.

Rail: Is there a poem by her that particularly moves you?

Nguyen: There's a poem that recounts her return to Hanoi after being gone for so long. When I first came across it, what struck me was this idea of return, and it was upon my returning to Vietnam that I came across this poem. I felt connected to her, even though her return wasn't transpacific like my return, it was just from Saigon to Hanoi, but for many, many years it was impossible to travel between the north and the south, and I felt that in her poem.

Rai: Can we read her poetry together? Let me read her fragment in Vietnamese aloud, then perhaps you can read your translation? I can also read from mine. And then we can keep talking.

Nguyen: That's a nice little exercise for a Tuesday morning.

Rail: I know.

Tôi Về
by Thư Linh

Từ buổi xa quê cát bụi mù
Lạc trong kỳ ảo của thiên thu
Đường dài thăm thẳm chân chồn mỏi
Sương quyện mơ hồ gió lạnh ru
Chỉ ngại lối xưa trăng huyễn hoặc
E rằng nẻo mới cảnh hoang vu
Tôi về tìm cái tôi còn, mất?
Thi hữu đừng chê khách viễn du

Nguyen: I have this obsession with quê, and quê is something that's quite remarkable in Vietnamese culture, particularly in Vietnamese literature, and it's something that's very hard to translate. I just wanted to say that before I read the first line, because the first line automatically conjures up this notion of quê, or homeland, but "homeland" doesn't quite contain the Vietnamese usage of quê.

Returning Home

From the time I left my homeland, amidst the dusty haze
Lost in the strange illusion of perpetuity
The endless road, even longer with my weary feet
The misty fog blends with the lullaby of the cold wind
Hesitant of the old route, mysterious under beguiling moonlight
Fearful of the new paths that lead to desolate territories
I return home to find the self that remains, the one gone?
Fellow poets, do not mock this distant traveler.

Rail: Thank you. It's always fun to have a couple of people translate the same thing and then see how they differ and where they meet. My translation is a light reversal of your grandmother's fragment, and also kind of an elongation.

Nguyen: Will you share?

Rail: It's called "Rewinding the I."

Rewinding the I

A far-roaming one she is. A long-distance strayer. A guest from outlying lands. Having introduced herself she now asks her poetry friends round here to kindly not mock her foreignness please. She is returning to her former homeplace. She is rewinding. She is rewounding. In search of the lost I that remains. Or is it the time that remains. That old alley she recalls is flooded with false moon. This new street ahead seems just as desolate. Damp fog is winding onto her. Dream haze coiling into her. Cold winds braiding into hair. The road is so long, so long and the feet are tired. Lost in the odd mirage of the thousand years. Far from the soil of birth. Far from the birth of soil. And the eyes, the blind I's, are again swimming as dust.

Nguyen: Beautiful. There's this recurring theme of bụi, all these dust motifs in Vietnamese poetry, or in Vietnamese literature in general. Why do you think that is?

Rail: Perhaps it's connected to the influence of Chinese poetic imagery, especially Chan Buddhist imagery. The idea that the world is all dream and all dust. Dream and dust are what we're made of. The English equivalent, I suppose, is "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." We come from the earth, and then we come back…

Nguyen: We return to the earth.

Rail: Are you aligned with this dustiness?

Nguyen: Yeah. I mean, it makes complete sense, right? It's an idea that's lasted for so long. We come from the earth. Everything we have that enables our survival comes from the earth. We've come to a point where we've extracted so much of it that it's become dangerous. But we will return to the earth regardless.

Rail: Something that poetry and earth share, for me, is a quietness. You've said that compared to words, silence feels more familiar to you. You grew up in this difficult silence of a diasporic family, as you put it. And yet, your grandmother taught you that silence can also be strong and loving. These days, where do you live in the zone of silence?

Nguyen: We're talking about dust and returning, and for me, the imagery of dust is one of silence, like a settling. The other thing, I guess when I think of dust, it moves around and moves about by the wind. People pick up dust, and dust attaches itself to carriages and shoes and travelers, and dust travels. It travels. It moves about, but it doesn't voice its opinion. It is a kind of witness.

When I think about the active observer, this idea of an active observer or a witness, I think of silence. Both my grandmothers were Buddhists, and my paternal grandmother was a very quiet woman. She was a very convincing woman when she spoke, but she didn't speak much. It struck me that she was probably in her head a lot, thinking or maybe trying not to think. I don't know. It's hard to tell, because I was so young, but I find myself very much like her in that I find myself inside my head often, trying to be silent inside the head. There's a difference, right? You can be quiet on the outside, not speaking, but inside you could be a complete shit storm. And so I am looking for that silence inside where I can find a real quiet center.

Rail: I like that poem you shared by Pablo Neruda, "Keeping Quiet," especially that line about a huge silence that interrupts the sadness. Silence and dust are also linked together in your film, *The Sounds of Cannons Familiar Like Sad Refrains* (2021). At the scene where they detonate the unexploded ordnance, dust flies up. We get a bird's-eye view of the explosion's dust, but it all felt so silent. The silence of the dust flying up stays with me.

Nguyen: The explosion happens, and the loudness, the sound of the bomb being detonated, lasts maybe a few seconds if you count the echoes, and then after that, it's complete silence. And in the film, there's a cloud of dust that expands to hundreds of meters tall into the sky, but it's actually a cloud that's settling. It's land that has been tossed and agitated, dispersed into the air, and it's kind of settling down back into the ground and, in a way, returning home. So that moment, for me, when I watch it again, seems spectral. It seems like an apparition. It's like a ghost of itself. There's a beautiful connection between silence and dust. We couldn't actually film close up—we tried to place some cameras near the bomb, and we built all these boxes and structures to protect the camera, but we just couldn't get a good angle of it. I think the most poignant angle is the angle from above where you just see the cloud of dust. Which is something that we've been looking at a lot these last few months, this last year.

Rail: It's been difficult to look at the news. It is a repetition of what we, as Vietnamese, and I'm sure many other peoples, know well.

Nguyen: It's interesting that you say that, and I say that too, but we know it…

Rail: Visually. You're right. We don't really know it.

Nguyen: We know it as inherited memory.

Rail: And yet in a way, it feels real. The transmitted wound can consume the memory and the mind. You're right, though. We should honor the difference between the people who were there and the people who, like us, came after.

Nguyen: I think the way that memory functions, and trauma, which has become such a used word lately—the way that trauma functions is fascinating, right? Just in the fact that we've spoken about those experiences that we didn't really have. But it feels so real sometimes. I wonder how that operates. I guess my work has been trying to figure that out: how memory and the body work in relation or in opposition to each other.

Rail: This is a digression, but I have to make this connection. Right now with your red hoodie pulled over your head, you look a little like Bodhidharma in these Chinese paintings of him wearing his vermilion robe. Bodhidharma was often portrayed as this almost surly-looking monk with very strong, firm, exotic features to emphasize that he came from elsewhere.

Nguyen: Bodhidharma, he traveled from South Asia to East Asia and brought ideas of Buddhism. Is that correct?

Rail: Yes. He's regarded as the first patriarch of the Chan tradition.

Nguyen: Didn't he also bring martial arts?

Rail: According to the lore, yes, he also founded Shaolin Kung Fu.

Nguyen: As he traveled, he came upon various animals and he learned their different fighting techniques. Tiger style and snake style and praying mantis style and so on and so forth.

Wushu, kung fu, those forms are quite beautiful. They're almost like dance, rather than a practical form of self-defense. The techniques aren't as harsh or as pragmatic as something like boxing or Muay Thai. They're kind of these ritualized dance forms almost. If you've seen a Wushu performance, it's kind of like ballet.

Rail: Martial art is indeed a dance, and an animal-inspired one. Ballet is more geometrically formed, don't you think? The regimentation of the body into this perfectly proportionate, athletic vessel.

Nguyen: Almost like a machine, no?

Rail: Yes, whereas the way martial artists look at the body feels, to me, closer to the animal world in a weird, fascinating way.

Nguyen: I've been thinking a lot about ritualized dancing and how different cultures outside of the West have used different forms of ritualized dancing as a way to heal trauma. We have started to learn or discover that trauma is held in the body. A lot of people say that trauma is held in the hips. Bessel van der Kolk, the author of *The Body Keeps the Score*, was talking about this in an interview I was listening to, and he was mentioning how forms like tai chi or Qigong or even capoeira or other dance forms, like tango even, any kind of dancing is a form of dealing with the traumas that are in the body. Capoeira is especially interesting because it was like a physical form of resistance, but hidden inside the aesthetics of dance, which I find fascinating.

Rail: The history, the spirit, of capoeira is beautiful. In my mind, dance is not separate from ritual.

Nguyen: My brother has a dance school in Saigon, and he has a dance crew that he works with, and they do hip hop choreography. When you see a stage full of dancers who are completely in sync with each other, there's something magical about it. It's mind blowing how they become one entity.

Rail: The synchronization of bodies can be powerful. Though I must admit that when I was a schoolchild in Hanoi, wearing the red-scarfed uniform and occasionally marching didn't exactly feel like a spiritual communion. But I'm familiar with the idea that one is not supposed to stand out.

Nguyen: That's interesting you say that, because I grew up hearing these stories, because my parents were dancers. They were really into cha cha. I mentioned this to you before, but after 1975, all those dance forms were illegal in the south.

Rail: For a time, many forms of culture were.

Nguyen: Any form of culture was illegal. And so I think there was this saying, like, "cấm ăn chơi, cấm quậy phá, cấm nhảy đầm." Isn't that fascinating? No partying, no dancing…

Rail: No disturbance. Don't disrupt the order. Don't rock the boat.

Nguyen: Don't rock the boat. [*Laughter*] And my parents would hold these small gatherings, and they'd invite their friends to come and dance cha cha, rumba, tango, and all those bolero forms, and they got caught. This was late 1975, before I was born. They got caught. And it was my grandmother, whose poetry we just read, who came out and talked to the police on her children's behalf, and managed to sway them and alleviate the whole situation, managed to keep my young parents out of jail, just by talking to them.

Rail: The power of a poetic voice. I'm glad to hear of this triumph of poetry over policing. A poet's voice, I never underestimate it. It can be fragile, and at the same time, quite strong.

Nguyen: You translate a lot of poetry from Vietnamese to English. What is the hardest thing in translating poetry?

Rail: The cadence. Getting the rhythm right. There can be a lot of stock imageries in a Vietnamese poem—you know, the thousand autumns, the homeland, and so on. But if you get the words and the rhythm right, the permutations are infinitely beautiful. Meaning matters less and less compared to the music of the poetry. Sometimes words dance vibrantly in one language and not so much in the other. So the goal is to make the cadence alive somehow, even or especially in translation.

Nguyen: Interesting. So in one language it could be a cha cha, but in another language it can look like capoeira.

Rail: Exactly. A song can have many lives. Translation as reincarnation.

Nguyen: In the film *The Sounds of Cannons*—I've been doing this a lot, and I've been trying to get better at it. I've been translating a lot of Trịnh Công Sơn songs, because a lot of my films draw upon Trịnh Công Sơn, and Trịnh Công Sơn is a very beautiful writer. You know, first and foremost, he was a poet.

Rail: And a Buddhist one.

Nguyen: And a Buddhist poet, yeah. So it's been extremely challenging trying to translate lyrics of Trịnh Công Sơn from Vietnamese to English. How do you think I did in *The Sounds of Cannons*, for his song "Đại Bác Ru Đêm"?

Rail: You did well. Subtitles for Vietnamese movies can sometimes be hilariously bad. I like those a lot too, actually. I want to refrain from the binaric judgements of good vs. bad translations. With your work, I am moved by the line you picked for the title, *The Sounds of Cannons Familiar like Sad Refrains*. "Đại Bác Nghe Quen Như Câu Dạo Buồn." You nicely translate *dạo* as "refrain." *Dạo*, to me, also sounds like a wandering fragment of music. "*Đi dạo*," you know, "going for a walk." Perhaps like the song of a street vendor. Your selection of that song is poignant.

Nguyen: The direct connection to "*Đại Bác*" and cannons was there, and it was a pretty easy pick, but it wasn't until I started translating it that I started to understand how Trịnh Công Sơn was thinking about sound and body. Like, the flesh of our mothers and children, like, "Oh, golden flesh." There's this really strong connection he makes between the sounds of these cannons far away and their impact on the body, the body of the people.

Rail: He compared the sound of bombs falling to lullabies. There's so much strength and so much grief in that line. It's a murderous sound, and yet it was so frequent in Vietnam that it was like the lullabies that put you to sleep every night. And then there was this imagery of a street sweeper pausing the sweeping to just listen to it. This brutal sound was becoming atmospheric and a part of everybody's lives.

Nguyen: When I was in Quảng Trị doing research for this series of works, one of the things that shook me when I got there was the sounds of bombs being detonated in the distance. You would hear a bomb every thirty minutes, a loud boom and an echo in the distance, all day, every day. It was insane to think about the amount of unexploded ordnance that still contaminates that area, especially that area in Vietnam, because it was so close to the DMZ. Have you been to Quảng Trị?

Rail: I haven't. I wish I had more familiarity with the dialect.

Nguyen: Yeah, this is a beautiful segue into language, right? When I was making *The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon*, it was crucial for me that the actors spoke in a real daily Quảng Trị accent. But I think, because people from Quảng Trị are so conscious of their accent, they soften it up, even subconsciously.

Rail: I don't like that there is a dominant "correct" accent in Vietnamese. People from certain provinces feel obliged to adjust their accent according to the northern one.

Nguyen: There's this saying that a friend of mine told me a while back, they say something like, people in the north get the first part of the word wrong. People in the center get the middle part of the word wrong, and people in the south get the last part of the word wrong. We're all getting it wrong.

Rail: We're all equally wrong, [*laughter*] as this species called human, I absolutely agree.

Nguyen: I really appreciate this conversation, because there are these connections between dust and silence and the body and language and translation and song and lyrics that you managed to connect so nicely.

Rail: Reading poetry together helped. It grounds the tone of the space. It's like this gesture you did when you were talking about the settling of dust, which looks like a tai chi gesture to me, the sinking of the breath down to the belly. Reading poetry together is like sinking the breath together. The bodies are suddenly in sync.

We should reroute back to your work. The branches of some of your kinetic sculptures resemble the forms of trees. Other works recall celestial animals like dragons. Can you share some thoughts on the natural world and the supernatural world?

Nguyen: I made this film in 2017 called *My Ailing Beliefs Can Cure Your Wretched Desires*, which looks at the natural world from a specifically Vietnamese point of view, exploring the folklore, exploring how tales of animals have integrated themselves into the history of Vietnamese politics, like Hồ Con Rùa, for instance. We've obsessed over these different animal forms and have caused the extinction of rhinos all over the world because of different belief systems. The relationship between the human and the natural world is a fraught one, and it's ironic that Vietnam, which is one of the most biodiverse places in the world, is also experiencing some of the highest rates of extinction.

And then you think about all the connotations that the different animals carry. Dragons in the East have a very different reception than dragons in the West, for instance, or how tigers during the American intervention in Vietnam were seen as this monster in the jungle, and the US army would be attacked by tigers, or try to kill as many tigers as they could. The inculcation of animals, nature, politics, culture, and tradition is a really tangled web, and it seems like we're not processing all of that in a way that leads to any kind of symbiosis. We're just afraid of the unknown, which the animal world still is to us. To a large extent, the natural world is still unknown, and we're just continuing to destroy it. I'm constantly trying to understand that relationship.

Rail: The central issue I hear from you is that of desire. We romanticize both the natural and supernatural worlds while we consume them all the time. We relentlessly eat and extract from the earth. We use the icons of supernatural animals in our religious texts….

Nguyen: And even sports teams in the US, they're all animals. We obsess, we idolize, we do all sorts of things. And that is a consumption in and of itself.

Rail: To idolize something while killing it. What a human thing to do.

Nguyen: A very human thing to do. And what we should all do is just sit down and be silent.

Rail: Just sit into the huge silence that brightens the sadness. Simone Weil once said the problem with humans is that we eat when we're only supposed to quietly look.

Nguyen: That's beautiful.

March 3, 2025

HYPERALLERGIC

Tuan Andrew Nguyen's Ballad of the Bomb

The US deployed the largest aerial bombardment in history during the Vietnam War. Here, the artist tells the plaintive story of those unexploded weapons.

It begins with an explosion that judders the floor and resounds in your bones. Following that starting gun, the left channel of Tuan Andrew Nguyen's "The Sounds of Cannons, Familiar Like Sad Refrains / Đại Bác Nghe Quen Như Câu Dạo Buồn" (2021) plays archival footage glorifying American military might. The soundtrack alternates between victorious horns and a masculine voice with a Transatlantic accent boasting of the USS Bainbridge, the world's first nuclear-power-guided missile frigate. Whereas the video on the left is composed of quick, grainy, spliced-together clips in military shades of blue and gray, the one on the right is slow-roving, it's almost uncannily crisp camera following a squad of workers as they carefully maneuver a bomb out of the russet earth within the lush greenery of the Vietnamese province of Quảng Trị.

The United States's bombing of Vietnam during the two decades of the Vietnam War (called the "American War" there, for obvious reasons) constitutes the largest aerial bombardment in history. Tons — literally — of unexploded ordnance (UXO) still stud the landscape. In many of his films, Nguyen interviews Vietnamese war survivors, building a scaffold of human memory. But when people are dehumanized — an essential first front of war, fought right at home, in the theater of the psyche — humanizing an object might, paradoxically, kindle empathy. Accordingly, the "protagonist" of this film is that very unexploded bomb in the right channel, musing in a booming, bass voice.

With this UXO's unburial comes, for lack of a better term, a trauma dump. He's a shadow of himself, he complains, after having been abandoned here for decades. His indoctrinated hatred toward the Vietnamese is bitter but vague, and falls apart with any prodding. "They've dug me a grave," he says at some point of the bomb squad, with something like gratitude. "Gave me a proper burial." His existence will likely stoke a deep sense of pathos in the viewer: Absurdly, and poignantly, here is a missile experiencing imposter syndrome. He tells us that 10% of those bombs dropped did not explode. Was this on purpose, the silent protest of American soldiers opposed to the war, "Or am I just a failure?" If you think about it, he was drafted into the war like so many — even worse, he was *created* for it.

In the two rooms bookending the video installation are two Calder-esque sculptures wrought from metal bomb casings and artillery shells, one hanging from the ceiling and the other rooted to the floor. If they could speak, I wonder how they would feel about transitioning from an unwilling mercenary of war to a sleek object of contemporary art, tinkling gently with the opening and closing of gallery doors. I wonder if they would laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of being returned to

their homeland for this new purpose. I wonder what they would think of their younger "brothers and sisters," as the UXO in the film put it, wielded in endless wars all around the world, to which they are in mute, inert kinship.

Tuan Andrew Nguyen: Lullaby of Cannons for the Night *continues at James Cohan gallery (291 Grand Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through March 22. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*

October 22, 2024

stir world

The Other Side of Now reckons with complex transcontinental colonial histories, acknowledging the intergenerational nature of violence.

Tuan Andrew Nguyen's video, *The Spectre of the Ancestors Becoming* (2019), is replete with moments when one feels a kick to the gut and a sense of sickness at the enduring violence and corrosiveness of colonialism and extractive capitalism. During an imagined scene enacted between Ibra, a Tirailleurs Sénégalais (Senegalese infantrymen who fought in the French army during both world wars and in wars of colonial suppression in Algeria, Vietnam, Laos among others) and his Vietnamese wife, Nguyễn Thi, there is a discussion about his wish to return to Africa with their children — she does not want to leave. "I'm French only when they need bodies for bullets," the soldier laments of a role that has been conveniently erased by Eurocentric historiography.

Later, the son Ibra leaves Vietnam with confronts his father about not responding to his mother's letters and "amputating a part of my life". The son feels an outsider in Dakar with his bi-racial features and a sense of being incomplete because of a colonial tension which has led to his family breaking up. An intimate, messy colonial legacy that will remain through him, his newborn baby and then the next generation. *The Spectre of the Ancestors Becoming* is one of three video installations in Nguyen's *The Other Side of Now,* an exhibition which runs at the Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town, South Africa until 20 July 2025.

Another protagonist (a modern-day descendent of a Vietnamese woman and a Tirailleurs Sénégalais) from another story arc in this series of vignettes which form the installation, holds up a portrait of her grandmother; the French-made car in the background confirms colonialism's economic resilience and entrenched residual power. Comprising filmed and audio-recorded enactments of imagined or real scenes between parents, grandparents and offspring, and intimate archival photographs (from Vietnamese-Senegalese families in Senegal which includes family archives and military/ news ones) *The Spectre of the Ancestors Becoming* is powerful and poetic in its stated aim to "untangle" complex histories and complicated intimacies of Vietnamese and Senegalese solidarity. Different narrative elements are screened simultaneously across the four screens creating an apt sense of disorientation.

Set in contemporary Vietnam, most of the protagonist Habiba's reflections occur around the Moroccan Gate, a monument in Hanoi's Ba Vì district built by Moroccan defectors from the French army. The gate serves as a portal between Vietnam and Morocco, between the worlds of the living and the dead, and is also the focus of a speculative segment at the end of the film which warns of the contemporary environmental catastrophe humanity faces. The dual-screen emphasises the notion of two worlds and two perspectives, of identity unsettled — a double consciousness echo of WEB DuBois.

Habiba reads a letter to her father, written because "no one living will listen". It details her outlier status in both Vietnam and Morocco (where she attempted to settle for a while) and an exploration of her own identity—with its perceived missing parts—through trying to discover who her father was. "It's been 60 years and I still don't have a place to call home," she says, mourning a constant search for roots. This is an intimate familial desire for ancestral connection but meeting, often, only residual colonial violence.

In the room adjacent are accompanying works, *Contact (02)* (2024), a sculptural replica of the handmade sign on the Moroccan Gate, and *Letters from the Other Side* (2024). *Letters from the Other Side* consists of two embroidered tapestries which replicate the propaganda pamphlets the Việt Minh independence movement distributed to Tirailleurs during the First Indochina War to convince them to defect. Several hundred of the approximately 1,40,000 soldiers either surrendered or did defect according to recent news reports.

One of the most powerful pieces in the exhibition is *Solidarities Between the Reincarnated* (2019), a collection of family archive photographs presented in frames on furniture for display. It is a poignant reminder that stories of families—however, and wherever in the world they may be constituted—are universal ones. Contemporary resonance is also loud in *The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon* (2022), the longest of Nguyen's video installations — and his most filmic in terms of narrative, scripting and cinematography. The aesthetics cause the piece to move between Korean melodrama and hard-hitting documentary as it follows the protagonist Nguyễt, who works in the family scrapyard in Quảng Trị, a demilitarised zone that split Vietnam between the north and south.

Nguyệt believes she is the reincarnation of the sculptor Alexander Calder, has an extremely needy mother and collects scrap, including the shells of bombs from the Vietnam War involving the United States. Her cousin Lai has lost fingers, an arm, legs, his sight and two other cousins while exploring a land-mine and teaches children to avoid ending up like him — or worse.

As 2000-pound bombs rain over Gaza and now Lebanon, Nguyen's exploration of the lasting effects of war and its associated traumas are inescapable in 2024. Over 41,000 are reported dead in Gaza – families erased, communities destroyed. Children are trapped and slowly dying under the rubble of devastated buildings, while others walk past every day searching for food or medical assistance, unable to respond to those pleas. These are new acts of violence that Nguyen's work demands we confront in the present — and repeat Lenin's nagging question: What is to be done? Today, and for generations to come.

Nguyễn's work acknowledges the intergenerational nature of violence. It attempts to repair through the process of turning haunting into healing. This is most evident in how some of the bombshell casings gathered in the film have been remade as five *Singing Bowls* (2022): the audience is invited to play with these bowls set at different frequencies for different types of healing.

The Other Side of Now successfully disentangles and highlights these messy, obscured and erased colonial histories through collaboration with communities and a subsequent reflection on the intimate and familial. In doing so, the exhibition also connects a city and a country with a violently racist past to a present where colonial and apartheid traumas still flourish unresolved. Where state violence, like the police massacre of 34 striking mineworkers in Marikana, South Africa, in 2012 perpetrated and perpetuates the madnesses of previous regimes. It also connects South Africa to a world almost overwhelmed by environmental, political and economic conflicts — all of which have their roots in the colonial, extractivist past.

August 10, 2023

The New York Times

The artist's video installations and sculptures show how the Vietnam War still reverberates through generations.

One of the wisest, most beautiful and unsettling exhibitions in New York this summer is "Tuan Andrew Nguyen: Radiant Remembrance" at the New Museum, a show about coming to terms with the intergenerational trauma of war. Nguyen works in video and also makes art objects pertaining to them. In the three recent moving-image installations here he creates narratives that operate in cinematic and real space in different, often affecting ways.

Nguyen was born in Saigon, Vietnam, in 1976, and came to the United States with his family three years later. His family lived in Oklahoma, Texas and Southern California, where he earned a B.A. and an M.F. A. Revisiting Vietnam as a young man, he came to see the country and its trials as the primary subject of his art; in 2005 he moved to Ho Chi Minh City, where he continues to live and work.

Nguyen is a documentarian and an assembler of broken things with a preference for collaboration. His work aims to heal the fragmented lives and retrieve the suppressed memories of the marginalized people most affected by colonization, war and displacement, especially in Vietnam.

The artist's first major exhibition in an American museum, "Radiant Remembrance," has been organized by Vivian Crockett, a curator at the museum, and Ian Wallace, a curatorial assistant. Its video installations focus on people who live in the shadow of the two long wars for Vietnamese independence.

"The Specter of Ancestors Becoming" (2019) and "Because No One Living Will Listen" (2023) explore the aftermath of the First Indochina War (1946-1954). "The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon" (2022), the most ambitious work — and possibly a masterpiece — takes up the Vietnam War (1955-1975), which was known in Vietnam as the American War.

Nguyen's taste for collective artmaking began when, as an undergraduate, he was active in a graffiti crew. It resurfaced in 2006 when he became co-founder of the Propeller Group, a three-artist collective that was especially active in the 2010s.

His own moving-image works are also collaborative: Their stories are based less on official archives than on personal interviews with people who can end up enacting versions of themselves in front of his camera.

He also strives for collaboration among art mediums: most impressively in his sculptures but also in photographs and drawings that accompany the video pieces here.

His working method is clearest in "The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon," a 58-minute video that is exhibited with a group of sculptures that also appear onscreen. The ensemble was shown at the James Cohan Gallery last year. It exemplifies Nguyen's ability to make material, space and perception, both in and around his films — what I would call form — a powerful part of their narratives.

"Unburied Sounds" is set in Quang Tri, a Vietnamese province where abundant munitions fragments and unexploded ordinance (UXO's) from U.S. bombings are a constant danger and a material resource. They are also the through-line of the video's plot and the connection to the accompanying sculptures.

The sculptures, all from 2022, give new purposes and meanings to the discarded war metals. "Unexploded Resonance" is the shell of a large bomb, dropped from a B-52 aircraft; it hangs from an antique wood stanchion and serves as a temple gong. "Shattered Arms" is a carved wood statue

of the goddess Quan Yin, whose damaged arms and hands have been repaired with shiny brass new ones cast from artillery shells. Brass also figures in "A Rising Moon Through the Smoke," which copies and translates a signature mobile by the American sculptor Alexander Calder into an artifact worthy of Eastern cultures.

These objects all appear in the film, essential to its tragic, indomitable tale. The film's main character is Nguyet (the actress Nguyen Kim Oanh), a young artist who collects scrap metal to make her living and her sculpture. Having been born in 1976, shortly after Calder's death, she believes she is his reincarnation. Another important character is Lai (Ho Van Lai, playing himself) who was horribly maimed as a child when he accidentally detonated a cluster bomb. In the final scene of the film, he sits in saintly serenity on the rocks of a shallow stream, wearing the prosthetic brass hands that Nguyen made to repair the Quan Yin sculpture.

Neither of the remaining pieces have this knitting-together of objects and video. However a four-channel video, "The Specter of Ancestors Becoming" (28:30), achieves its own impact — a kind of slow-moving kaleidoscope — by projecting short scenes of intergenerational and cross-cultural exchanges among the descendants of the Senegalese troops who were enlisted to fight for the French in the First Indochina War, and took Vietnamese wives.

In one segment, a Senegalese-Vietnamese adolescent combs the long, straight hair of her Vietnamese grandmother, while gently quizzing the older woman about her past life in a country that which she will never see again. In another, a Senegalese father argues heatedly with his Senegalese-Vietnamese son, who has named his baby daughter after his Vietnamese mother — still in Vietnam, whose existence his father has done everything to erase.

"Because No One Living Will Listen" (11:30 minutes) is a two-channel video that is Nguyen's most recent work, and his first to use CGI (computer-generated imagery), which increases the visionary quality of his efforts. It centers on Habiba, a Vietnamese woman who moves mournfully through the landscape holding a letter like a talisman that she has written to her dead Moroccan father, who died when she was a baby. To either side of the screen hang embroideries on white khaki fabric — enlarged versions of propaganda pamphlets that the Viet Minh insurgents dropped on French colonial troops urging them to defect, which Habiba's father did. Balancing this change of scale, she carries and ultimately burns a small model of the Morocco Gate, built in Hanoi in the late 1950s by Moroccan defectors from the French Army. The elegant anguish of the work's title sums up her predicament.

The undercurrent of enduring suffering in the wake of war lies at the heart of "Radiant Remembrance" and runs through Nguyen's work. Suffering is in the details, he seems to say. Nonetheless, his skill at excavating them and at embedding them in moving images and art objects makes this an inspiring, even exhilarating show.

THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

An-My Lê can barely recall the Hawaiian shirt that the blond American wore when he put her into a black cargo van. Though many of the artist's memories from the spring of 1975 bleed into one another — slanted piles of burlap sandbags encasing her bedroom wall, fallen artillery shells lining the streets near her school like bread crumbs — what has remained with her lucidly from those last few days of the 21-year war that divided her home country against itself, is the profound fear that had engulfed Saigon. The city was bracing for the Quân đội nhân dân Việt Nam, the Communist army of the North, and the Việt Cộng, the guerilla-style militant groups from South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, to capture the capital of Việt Nam Cộng hòa — what the United States and the rest of the Western Bloc knew as the Republic of Vietnam. Lê spent that night on the military tarmac of Saigon's Tan Son Nhut Air Base with her father and two brothers. When dawn broke, she took one last glance at the landscape through the windows of the American C-130 aircraft as it disappeared into the clouds. She was 15.

Complicated emotions of uncertainty and anger, guilt and abandonment all intersect for artists from Lê's generation; those who are not fully Vietnamese in Vietnam nor American in America. Shrouded in war, these Vietnam-born American artists use their memories not so much as a political protest as an emotional inquiry, through the generational traumas that have plagued their families since the day they left home.

How a displaced culture can endure in America is a complicated concept for anyone to attempt to grasp. The Vietnamese diaspora is a marginalized generation who had no choice but to flee their homeland and then integrate themselves into the society of the enemy — it's the center of a disconnect they've been trying to grapple with for the past five decades. And only now are Western institutions finally giving these displaced artists room to engage with these traumas.

"We never talked about it after," says Lê, 63, who will be the subject of a retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art in October. She now lives in Brooklyn. After leaving Vietnam, her family was taken to Clark Air Base in the Philippines as refugees before being shuffled to Wake Island, Guam and, finally, Camp Pendleton, a Marine Corps training center in Southern California that housed over 50,000 displaced Southeast Asians from April to October of 1975. After gaining U.S. sponsorship, they settled in Orange County, where they eventually reunited with her mother, one of the final evacuees from American Embassy after the fall of Saigon. "I always looked back at the experience like, 'My God, it was nothing. Don't even think about it.' I felt so terribly lucky that we didn't have to experience many of the horrors that others did. I never thought I could go back."

American assimilation and its effect on identity has long interested Phung Huynh, 46, who left her country after the end of the war. Her parents were already refugees living in a refugee state — her mother, a descendant of Southern Chinese immigrants, and her father, a Cambodian genocide survivor — when they purchased a large fisherman's boat in 1978 to smuggle themselves out of the southwestern port city of Rạch Giá. Beneath the rickety vessel's deck, she and over 30 family members crowded together in silence between crates of raw fish and ice as they made their way toward a camp in Thailand. After three years in Michigan, she has lived in Los Angeles ever since. "There is a lot of inherited trauma, resentment and the feeling that we should be grateful," says Huynh of her family's experience.

Her 2021 series, "American Braised," which is currently on view in the exhibition "Vietnam in Transition, 1976-Present" at the Wende Museum in Culver City, Calif., inlays imagery from her own refugee experience into glass snow globes atop cumbersome wooden bases. In one orb, specs of silver confetti float around weathered images of Vietnamese civilians climbing over one another to reach the helicopters evacuating the roof of an apartment building used by the C.I.A. during the fall of Saigon. In another, grains of snow engulf a photograph of Huynh's first White Christmas in the United States. The souvenirs, like much of the multidisciplinary artist's work, function as an encapsulation of her memory. They also speculate about what might have been. "What would have happened if we stayed?" asks the artist. "Who would I be if the war didn't occur?" She still keeps a go bag with her two sons' passports ready at all times.

Saigon-born Tuan Andrew Nguyen, who immigrated with his family to the United States in 1979 and lived in Oklahoma and Texas before settling in California, has been asking himself similar questions his whole life. The 47-year-old artist's sculptures and moving-image works broach expatriation and the idea of returning to an unfamiliar home, something he experienced firsthand when he relocated to Ho Chi Minh City in 2004 after receiving his M.F.A. from California Institute

of the Arts. His first major American exhibition goes on view this week at the New Museum in New York. In addition to new works, the show includes a 2022 project consisting of unexploded ordnance that Nguyen, the co-founder of the artist collective the Propeller Group, came across in the Quảng Trị province of northern Vietnam. By fashioning shell fragments and salvaged bomb metal into Alexander Calder-esque mobiles tuned to 432 hertz — a frequency said to heighten perception and increase mental clarity — the artist attempts to tangibly come to terms with his home soil.

People move on by confronting the demons of their pasts, but such a resolution is not so simple for the Vietnamese Diaspora, whose memories are plagued by losses — of life, of land, of childhood. While the Việt Cộng was the fear they grew up with, much more awaited them as they crossed the Pacific to start over. As a result, many of the works on this topic leave the viewer feeling just as frozen as the artists that made them: struggling to move forward.

"I think a lot about the notion of the enemy," says Lê, who participated in and photographed Vietnam War re-enactments across Virginia and North Carolina between 1999 to 2002. When she first returned to Vietnam in the '90s, through a grant from her M.F.A. program at Yale, she did not do so to visit her home, which had been renamed after the Communist President Ho Chi Minh, but

rather to walk atop the enemy's foreign terrain. The artist found herself surrounded by northern Vietnamese who had had no choice but to attack their own countrymen. They had worn the same uniforms the re-enactors wore — that she wore — decades later. "It helped me understand the notion of Vietnam being an idea or a myth rather than an event. In blurring those lines, I think I found empathy."

For nearly half a decade, Lê returned to her home country once a year, venturing further and further into what was once the unthinkable. "It was extraordinary," she recalls particularly of its capital, Hanoi, where her mother grew up with relatives she never knew existed, and Thái Bình, which is known as the hometown of rice. "I felt at home [in the north] even though I had never been there." Captured over the course of that time, Lê's "Viêt Nam" series (1994-98) shows her attempt to reconcile her lost memories of the country's blood-soaked soil with its contemporary landscape. In 1995, MoMA purchased a black-and-white photograph of a precarious young girl on a *cầu khỉ* ("monkey bridge") crossing the Mekong River Delta, the artist's first work to be acquired by a major art institution. This fall, that image will be joined by 17 other large-format photos from the project as part of the artist's largest museum survey in New York. Thirty years since taking them, Lê still struggles to articulate the significance the photographs have had on her understanding of her own identity. "That culture — my culture — felt so ineffable at the time," she says. "I had all these memories and extensions of what I had lived, what I was told I lived, but I didn't know it. As soon as I saw the landscape, part of it made sense to me."

But did it answer all of her questions? "No," she says, "not at all."

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