VAGABOND

FEATURING VIETNAMESE ARTISTS:

Anthony Le
Antonius- Tín Bui
Hien Kat Nguyen
Jess Nguyen
Khánh H. Lê

Kim Khouan Khong Sandara
Leo Nguyễn
Mai Khôi
Naomi Ngoc Le

Philippa Pham Hughes
Thu Anh Nguyen
Uyen Hoang
Valerie Plesch

TABLE OF CONTENTS

VAGA

Anthony Le
8-13

Antonius-Tín Bui
14-19

From The Editors
4-7

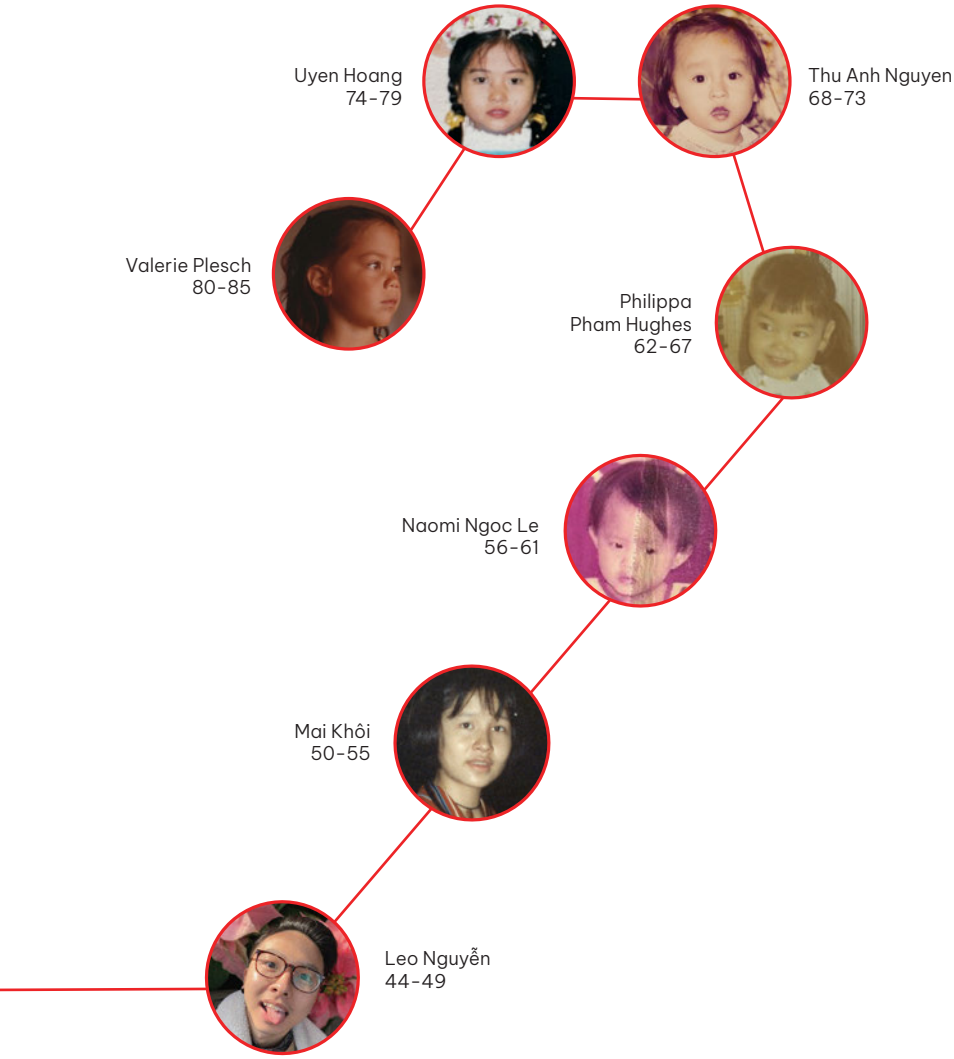
Hien Kat Nguyen
20-25

Jess Nguyen
26-31

Khánh H. Lê
32-37

Kim Khouan Khong Sandara
38-43

BOND


Uyen Hoang
74-79
Thu Anh Nguyen
68-73
Valerie Plesch
80-85
Philippa
Pham Hughes
62-67
Naomi Ngoc Le
56-61
Mai Khôi
50-55
Leo Nguyễn
44-49

Anthony Le: I'd like to start with gratitude, because I'm so excited to work with you Philippa on this project. I admire your work and social sculpture. I know that your work is also about identity and about being Vietnamese and American.

Philippa Pham Hughes: I'd like to express my gratitude as well because we haven't known each other very long, but when I went to your show at Transformer, I felt like I understood your work and connected to it immediately. Especially the feeling part, because the only time the conversations that I organize are successful is if people express their deepest, most vulnerable feelings. I feel like that's what you tried to do and I responded to that. I'm really excited to get into exploring our shared identities.

A: This zine features Vietnamese artists. We interviewed 13 artists and have asked each person to write a letter to their younger selves as an act of self-love. Since the pandemic, I keep meeting Vietnamese artists in the art world here in D.C. and from around the area, as well. I'm so delighted each time because I grew up in Tennessee where there weren't many Vietnamese people. To see these artists out here displaying different types of work has been really inspiring.

P: I also grew up in the South, so that's another thing we have in common. My brother and I were the only Asian looking people in our school until I went to high school. For so much of my life, I suppressed my Asian-ness. Certainly my Vietnamese-ness. When I was growing up, things were too close to the Vietnam War, which was a terrible war on so many levels. So I think that made me never want to say, I am Vietnamese. I'm only recently becoming more comfortable in my skin and with my identity, partly because I keep running into Vietnamese American artists and writers and people on TV and it's so amazing. I just never saw that when I was growing up.

A: Yeah, I felt similarly growing up. My identity was my little secret that I didn't want to have to explain because I couldn't explain it in a lot of ways. There was this war and this horrific thing and then this diaspora. It's hard to explain, and my parents didn't talk about it very much when I was growing up. I have distance now and the useful tool of therapy to help me work through these feelings.

I went to Vietnam most recently in 2018, and I didn't go with my family. Are they going to think I'm Vietnamese, or not? I don't really speak the language, and nobody thought I was Vietnamese. That dissuaded this notion that I'd find happiness in the motherland, but honestly, it has freed me up. Okay, no one thinks I'm Vietnamese, but no one's opinion on that matters. I'm still Vietnamese, and I'm going to explore and express it in my own way. I'm an artist, so I'm going to poke around

with it and make fun of it and I'm going to enjoy it.

P: We aren't actually Vietnamese people who live in Vietnam. We're creating a new identity for ourselves.

We're trying to figure out where we fit in the world, where we belong in the world, no matter what your identity. That's kind of a fundamental human question that we all want to know the answer to, and it's a lifelong journey to figure it out.

I also don't speak Vietnamese and that right away makes you not Vietnamese, especially to Vietnamese people. When I went to Vietnam, everybody thought I was Swedish. I kept trying to say, I am one of you. They said, no you're not.

When my mom left North Vietnam in 1954, she left behind two sisters who had married communists who weren't allowed to leave. There was no communication between our families from 1954 until 1996 when my uncle reconnected with them. When my mom and I went to Vietnam after that, we found all those relatives, and they looked like me. They kept holding my hand and wouldn't let me go. We have the same tall forehead and the same smile. It was so weird.

It was the first time I ever felt like, other than the family that I grew up with in Virginia, that there were people like me in the world.

Did you find relatives in Vietnam?

A: I did. My uncle lives in Saigon. I was so nervous to meet him because of the language barrier. They came to lunch with my friends, and it was so sweet. They also saw me off before I left. We had this communication barrier, but I could still feel the love. I can still understand a little bit of Vietnamese, so we were doing our best to communicate. I made a pastel triptych afterwards about unspoken feelings despite the barrier.

I'm excited to see them again because as an artist, I see myself as a translator of feelings and ideas, and we also have Google Translate and other tools to communicate across that language barrier. I'm excited to have more conversations with them when I visit again.

P: Another thing that happened to me in that first trip to Vietnam was my family took me to where our family

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— PHILIPPA HUGHES

had owned lands with the house they'd lived in and the grounds where my ancestors were buried. There was great grandpa and great, great grandpa. I saw their actual tombs and it made me feel a little like this is where I belonged. It was amazing. I can't quite explain why but I want to find a way to translate those feelings out into the world. I usually do it through writing and you do it through your painting, but it's fun finding these other modes of expression and being seen through this project.

A: What are you excited about for the Zine?

P: I have been wanting to do a zine for so long. I have been a voracious reader my entire life. I love to write. I'm excited to create something with words. The great thing about a zine, though, is that it can integrate so many different kinds of art forms along with the words, like photography and other visual art forms. The zine is a way to express ideas in a variety of delightful ways.

A: I am also excited because I don't write very often, and I'm trying to write more now, especially poetry. It's exciting because it's very open ended. It's very DIY in a lot of ways. I'm really excited to learn more about each artist and be in community with them and to support them.

What is an outcome that you wish for this project? For me it is the specificity. The story of the Vietnamese community and the diaspora has been told a lot though I feel like there is a divide between West Coast and East Coast.

P: And Texas!

A: Yeah, and Texas. Then we have the Eden Center here in Falls Church, Virginia, and it's being threatened with redevelopment and gentrification. This zine is almost this rallying cry to say, hey, we're here.

P: I'm very excited about the specificity for sure. But also, my larger project is around what does it mean to be American? And being Vietnamese is one aspect of being American. The fact is that I am DNA 50% Vietnamese and that means something. I'm exploring. I don't know the answers. I am struggling and I think doing art is part of that struggle and being around our fellow Vietnamese artists helps. I shouldn't call it a struggle, because it's exciting and fun even if it's hard.

A: For me, being Vietnamese American was almost about reducing myself when I was growing up. Now it feels expansive. I'm double things. I think that spirit of abundance is something that's shared with all of the artists.

P: I think about it exactly the same way, especially in our politically polarized times when many people have become essentialists. I often go back to Walt Whitman who said, “I contain multitudes.” Every one of those multitudes is pretty giant, and like you said, just keeps getting bigger and bigger.

The specific can become universal. When we share specific experiences, there is a universal appeal in our shared humanity.

We have a really good mixture of artists, musicians, and poets, but also perspectives. As with any group of people, there’s going to be a spectrum of perspectives. There’s 330 million ways to be American. There’s 7 billion ways to be human.

IT'S LIBERATION THROUGH SELF-LOVE AND VULNERABILITY. THERE IS AN HONESTY THERE. THERE IS AN OPENNESS TO BE WRONG THERE. THERE IS A FORGIVENESS THERE.

ANTHONY LE

My name is Anthony Le, and I am an interdisciplinary artist. I work in painting, sculpture, performance and fashion.

As I mentioned in From The Editors, I feel free in my identity now because I realize there is no right or wrong way to be anything.

I felt a lot of pressure growing up to conform to the model minority myth. Put your head down; do the work; your parents sacrificed so much. That made me feel very small, especially growing up in Tennessee. I used to minimize my feelings to be a good American worker robot, but now I'm feeling the feelings, thanks to therapy. I enjoy finding these very specific things about my past and my heritage that I love and share them through my art.

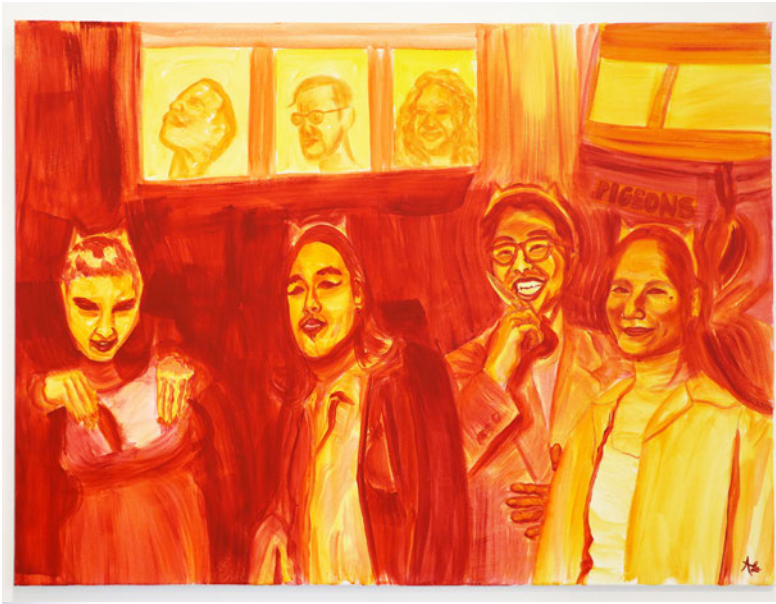
It's liberation through self-love and vulnerability. There is an honesty there. There is an openness to be wrong there. There is a forgiveness there.

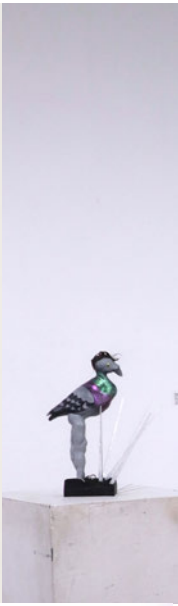
My painting "Vagabonds" inspired the title of the zine, and it's a painting of my friends. There's Uyen in there, Leo, Rosie and her bandmates and my spouse Ashley. There's a train inspired by 1914, a Vietnamese restaurant that I go to a lot in DC. It's a meditation on thinking about how the word "vagabond" to me is about transition. It's about travelers; it's about community. It's like this devious little party that you kind of want to join, but it also seems a little dangerous, diving into my exploration of queerness' historical demonization as social deviance.

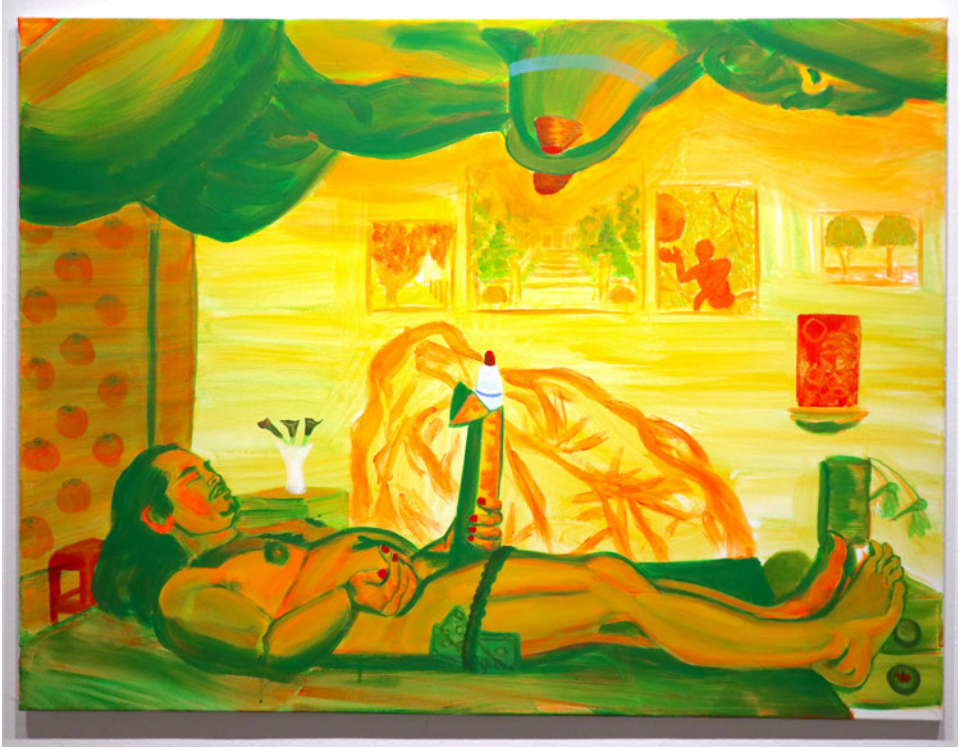
I identify as queer and non binary and feel a sense of responsibility towards masculinity, so my pronouns are he or they. I kind of identify with pigeons too. The artist formerly known as Maps Glover enlightened me to how iridescent and present pigeons are in cities. Yet they can easily become invisible. I feel that as a queer person in a hetero-presenting relationship and a masculine-presenting person during a lot of my life. I'm finding liberation through my queer community, and thank my queer role models for recognizing my queerness even before I did.

P: What inspires you?

Ocean Vuong's poetry has always inspired me. I really love "Old Glory," which is a poem where Vuong points out how violent machismo, masculine patriarchal language is in everyday cliches. It's so violent when you see them all together, and this heart of violence also relates to the military industrial complex I live within in DC.


PIGEONS





VAGABONDS, 2023

Acrylic on stretched canvas
30 x 40 x 0.75 inches

PIGEON LEGS (LEFT), 2023

by the Model Mutiny Art Collective
Apoxie, wood, wire, plastic, acrylic paint and hair sculpture
15 (h) x 7.5 (w) x 3 (d) inches

TRUST PIGEON (RIGHT), 2023

Acrylic on canvas with scroll hanging
60 x 31 inches

THE MODEL MUTINY LIVE PRINTING ART PERFORMANCE, 2021

Performed by the Model Mutiny Art Collective at Disco DC

Anthony Le (performer)
Ashley Jaye Williams (performer)
Canine Teeth (music composer)
Photo by Michelle Claire Lorentzen

OPEN MIC (MILITARY INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX), 2023

Acrylic on canvas with scroll hanging
60 x 31 inches

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Dear Trung,

Leaving home is the first revolution.
Southern hospitality is sweaty and salty on the lips.
Not too bad for an ~~immigrant~~, no, refugee family #AmericanMade.
But too bad for my self-esteem, and you won't hear me say "y'all".
Does the world begin inside the home or out?

Chosen family is the second revolution.
A life with fellow artists makes art your religion.
Adult play is true pleasure and creation and destruction.
We run into the dark, searching for what's buried within.
And we dress like pirates for the tax write-offs.

Ocean Vuong is the third revolution.
The voice from the audio book makes me want to cry.
Except girls like me don't cry and boys like me can't.
Gorgeous the passcode to Queer joy, probably happiness.
Soft words pierce my yellow belly.

Therapy is the fourth revolution, of course.
Bridge the gap between what you don't know about your family,
With what they don't know about you. Sprinkle in patience.
Your body has hidden wisdom, a murmur of muscle tenses.
Embrace the comfort of tears, even in a bathroom stall.

Returning home is the fifth revolution.
Let the aughts and the ought-tos wash away.
The riptide takes you then turns into itself.
Language can be a barrier, but translation is your practice.
Who knew the return of "y'all" was most inclusive and sincere.

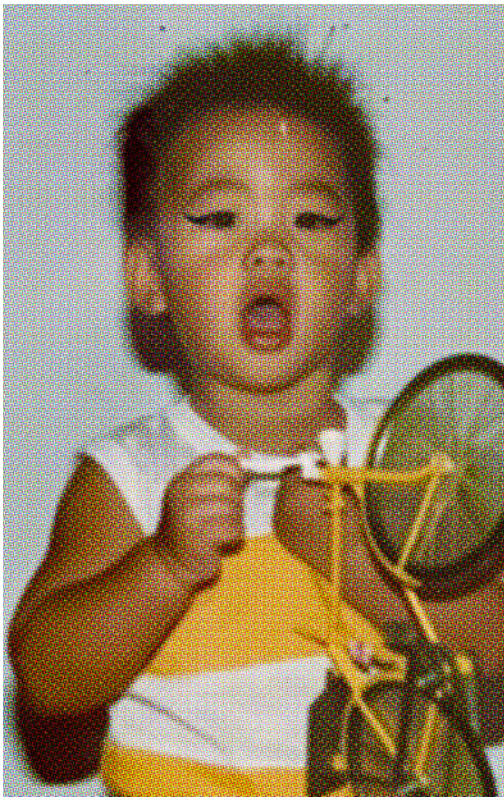


PHOTO BY CAROLINE XIA

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT FOR US TO DIVE INTO THE PAST, DIVE INTO ARCHIVES, UNDERSTAND OUR HISTORIES BUT ALSO DARE TO DREAM IN NEW DIRECTIONS?

Antonius-Tín Bui

I'm Antonius-Tín Bui, an eternal student, a poly disciplinary artist, and an infinite shapeshifter. I'm just flopping [around] in a burning world and trying to find other fish on land who are collectively searching for a better ocean.

I would really credit my family for the way I fluidly move between mediums and art forms because I didn't have any formal art training until my senior year of high school, and most of my creative ways of being were just fostered in the household from developing games in the backyard, putting on fashion shows, playing with Barbies, building forts, having sleepovers. I also saw how important of a role my parents played in organizing events not only for our family but for the Catholic Church. And so I didn't really see a distinction between life and art growing up.

Re-familiarizing myself with Vietnamese cooking has probably been the most rewarding part of my creative practice. I'm actually taking Vietnamese lessons, cooking Vietnamese food and just gathering with friends. It's kind of where it's at. Philippa, you do that. That's part of your practice, fostering gatherings.

P: I think about relationship building all the time. At the end of the day, it's our relationships with one another that matter the most.

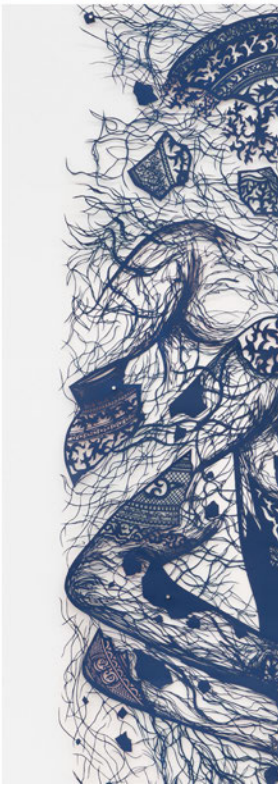
As I garner more success in the art world, the further and further I feel away from certain loved ones in my life, especially my family even though I collaborate with them to a certain extent. I constantly find myself yearning to return to that, and it's really difficult in a capitalistic society.

Maybe we should all just be funded by the government to be artists or have a starting salary as cultural workers. Maybe redistribute the money within the US military and weapons and arms <laugh>.

I've made it a goal to spend at least one year abroad, and that priority has actually arisen from just knowing that the art world will never save you. It will always demand more of you. I know that traveling is such a privilege, but I really do hope that every South East Asian person who desires to can travel to Asia to explore and to figure out their relationship to their motherland or whatever they want. As we can see in Saigon, Hanoi, and other cities in Vietnam, the kids just be kidding <laugh>. The art scene is obsessed with goth and DJing, and they have balls now.

How important is it for us to dive into the past, dive into archives, understand our histories but also dare to dream in new directions?

CUTTING OFF
UR DICK JUST
CUZ U FEEL
LIKE IT



NOT EVERYTHING FLOATS. I AM TRYING TO LEARN WHICH PARST OF ME TO LET SINK, 2022

hand cut paper, ink, and paint
92 1/2 X 60 inches

UPON SKIN, UPON STONE

upon skin, upon stone is a dance narrative film (12 mins) that premiered on September 26th through Washington Project for the Arts for KUVV, a multidisciplinary, collaborative project organized by choreographer and performance artist Hayley Cutler, exploring the relationship between home, familial lineage, and the body, 2020.

Responding to various Vietnam Veterans Memorials on the East Coast, Theresa and Antonius will complicate our understanding of the Vietnamese diaspora through intuitive movement and poetry. Oscillating between intense stillness and chaos, they explore the phenomena of reverb as a metaphor for assimilation. Beginning with references to our traditional Vietnamese-Catholic upbringing, our movements will echo into glimpses of an Asian-American futurism.

THERE ARE SO MANY WAYS TO HOLD WATER WITHOUT BEING CALLED A VASE. TO DRINK ALL THE HISTORY UNTIL IT IS YOUR ONLY SONG, 2022

hand cut paper, ink, and paint
86 x 42 inches

RETURN, MY MIRRORED SISTER

Performed at Spring Hill Arts Gathering 2023 as part of "Slow and Sweaty", a group exhibition envisioned by Claire Kim, The Here and There Collective's curator. return, my mirrored sister was a collaboration between:

Issei Herr (Cellist/Musician)
Antonius-Tin Bui (Producer, Choreographer, Performer)
Phuong Nguyen (Costume Designer)
Michelle Phuong Ho (Poet/Performer)

Movement/Dance by:
Niki Afsar, Lili, Thanh Bui, Theresa-Xuan Bui, Dinh, Glenna Yu, Kathy Guo, Antonius-Tin Bui, Iris You
Photography: Nu

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

LEFT TO RIGHT: JAMES-LONG BUI, ANTONIUS-TIN BUI, THANH BUI, THERESA-XUAN BUI

The wishes from parent.

We can spend time on work, on passion, on personal life and forget that time with our parents is something that really needs to be a priority. The older you get, the older we are. When Love is great enough, you will realize that the most valuable asset of parents in none other than their children. Remember that your journey to adulthood all includes the shadow of your parents. so arrange your time, listen, understand and show your love for your parent everyday.

Home sweet home! this quote is beautiful. When you grow-up, home is the place you wanted to leave fastest to explore the world is now the most peaceful and safe place to return. You will realize that no matter how old you are, when you return home you are still a child, As the parent take care of every meal and sleep. Not only do you look forward to coming home, parent look forward to you even more. Every meal we spend together is precious that money can not buy. It doesn't matter what you give or receive, as long as you can see your parent, home is still a place to come home to.

Have you ever wondered how long it has been since your last traveled with your parent? It not required a lot money to do things that you wish, you can absolutely do what is within your power like arranging a trip every year with the whole family. Short or long trips will be memorable moments in parent, aging parent journey. Just like us, parent also need to go here and there, change the environment and learn more interesting things.

Mom and dad very much hope that you will understand our wishes when we getting old. If us have amnesia or are terminally ill, please don't abandoning us. Take care of your parent to the best of your ability with love and respect. Live well and remember all the things we often say and teach.

Love our children very much.

Mommy Daddy Bui

Mon, Feb 5, 2024, 7:20 PM

PHOTO BY ALEXIS COURTNEY

YOU DON'T NEED A FORMAL ART EDUCATION FOR ART TO SPEAK TO YOU BECAUSE IT WILL JUST SPEAK TO YOU. YOU JUST GOT TO LISTEN.

HIEN KAT NGUYEN

A: What was it like growing up in Saigon?

It was a different time when I was younger. I left Vietnam when I was 17 years old, an angry, confused, queer kid. I had no role models, and I didn't know how to answer inconsiderate questions back then. But now I can be like, I don't want to answer. I have the ability to fuck around and mess with people <laugh>. But nowadays queers in the younger generation and mental health awareness is much more visible.

P: Why did you move to Richmond, which is my hometown?

I was interested in art but I was having such a huge problem with the language barrier. Then an art teacher advocated for me, and VCU accepted me.

A: How was the art school experience? I didn't go to art school.

You don't need a formal art education for art to speak to you because it will just speak to you. You just got to listen.

I make art to document my experience and to communicate beyond the barrier of language. Folklore, narrative, and storytelling is what I'm interested in.

For me, it's easier to have an artwork tell my story for me. I want to be understood, but I don't want to just open up to anyone. I'm an open book, but people got to read.

P: Do you think about your Vietnamese-ness in your art?

I believe I'm the result of thousands of people that got together and fell in love. My experience cannot be separated from the history and community and society that I happen to be a part of. It's like a tree. Even when the tree dies, all the trees around it still feed off of it. The root system has just so many layers of history connected and somehow is reflected through my experience. My Vietnamese-ness just comes through in my work, so I don't need to make it come out. It's just there.

A: You asked me for some of my hair. What are you going to do with it?

I'm going to felt it together with a bunch of other Vietnamese hair inside a wood box for a project called the Special Normal. The box has pangolin scales carved on the outside. I was inspired by the tragedy of pangolins in Asia. People think that their skin can cure cancer or they can cure everything. The pangolin skin has this component of our hair which is keratin. Ten thousands of these animals die tragically every year for no reason when we can just eat our hair.

THÔI NÔI, JANUARY 2023

Ashwood, plastic, steel, electrical parts.

71 x 36 x 35 inches

UP ROOTING, SEPTEMBER 2021

Pinewood, 12 ft of the artist-made umbilical cord, plexiglass, Virginia bamboo, steel, replication of the artist's luggage tag (VN->US April 2017).

83 x 16 x 16 inches

ALL OR NOTHING, DECEMBER 2021

Pine wood, paints, chains, rope, metal ball.

87 x 48 x 27 inches

WHO OWE THE VIETNAMESE ONE THOUSAND ONE HUNDRED TWENTY YEARS, FEB 2023

26 x 40 X 40 inches

Dear H.N.

It seems therapeutic for one to try talking to their younger self
Yet, I feel uncomfortable and hellish trying
How am I supposed to talk to an identity I have done so much to leave behind?

I feel it is difficult to talk to you
Especially when I can't imagine a future for myself - It is hard to have a look at the past when I am barely present

But here I am, I hope you will still try, too.

From experience, I can imagine how hard life can be for you.
Or is it simple to grow up in an environment where people speak the same language as you sharing a common yellow skin tone and black hair as you
and somehow
you can't feel like you
belong. Is it horrible
and lonely

Who do you have but yourself to blame, right?
-To be frank, you won't be fair if you blame yourself.

Life is much more complicated than you
were informed you are a faggot existing in a heterosexual society
you come to school with old books and a bootleg uniforms you aren't a boy and you like things that are labeled for boys

The nuance area is so fuck up thin when you grow up. The gray area is supposed to be large! Give yourself credit for surviving and resisting this traumatic wonderful life. I think an artist needs at least two out of three elements to be a good one. Finance, a drive, and a life with depth. You are living life for the first time, ever. I allow you to make mistakes and be confused

Tomato tomahto
Somehow, I am still finding somewhere to belong.

Where I am nowadays, it's can be offensive and ignorant for people to assume I look like other yellow people
and no one around looks like me or speaks the language I grew up speaking
I struggle to accept my accent and it attracts unwanted attention without my consent

I am sorry no one was there to tell you the future will get better.

Tomato tomahto
here I am telling you

the future will get better. Remember to play and have fun

PHOTO BY LINDA ZHENG

HOW DO WE FIND THE JOY WITHIN OUR RESILIENCE TO KEEP GOING?

JESS NGUYEN

I have intentionally structured my life to bring me closer to devoting my life to liberation work. I work with an organization called the Asian/Pacific Islander Domestic Violence Resource Project and a part of what I do is political education. I help build curriculum to talk about anti-violence work to Asian communities, and that means breaking it down for women who are immigrants and whose first language is not English.

I'm also one of the founders of Viet Place Collective. My friend Quỳnh told me that they were having meetings with folks who were concerned about this redevelopment plan around the Eden Center, which is the largest Vietnamese commercial and community hub on the East coast. I felt so powerfully about this that I dug into my archives of family tapes where my family first moved here and footage of me growing up. I created a clip of my family as a way to pull people in to talk about the Eden Center and what was happening with the redevelopment plan.

I want to investigate how people here understand their displacement and settlement in this area because of a war. I want to understand how resilient they are and why they became so resilient. I want to connect it back to our generation of Vietnamese people growing up here in America and how that impacts the way that we think, the way that we move and interact with the world.

I want to break down what it means to be Vietnamese American without talking about the war because that's not all we are, right? What sustains me in doing this work is not my undying curiosity to understand the inner mechanisms of the war and the violence it has inflicted, but rather how my mom and my aunties can stay up so late laughing so hard in the way that they do, talking to each other and joking around and trying to make little desserts like che. How do we find the joy within our resilience to keep going?

A: What inspires you?

Have you heard of June Millington? She is a guitarist, mainly on electric guitar, but she likes to play acoustic too in the first all woman rock band to be signed to a major record label in the United States, Fanny. She is Filipino and her sister plays bass in the band. I was so deeply inspired by hearing about Fanny that I got into a rabbit hole of research, and I found out that June created a music school. I look up to them because not only has June broken down so many barriers and helped pave the path for people like me to grow into our art, but they have created this beautiful community. This music school called the Institute for the Musical Arts creates the space for women artists and non-gender conforming artists to learn music safely, because she understands what it was like to be a brown woman in the music industry, and it wouldn't have been possible without her vision, and without Ann Hackler's extensive organizing and educational background.

I can't imagine for you.
color? Do they

What dreams do you have in
look like mine?

Trúc My,

Spring season of 2024

I've written to you before, yet all of these letters haven't quite captured what you've wondered about most— the essence, or rather a vividly painted portrayal, of home. My words can only offer a glimpse of this experience, which transcends just a feeling or place. You just have to be there.

20 something years after the end of the war, our first home was a landing place for three generations of family, where the dreams of ông bà nội unfolded. Home felt like spring seasons spent counting the cascading pink blossom petals from the tree in our front lawn, the sound of cải lương from Paris by Night faintly traveling out windows late into the cool evening, and lingering scents of dầu xanh and moth balls in our closets.

Home is comfort in familiarity, is safely surrendering the embellishment of a truth (yours), is the inspiration to embody the hypnotic manifestations of a greater love you and your ancestors have dreamed of.

Sometimes it's a 200-year-old house with rustic charm, exposed dark wood in every corner. It's nestled on a patch of land across from the most beautiful lake, encircled by a ring of evergreens, an easy place to float and pass time. A home that always smells of earth, lit solely by a still hanging light in the middle of the kitchen island during the evening; this will always be the first thing you see when you shuffle in for midnight tea after practicing in the barn. During the day, sunlight will flood the dining room (your favorite room to read in) through gridded windows covering the wall, reminiscent of glass blocks.

Most of the time, home is exactly where you are, wherever and whenever that may be. So long as you hold your loved ones with steady hands and tend to heavy hearts with care, including your own, home is always with you. Remember this: purposeful art is not a sure product of tragedy, as pain is not a prerequisite for creation. Let your heart guide the music.

Thank you for holding onto the hope and boundless curiosity that there has to be more. Turns out, there is.

Abundantly,
Chị hai

HOW CAN WE LEVERAGE VISUAL ART, CINEMA, FOOD OR MUSIC TO SORT OF BRIDGE THE GAPS THAT ALLOW COMMUNITIES TO SEE EACH OTHER?

A: What was growing up like? How is having kids now?

As a child, you have to translate, and there was a lot of resentment, but I begrudgingly did things for my parents. As an adult reflecting back on that period, I felt lots of shame. I began to engage in my own art as a way to face my shame, using my work to think about my family being immigrants.

I felt like I was never loved by my dad. He would say something, and I would say something else. It was always like butting heads. I always felt like he had such a high standard of me that I would never be perfect in his eyes.

But having a child of my own, seeing how hard I work to plan for him, I realize how hard my dad loved my sister and I. In 2020 when he passed away, I began to realize that fatherly love that he had for me that I never was so aware of.

I also changed how I want to raise my kids too because growing up, I never heard him say, "I love you" to me. For my kid, I always want him to know.

P: I just read "I Love Yous Are for White People" by Lac Su, a Vietnamese person. I just want to say that because everything you're saying, oh, I'm going to start crying because I felt those things too from my own mother.

A: Can you talk about your work with Little Saigon in Clarendon?

After the war, they came here. They just wanted to be close to the capital so that they could talk to family members in Vietnam. The only place that they could afford was the abandonment of Clarendon. But then the 90s expansions pushed them out of Clarendon, and they had to fall back to Falls Church. And there's all these feelings of resentment.

What art can do is begin that healing process. How can we have conversations, talk about who we are, how we ended up here, celebrating their history, celebrating without sort of pointing the finger. Because when the pointing fingers begin to lower, the other side can begin to reflect. When someone else becomes defensive, it's harder for them to reflect. By engaging communities, I'm hoping that I can disarm these negative resentments, so that we can begin to do deeper thinking. How can we leverage visual art, cinema, food or music to sort of bridge the gaps that allow communities to see each other?

A: There's a lot of deconstruction in your work and a lot of the patterning and mixed media. How do you use those to disarm?

The patterns are mesmerizing. People stop and stare. In these patterns, I think about the tenderness of humans hanging on to their lives whether it's in Gaza, whether it's in Syria or any war torn countries that have people hanging on by a thin thread.

SHE WAITED FOR THE REST OF HER FAMILY FROM THIS POINT IN PLACE

RAIDED BY PIRATES BUT THEY MADE IT TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SEA

SITTING THERE WAITING FOR

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

My Dearest Uncertainty,

I apologize if using the name Uncertainty is provoking toward you. I don't mean it as a negative connotation or to devalue you or your character in any way. Instead, I hope you will embrace it as a mark of honor that defines your character in the coming days of turbulence as you become your own man and an American.

Of all the names, why Uncertainty? What else can you call a boy who constantly moves from home to home and from school to school every year? It's not your parents' fault that your family is here in America when they're in their forties, working 4 to 5 jobs a week to meet ends needs. They are doing their best so that your education is worthwhile. Moving you from one neighborhood to the next is their way of climbing the American dream, not for them, but for you and your sister. During those early years, your family never bought anything new for themselves. Second-hand clothes and second items are all that allow of you. Wearing old clothes, like the one with a fluorescent green that says "Happy July 4th, '87," means all your classmates judge you and your family. You never know if your school day is filled with embarrassment or joy when you slowly begin to understand what your friend is saying or communicating to you through English.

If the weekday seems terrible, the weekend is the same. Sure, kids your age go to sports clubs or get together for birthday parties on Saturday and Sunday, but your parents need you and your extra hands to vacuum and clean the office during the weekend. Eventually, when you are old enough, they will bring you to clean at 4:00 am before you head to your high school. You'll constantly ask if Life will improve for you or your family. But Uncertainty, look at this as Life training you and your character to be relentless and achieve higher ground for yourself and your family. No one knows the value of achievement and what it takes to get to where you are other than you and your family. Your mother and father never ask anything of you other than to help them help you and your sister be the best American version of them. They sacrifice so much silently; the least you can do is wish to be born into an American family.

As much as you despise your family at this young age, I hope you strengthen your emotions as you learn about death and letting go. You are forced to take care of two women whom you love dearly, slowly passing away in front of you as you helplessly watch them leave this world. First, your 2nd Auntie, who loved you like her own son because she cannot have children of her own. Every month, you take her to get her chemotherapy and watch how painful it is for her. You will be the only surviving witness to her pain and loneliness. A year and a half into her treatment, she passed away. As a teen, you'll silently witness her last moment on earth as you translate everything she says to the doctor. No one in your family will talk about it, and you will carry this sadness with you for her sake. In the middle of your high school year, the grandmother who took care of you

in the countryside was diagnosed with dementia. She passed away, not remembering who she was, but you cared for her that last year. No one will be there to talk to you about death or help with grief, but this will teach you about invisibility.

Life can be both harsh and challenging, but it's the best teacher you will have. Struggling for visibility is a lifetime work, but every door you open is another widening door for a family like yours.

PS. You will eventually get a painting of your grandmother into the National Portrait Gallery, and it will then travel to four other major museums across America. Uncertainty in Life will lead to certainty in your purpose, so keep working and grinding.

PHOTO BY LIZZI SKALKA

I THINK PEOPLE ARE BAFFLED WHEN THEY SEE MY TEMPORARY TATTOOS THAT ARE ABOUT THE BOMBS IN LAOS, AND THEN THEY SEE THIS CAT DRAWING, AND IT'S BOTH ME.

Kim Khouan Khong Sandara

I'm Kim Sandara. I am of the Lao and Vietnamese diaspora from Falls Church, Virginia, now living in Brooklyn, New York. When I graduated in 2016 from MICA, I did a lot of abstract expressionist work. It was going into queer themes of creating spaces that don't exist for myself and ruminating and reflecting on my experiences as a queer person with an intersectional identity.

From there, it grew into also questioning my Lao identity.

I did the 270 million project to make 270 art pieces inspired by nostalgic Lao music from the 50s and from my dad's taste. They're all 9 by 12 inches. They're all in black ink, inspired by Lao music. They each represent 1 million bombs dropped on Laos during the Secret War/Vietnam War era. Every time one piece is bought, a third of the money goes back into making art, a third goes into buying groceries and paying rent, and then a third of the money goes to either Legacies of War, which is a nonprofit in America that advocates about the history, or COPE, which is a rehabilitation center in Vientiane where people that get hurt from the bombs can get prosthetic limbs and physical therapy. Every time a painting is bought, there is a blackout in the grid of paintings and that's meant to symbolize the bomb workers in Laos. A lot of the bomb workers are actually women because it's a high paying job, and it's a job that women are allowed to do. They're also caretakers, the aunties and moms that lose children to bombs and are looking out for the community. They're doing this work that's really dangerous, but it's going to create a safer future for their families.

A: Thinking about these themes, what are your thoughts on the role of the artist, activism, and self-care?

For a while I was stunted about creating things related to the Lao diaspora, so I went back to working on a graphic novel about my coming out story that I've been working on forever. When I saw what was happening in Palestine, my reactions were really immediate because it was so similar to what I had just been reading about for a year and really marinating in.

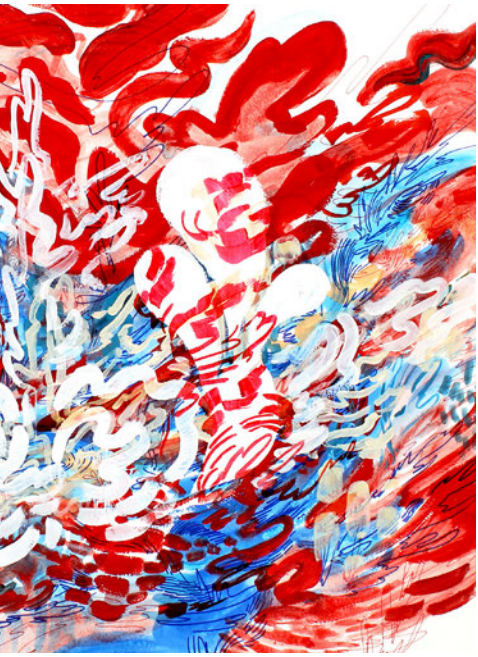
I run a shop, too. I do fun little illustrative things. I think people are baffled when they see my temporary tattoos that are about the bombs in Laos, and then they see this cat drawing, and it's both me. I think it's okay to be a full ranged human.

P: How do you feel about the Vietnamese part of your identity?

For a long time, I have tried to suppress my Vietnamese identity because I didn't feel very connected to the culture growing up. Although now I look back, and the culture was all around me. I can't speak Lao that well, can't speak Viet at all. There's all this baggage that I have to get over, and I feel like being invited to something like the zine where it's very safe to explore feels nurturing and healing. Things like this also make me feel more optimistic about the grand scheme of how everything is horrible, but we're doing our little things in between to make it better, and that's all we can do.

STRENGTH TO ALL OPPRESSED PEOPLE IN THE YEAR OF THE DRAGON, 2024

SYMMETRY (OR LACK OF), 2023



DREAMING OF LUANGPABANG... WHITE AMERICANS TELL ME IT'S GREAT THERE, 2023

FREE PALESTINE, 2023

Dear Baby Kim,

You're Lao and Viet. Being Vietnamese has always felt mysterious to you growing up because you grew up mostly in Lao culture, but let me tell you how you've also been Vietnamese this whole time.

You never really celebrated Tết, but you always went to Wat Lao for the solar new year. You never knew your Vietnamese grandpa, but at the Lao temple you visited him every year.

Every time people ask you about Laos, you would say it's located next to Vietnam because people know of Vietnam but no one knows of Laos. Afterwards, you might sheepishly say you're also Vietnamese. You were always hesitant to say "Vietnamese" because you were scared to get quizzed on the culture or language.

That's okay; you just thought since you had to give an entire history and geography lesson on Laos to every single person you met on the East Coast–that they might want that for Vietnam too and you didn't know as much about Vietnam. It made perfect sense to feel shy.

Remember all those times Mom made delicious Vietnamese dishes like phở, bánh xèo and spring rolls? She couldn't get your tongue to speak Vietnamese because all the new sounds of a third language made you giggle too much, but she taught you how to taste and cherish Vietnamese flavors! You like to eat like a Vietnamese person.

Remember all those times your Vietnamese family came from Pennsylvania and bought at least 72 bánh mì from the Eden Center to share with the whole family? You couldn't speak Vietnamese and you didn't know all the customs, but they taught you how to share the wealth like a Vietnamese person.

Remember the old Korean lady who ran the convenience store downstairs in our apartment building? One cold winter day, Mom brought her a hot bowl of pho to share because she worked near the outside door. You have never worn an Áo dài but you know how to look out for your neighbor like a Vietnamese person.

Remember when Mom made you help our next door neighbor Chi An with her printer and internet? It wasn't rocket science for a millennial like you to figure out but Mom taught you to be kind like a Vietnamese person.

Mom never forced you to be an A+ student – she just said to be good and to try your best. She wasn't the stereotype of a tiger mom. She was born in the year of the pig afterall. You may have been raised more Lao, but Mom taught you to eat well, to share, to be kind, to stand up for yourself and to follow your heart just like a Vietnamese person. You are enough and always will be.

With so much love,
Older Kim

I ALWAYS FEEL LIKE COMEDY HAS A LOT TO DO WITH CONTRADICTIONS. WHEN YOU SEE THESE TWO THINGS THAT SHOULD BE ALIGNED, BUT THEY ARE NOT.

LEO NGUYEN

My name is Leo Nguyễn. I am a comedian, a performer. I organize parties, shows, music and comedy festivals in New York and DC.

I perform in Vietnam when I visit my family in Saigon. It's a budding comedy scene that really encourages a lot of avant garde ideas and out of the box thinking.

It's like a sports team playing an away game to a sports team playing the home game. You get that added support of your people, your ancestors, your land, and, I always feel, more comfortable trying new things in Vietnam, compared to trying new things here.

Me and my pals back at home, we co-founded, a collective called Local Lầy. It's like locally, but Lầy is like a term in Vietnam where we talk about trying new things and get your hands dirty, muddy you know, kind of, dirty water fingernails, you know.

Local Lầy is a bunch of artists who are comedians. There are a few drag artists. There are a few traditional theater people in the past that converted into comedy and drag. So we do a lot of musical comedy. We do drag, and we do Vietnamese bingo, where two drag performers call out numbers and bingo, but they have like an entire verse before that <laugh>. So they'll pick up a number and read a poem, or they sing like a song, and then they end that with the number.

One of the most appealing things about stand up is that there's a set up, punch line and tags, but for the anatomy of a joke, you can almost do whatever you want. I keep developing new stories, dive deeper into my identity and find out more contradictions in my life.

I always feel like comedy has a lot to do with contradictions. When you see these two things that should be aligned, but they are not. There's something there for me to dive in and make that contradiction resurface. When people see that contradiction, they will see the contrast, and they will laugh.

I also want to have more shows and more community-based activities, giving Asian comics time to let them shine. There's a very small amount of Asian comics in DC, so I feel outnumbered. Then you kind of feel like you have to conform yourself within the norm. Being a local legend is an okay goal, but conforming into that small bubble to be the guy in a small bubble? I'd rather be somebody small in a big bubble, and let my authenticity shine through and without having to conform with the DC comedy scene or the New York comedy scene or whatever.

LEO NGUYEN

DUI DẺ NIGHT IN SOCAL, MARCH 2024

30% caffeine, 20% Sting Dâu, 15% old friends,
15% new love, 20% fresh memories

SOJU WINTER IN NEW YORK CITY, FEBRUARY 2024

1/4 Red Bull, 1/4 burnt cigarettes in the snow,
2/5 pizza, 1/5 crepes, 3/5 broke

Gửi: To: Nguyễn Tri Nguyên Lộc

Lives at: Ngụ tại: 122/1 Trần Đình Xu, Phường Nguyễn Cư Trinh, Quận 1, Sài Gòn.

Re: Le Quy Don High School, an October school day in 2011.

It was math class, probably the 2nd period or 3rd of the day, either just before or right after recess. Yes, Vietnamese students still get recess in high school because is there any reason not to? It is the sought-after 20 minutes that see couples poured out of their classes, rendezvoused at the canteen, get 2 iced-tamarind from the smiley middle-aged canteen lady, then scattered to their hiding spots:

behind the school and along the narrow bike parking strip, or upstairs on the top floor with the botanical garden is a popular recess dating spot,

or anywhere on the center court if you were feeling the need to profess your scandalous two-day-old burning love story.

Anywhere in this colonial French-built 150-year-old school would be a great spot to enjoy that iced-tamarind together. /cling-cling/

Anyway, it was math class. My math teacher is this particular 50-something man, Mr. Bích. I am not making this up. Imagine if he teaches English.

Mr. Bích has a daughter who was also in the school and one year to my senior. So Mr. Bích is like that quirky uncle who always has something funny in their mind, but rarely let it rip. They always get caught laughing at their unspoken thoughts, before anyone has a chance to know what they are. Mr. Bích has a stutter, which often gets in the way of landing his jokes. Then, the evil pupils (me leading the pack) would always giggle /loudly/ when he did that. Now, as a comedian, I have nothing but utter respect for him to always shoot for the punchline. Don't let a simple probability of known risk get in the way of you going for glory. Respect, sir, respect.

Huy and I sat on the first row as a disciplinary measure from our home teacher to keep us from trouble (we used to be in the last row). But the reposition couldn't stop us from clowning. We were absolutely diabolical. You have *that friend, the person that shares your humor frequency, they basically act as a magnifying amplifier for all of your nonsensical, outright ridiculousness that sends both into a prolonged laughter comma.

There were two math periods that morning and it's halfway through the first one. The class is quietly dissecting the derivative function on the chalkboard. When it's quiet in a Vietnamese classroom, you can hear a pin drop, the vent from the AC- though it's rare for a public Vietnamese school to have AC, my school is a bougie one. Amidst the silence, I seem to lose focus on the problem in my notebook, probably because I haven't found a way to solve it yet. Like instinct, my eyes departed, and my attention scattered. I heard something from the teacher's table, Mr. Bích he dropped his pen- I supposed. Then, I saw Mr. Bích reaching out for the pen on the ground, while still sitting down.

"Oh uh" I thought, "this can't be good."

Time slowed down, Mr. Bích continued to reach, and reach, 2-4 inches away, and it seemed like forever.

/BAMMMM/

The inevitable had come. He ended up falling out of the chair, bodies on the ground, teachers and students alike. I guess when even if you are a math teacher,

you can't ignore the simple rule of physics, you could end up on the ground in front of 40 teenagers. He was fine, but his pride was not. It definitely didn't help when I rushed up and put the chair back up instead of helping the poor teacher, amidst erupting manic laughter. The class did not hold it in, and we got a free second period because Mr. Bích just gave up and called it a day. To us students, any free period was an oasis in a 10-hour school day. It was a day to remember.

That 15-year-old class clown named Nguyên Lộc (Leo before Leo) is the person I am writing to today to thank him.

Lộc ơi, tao cám ơn mày lúc mày 15 tuổi. Vì lúc đó mày vui, mày vô tư, vô nghĩ, mày ngầu, và mày luôn muốn lan toả một thứ năng lượng tích cực. Mày muốn làm mọi người cười, không gì lí do gì, chỉ là mày thích nghe và thấy người khác cười, và mày từ lúc nào đó coi những nụ cười đó nhưng một nguồn năng lượng mà mày không thể sống thiếu nó. Và cũng từ lúc nào đó, nó cũng trở thảnh trách nhiệm và công việc?

That 15-year-old kid showed up to school every day with a few goals: play ball, hang out with his sweetheart at recess, eat a good lunch with free soup and rice refill, and make as many jokes in the classroom as possible. Actual schoolwork was never a priority. He knew how to be the happiest in that environment and everything he did revolved around that core mantra.

He was very original, brave, and rebellious. He should have known that he was going to be a comedian. But at that time, he thought he was going to be a journalist or a teacher. He made people laugh just because he liked seeing and hearing his classmates laugh, not for an IG like, or for a follower, or a paid audience.

He just does it. Pure and idealist. Foolish and inexperienced?

After more than a decade of living away from home, somehow I have found myself in a particular circle of artists, performers, and entertainers. Behind the curtains, when the crowd has cleared, and the floor is empty, you see past the glamour of the spotlight and the privilege of performing as a routine. Nevertheless, being jaded seems to be a recurring thing, rather than a one-and-done phrase. It's tough to be an artist, especially in a foreign land. But that 15-year-old dove headfirst into the unknown. He was so fearless, left home, flew across the world, and erased the line of East and West.

Because of that borderline-foolishness bravery inspired by High School Musical daydream,

I am here

Pursuing what I love

Doing stand-up

Throwing parties.

Still making people laugh.

Having a community.

Slowly finding a home away from home.

I guess, the 15-year-old me would be even more proud of myself than I am today.

And I am working on that.

Thương mày, Lộc lúc 15 tuổi.

Signed, kí tên.

Lộc và Leo, lúc 27 tuổi.

PHOTO BY OSLO FREEDOM FORUM

WHEN I START TO MAKE WEIRD SOUNDS WITH MY VOICE, I FEEL SOMETHING SPIRITUAL INSIDE ME. I THINK THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN AN ARTIST'S LIFE IS TO FEEL 100% FREEDOM.

MAI KHÔI

My name is Mai Khôi. I'm an artist activist from Vietnam. I studied music from my father when I was six years old. At 12 years old, I joined a wedding band with my father. Yeah, that was fun. And then, when I finished high school, I moved to Saigon and became a lounge singer. After a few years of being a lounge singer, I released three albums and was getting famous. Then in 2010, I got the song of the year award. I became even more famous, but then I was very frustrated with the censorship system. I became an activist first just to protect my right to be an artist, but I wanted to help artists in my country to protect their rights as well.

I nominated myself for the National Assembly election in 2016. I wanted to raise awareness for people about their right to participate in politics. I went to a protest and saw many people getting beaten up on the street by the police. My art changed when I witnessed that. I started to make some experimental sounds that express the anger inside me.

I left Vietnam at the end of 2019 because I was threatened to be put in jail. My motivation now is to create art about my life, social issues in Vietnam or here in America.

Bad Activist is a very important project for me since I got to the US. I started to do Bad Activist when I was in New York in 2020. The early version was a solo performance. I play my song with my guitar, telling the story, and I have a collection of pictures and videos behind me, so people can see my story.

I made it to Pittsburgh for a fellowship at City of Asylum and the University of Pittsburgh. Here I was introduced to other collaborators. Mark Micchelli is my music director, and he is a theater director. We developed my script of Bad Activist together. We have a projection designer to work on the footage, so we just have the finished version of Bad Activist, which I performed in February at Joe's Pub in New York.

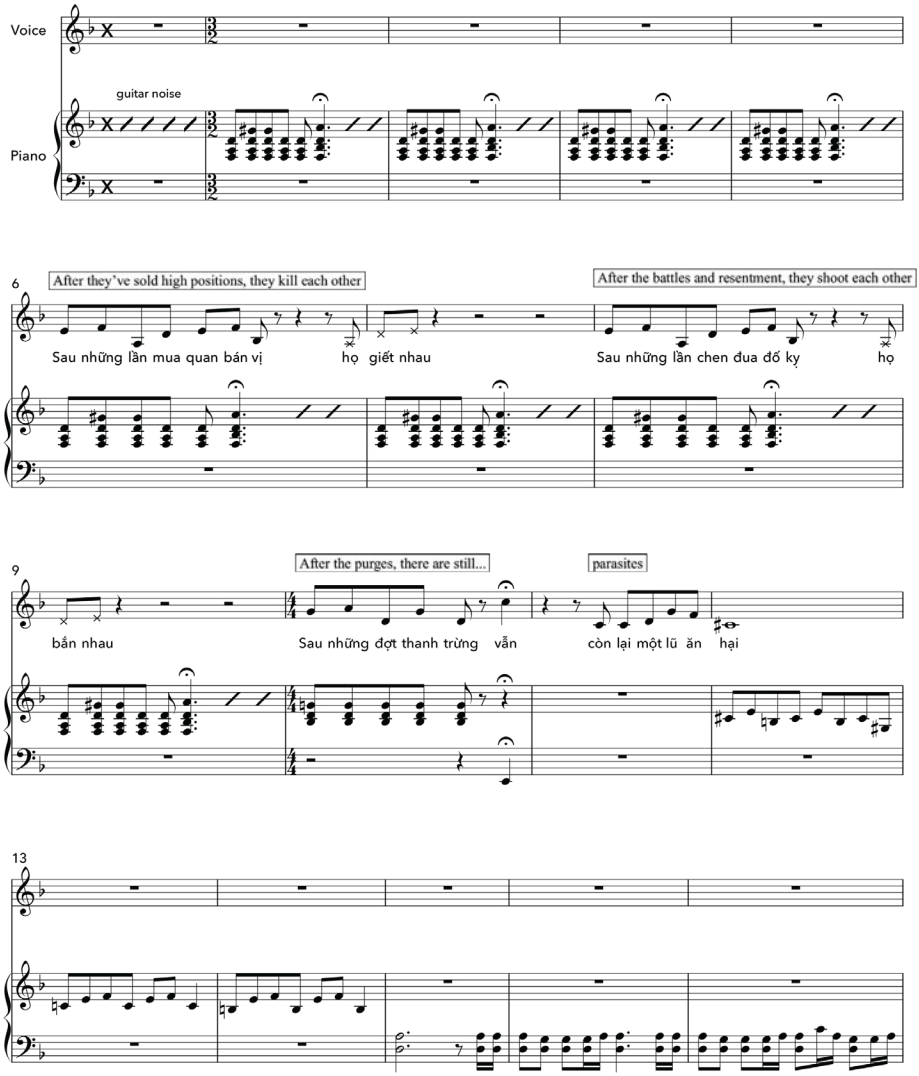
A: What is the role of the avant garde in your work?

Ten years ago my music was very different. It was just cheesy pop songs, but since I got involved in activism, I met Ngoc Dai, my fellow musician in Vietnam and my mentor. He is the first composer who wrote experimental music, avant garde music in Vietnam, and it inspired me a lot. When I start to make weird sounds with my voice, I feel something spiritual inside me. It's more soulful than before. Not many people like this style of music, but there is a very high pleasure in the creative process that I feel when I make that kind of music. I think the most important thing in an artist's life is to feel 100% freedom, so I think I am going in the right direction.

WHAT TO DO?

(Làm Gì Đế)

Music and lyrics by Mai Khôi



What to Do? / Làm Gì Để

18

Remember the endless turmoil of our country
When they, corrupt, take turns robbing and stealing

Nhìn xem quê hương bao_lần đảo diên khi chúng thay_nhau vơ vét rút ruột và tham

Bm/D Am/D Gm/D

22

Remember the people, laughing and laughing
While they destroy and kill each other, every day

nhũng Nhìn xem người dân đang cười_ hả hê người dân đang cười_ chán

DΔ7 Bm/D

25

chê khi_thấy chúng hại nhau diệt nhau từng ngày Ah___ ah___ ah_____

Am/D Gm/D DΔ7 Dm Am/D Dm Am/D Gm/D Am/D

31

When... How... What to do...
...to make the crumble?

ah_____ Bao giờ làm sao cho? Làm gì để chúng phân rã?

Gm/D DΔ7 noise

Dear Mai Khôi 2001 (age 18),

Do you remember the day, when you were 8, that aunt Hien held your hands and looked at the lines on your palm and told you that in the future you will be living in exile? You liked that idea. But you didn't take it seriously. You had another dream to follow: becoming a pop star to help your family, because you knew that you could sing any song you heard on the radio. And now here I am, just turned 40, living in the US, at the start of my refugee artist's life. Soon I will become a Vietnamese American. That was not my choice, but life pushed me to go this way. Because of my activism for artistic freedom and freedom of expression, the government forced me to the leave our country. It's hard to start everything from the beginning in a strange country, so sometimes I think about you and wish you studied harder so that it would be easier for me now.

I might not be the person you wanted to become in 20 years, but I'm the one who knows you the best, and we are now in similar situation: You are starting a new life in a strange city. I'm starting a new life in a strange country. You are an 18-year-old girl who just finished high school and moved to Saigon, the biggest city in Vietnam, and the only one that could incubate your pop star dream. You can sing very well. You can write your own songs. You think you are a little more special than most of the famous singers in Vietnam. But how could you promote your talent? You don't have any connections here, don't have money either. Your parents gave you just 30 dollars to start a new life. That's all they had, but they believe that you are highly determined to make it in the big city. You also believe that. You become a lounge singer in the very first week so that you can earn money right away. With a paper map in your hands, you are riding a motorbike from bar to bar, club to club, singing 7 to 9 gigs a night. You were sure that after a few years you would save enough money to pay your favorite producer to work with you and make you famous. Your plan seems perfect, but you don't have a plan B if something changes. You love your country, love your people, love singing, and you have a good plan - nothing could change your mind. You don't know that one day soon you will be insulted by a censor and become very frustrated with the censorship system. You will want to make a change. Just like your family and friends growing up, you didn't know anything about human rights, politics, activism, or artistic freedom – or any kind of freedom. You suffer and the people around you suffer from inequality and puritanical laws and an unjust political system. But you don't know what to do to help. Earning a living every day had kept you too busy to think deeper about the ways you could help your society. You chose the easiest way: give away some money to the homeless on the street, participate in some charity events to help poor children or the people in the flood zones of central Vietnam, share your prosperity with friends who need help...You think that whatever happens, the most important thing is just to try to stay young and beautiful forever. So silly! You think with your talent and your beauty, you will be famous and rich very soon and then you will be able to help your parents. I know you can do that, but you could do better than that. I'm not going to tell you what would be better because you will find that out by yourself. You will learn those life lessons by yourself. You will be changed in a good way. I just wish you studied English more seriously. Born in Vietnam, a poor country with a bad educational system, you didn't have many choices. You didn't know anything about the world other than what the one-party dictatorial government showed you in the media. You didn't know where to see good art and music, didn't know where to discover good books to read, where to find resources... The internet and computers were not popular at that time, but somehow you already knew that English is the global language. If you had learned better English, it could have helped you to access the world. You would have found better choices, and many more opportunities. But you were learning English only

by listening to English love songs, and you thought that would be enough. If I were you, I would not spend so much time hanging out with friends, drinking and talking bullshit until late into the night. Instead I would seriously study English and find books to read. Friends are important, but you should balance your time between studying and hanging out. You are not even thinking about the possibility that you could become a very different person in the future, completely different! Have you ever thought that one day you would be sitting next to the US president and talking with him about human rights in Vietnam, trying to keep his advice in mind even while feeling disappointed in him? I'm sure if you knew that, you would study English much harder than you are now.

I know you always trust your intuition. You always choose to be different. That's good.

Intuition and daring to be different are two good qualities for a creative artist, because there is nothing new under this sun, but you.

And finally, I just want to thank you, for always being so calm, lovely, and kind to everyone. You always love with all your heart and treat everyone with respect and compassion. That's what we inherited from our mother. Let's keep it and spread it!

NAOMI NGOC LE

My name is Naomi. That's the name I picked out for myself because my Vietnamese name is Ngoc, and no one really can say it over here. I came here for school in 2011. The good thing about education over here is that you have to take a little bit of everything. I took ceramics. I took drawing, and I was pretty good at it. I still didn't think I was going to be an artist, but in my head I was like maybe I can take two more classes. I took 2D, and then I took 3D, and that's the moment I texted my dad. "Dad, I cannot be a nurse." He was pretty upset about it. I mean understandable. No, actually, not understandable. I just wanted to do what I loved, so that's when I decided to go into art.

A: I saw your sponge installation at American University. Why do you use everyday objects in your work?

I look a lot at Tara Donovan. And one thing she does really well is use things that you have easy access to and make it unrecognizable. And I think that is something I'm very interested in.

I don't have to use sponges to clean my car. I will use it as an installation material. It's like how I am as a person. I don't have to be a dentist or an engineer. I can be an artist.

P: What does Vietnamese American mean to you?

I'm not Vietnamese American. The government calls me an alien, but I was born on this earth. Honestly, I have lived here for so long, but I'm not American. I am Vietnamese, but I know nothing about the culture in Vietnam now. Vietnamese American people, when they go to Vietnam they are called Việt kiều. They're not going to call me that because I am not.

P: But now you are?

I don't know.

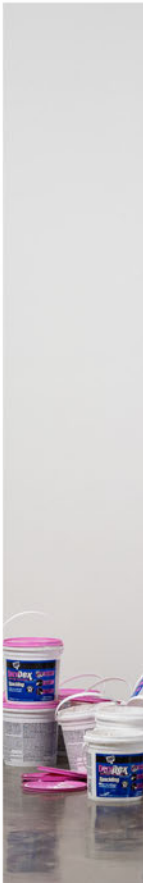
P: Maybe there's a new category?

The fake American <laugh>.

I DON'T HAVE TO USE SPONGES TO CLEAN MY CAR. I WILL USE IT AS AN INSTALLATION MATERIAL. IT'S LIKE HOW I AM AS A PERSON. I DON'T HAVE TO BE A DENTIST OR AN ENGINEER. I CAN BE AN ARTIST.

A: What inspires you?

One of the artists that I love is Yayoi Kusama who is also an Asian woman. She does what she loves for literally her whole life, but a lot of artists nowadays think she's overrated because everybody knows her. If you're a fan of her, you would know she struggled so much mentally and physically in Japan and over here in America. She was so good early on that people started copying her like male artists. People were copying her life long practice to make their own money. I think about the role of her gender a lot and to have that level of success and to be a woman of color. Some people would never think a woman could be as successful as Jeff Koons, but Jeff Koons is nowhere near her in terms of artistic practice.



SPACKLE, 2023

10 X 10 X 3 feet

NAOMI NGOC LE

LETTER TO YOUNGER SELF

Success

It is an illusion

School

Hard Work

School

School

Lonely

In America

Whose dream?

Hard Work

School

Isolation

Discrimination

Success?

Home

Is not a place

School

School

School

School

Far

Too far

My dream

Possibility

No

School

Stability

Mentally

Not even my dream

School

Is

School

Their dreams

Success

The land

Isolating

Strange

Over decade

No string attached

Waste

If she was me

Success

“My dream”

My dream

School

IMAGE BY DORCAS MUSSEB

THERE IS NO ONE VIETNAMESE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, AND DOING ALL THESE INTERVIEWS JUST PROVES THAT THERE'S SO MUCH DIVERSITY EVEN WITHIN THAT CATEGORY.

PHILIPPA PHAM HUGHES

My name is Philippa Pham Hughes, and I am a social sculptor and a curator. I just love all things art, and I've been organizing art stuff large and small for almost two decades now. Social sculpture is creating space that allows for conversations and relationships to happen. The artwork cannot become complete until those conversations occur, until those relationships start to happen. The sculpture is the space, whether it be conceptual or physical, but oftentimes I use physical objects and other art forms like poetry, dance, and music to help create that space.

What I'm working on right now is at the University of Michigan Museum of Art. I'm the visiting artist for art and civic engagement. When we first started working together, I thought I was going to curate a little art show, but it evolved into that gallery space becoming a social sculpture. Yes, we're going to hang art on the wall, but the entire space will be the artwork. I'm trying to transform the space so that when people walk in, they'll be like, oh my gosh, I am somewhere different. You're going to feel different from everything that happens outside of this space where people are polarized and don't talk to each other. In that space, I'm thinking a lot about flourishing and how we create a flourishing society together through conversations and relationships.

A: Can you expand on your exploration of American identity and how unity and this flourishing relate?

American identity is complicated, as you and I have been talking about. I grew up in a pretty white place. I thought that to be American was to be white and to have these certain cultural signifiers. I never learned how to be Asian. As I've grown older and started to explore the different layers of my identity, I realized that to be American means so many different things. Like Walt Whitman said, I contain multitudes. My video project, which was called The Greatest Poem, was based on this idea that Walt Whitman said that the United States are the greatest poem. What he meant was that the United States are made of these disparate parts that become a unified whole. I thought a lot about his poetry when I thought about my own identity as an American. And yet, we're all kind of lumped together as Asian Americans. What does it even mean when we say Asian American? Even within my own family, there are different experiences. There is no one Vietnamese American experience, and doing all these interviews just proves that there's so much diversity even within that category.

A: What inspires you?

One is street art. I love the ephemeral nature of it. It's an expression of raw emotions and feelings and ideas, and I just love that immediacy. I love that next time you walk by that block, it might be gone.

I really love performance art, too, because it relates to social sculpture in the sense that it's a live human experience. The artist is in a relationship with the audience. I like active art. And, again, there is an ephemeral nature to performance art that I appreciate. If you don't see it, that's it. You'll never have that experience.

LOOKING FOR AMERICA AT THE EL PASO MUSEUM OF HISTORY, 2019

Photo by Adam Ruben

THE PINK LINE PROJECT PROJECT

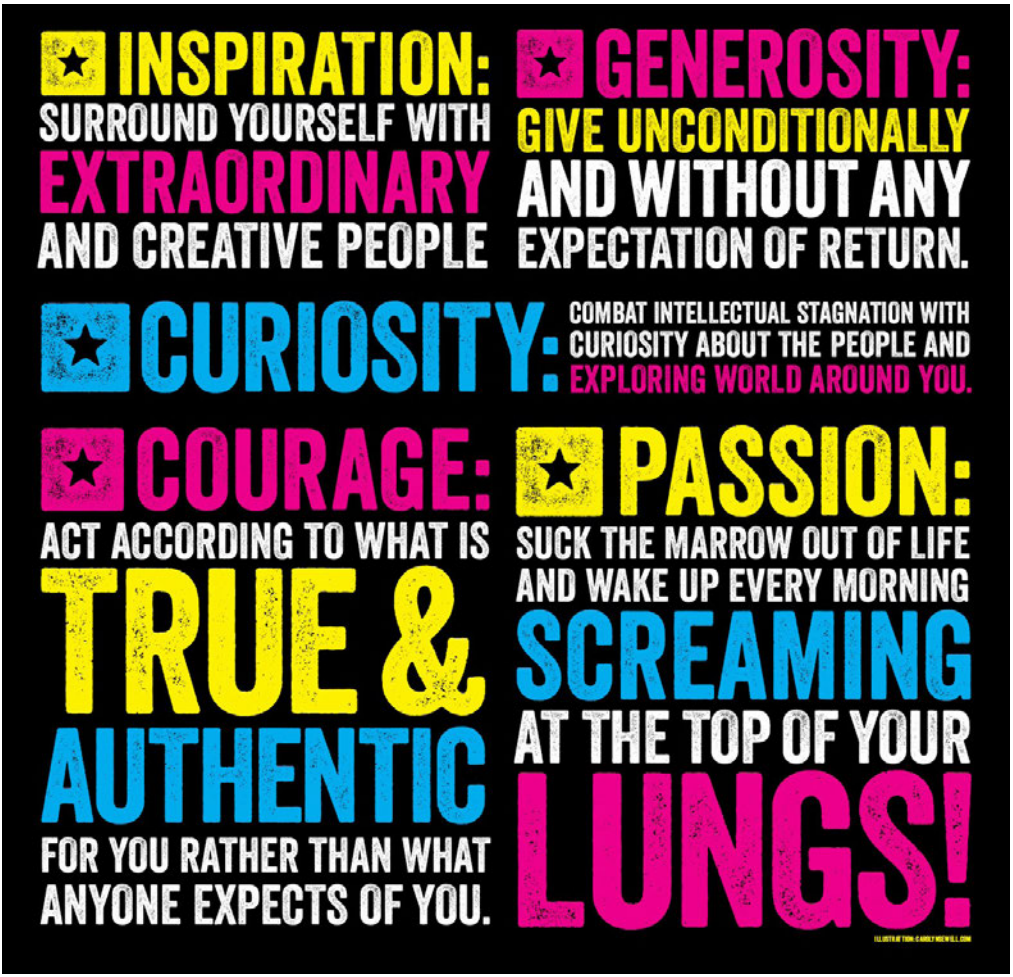
Photo by Josh Cogan

THE END OF THE PINK LINE PROJECT PROJECT, CHERRY BLAST, 2013

Photo by Bud Wilkinson

Dear Philippa,

I recently read every journal you ever kept. (There was a worldwide pandemic so I had a lot of free time.) Those thousands of pages revealed your relentless curiosity and unbridled wonder, and a lifelong struggle to understand yourself and your place in the world, to feel a sense of belonging. And just when you thought you'd figured it all out, a seismic plot twist occurred in the middle of that pandemic that made you question everything you thought you knew about yourself. (Everything turned out ok. Just like it always does.) Fortunately, you'd spent a lot of time during another moment of personal crisis figuring out the things you cared about most and turning them into a set of core values, which I'm sharing with you now. (You survived cancer!) Stick to your core values because they will guide you toward flourishing, toward becoming the best human you can be. You turned a lifetime of experiments and fearless exploration into an identity that was all your own. You belong in the world because you are unique in all the world. (The Little Prince will teach you many things you need to know.) Two more important things I need to tell you: Know thyself and to thine own self be true. What is essential is invisible to the eye.



Created By Carolyn Sewell

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE THE DAUGHTER OF A MAN WHO HAD THE MOST BEAUTIFUL HANDWRITING I'VE EVER SEEN AND WHO COULD DRAW ANYTHING BEAUTIFULLY, BUT NEVER GOT TO BE AN ARTIST?

THU ANH NGUYEN

A: Can you tell me about your interest in flowers and protest?

The beginning of my teaching career started with my interest in modern and deconstructive language, and so I've always taught manifestos and revolutionary writing. Part of protesting is literally or figuratively deconstructing it and making something else out of it. So when I started painting florals, I was thinking about Breonna Taylor. When I started painting large scale protest posters, I realized I can use the words of protest and also surround them with floral art. It's the juxtaposition of saying something like "fuck the patriarchy" and having really beautiful flowers next to it. Maybe your eye is drawn to the flowers, and then you're reading the text and realize the significance.

I also have a poem called "Tradition." I had noticed all my cousins have Vietnamese names that are very traditional, and they're all flowers. They would come to the United States, and they'd be translated into flowers. My aunts are named Lily and Rose. My dad said he didn't want to name me after a flower. He said, your name means rare book and scholar. When I first heard that, I had been a writer and that was like my identity, I thought, wow, this is amazing.

P: What inspires you?

I saw "Origin" recently, and the way that Ava DuVernay has been so openly sentimental in her movies, I get warm from it. There's this gorgeous scene where someone has just passed, and the person mourning them is lying on a bed of leaves and storyline wise it doesn't make sense, but I love the bravery in her being like, fuck it, something terrible is happening right now, and I'm going to take this moment to be in the emotions of it.

It makes me feel like noticing and pausing when I want to censor myself. Noticing when I might feel shame about something and just trying it anyway because you don't know what someone is going to relate to in your artwork.

A: What does Vietnamese American mean to you?

What does it mean to be the daughter of a man who had the most beautiful handwriting I've ever seen and who could draw anything beautifully, but never got to be an artist? Or to be the daughter of a woman who designed ballroom gowns as a seamstress in Vietnam, and then came to the States, and people realized that she had such facility and dexterity with her sewing, but neither of them thought art would be a place that I could go. Then both of their children are artists.

P: That is literally the definition of the American dream.

MIGRATION
IS
BEAUTIFUL

VIET
NAM
ESE

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

MIGRATION IS BEAUTIFUL

STAND UP FOR AAPI

MADE BY REFUGEES

VIETNAMESE

Dear Baby Thu,

You will forever hear stories of how much work you are:
you never sleep, cry and cry until someone rocks you,
rocked and fanned and soothed all night by your grandmother.
You used to hear this story as an indictment, but now you hear it as proof:
how much you are loved, how lucky you are to have these women caring for you.

Dear Thu, age 5,

Three kindergartens in one year: this is where you learn to embrace change
to put on different personalities like jackets to adorn yourself, to feel safe and warm.
In New Orleans, you love the games the church missionaries donate to you,
learn to play Sorry! and Tiddlywinks with your brother, your best friend because
so much change so quickly, you learn to hold tight to the constants.

You learn to sleep with cockroaches, you speak a bayou drawl
that makes it hard to fit in at first when you move to FL.
You realize that fitting in is overrated, so you make up fantastic lies about where you came from;
none of the kids have heard of Vietnam, you learn what it means to be a foreigner.
This is how you really learn to tell a story. Stories will save your life over and over again.

Dear Thu, age 19,

After years of trying so hard:
you've earned enough scholarships to get you the hell out of FL.
You think college is where you'll finally be the you that you've always longed to be.
For the first time, you are surrounded by other Asian people who are not related to you.
You craft a new family because you've run away from home. You started running when you thought no one there could ever understand you.
You think running is the answer,
but when you have your first really deep depressive spell, and you are shaky,
the only grounding you can find is going home again.

Dear Thu, forever and ever,
You will keep feeling sad sometimes:
while your first son puts you through the same trials you put your family through,
while you live in Scotland for a year, the dark North Sea as your backyard,
while you give up on law school when you end up writing poems instead of briefs,
Poems in any spare moment you have.

You realize art is your answer even as you never stop asking questions or running away,
you are the you you've always been: restless.

You circle home again.

YOU OPEN YOURSELF UP IN THE ART, AND PEOPLE LOOK AT YOUR PSYCHE.

UYEN HOANG

My name is Uyen. I am a graphic designer. I call myself an artist, but I feel more like I'm a beginner. I taught myself everything.

I grew up in Saigon, Vietnam. It was day and night because Saigon was bustling, and then you come here and life is slower. I moved to a suburb of Atlanta, and there were only a few of us Asians there.

You talk about Vietnam and people still to this day ask me, "Are you from the north or the south?" They are these quite ignorant questions about Vietnam as a society, as if the concept of Vietnam is only from the Ken Burns documentary.

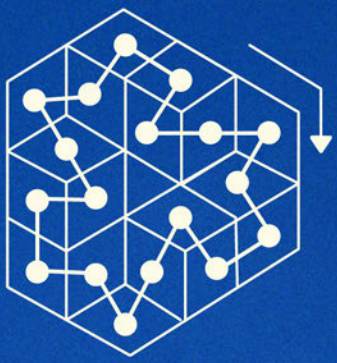
I turn to art, and I make stuff that's just for my own enjoyment. I thought it was selfish at first, but it really helped me gain agency and grow up. I feel like I am honoring myself.

I'm sick of painting eyes right now. I don't want to draw portraits anymore. I don't want these eyeballs following me around my house. I'm painting animals like humans, like animorphs. Anthropomorphic? Now that works. Something funny, cryptic, and somewhat relatable. You open yourself up in the art, and people look at your psyche.

A: What inspires you?

I like stories that are more absurd. Have you read Franz Kafka? He's my favorite author. It's fiction like no one wakes up as a bug, right? Yet, everyone still has expectations for this bug. The bug has to go through trials and bureaucracy to find out why, but no one can give it an answer. That's how I feel sometimes.

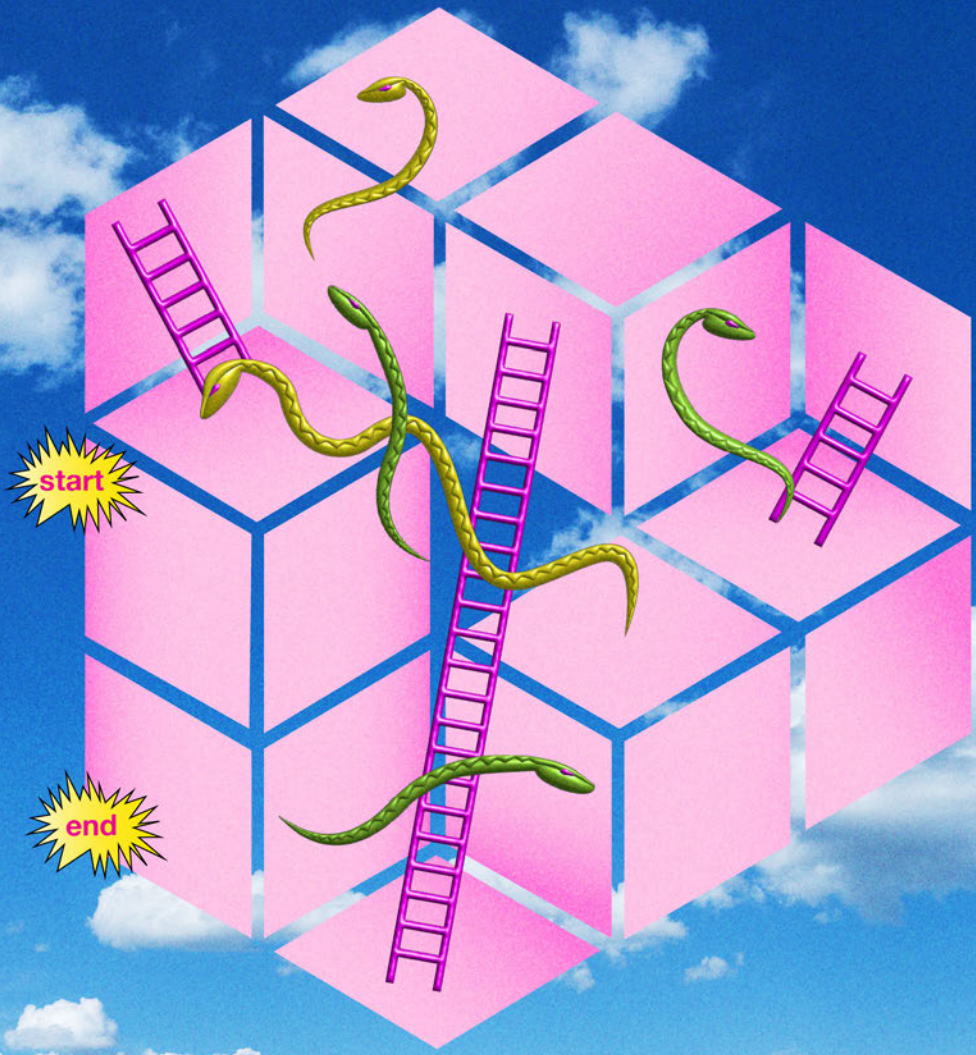
People say that my art is clever and humorous. My mother used the Vietnamese word "Lập dị", which means wacky, a word that many artists are afflicted by.

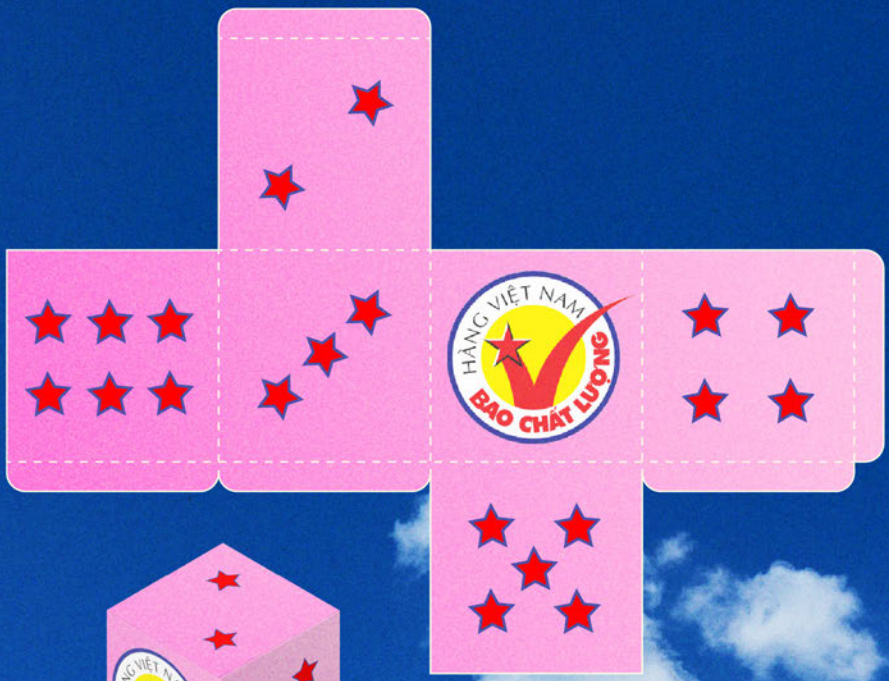


Hi past Uyên,

I have no great epiphany for you.
Maybe it's best to proceed without the foresight.
No doubt, có nói em cũng chẳng thiết để tai.

Ê suýt nữa thì quên... I made a game for you.
Để em chơi khi em phải ở nhà vì thiên tai.





pick your player

MAGGOTS' PUBERTY, 2024

Acrylic on stretched canvas
Work in progress
30 x 24 inches

SUDS UP, 2020

Acrylic on stretch canvas
Bathtime is more fun with play pretend.
Suds up!
24 x 30 inches

PLAYTIME, 2020

Acrylic on stretch canvas
Lost in my mind, where everyone loses their head and the rules don't make sense
30 x 30 inches

I AM PROUD THAT I AM THE GRANDDAUGHTER OF VIETNAMESE REFUGEES AND OF WHAT THEY HAD TO DO TO SURVIVE HERE AND START ALL OVER AGAIN.

VALERIE PLESCH

My name is Valerie Plesch. I am from Washington, D.C., and half Vietnamese, half Argentine. I'm a photojournalist and documentary photographer. I work here in Washington covering the news, and I also do long form storytelling projects on my own. I love spending time in people's homes, doing portraits and capturing daily moments. I do a lot of stories on the refugees, too.

My grandparents, my aunts, uncles, and cousins, they all were refugees. I am proud that I am the granddaughter of Vietnamese refugees and of what they had to do to survive here and start all over again. I've done a lot of stories with Afghan refugees, too. What happened in Vietnam and what happened to Afghanistan, it's scary how similar the fall was in those two countries. There's disappointment to how history keeps repeating itself, as we've seen in these places that America gets involved in with no real end game. I translate that fear, that anger, and disappointment to tell the stories of these people and what happened.

I did a long term project on Vietnamese American voters and the 2020 election. I reported at the Eden Center. There was even an official campaign office for Trump in the Eden Center. I was there one day when both Vietnamese for Trump and Vietnamese for Biden were clashing. The police had to come. All I could think about was that the war trauma was playing out right there in the parking lot. One woman had a printed paper with some of the words on it along the lines of "Biden killed my family" because they thought that Biden didn't want to accept Vietnamese refugees. For her, she lost family members at sea and is blaming Biden. It was a very eye opening experience for me. That was the first time I did a story about the Vietnamese community, and it was very difficult.

A: You also lived in Vietnam, right?

That was the most life changing experience for me. But it actually started in 1998 when I went for the first time after high school, and we went on a big family trip with family members from Europe. Then my mom, my brother, and I went to Vietnam for maybe six weeks just to see my side of the family, just to see the country. I knew at that moment that I was coming back to Vietnam to live, and I did four years later when I graduated from college. I saved up money and lived in Saigon for a year. I met so many people that I'm friends with today who are like me, either half Vietnamese or full Vietnamese but grew up in the United States. They went back to Vietnam for similar reasons and to go back to their roots.

P: What inspires you?

My father gave this book to my mom in 1969: Photographs by {Henri] Cartier-Bresson. He's considered the father of modern photojournalism. He was a French photographer. He founded Magnum Photos. I just remember as a kid, looking at all of these images and thinking who are these people? I was just fascinated with these black and white photos. I actually interned at Magnum Photos in 2002. I was working in the archives department and, of course, seeing a lot of these images in print was amazing.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

KOSOVO

2014 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

VIETNAMESE AMERICAN TRUMP SUPPORTER

BANS OFF OUR BODIES MARCH IN DC, 2022

Dear Younger Valerie,

I am writing to you from a place in my life where I am living the best version of myself. It took some time to get here, and what a ride it's been! I am so excited for you and what lies ahead. The whole world is for you to explore, and your life is going to be full of adventures, discoveries, and yes, difficult decisions to make along the way. Some will be painful and uncomfortable, but they will help pave the way for creating important pathways towards a more authentic life that is designed just for you.

You will make it! Even when the path seems dark and without a clear light at the end and with lots of obstacles, don't give up. You will have to make many topsy-turvy turns along the way, but just remember to make the best out of those turns and trust in the journey you are in and the story where you are the main character in all the chapters.

These four traits will help you:

Resilience
Determination
Grit
Self-compassion

Always embrace your independence, diverse background, passion for life, learning about other cultures, and never settling for less than what you deserve. The universe has some interesting plans for you! The things that make you different are the things that will make your journey extraordinary and fuel your insatiable curiosity for an enriching life, and the ability to comfortably straddle different worlds and connect with people from all walks of life. This is what truly defines you as you live your life as a photographer, journalist, and storyteller.

I'm sorry that it was hard growing up without a father, but isn't it a special feeling knowing that you have so many of his traits? Like being a loyal and dependable partner, friend and colleague, world traveler, and lover of photography. Mom and dad's love story was so beautiful: two young people from Argentina and Vietnam meeting in Switzerland, getting married in England, and moving to the Washington, DC suburbs where you grew up surrounded by your Swiss grandmother and Vietnamese refugee grandparents and relatives. Honor and keep that story close to you. I know it must have been hard to feel out of place growing up as a first-generation multicultural American but all your uniqueness, your quirks wrapped up in a spunky personality, and your thirst for knowledge and understanding - the opposite of fear - is what makes you YOU!

Believe in kismet and yourself, and always trust that you will find your way.

I leave you with this beautiful quote from Thich Nhat Hanh:

“Waking up in the morning, I smile. Twenty-four brand new hours are before me. I vow to live fully in each moment and to look at all beings with eyes of compassion.”

With warmth and love,

Valerie

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VAGABOND

★ FEATURING VIETNAMESE ARTISTS ★

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