

WIELS

**THAO
NGUYEN
PHAN**

**MONSOON
MELODY**

01.02 – 16.08.2020

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INTRODUCTION

Monsoon Melody features a trilogy of video installations by Thao Nguyen Phan – *Tropical Siesta* (2017), *Mute Grain* (2019) and *Becoming Alluvium* (2019) – which take a poetic approach to pressing questions such as food security and our ecological responsibilities. Each film is accompanied by a series of paintings whose dreamlike imagery evoking folk- or fairy-tales is undercut by the suggestion of violence.

Phan draws from the rich and turbulent history of her native country, Vietnam. Her work transgresses a purely historical point of view to incorporate an interest in literature and language. Through storytelling, mixing official and unofficial history, it challenges what she describes as political amnesia. She reveals the forgotten while proposing an alternative present-day reality infused with beauty.

Phan's key protagonists are often children and much of her filmed material is improvised. For *Tropical Siesta*, she cast her cousins and their neighbours. "They guided me to many of their play spots and I developed the script following their daily activities. Sometimes I just followed them and that was when the magic occurred." Like her mentor Joan Jonas, Phan allows herself a great freedom to play and embraces a visual language that could risk being seen as naïve or sentimental. Phan, however, embraces sentimentality in its original meaning: as the reliance on feelings as a guide to truth.

She has spoken of how working with these rural children has changed her approach to making work and seeing the world: "Vietnam is developing rapidly economically. That creates great environmental damage and a huge gap between rich and poor (even if we are officially socialists). This social injustice must anger anyone with a soul. I am sad for the kind of education offered to these children, and admire their ability to be pure and happy in any situation. I am sad that in the development of the country, people forget the people in the countryside, and for me the beautiful landscape of the Vietnamese countryside is a landscape of hidden trauma. The children taught me to respect the poetics of everyday, the preciousness of life. I cannot help but be thankful for that."

**CURATORS: ZOË GRAY (WIELS)
& HILDE TEERLINCK (HAN NEFKENS FOUNDATION)**

Text by Zoë Gray. All quotations of the artist taken from the accompanying book *Monsoon Melody*.

GALLERY 1

BECOMING ALLUVIUM & PERPETUAL BRIGHTNESS

Becoming Alluvium

2019

Single-channel colour video

Perpetual Brightness

2019-ongoing

Watercolour on silk, Vietnamese

lacquer on wood (pigment,
lacquer, eggshell, silver leaf)

Made in collaboration with

Truong Cong Tung

Individual painting:

Delta (from Perpetual Brightness series)

2020

Vietnamese lacquer, pigment, silver and
gold leaf on wood

Made in collaboration with

Truong Cong Tung

Becoming Alluvium is Phan's most recent film, continuing her research into the Mekong River and the cultures that it nurtures. Through allegory, it explores the environmental and social changes caused by the expansion of agriculture, by overfishing and the economic migration of farmers to urban areas. "The Mekong civilization can be summarized in terms of materiality – the river of wet rice civilization – and in terms of spirituality – the river of Buddhism," explains Phan. "However," she continues, "unlike the teachings of compassion and mindfulness that are taught by Buddha, in reality, the land through which the Mekong flows experiences extreme turbulence and conflict [...]. In recent decades, human intervention on the river body has been so violent that it has forever transformed the nature of its flow and the fate of its inhabitants."

Despite its non-chronological narrative and associative logic, Phan's film can be divided into three main chapters. The first opens with a citation from *The Gardener* by Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, published in 1913, which speaks of the unity of the human and natural universe. The film recounts the collapse of a dam that caused the death of many villagers downstream, including two teenager brothers. "They reconcile in their next life, in which the older brother reincarnates as the Irrawaddy dolphin, and the little brother as the water hyacinth," says Phan. "Both are iconic," she continues, "the Irrawaddy dolphin being a beloved fish of the Mekong, the water hyacinth being a notorious invasive plant." The work manifests her belief in the moving image as a "cascade of reincarnations," influenced by her upbringing in a traditional Vietnamese family, where Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism co-exist alongside a multitude of local deities.

The second chapter of the film combines images of people navigating the Mekong as they go about their daily lives, with a voiceover reading from *L'amant* [The Lover] by the French author Marguerite Duras. This is an autobiographical novel published in 1984 that recounts Duras' coming-of-age in French Indochina (present-day Vietnam). This chapter of Phan's film is the most documentary in its visual language, yet through its lyrical tone manages to mix the epic with the everyday; for example, combining images of rubbish heaps with reflections on waste from Italian author Italo Calvino's 1972 novel *Le città invisibili* [Invisible Cities]. By citing such writers, Phan taps into a rich literary tradition of philosophical travelogues and imagined or (mis)remembered stories of far-flung lands.

The final chapter retells a Khmer folktale about a princess who insists that man should recreate the beauty of nature: in this case, by producing jewellery as beautiful as the morning dew. The story is told via Phan's animated illustrations, in which she paints her protagonists – together with various wonderful examples of flora and fauna – over 19th-century engravings. The latter are illustrations by French explorer Louis Delaporte who was part of an expedition that attempted to reach the source of the Mekong. Phan ornaments and adapts Delaporte's images with a variety of headless characters, inspired by decapitated Khmer statues that she encountered in the Musée Guimet in Paris; rare and ancient sculptures that were “saved” by being taken away by the colonising power.

Perpetual Brightness is the title Phan gives to the accompanying paintings, for which she returned to traditional techniques learned during her studies in Ho Chi Minh City. The structure of the folding screen in which the paintings are presented references a lacquered screen by modernist designer Eileen Gray. However, Phan explains, “unlike the purism of Gray’s lacquered screens, *Perpetual Brightness* is full of allegory, both in terms of its subject matter and its execution. The screen is double-sided, one side is a fragmented map of the Nine Dragons river [...] using the Vietnamese lacquer painting technique. The river is inlaid with eggshell and silver leaf.” On the other side, the silk panels depict a ceremony of mourning and the worshipping of the spirits of stranded whales, a ritual practiced by fishermen along the Vietnamese coast. Phan elaborates upon her subject’s connection to her chosen medium: “*Perpetual Brightness* criticizes the desire for a physical brightness, the brightness from electricity consumption and the brightness of the dollar bill, manifested in the accelerated speed of dam building on the Mekong. Lacquer and silk painting [...] require water to exist as a medium. Lacquer paint can only dry in a relatively humid atmosphere, then the paint is sanded away under running water in order to reveal the layering of paint underneath; each lacquer panel is indeed an archaeological site. In the same way, paint pigment on silk is absorbed by the method of washing away each layer of painting. The lacquer palette is entirely a natural material: soil, stone, lacquer tree sap, gold and silver leaf, and eggshell. This is a similar process to that of the Mekong River that brings alluvium and sediment to the delta, and washes away the impurities from chemicals and industrial activities.”

GALLERIES 2 - 4

TROPICAL SIESTA & VOYAGES DE RHODES

Tropical Siesta

2017

Double-channel video, colour

Voyages de Rhodes

2014-2017

Watercolour on found book pages

Tropical Siesta is located in an alternative version of present-day Vietnam, where everyone is a farmer. It takes two 17th-century texts by the French Jesuit priest Alexander de Rhodes as a lens through which to examine the colonisation, depiction and languages of Vietnam: *History of the Kingdom of Tonkin* (1650) and *Rhodes of Viet Nam: The Travels and Missions of Father Alexandre de Rhodes in China and other Kingdoms of the Orient* (1653). These were some of the earliest European publications about life in the region, but Rhodes is best known for his standardization of the written Vietnamese language in the Roman alphabet, which he codified in a Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary in 1651.

Phan's idea for *Tropical Siesta* took shape in 2016, when she began to spend a few months every summer in a remote village of Gia Lai province, in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. "This village, which seemed so peaceful, was experiencing political upheaval and environmental damage, suffering from deforestation, poverty and intensive, unsustainable rubber, coffee and pepper farming. The village has a complex migration history," she continues, "since the Viet (Kinh) ethnic group [the major ethnicity of the Vietnamese population] came and lived among the indigenous community (the Jrai people)". Both the Jrai and the Viet people have a writing system using the Roman alphabet developed by missionaries. While Romanized Vietnamese is the official writing system of Vietnam, the Jrai written language is only taught in church (since most Jrai are now Protestant or Catholic). "I realized," says Phan, "that no one could represent this complex narrative better than the schoolchildren, who are experiencing the first step of writing."

"Rhodes' books are the only texts the children study," recount the film's subtitles. "The children transform and manipulate the content of the stories for their own interest. For them, this make-believe is something that brightens up their agricultural daily life." The children's games always have a sinister undertone and Phan's filmic images often evoke journalistic photographs, particularly the now iconic images of the Vietnam war, but also of more recent conflicts or the ongoing refugee crisis.

Phan's accompanying paintings also depict the dream-like world of the children's playful yet sinister re-enactments. The printed pages of Rhodes' books become the physical support for Phan's imagery. Her paintings do not illustrate the text but rather open up a dialogue between various layers of reality: the Vietnamese landscape and its customs as documented by a colonial missionary. Under French colonial rule, Vietnam adopted the Romanized alphabet as codified by Rhodes and – over time – the Chinese script was overruled. By superimposing images onto text, Phan evokes the plurality of voices, media and viewpoints that concur in the writing (and erasing) of history.

GALLERIES 5 - 6

MUTE GRAIN & DREAM OF MARCH AND AUGUST

Mute Grain

2019

Three-channel video, black and white, 15
mins, 45 seconds

Audio in Vietnamese with English
subtitles

Dream of March and August

2018-

Watercolours on silk, framed,
dimensions variable

Mute Grain is a three-screen black and white film, which Phan describes as “a lullaby dedicated to the loss of lives, to the separations of the living and the dead, unable to reconcile due to the tragedies of war and famine.” Combining video, sound, painting, installation and archival material, it recounts a seldom discussed historical event: the 1945 famine that took place during the Japanese occupation of French Indochina, believed to have caused the death of over two million Vietnamese. This is a precise historical case-study with which Phan examines current questions of food insecurity and man-made scarcity. While the subtitles are brutally matter of fact about the effects of the famine, the images are ones of plenty. We see close-ups of hands weaving a traditional hat, eating a bowl of rice, stroking a cow’s hide, brushing an ear of corn. The sound comes from these actions and textures, a sensuous counterpart to a stark tale.

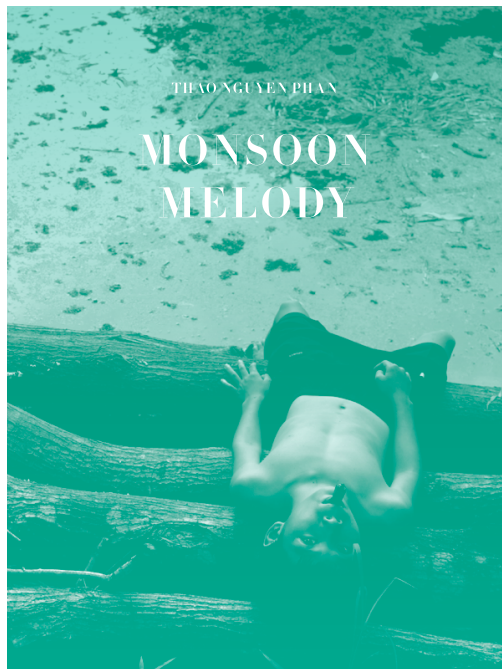
Phan intercuts historical photographic footage with the images she has filmed, and then adds another layer of narrative by drawing whimsical, well-fed children over the harsh imagery of emaciated bodies. The film moves from the general to the specific with its dedication – “Inspired by memories of March and August, children who were abandoned in time of famine” – and slips seamlessly between different eras, between a specific historical moment, an abstract dream time, and today. Despite its bleak and potentially controversial subject matter, Phan explains “I am never keen on creating something overtly critical or too bold a statement. My visual inheritance is from Soviet animation, such as *Tales of Tales* (1979) by Yuri Norstein, or reflections on environmental catastrophe through the child-like view of the Japanese Studio Ghibli.” Phan elaborates: “In *Mute Grain*, there is no plethora of historical evidence or numbers. On the contrary, I strive to poeticise, to fictionalise, to make absurd my expressions. For me, the magical, the irrational and the imaginary have a way to reflect reality more profoundly than the restraints of facts and documents.”

The story of March and August reflects the poorest months of the lunar calendar, a time of scarcity when farmers had to borrow money or look for alternative work to sustain themselves. March and August are the protagonists of the painted tale that echoes the filmic narrative. Using the oriental technique of silk painting, Phan depicts the tragically separated siblings trapped in parallel worlds. The paintings are hung in couplets, like the brother and sister of the title, “each half the counterpoint to the other: disagreeing while supporting each other,” in a tradition of allegory that is both European and Asian.

PUBLICATION

MONSOON MELODY

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication also titled Monsoon Melody. This monograph features reproductions of Phan's recent work and contains texts by Zoë Gray (WIELS), Sam I-Shan, Lila Matsumoto, Han Nefkens, Pamela Nguyen Corey, Thao Nguyen Phan, Hilde Teerlinck et Thomas D. Trummer.



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BIOGRAPHY

Born 1987, Vietnam. Lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Trained as a painter, Phan is a multimedia artist whose practice encompasses film, painting, installation and performance. Drawing from literature, philosophy and daily life, Phan observes ambiguous issues in social conventions and history. She started working in film when she began her MFA in Chicago. Phan exhibits internationally, with solo and group exhibitions including Rockbund Art Museum (Shanghai, 2019); Lyon Biennale (Lyon, 2019); Sharjah Biennial (Sharjah Art Foundation, 2019); Gemäldegalerie (Berlin, 2018); Dhaka Art Summit (2018); Para Site (Hong Kong, 2018); Factory Contemporary Arts Centre (Ho Chi Minh City, 2017); Nha San Collective (Hanoi, 2017); and Bétonsalon (Paris, 2016), among others. She was shortlisted for the 2019 Hugo Boss Asia Art Award. In addition to her work as a multimedia artist, she is co-founder of the collective Art Labor, which explores cross disciplinary practices and develops art projects that benefit the local community.

SUPPORT & COLLABORATION

This exhibition is the outcome of Phan winning the 2018 *Han Nefkens Foundation – LOOP Video Art Award*. It also marks the beginning of a series of collaborations between the Han Nefkens Foundation and WIELS, bringing together their resources and expertise to support and present ambitious audio-visual work from around the world. This exhibition is also a collaboration with Fundació Joan Miró (Barcelona) & Chisenhale Gallery (London) and is supported by Galerie Zink Waldkirchen.

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