

Conversation with Vietnamese artist Thu Van Tran

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'Trail Dust' at Almine Rech Paris

By Ian Tee



Thu Van Tran in front of her work 'At a Tortoise's Pace' (2019). Photo by Julio Piatti. Image courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech.

Born in Ho Chi Minh City in 1979, Thu Van Tran arrived in France at the age of two as a refugee. The colonial history between the two countries and her experience of living as a cultural outsider are embedded in her work, which is best described as an encounter between semantics and materials. For instance, Thu Van's interest in rubber relates to its significance in the colonial exploitation of Vietnam, and the subject is materialised in different guises from stained wall frescos to cast sculptures. Though her presentations tend to be minimalist in form, she brings to the aesthetic experience a sense of historical awareness that is often buried or repressed.

In 2018, Thu Van was nominated for the Marcel Duchamp Prize, the biggest art award in France awarded annually to an artist working in the country. Her work was also recently presented at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017), Moderna Museet (2017), Petit Palais (2018) and Art Basel ('Statements', 2017; 'Unlimited', 2019).

We speak to the artist on the occasion of her latest solo exhibition 'Trail Dust' at Almine Rech, Paris.



Thu Van Tran, 'Barque du Palacio', 2007, installation view on the rooftop of the Palacio at Noisy-le-Grand, France. Image courtesy of the artist.

I'd like to start this conversation with your formative years and early education. You were a student at the Glasgow School of Art in the Environmental Design Department in 2000, before doing an MFA at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts of Paris three years later. Did you know you wanted to be an artist from the start or was it a shift that occurred during this period of time? Going back in time, I knew I would become an artist around twelve years old. My parents started jobs that didn't allow them to go home to us. I saw them having a hard time after going through war and exile, and I told myself that life shouldn't be such a struggle. I locked myself in my room and drew tirelessly. It was a space of victory, and only art has allowed me this kind of denouement.

As a daughter from a traditional background, I had to emancipate myself from familial expectations. Moreover, I realised that as a refugee, I had to develop my own language. My studies helped me do that, while formalistic, minimal and conceptual approaches from the West allowed me to see art in a privileged and autonomous sphere. During my years as a student, I focused on retinal concerns and beauty, while my research today deals with historical and social concerns.

You have received a number of grants and project allowances since 2004. They tend to come from state institutions and French foundations. How has the support provided by these funds impacted your development as a young artist?

I obtained my diploma from the Fine Arts School of Paris in 2003, at the age of 23. I knew that the certificate I had just received would not serve me in other fields, and I would inevitably face questions linked to the production of works. I decided to stay in Paris while the majority of my friends from school left for Berlin or the United States. My practice was put to the test by challenges associated with living in the city, such as the lack of space. Together with my researcher peers, we opened artist-run spaces which catered to our passions.

Of course, grants and prizes supported some of my earliest ambitious projects. One example is the construction of a wooden boat which was placed on the rooftop of the Palacio in Noisy-le-Grand. The site is a piece of authoritarian architecture in Paris' periphery put up in 1975. But I would say that these sources of funding were never enough, and I had to work on the side or find a way to co-fund my own projects. This is still the case today.



Thu Van Tran in her studio. Image courtesy of the artist.

Could you describe the general attitude towards funding for the arts in France?

The French Ministry of Culture provides a certain number of grants, which I think has increased since the beginning of this decade. Regions and cities also support artists with residency programmes or public commissions, depending on their cultural policy. This comes from our socialist past. The Left had fought for a place for artists in our society during the late 1970s and 1980s. However, in my opinion, public funding is still not enough if we consider the demands artists have to negotiate. This is why many partnerships with the private sector and foundations emerged, such as La Fondation des Artistes. Contemporary art prizes are also increasingly popular, even though they put artists in a constant state of competition.

How would you describe your relationship with Vietnam?

I speak and think in French. Because of my studies in France, I share a French artistic heritage based on reason and certainty. However, at night, I dream in Vietnamese. My intuition and inner world are not located in a Western context. They are connected to an intimate and unique experience, a personal trajectory lined with tropical trees and moisture that survived in my subjectivity. I move between vernacular and western points of view. Five years ago, I regained my Vietnamese nationality and that was meaningful.



Thu Van Tran's solo presentation at 'Statement' Art Basel 2013 with Meessen De Clercq. Photo by Sebastiano Pellion di Persano.

Joseph Conrad's novella 'Heart of Darkness' is a source material for a number of works you've made which were presented in your solo exhibition 'We live in the flicker' (2012) at Meessen De Clercq, as well as at **Art Basel 'Statement' (2013)**. Why is this book important to you?

Joseph Conrad returned from a trip to Congo at the end of the 19th century, after which he suffered from aphasia for about 3 years. He finally transcribed his story and the violence that he had witnessed in the form of a novel. Instead of writing it in his mother tongue, Polish, or French which he was proficient in, Conrad chose English. It was as if only a language he was uncomfortable with could break the aphasia.

This process inspired me. I decided to translate his novel into French as an artistic gesture. Using my lack of proficiency in English as a factor in the process, it was about bringing meaning to misunderstanding and negotiating different worlds. Conrad navigated upstream along the Congo river during Belgian's occupation, whereas I am coming from Vietnam, a former French colony. I was looking for a kind of collision.

In this project, I was also thinking of ways to exhibit writings, and how light and darkness could materialise. The first presentation was of the entire manuscript, with 60 pages that became increasingly soaked with black ink.

The page backgrounds went from pure white to deep black. I wanted the darkness to become more present as we experience the text.

My series of unfixed photograms 'We live in the flicker' is also a reading experience. I chose to extract sentences from the novel where light appears but could never remain, since it is always caught up by the darkness of the story. I stencilled sentences on photosensitive paper, allowing sunlight to inscribe them. When the photograms were finally exhibited, the light that made these words visible ended causing them to disappear as well, since the exposure process was still ongoing. It was about capturing the phenomenon of appearance and disappearance.



Thu Van Tran, 'Colors of Grey #1', 2019, pigment and water on paper, 150 x 210cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

When dealing with form and abstraction, there are two strands in your practice that stand out for me: engagement with photochemical processes and the painterly aspect of a series like 'Colors of Grey'. One point of connection between the two is in the recurrence of light as a theme. Could you talk about the conceptual underpinning behind the use of these techniques and materials?

You are right. I think that both practices, the photochemical process and frescos, are dealing with light. For the former, light is the medium itself. While in the latter, the light is what we are looking for through the layers of paints, which has a spiritual connotation.

In using light, I want to deal with an experience of seeing. To highlight something is to put it into perspective, therefore posing the question of whose viewpoint one is looking from. The 'Colours of Grey' series utilises the erasure of the colours. The greys are produced as a result of adding colours on top of each other, which resulted in a nullification. We look for light in this melancholic field.



Thu Van Tran, 'Maid Day', 2018, installation view in 'A place in the sun' at the Musée et Manufacture du cristal, Saint-Louis Les Bitches. Photo by Olivier Dancy.



Thu Van Tran, 'Maid Day' (detail), 2018, installation view in 'A place in the sun' at the Musée et Manufacture du cristal, Saint-Louis Les Bitches. Photo by Olivier Dancy.

Some of the photograms you've made are huge, such as those presented in the exhibition 'A Place in the Sun' (2018) at Fondation Hermès Musée et Manufacture du Cristal. What is the process behind developing those works, as you move from smaller sheets of paper to large rolls of fabric? Were they produced in your studio or did you require the assistance of other professionals?

The series of photograms shown in that exhibition is titled 'Maid Day', named after the off-day of domestic maids. Phonetically, it also sounds like "Mayday", which is what we hear an S.O.S. call. I witnessed a silent protest on the streets of Hong Kong during a trip in Asia.

Actually, it was a gathering of a female community, mostly coming from the Philippines. Every Sunday, this minority group takes possession of the outdoor areas, sitting together on the streets and at overhead walkways that connect the central district to the harbour. Together, they form a massive and immobile presence in the public space.

These women and their sense of identity touched me. They showed themselves to us, putting their fragility and dignity in the light. We move on, they stagnate. When the night came, these pieces of cardboard that they sat on are left on the sidewalks, and one could feel their absence. I sent some of these cardboards back to France.

My idea was to play with this idea of appearance and disappearance, and to capture their protest, the contradiction of their resistance and their fragility. Back home in my studio, I unfolded photosensitive paper in front of my bay window and placed the cardboards on top of it. I also added my own clothes in this composition, as I wanted the feeling of human bodies. Everything was exposed for months, and the chemical effect produced saturated shiny blue tones. Light had revealed their silence.



Thu Van Tran's presentation for the 2018 Marcel Duchamp Prize exhibition, at the Centre Georges Pompidou. Image courtesy of the artist.

One of the highlights of your career thus far is being nominated for the 2018 Marcel Duchamp prize.

Personally, what does it mean to be shortlisted for it? And what did you hope to achieve your presentation for the exhibition?

I am very proud of this nomination. It was simply a turn of events; I met the right people and made good choices, at the right time. Preparing for the exhibition at Centre Pompidou was a big challenge, though I was more than happy to accept. It came after my Venice Biennale project, which was also focused on memory and language, using symbolic materials and colours.



Thu Van Tran's presentation at the 57th Venice Biennale 'Viva Arte Viva', in a section curated by Christine Macel at The Arsenale. Image courtesy of the artist.

In an interview about your work in the 57th Venice Biennale 'Viva Arte Viva' (2017), you said: "But aren't we made by stains? Isn't history made by contamination, occupation and domination?" In the face of larger historical forces, what can art or an artistic gesture do?

I am often asked if my work deals with violence and oppression. To that, I would rather say it's about contamination. We embody this notion through our mutant identities, regardless if we consider ourselves migrants, tourists, citizens... Our past and personal history are stains. We are determined by our shifting geography and have to negotiate these elements whenever we are forced to learn a foreign language or forced to take the path of an exile.

As artists, we give the speech to materials. They are memories, embodying forgotten or anonymous witnesses. And I truly think that the aesthetic experience provides a way of reconsidering history and posing critical questions. I think that beauty is a strong ethical position which allows for a rendezvous between the oneiric and the historic. A work of art should bring about both contemplation and discourse.

You have been teaching an undergraduate course at the Paris College of Art since 2012. Is teaching an important aspect of your practice or personal life? How do you manage your time as a lecturer while maintaining a studio practice?

It is important for an artist to transmit information. When the teaching position was offered to me, I thought that sharing my practice with my students would also strengthen it. What matters the most to me is if I can be useful to the young generation. Although it is not easy to juggle between my practice and teaching, especially since I have to travel a lot, I think it is a positive thing for students see my way of managing these commitments.



Thu Van Tran, 'Rainbow Herbicides #1, #2, #3', 2019, graphite on Canson paper, spray paint, 189 x 159cm (each, framed). Installation view at Almine Rech, Paris. © Thu Van Tran. Photo by Rebecca Fanuele. Image courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech.



Thu Van Tran, 'Trail Dust', 2019, exhibition installation view at Almine Rech, Paris. © Thu Van Tran. Photo by Rebecca Fanuele. Image courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech.

Your current solo exhibition at Almine Rech Paris is titled 'Trail Dust'. Could you tell us more about the title and what viewers can expect?

'Dust Trail' was the name of a toxic spray operation conducted by the United States army during the Vietnam war. It shows how American policy used semantics to hide the horrors committed. Misleading poetic names as “Rainbow Herbicides” utilise oxymoronic language to colonise our imagination. The evanescent dust trail is now linked with destruction and aches.

The exhibition gathers numerous new sculptures made by petrification, a transformation of living and organic in minerals and fossils. The show begins with the earth and telluric forces, then brings us to the sky and the spiritual dimension of the celestial. It ends with an installation of turtles and paintings made of rubber skin.

Are there any other projects you are working on that you'd like to share?

In 2020, I am presenting a solo show at the Kunsthaus Baselland which will run during Art Basel.

'Trail Dust' is on view at Almine Rech Paris, from 23 November 2019 to 11 January 2020.