

## ARTFORUM

### CRITICS' PICKS

#### “Where the Sea Remembers”

THE MISTAKE ROOM

1811 E. 20th Street

July 13–October 12, 2019



Thu Van Tran, *De Vert a Orange*, 2019, photograph, alcohol, colorant, rust, 70.87 x 94.49".

“Where the Sea Remembers” is roughly titled after noted antiwar Vietnamese singer and composer Trịnh Công Sơn’s wistful tune, often sung during the Vietnam War as a farewell between those departing and those remaining at refugee camps. Encompassing work in a variety of media, the show is unfettered by an overarching theme, though the interests of the thirteen exhibiting artists—most of whom currently live in Vietnam—overlap in their exploration of notions of belonging, displacement, technological advancement, and wars waged in and devastation wrecked on their homeland.

Standout pieces weave cultural commentary into a poignant evocation of place. For *Traces of Infinity*, 2018, Trương Công Tùng buried plastic fertilizer bags in soil from Vietnam’s Central Highlands, allowing them to acquire a tannish translucence vaguely resembling human skin. A swath of these hang on the gallery walls and serve as a background for *When the virtual becomes the actual, and the actual becomes the virtual*, 2018, a beleaguered pair of toy-horse sculptures covered in obsolete computer-keyboard keys that seem to slough from their degenerating bodies. A light one stands precariously as though barely alive, and a black one prostrate, as if charred and dead.

The show’s most powerful image is Thu Van Tran’s *De Vert a Orange*, 2019, a large-scale photograph depicting a jungle enveloped in scarlet vapor. Created by chemically reddening a silver gelatin print, this abstracted landscape refers to the United States military’s use of Agent Orange and napalm during the war, lethal substances dropped from warplanes that destroyed forests and caused horrific health problems—from cancers and birth defects—not only for those who were exposed at the time but also for current residents. When viewed from different angles, its murky incarnadine surface subtly shifts from acrid orange to blood red, yielding faint suggestions of vegetation and figures that emerge and then vanish.

— Annabel Osberg