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# THE MATERIALITY OF MEMORY

THU VAN TRAN

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## Press Review

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Grotesque histories of political domination and beautiful moments of intersubjective connection—for Thu Van Tran, these are both instances of contamination: a phenomenon where disparate agents come into contact, and a process that has fundamentally informed our world. Born in Ho Chi Minh City in 1979, Tran moved to France with her family at the age of two. Growing up between cultures led her to question “pure” as a descriptor of peoples, places, and histories. Subsequently, in her artworks of the last two decades, she has investigated the stains—a form of contamination—that mark the earth and its inhabitants. I caught up with the artist to discuss what tracing these residues has led her to uncover in relation to rubber tree plantations, the Amazon, and chemical weapons deployed during the Vietnam War.

**Contamination and staining recur as subjects and methods throughout your sculptures, photograms, drawings, and films. How did these motifs become important to you?**

Whether the products of human action or organic processes, stains reveal things to us. In particular, I have been studying the modern history of domination through the remnants of acts of contamination, which include the transplantation and exploitation of rubber trees. The species *Hevea brasiliensis* was not native to Indochina. In the 17th century, a French sailor brought it to the region from Brazil. The Institut Pasteur based in Saigon had developed the technique of grafting to propagate the plant. This entails a scion invading a host that is already established with deep roots. This process perfectly illustrates the colonization of Southeast Asia. A stranger arrived at an “untouched” land and to establish himself he contaminated the native environment. In Vietnam, for example, when missionaries landed in the 17th century, they globalized our ideograms and sounds by transliterating them with

the Latin alphabet. Destructive as it was, this modification of the local language made Vietnam what it is today. So I understand contamination as a fact of reality that impacts us all.

Contamination also disrupts the impossible idea that any place is perfect and virgin. For my display at “Viva Arte Viva,” the central exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2017, I furthered my dissection of this concept. I was looking at the history of rubber through the vernacular lens of plantation workers and their revolts. I was allotted a space with white walls. This troubled me because this blankness carries with it a lie: nothing is truly untouched. History is full of stains and disorder. So I poured rubber onto the white walls to produce a rendezvous between the two materials. The conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp said that a piece of art is actually a successful rendezvous. But this meeting is always fragile.

The pouring of the rubber is an act of staining. It problematizes the notion of purity. I often refer to Barack Obama’s identity. He’s known as the first Black president of the United States, but actually he’s half-White and half-Black—equal. It’s like we can’t recognize the mixture or let the “impurity” exist as it is—one color has to dominate. That was the beginning of my exploration of a landscape of stains. We are all products of contamination—we are mixtures of genes, microorganisms, cultures. This led me to insist on the idea that we have to reveal stains and imperfections as they are. And that is relevant in nature too. Strong ecosystems are made up of all forms of life that leave traces on each other.



Installation view of *Novel Without a Title (Clusters)*, 2019, 41 bronze leaves, dimensions variable, at “Trail Dust,” Almine Rech, Paris, 2019–20. Photo by Rebecca Fanuele. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech, Paris/Brussels/London/New York/Shanghai.

**In a way, you replicate the invasive process of rubber-tree grafting in your series of installations of leaves cast in bronze, *Novel Without a Title* (2019– ), which you showed this year at Almine Rech gallery in Paris and at Kunsthaus Baselland. How do you make these sculptures?**

I collect the leaves from the grounds of tropical forests or greenhouses, especially L’Asie Tropicale at the Jardins des Serres d’Auteuil in Paris. The greenhouse was built just before the International Colonial Exhibition in 1907 when France exhibited Indigenous peoples from its colonies in pavilions as testimony to the great empire of France. The greenhouse has a similar pretension. It tries to order the wild tropics with this vain aspiration of owning it. I think of Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer, who said that our desire to represent nature actually reveals our wish to own nature. The greenhouse is interesting to me

because of this history, but also because it is where I find peace. I love greenhouses even if they are problematic in their history. It’s a place of harmony.

I bring the leaves that I gather from these places to my bronze foundry. I then cast them using the lost wax technique, meaning I encase the leaves with wax, place them in ceramic cylinders, and pour in molten bronze. The bronze will melt the wax and burn the leaf, taking its place. This is, in essence, petrification: a living body is transformed into a mineral. The petrified object is directly imprinted with memories—it is what had touched for the very last time the



*In the Fall, In the Rise*, 2018, photogram on Fuji paper, 195 × 127 cm. Photo by Philippe de Gobert. Courtesy the artist and Meessen De Clercq, Brussels.

original leaf. When it comes to the work's installation, my concerns are to reproduce this feeling of a cycle—something living and dying at the same time, and this passage of time as is recorded in a forest.

The passage of time is also embedded in the photogram series *In the Fall, In the Rise* (2017- ). To create these images, you place leaves of the rubber tree on photosensitive paper and expose the sheets for different durations—in some cases, for over a month. As a result, these works index not only the forms of the leaves but different time periods. What led you to work with photograms?

Photograms involve an object contacting a photochemical surface. To put different things into contact—for example, rubber on a wall, or clay on a tree trunk, or molten bronze with a leaf—is the first step toward preserving traces. This occurred to me when I saw the casts that archaeologists had made of the Pompeii victims. The bodies of the deceased were entombed in ash, and, over time, the cadavers completely disintegrated, leaving cavities in the ground. The plaster that the archaeologists poured into these cavities took the place of the bodies, capturing the victim's postures. This contact between two different materials can reveal truths via fiction. Photograms, because the receptacle is a photosensitive surface, are like wet ceramic slabs. You can impress objects onto the surface, recording the items as they are. The other thing that is fascinating about photograms is the introduction of light as part of the process. I discovered that when I exposed objects on photosensitive paper, the reactions differed depending on the season and whether it was in moonlight or the very first sunrays in the morning. Lights from celestial sources have powers that we cannot control.

*In the Fall, In the Rise* records two different lights—sunlight and moonlight—from two different corners of the world: Brazil and



*In the Fall, In the Rise*, 2018, photogram on Kodak paper, 195 × 127 cm. Photo by Philippe de Gobert. Courtesy the artist and Meessen De Clercq, Brussels.

Vietnam. The leaves that were exposed on the photosensitive paper were collected from those locations as well. In Vietnam, specifically, I gathered the leaves from a plantation established in the 1920s by French tire manufacturer Michelin. Until the plantation's nationalization in 1975, the company's biologists were developing the perfect genome for the most efficient rubber-producing trees there. In Brazil, I went to the site of American industrialist Henry Ford's failed Fordlândia plantation, which, just two years after it was seeded in 1928, was overtaken by fungi and marred by revolts. That was significant to me—in the first decades of the 20th century, in two different places, there appeared these attempts at extracting from nature to build a capitalist world elsewhere. Nevertheless, what touched me the most was my physical experience of the plantations—their movement, their beauty. I wanted to capture this beauty and at the same time reveal this disorder in history.



Detailed installation view of *Red Rubber*, 2017, wax, oak wood, 20 × 24 × 260 cm each trunk, 47 × 57 × 280 each crate, at "Viva Arte Viva," the 57th Venice Biennale, 2017. Photo by Éric Baudart. Courtesy the artist.

You have also made sculptures of rubber trees. In *Red Rubber* (2017), which you showed at the Venice Biennale, the latex casts of the tree trunks are dyed scarlet. Why this color?

The red refers to two things. Michelin had two plantations in South Vietnam. In both locations, the soil is red. One of the two plantations, Phú Riêng, is also called Màu Đỏ (The Red) because of the color of the earth, but also for the revolt that happened there. When Michelin arrived in the 1920s, they deforested the land to create the plantation. At the same time, they built housing, hospitals, schools, and churches to convince the Indigenous people to work for them—they presented a perfect image of hope. But actually this simulacrum was built so that they could control and deploy these human resources as they wished. That started a period of violent oppression. The Indigenous were not well-treated—they did not receive the food that they were promised, and they had to work all day and even at night, because if you bleed the trees at night the rubber is better. Gradually, some of these laborers started writing letters, poems, and especially histories of the injustices that they suffered. Communism in Vietnam has its roots in this period—there wasn't a communist ideology yet, but it was a fight initiated purely by the working class. At the same time, a sense of identity was emerging alongside a desire to be independent as a community, a minority, as native peoples. These factors paved the path to revolts. It is also why the color red is emblematic of the Communist revolution.

And so, for the project, I created a mold of a tree trunk from the Michelin plantation in Phú Riêng. I wanted the casts to be milky to reproduce the beauty of the latex of rubber, but I also wanted an oneiric element. I introduced red because it contrasts sharply the colors that you would find at a plantation. It should have been a bit more pink because I was aiming for something unnatural. But history pushed me back—the presence of this color in rubber history is indelible. In a way, this technical mishap reveals what is always the position of my work: in between a sensorial experience and open debate on history.



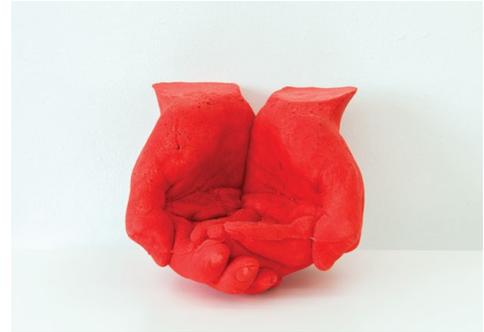
*Defeat in Petrópolis*, 2016, insolation on cardboard, rubber, pigment, rubber tree wood, 110 × 70 × 65 cm. Photo by Éric Baudart. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Castiglione, the Meurice Hotel, Paris.

You have investigated the ecological and colonial histories of Brazil as well, such as in the multimedia installation *Defeat in Petrópolis* (2016- ). What inspired this project?

This work is not finished yet. I will be further developing it. What initiated it was a novella written by Stefan Zweig called *The Royal Game* (1941). Zweig's biography taught me a lot. During World War II and the madness in Europe, he sought refuge in Petrópolis, a city in the hills north of Rio de Janeiro, at the edge of the rainforest. There, he wrote this story about the fight of someone whose imagination and thoughts were being colonized by an authoritarian state. This protagonist develops chess-playing skills that eventually save him. In real life, Zweig committed suicide days after finishing the book. That indicated to me that nature couldn't save him, even if he wanted to find refuge and peace there. Petrópolis is also symbolic as a city because it's where the first Portuguese missionaries in Brazil built colonialist villas, churches, and an opera.

I wanted to respond to *The Royal Game* to honor Zweig, but also to readapt the history through a history more familiar to me, which is that of rubber. I wrote two internal monologues for two chess opponents. The first monologue is that of a missionary who arrived in Brazil in the early 17th century to transmit his own faith. But when he sees Indigenous people living in harmony in nature, his own rules and principles become unjustified and he silences himself. The second character is a conquistador who arrived two centuries prior. He also shares his moments of doubt after witnessing his own civilization's treatment of another civilization. He remembers when the hands of a native worker were severed as punishment for their attempt to run away from the rubber plantation. This violence completely contrasts with his memories of the beautiful jungle when he first arrived. He also starts to lose faith in his own actions. Both characters become contaminated. We hear their internal monologues as voiceovers. It's like the two players share the same spirit, which haunts this landscape, as they experience the same history and doubts century after century. I will add a third character, a girl from a suburb of Rio de Janeiro who is living in 2020. She is also trying to find a reason for why she's in Petrópolis. We see this place that has been built by strangers through the lens of a few strangers.

I have made a small maquette of the chess game, and prints of the scripts that have been impacted by sunlight differently—the monologue of the missionary is more faded than that of the conquistador, and the girl's is the least faded. In the coming year, I will be working with a theater to reproduce the interior of Petrópolis's opera house. This will be the set for the play.



*Récolte Rouge*, 2015, plaster and pigment, 14.5×16×10 cm. Courtesy the artist.



Installation view of *Amazone mesure de l'Horizon, de l'Oblique et de la Verticalité*, 2015, hevea wood, glass, and Amazon river water, 120×4×8.5 cm each, at "Cao Su Pleure," Espace Art & Essai, Rennes 2 University, 2015. Photo by the artist. Courtesy the artist.

In *Amazone mesure de l'Horizon, de l'Oblique et de la Verticalité* (2015), you encase water from the Amazon river in levels. What is that work about?

That work wasn't premeditated. The idea came to me when I was making my way up the Amazon to find the Fordlândia plantation. When I first saw the forest from the outside, it appeared impenetrable. The more you go upstream, the more you feel that you are moving back in time, and the more you feel the majesty of the jungle. You just feel so weak in comparison. The Amazon river appeared so pure that I wanted to collect some water. I wanted a container that could refer directly to order, to juxtapose the disorder of the meandering water. I arrived at the level because that is the tool that humans have used to construct our world.



*Rainbow Herbicides #1*, 2019, graphite, spray-paint on paper, 60×40 cm. Photo by Wilfried Petzi. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich.

That installation was shown in “H as Homme,” which opened in September at Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle in Munich. At that same exhibition, there were works about the Vietnam War, including the group of drawings *Trail Dust* (2017- ) and *Rainbow Herbicides* (2017- ), and paintings *Colours of Grey* (2018). How did you develop these series?

I knew, like the rest of the world, that carcinogenic dioxides were released in Vietnam during the war, but I hadn’t heard of the names of the weapons and toxic-spray operations until I started my research. The names are beautiful. For example, *Trail Dust*, code for an operation, evokes a scene from a western movie where horses are galloping, kicking up the dust in a desert. *Rainbow Herbicides* is an equally evocative oxymoron that refers to the six deadly dioxins that the US military deployed—the most well-known was Agent Orange, but there was also Agent White, Pink, Green, Blue, and Purple. Each has its own properties, and the mixture made the total weapon. Even now, three generations later, we are experiencing the impacts because of genetic mutation. In October, a French court heard the case put forward by Tran Thi To Nga, a survivor of toxic-spray operations, against 26 US companies who formulated these chemicals. It is the first time that those manufacturers are facing their responsibilities.

That there could be such beautiful associations to words that denote such violent weapons really struck me. Those names stained my mental space. I worked on a few series that refer directly to the semantics, because to weaponize language is also a destructive act. It’s not a coincidence that the first missionaries in Vietnam overwrote our mother tongue in the 17th century—that targets local identity.

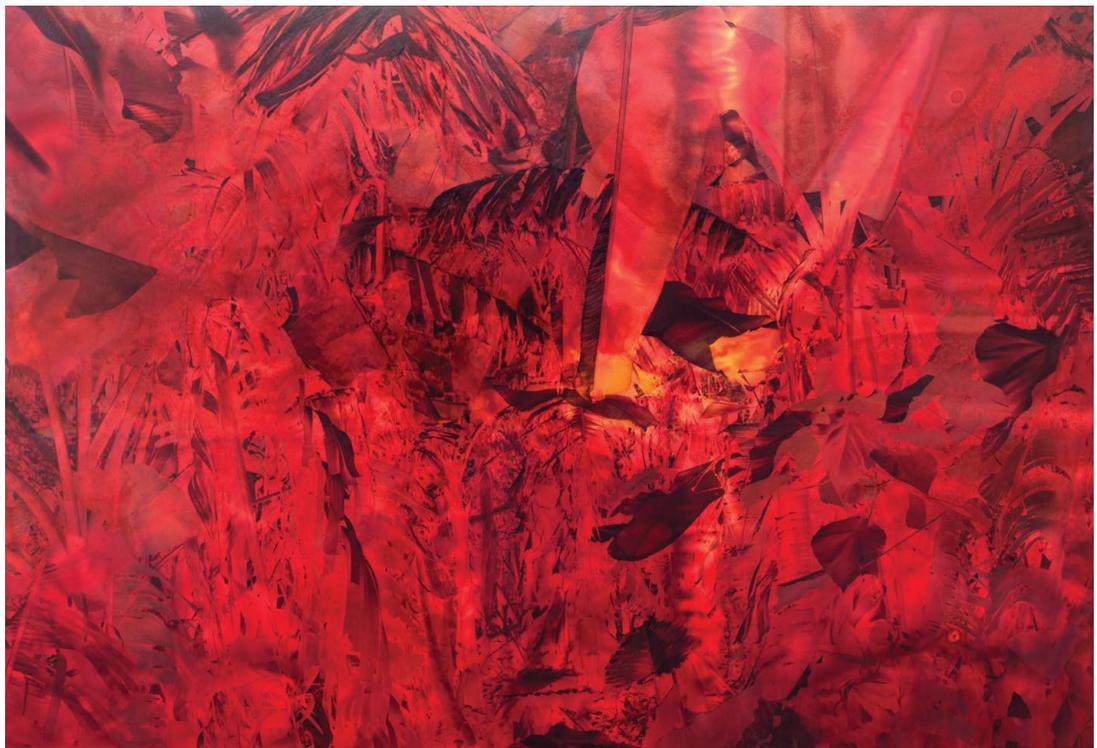
For *Colours of Grey*, I layered the six colors in the names of the *Rainbow Herbicides*, one on top of the other, with different orders and transparencies. The result of these layers is obfuscation. The colors void themselves to make gray. And that is what happened, literally—after the dioxins were dropped, there were explosions and fires, and the jungles turned into ashes, symbolizing melancholia, morosity.

*Rainbow Herbicides* is a series of drawings representing different explosions, from volcanic eruptions to atomic and napalm explosions. The drawings take a long time—it’s a meditative process—like the time that nature takes to grow. Then, in a few seconds, the toxic spray destroyed everything. I directly reproduced this act by spraying paint onto the drawings.

*Trail Dust* begins like *Rainbow Herbicides*. I slowly layer marks to create drawings of serene explosions. Then I cross-hatch over these initial lines, blurring the first landscape. Dioxin, the smoke, had blanketed Vietnam and destroyed it, effacing the green jungles, so I restaged that act.

At the 2020 Busan Biennale, you presented *From Green to Orange* (2014- ), a series of photographs depicting the jungles of Vietnam that you manipulated chemically. What is that series’ significance to you?

I submerged the photographs in three different baths—alcohol, rust, and ink. The alcohol erases the green, the ink stains the image, and the rust will leave particles on the surface, adding to the images’ materiality. For me, *From Green to Orange* is dreamlike. It explores the remains of images and memories. It’s like the forest slowly became a tragic dream or a supernatural realm haunted by ghosts. No matter where we look, there will be stains of history.



*From Green to Orange*, 2019, photograph, alcohol, colorant, rust, 160 × 240 cm. Courtesy the artist and Meessen De Clercq, Brussels.