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Hà Ninh Phạm

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A fantastical escape route from reality

By Alana Malika

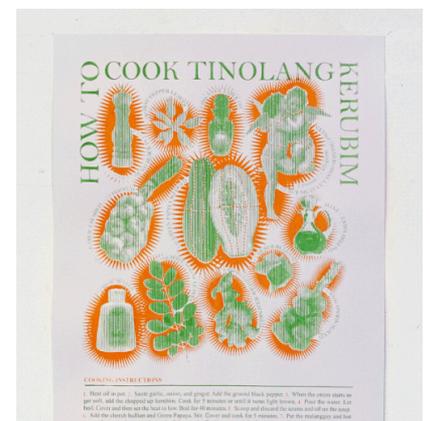
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Hà Ninh Phạm, 'D6 [Shrimp Pond]', 2020, graphite, acrylic, ink, colored pencils and alcohol markers on paper, 123 x 260cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Hà Ninh Phạm translates his elaborate topographical fantasies into mixed-media drawings, sculptures, and virtual games. Without overt references to his past, his spatial creations elicit empathy while never revealing personal details.

Born and raised in Hanoi, he received his undergraduate degree in Painting from Vietnam University of Fine Arts (VUFA). Afterwards, Phạm had to decide if he wanted to continue studying art. His father, who saw early promise in his art, offered to pay for his Masters programme if he entered an American art school. Phạm graduated from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 2018 and relocated to New York shortly after where he completed a residency programme and



had his first solo show titled 'Cheat Codes' at FRONT Arts Space. Since then, Phạm's work has been featured in various exhibitions in Southeast Asia, most notably [S.E.A Focus 2021](#) in Singapore, '[Necessary Fictions](#)' at The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, Hồ Chí Minh City, and 'Holding Pattern' at A+ Works of Art, Kuala Lumpur. Outside of his practice, Phạm is a lecturer currently teaching at RMIT University Vietnam, VUFA, and Monster Lab School of Design.



Hà Ninh Phạm in his studio. Image courtesy of the artist

In 'My Land', Phạm invents alternative realities as a unique form of escapism. The long-running project consists of four bodies of work: 'Mothermap', 'Logs', 'Institute of Distance', and 'Single Stories'. In 'Mothermap', the artist constructs terrains borrowing no pre-existing attachments from Earth and humanity. The terrain exists in a parallel timeline beyond our perception of reality and the only remnants we have are indecipherable maps and artefacts. In a series of mixed media drawings, Phạm acts as both creator and visitor of a world fabricated in his mind but devoid of inspiration from the cultures, politics, or histories that anchor his identity. Unlike mainstream science fiction, Phạm's geography creates discomfort without centering any faults within our world. These landscapes are neither a utopia nor a dystopia, rather the artist creates discomfort by immersing viewers into an enigma.





Hà Ninh Phạm, 'Institute of Distance', 2020, videogame, duration variable, edition of 20 + 2 AP. Image courtesy of the artist.



Hà Ninh Phạm, 'Institute of Distance', 2020, videogame, duration variable, edition of 20 + 2 AP. Image courtesy of the artist.

Phạm's detailed maps may not lead to a tangible territory, but his laborious construction of cartography and lore reflects his own struggles adapting to unfamiliar settings. While studying in Philadelphia, the foreign social scene and language barrier made him feel isolated. As a way to cope, he has learned to "distrust everything" and remain detached when navigating through a foreign place. The process of capturing the essence of these imagined worlds requires one to surrender their preconceived notions of reality. Without the presence of any universal letters, numbers or symbols, people viewing the project cannot act on social cues to understand the logic behind 'My Land'. Phạm lends his audience a glimpse of how to accept a circumstance without understanding it, a lesson he learned in real life.



Click [here](#) to read our conversation with Hà Ninh Phạm, where he elaborates on the biographical aspect of his topography, creating art during the pandemic, and his creative inspirations.

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