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ART • WEEKEND

A Two-Person Show Spans the Poles of Imagination

Tammy Nguyen's inspired reinvention of the myth of Narcissus occupies a world apart from Ha Ninh Pham's slightly demented vision of a parallel universe.

Jamie James October 26, 2019



Tammy Nguyễn, "Why can't I touch you" (2019), watercolor on paper stretched over wood panels, 61 x 91 cm (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

HO CHI MINH CITY — If Chanel boutiques and Maserati dealerships are the measure of globalization, then the Socialist Republic of Vietnam arrived on the world stage many years ago. Yet openness to Western notions about getting and spending money doesn't necessarily bring with it assimilation into the international marketplace of ideas. The art establishment in Vietnam resists innovative foreign modes

of making and thinking about art. Anything that smacks of what was once called postmodernism is still viewed with suspicion. The Vietnam University of Fine Arts, in Hanoi, which is descended from the colonial *École Supérieure des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine* (School of Fine Arts of Indochina), has long enforced parameters for contemporary painting grounded in the mid-20th century School of Paris: misty gray cityscapes in the style of Utrillo, sentimental agricultural landscapes, village maids in pastel-colored *ao dai* toting jugs.

The Factory Centre for Contemporary Art, in Ho Chi Minh City, was founded four years ago to provide a venue for artists whose work ventures beyond these strictures. Under its director, Zoe Butt, it has been gently guiding Vietnamese art into the 21st century. The Factory's current exhibition, *Necessary Fictions*, displays paintings and drawings by two international artists who have made

transcultural journeys in opposing directions: Tammy Nguyễn, a first-generation Vietnamese-American painter, born and raised in San Francisco and now based in New York, who studied traditional lacquer painting in Ho Chi Minh City on a Fulbright fellowship in 2007; and Hà Ninh Phạm, a Vietnamese artist who has recently returned to his country after two years of study in the United States.



Hà Ninh Phạm, "Wax Fortress" (2018), graphite powder, oil pastel and acrylic on mix media paper and synthetic paper, 220.98 x 208.28 cm

Nguyễn's ambitious cycle of 12 paintings, with the playful, enigmatic title *The Gazing Pool for Who and Ai*, spans the perimeter walls of the Factory's exhibition space. Her work makes a disorienting first impression, at times nightmarish, at times deceptively conservative in its imagery; yet as the viewer progresses through the sequence it become clear that the paintings present a carefully plotted parable. Nguyễn's complex, eccentric narrative is inspired by the myth of Narcissus, as told by the Augustan-era Roman poet Ovid. The essential elements of the myth are adumbrated in the first painting in the

series. "He Is Flower, Flower" is an image of monstrous beauty: an apparently male human figure removes a copper mask from his face, which releases an explosive mass of vegetation, with tendrils that terminate in budding daffodils.

In Ovid's narrative, Narcissus is a beautiful youth beloved by all who see him, yet cursed with an inability to love anyone but himself. He is pursued by a legion of lovers, but he spurns them all. When he sees his reflection in a pool of water in the forest, he becomes consumed by the desire to possess this image of his own beauty, an insubstantial illusion which cannot return his love. He wastes away with unrequited lust and finally metamorphoses into a flower, the daffodil (Linnaean genus *Narcissus*). Tammy Nguyễn deconstructs this superficially simple myth, fracturing its conceptual pieces and putting them back together again to address 21st-century issues.

In her paintings at the Factory, executed in a virtuosic array of media, Nguyễn enlarges Narcissus's tragic dilemma to a global scale. Humanity's self-absorption repudiates the power of Nature, as our species' self-love has created conditions that endanger the very viability of life on earth. Ovid's story takes place in the confines of a pool of water in a forest glade; Nguyen's vision embraces the planet. In her telling, the flood of Narcissus's tears carries him to



Tammy Nguyễn, "Echo of Mount Blanc du Tacul Nusantara" (2019), watercolor on paper stretched over wood panels, 183 x 152 cm

the waters of the ocean, to the core of the Earth. There, he is rebirthed and transformed, and he repopulates the land with his own floral incarnation, just as human self-love has refashioned the planet in our own image.



Tammy Nguyễn, "He is Flower, Flower" (2019), watercolor on paper stretched over wood panels, 152 x 183 cm

Nguyễn's study of Vietnamese lacquer painting engendered in her a passion for gorgeous, polished surfaces. In her work at the Factory, she magnifies the sense of pictorial space by juxtaposing layered surfaces, ranging from the sheer transparency of watercolor to the flat, matte opacity of flashe paint, with elegant forms that sometimes resemble collage cut-outs. The surface is enriched by brilliant gold, silver, and copper leaf, as well as darker oxidized metals, such as a Japanese gun-metal blue leaf that inwardly gleams infrared. It is a truism that all art must be seen in the flesh, but Tammy Nguyễn's painting is utterly analog, by turns meaty and evanescent, which defies digitization both in visual and conceptual terms. The consort dances together in an intellectual harmony that is uniquely satisfying.

It might seem counterintuitive to describe an artist with an MFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, who summered at Skowhegan and did a residency at Yaddo, as an outsider; yet despite Hà Ninh's recent experience in

the elite echelons of American art, he remains intellectually isolated from the mainstream. He doesn't reject currents in contemporary art; he simply ignores them. His imagination flourishes in an extraordinary alternate universe compounded with ideas, and his mission as an artist is to chronicle that place.



Hà Ninh Phạm, "[Institute of Distance]" (2018), graphite, colored pencil and acrylic on bristol paper, 121.92 x 193.04 cm

In a text block, Hà Ninh introduces the gallery visitor to his large-scale drawings with this declaration: "Nobody knows why, but ever since we were born, we have all formed a vision of an imaginary world. Each of us has our own world, yet we all refer to them with a single name: My Land." In Hà Ninh's imagination, My Land is "a place that exists outside of our perception of reality." The artist told me that he wants it to be "a completely foreign environment," one that "doesn't use any known sign, no numbers or letters, no known objects." It is flat world, roughly square, with four horizons, a place "where time is circular and space is paradoxical."



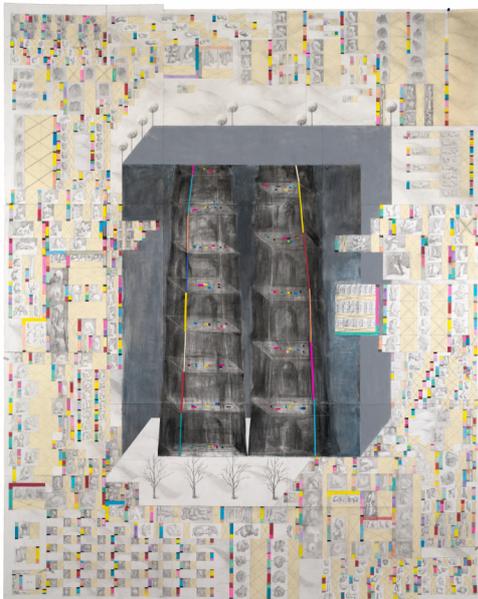
Hà Ninh Phạm, detail from "[Institute of Distance]"

Hà Ninh's imaginary universe recalls the emotionless cosmology of the *ficciones* of Jorge Luis Borges, a writer he greatly admires. The first piece in the exhibition is a comprehensive map of this world, entitled "[mothermap]." The titles of his drawings are in square brackets because they belong to our world, he explained; the drawings themselves belong to My Land.

These drawings are detailed representations of various landmarks on the mothermap, some of them over six feet high, on several sheets of paper joined together. The Museum of Memory Fragments, for example, was built to house the collection of a man who spent his life wandering throughout My Land collecting ordinary rocks. The museum has a fantastically complex cataloging system, owing to its unusual structure: the building "has two timelines and

fourteen spatial dimensions.” Another drawing depicts the Institute of Volume, which is devoted to determining the volume of two-dimensional objects. It accomplishes this impossible task by using a “paradoxical tool,” a circular protractor that can measure “spherical angles.”

It may sound drily cerebral, but the drawings themselves have a vibrant, intense inner life, varying in tone and technique. Some of them possess the mysterious quality of Song landscape painting, with monumental structures exquisitely rendered in graphite textured to resemble granite in mist. Other drawings are governed by enigmatic color codes, symbolic documents for which the key has been lost. Scale in the works fluctuates wildly; occasional close-ups reveal elegant sculptural forms that suggest a Surrealist dreamscape, with no discernible references to human civilizations past or present, while others have a medieval feeling, echoing background vignettes in a Brueghel painting, without people.



Hà Ninh Phạm, “[Museum of Memory Fragments]” (2017), graphite, charcoal powder, acrylic, masking tape and collage on bristol paper, 190.5 x 144.78 cm

Hà Ninh’s strange world has no visible occupants. There are relics of past wars, a fortress made of wax, and an army’s encampment, but no soldiers. The Museum of Memory Fragments is depicted in exquisite detail, but we know nothing about the man who collected the rocks it houses. Was he even human? Whenever I asked the artist about the people who built these places, his answer was, “No one knows.” Hà Ninh scrupulously adheres to the fiction that his imagined world exists in an alternative reality that he is privileged to visit and chronicle but has no control over. It is a lost land, a Machu Picchu of the mind. The construction of My Land is an obsessive project that presents an inexhaustible enigma, which has the power to transfix those who see it.

The curators at the Factory struggled to come up with a rationale for showing the work of these artists side by side. The real explanation is probably procedural, owing to the expense and legal difficulties entailed

by importing large paintings from America and the demands of scheduling at an art institution that is the closest thing Vietnam has to a museum of contemporary art. In any case, the curators needn’t have worried. Tammy Nguyễn’s inspired reinvention of the myth of Narcissus, straddling the stately hexameters of ancient Roman poetry and emergent ecological disaster in the 21st century, occupies a world apart from Hà Ninh’s slightly demented vision of a parallel universe. Yet these works talk to each other from the poles of imagination, the universe where all art lives.



Tammy Nguyễn, "Ai Ai Ai Ai Ai Ai Ai"
(2019), watercolor on paper stretched
over wood panels, 183 x 152 cm

Necessary Fictions continues at the *Factory Contemporary Arts Centre* (15 Nguyễn Ứ Dĩ, Thảo Điền Ward, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam) through October 27.

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