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for
My Mother
for
Myself

the — *art* — of Nguyễn Minh Thành

By
Carmen
Cortizas
Fontan

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“ Monday, I did nothing and think of nothing
Tuesday, I write down my own past
Wednesday, I read a love novel
Thursday, from morning until now I don't feel hungry at all
Friday, it's raining outside which makes me miss the sunshine
Saturday, I wrote a poem but I don't think it's beautiful
Sunday, Ave Maria, today I keep for my mother.

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Nguyễn Minh Thành's *Seven Days of the Week* (1995) is a series of scroll paintings that recount the spiritless days of a boy that balances a candle on his head. From purple, to black, green, blue, to yellow, the changing hues of the vertical box he lives in suggests a slow passage of time, turning night into day, and day into night.

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Layered over it, is a transparent fabric used in Buddhist funerals – perhaps to mourn that in the change of background, in the change of activity, the boy remains silently entrapped in the cyclical battle of one's existence. Thành recalls that until the age of eight, he did not have electricity, at which point his forehead had burnt many times from leaning too close to the candles as he studied. Over the years, the symbol of the candle has become a part of him, an endearing guide in his journey of finding meaning within himself.

Thành's personal approach to art also poses larger questions about understanding ourselves beyond the context that defines us. This universal challenge becomes especially relevant in a society like Vietnam during the 1990s as the opening of the economy simultaneously opened the door to generational disconnections and cultural contradictions. Today, Thành is considered one of Vietnam's first avant-garde artists for the manner in which he presented emotionality and vulnerability as a form of artistic expression.

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His self-portraits can thus be seen as a "multi - dimensional image of himself"², where he attempts to gain control over his memory in order to come to terms with his identity. An insecure village boy attached to his mother, an international artist disturbed by his success, and a simple being who has accepted both, are all layers that make up Thành's art. Inspired by Buddhism, Catholicism, family rituals, and the feverish religion of Doi Moi, Thành forms his own special kind of spirituality that develops into an ever-flowing thread of self-reflection.



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Nguyễn Minh Thành. *Seven Days of the Week*. Ink and watercolor on Vietnamese paper, 1995.
Nguyen Art Foundation Collection

T Born in the outskirts of Hanoi in 1971, Thành considers himself to have been raised by his mother. He admired her deeply, and always thought that he would become a farmer like her. But Thành remembers the day that his mother said to him: "I'd rather work harder than let you quit school to share my burden. One day you will be able to help yourself."³ To Thành, it was his mother's perseverant, understanding, and selfless character, that allowed him to realize his dream of entering the Hanoi Fine Arts University. At the university, he met Nguyễn Quang Huy, Nguyễn Văn Cường and Trương Tân, whom he would become close friends with. They were united in their boredom with the academic courses and spent their time yearning for the experimentality that the school lacked. Thành spent most of his time with his friends in Huy's 16m² apartment on 54 Hang Chuoi Street.⁴ There was a raging passion to create. They drew on dó paper, on canvas, and on the walls of the room. They became closely acquainted with Veronika Radulovic, a German professor who came to teach at the university, with the intention of sharing international art forms with young artists. This made them realize the outdatedness of their institutional education but also encouraged them to view their circumstance as a moment of art history unraveling itself before them, and perhaps even through them.



From left to right: Nguyễn Quang Huy, Nguyễn Minh Thành, Veronika Radulovic, and Trương Tân having lunch.
Image Courtesy of Veronika Radulovic.

Thành passed his final exam in June 1996, and by October of the same year, he held his first exhibition. At this point, the term installation had been brought up here and there amongst the recently graduated students, however, there was still no concrete definition that artists could confidently work with. Thanh was an exception to this. He "immediately understood that Vietnamese people have already realized this concept"⁵, in the interior design of temples, and in the arrangement of festivities or funerals. For this reason, he wanted to build an installation based on ritualistic objects, such as white cloths, incense sticks, tassels, tablecloth banners, and altar decorations, because of the spiritual significance they were given through a collective practice. Partly due to the irony of this concept, and partly because he had no idea what to call it, his first exhibition was titled *Installation*.

At the State Exhibition Center in 29 Hang Bai Street, he isolated different ritualistic objects from their original contexts, and instead placed them alongside 3-meter orange banners depicting the artist and his grandmother.⁶ At the top of the scroll, the grandmother squats behind bars, while at the bottom, the boy, sitting crossed-legged, with arms folded, and his head down, holds himself in an act of obedience and self - protection. Through this placement, the two characters, one at the end, and one at the beginning of life, equally exemplify the condition of being a prisoner. As "prisoners", they must accept the burdensome circumstance that life places on them both.

T Nguyễn Minh Thành and writer Dương Tường standing next to his
exhibition: Installation, 1996.
Image Courtesy of Veronika Radulovic

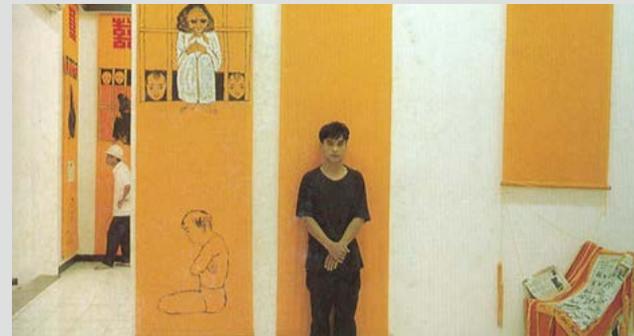


In another banner, Thành characterizes the boy as something between a child and a man, between his “lucky haircut”⁷ and his fancy black tie.

This self-portrayal becomes a projection of tradition and modernity imposing itself on the human body – in turn fostering a place of violence within one’s interior. Through this, Thành questions if he is just a simple boy growing up too quickly in a rapidly changing world, or an adult that can’t seem to move past the sweet pain of his childhood. In certain works, he paints the double happiness symbol above both the grandmother and the boy, perhaps as a way to reinforce this dichotomy in which he and so many others find themselves in.

Thành’s first exhibition came down to one fundamental question that would continue to follow him in the future:

+ +
“Does happiness exist
at all in this long life?”
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Nguyễn Minh Thành standing next
to his exhibition
Installation, 1996. Image Courtesy
of Natalia Kravaeskaia.

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T With this question in the back of his mind, Thành continues to explore the self through what he considers his unintentional self-portrait. At first glance, the 1998 series *My Face* does not seem to resemble Thành's face at all. The character has a long, egg-shaped head, with large eyes intensified by the dark shadow surrounding them. The eyebrows are thick and imposing, while the lips make a perfect heart shape. This empty yet imposing face embodies what Thành calls a "person without memories" and a "mouth without words" that lives vicariously through foreign bodies.

E In this series, he is both a spider as he is an archbishop and sometimes he is only a pot for a cactus to grow or a lily pad for a frog to smoke a cigarette. Again, he is making a reference to the conflict that exists between his inward and outward experiences. One such conflict is that of religion as an identifier of who we are and what we yearn for. His mixed references to contradicting religious motifs are rooted in Thành's Catholic upbringing despite a majoritarian Buddhist community. This obsession with how others perceive us by the factors of our birth can also be seen in Thành's manipulation of cultural motifs. Images of conical hats and straw baskets are creatively turned into physical extensions of his body. This act of morphing may be a criticism of how others (namely Westerners) saw him solely as a byproduct of his country. In this series of self-portraits, Thành be-headed himself from the collective body, in order to point out the contrast between himself and what everyone else increasingly expected from him.



Nguyễn Minh Thành, 1. Untitled and 2. Winter, 1997. Natural color on dó paper.
1. Archive Veronika Radulovic. 2. Collection Suzane Letch.

T In the following years, Thành kicked off his career
as an international artist. It was during this time that he felt
most compelled to explore the theme of his mother. In
1999, during a 3-month residency in Germany, Thành was
H faced with a sensation of social alienation that resulted in
his homesickness.⁹ He missed his mother and thought
about all that he had become because of her and in spite
of her. He wrote a letter to her emptying out the emotions
that had accumulated during his time away. This was
E intended to be a private letter. But what if he made it
public, would it not still be private for his mother? Would it
not be private for every individual that reads it?

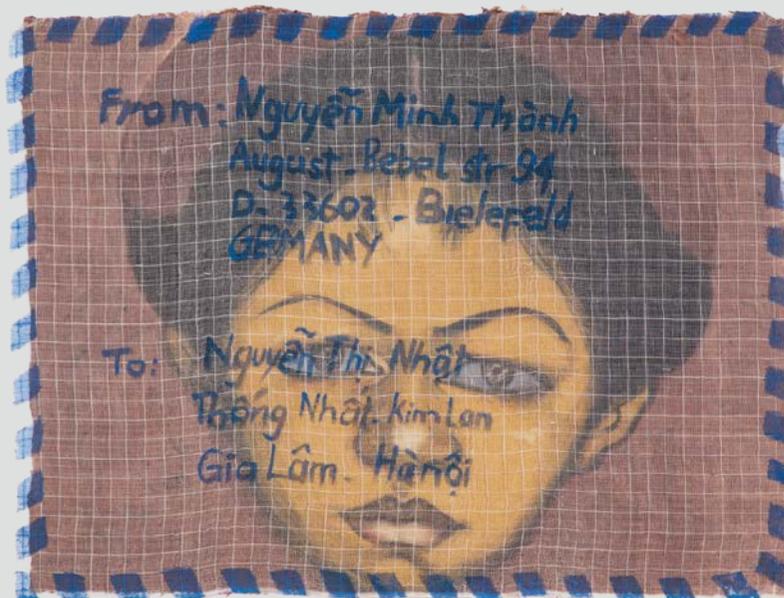
A This prompted him to construct an interactive mail
performance titled *Letters For My Mother*. He exhibited a
large painting of her, over which he hung an envelope. He
shared the letter and asked people at the exhibition to
write their own letters to his mother.¹⁰

As a result, people attached personal photographs,
texts, and drawings to their letters as if Thành's mother were a
pen pal or a friend. He then painted his mother on the
Vietnamese envelopes and sent them all to his village in
Kim Lan. This interactive approach eliminated the usual
occurrence of walking into an exhibition and then walking out
after a few short minutes. The viewers became part of the
performance, and it was precisely their cultural difference from
the artist that made their interpretations all the more significant
to the building of bridges between communities. Thành's
courageous act of showcasing his vulnerability thus allowed for
a safe space of emotional and creative expression. He wanted
his mother to consider the anonymous letters as also letters
from him, her son. This idea that stemmed from private feelings
and then turned public once again became private in the home
of his mother, who has all the letters kept safely.

Thành's dominant themes in the early stages of
his work involve his desire to take control over an
identity he feels is largely dependent on factors other
than himself. After 2008, there is a noticeable change in
the artist's approach to art. Considering the close affinity
between his subject matter and his state of mind, this
transition could be influenced by his experiences in the
years immediate to his international success.

In the span of ten years, he had gone from "a
countryside boy" to one of the leading contemporary
artists, exhibiting in Germany, Japan, France, Holland,
G and Australia. But to an extent, it seemed that he could
not escape being a countryside boy at the Biennials and
Triennials. Within the international frame, his works were
U highly regarded for their level of conceptuality yet he felt
there was no importance given to the inherent
Y emotionality they were rooted in.

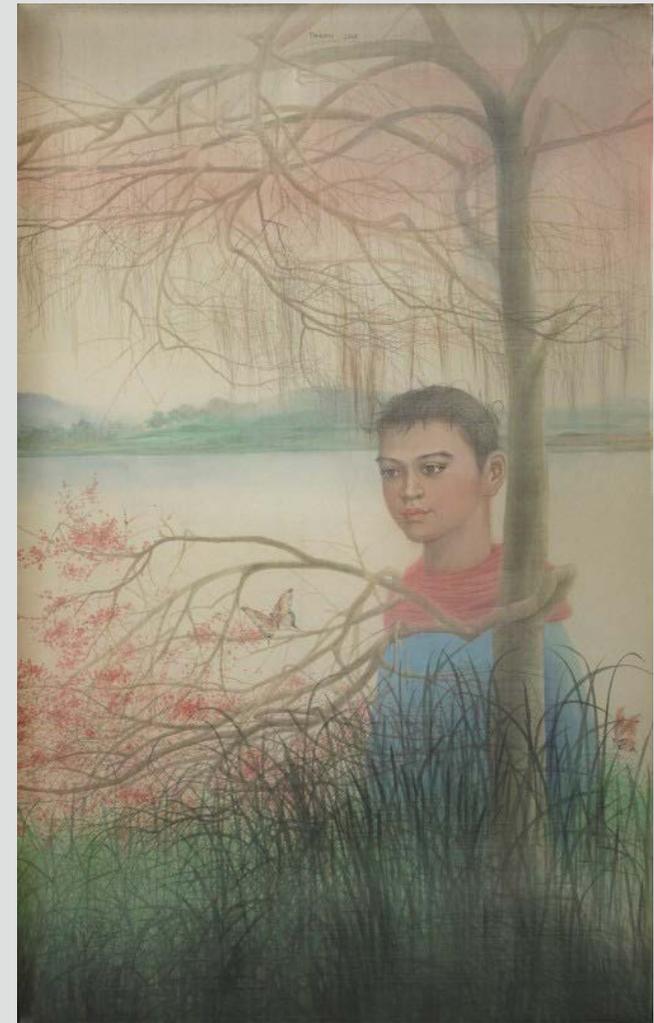
To Thành, art was a way to break the generational
constraints around him and release his convoluted
emotions. But the label that was given to him of a
"Vietnamese artist in post-Doi Moi society" meant that
N the unseen, the radical, and the confrontational were
M now criteria he had to follow in order to be regarded as
contemporary. "Is this conceptual enough?" was Thành's
I primary question as he became subconsciously
immersed in the wires of the art machine. He joked that
to be a good artist, one needed to be a better
businessman and an even better diplomat – both of
N which did not suit his character. The mounting pressure
eventually came to an end in 2008 when he moved to
H Dalat in Vietnam's Central Highlands, in order to focus on
finding peace and regaining his emotionality towards the
art he first knew.



Nguyễn Minh Thành, Letter For My Mother.
Mixed media (acrylic on Vietnamese paper/watercolor on gauze), 1999. Collection Van Laak und Bérengé

T Over the course of Thành's ten years in Dalat, he
endeavored on a journey of spirituality. Essential to this
was learning how to slow down. It was as simple as
observing the innocent resemblance between his hands
and the twigs of trees, his hair, to the nest of a bird. In
H re-learning how to draw his face, he practiced feeling
tenderness and compassion towards it, rather than
doubt and insecurity. He did not want to draw his portrait
based on the assumption that it has a nose, a mouth,
and a pair of eyes, but out of the sense of knowing
E one-self so deeply that the face can only be thought of
for its wholeness. He called this series *No & Meaning*
criticizing the notion of constantly finding the meaning in
the exterior as a substitute for finding meaning within. In
comparison to the *My Face* series, these self-portraits
A have an inherent quality of stillness that transcends the
canvas. He believes that while meditating, one must
allow for everything to continue so that the good and the
bad become mere clouds passing by. In this sense, the
self-portraits also indicate his growth in regard to his
indifference to compliments, critiques, or imposed
R criteria. As the entirety of his artistic practice is put into
context, it can be understood as a peaceful acceptance
of all the emotions he felt in his previous works. Over the
years, he has learned to paint each layer of his face, until
the past, present, and future seem to merge into one
T flowing portrait.

When he talks, Thành often makes reference to
the past and present as if they were two completely
worlds. For those of his generation, the Vietnam of twenty
years ago may often feel like a faraway dream, distorted
and surreal. This is why his open demonstration of
vulnerability during that period spoke for those who felt
psychologically affected by the quickly changing
environment. He believes that our life is only what we
remember, and if we don't remember anything, then it is
as if we have not lived at all. Thus, his artistic practice has
largely been based on forming a lasting relationship with
the memories that have formed him. His relationship with
memory can be compared to that of fire. As he explains,
it is only natural that if one touches fire they will get
burned, but in that instance, one would not say "I hate
you fire!". In the same way, Thành feels no hatred towards
the fire that burned his head as a child doing homework,
nor the fire inside of him as a university student, and so
on. It is not a dissociation but a continuance. Art critic
Natalia Kraveskaia explains where she finds the common
root of Thành's work: "For me, his art has always been as
a prayer: a prayer for a child who grew up without love, a
prayer for a woman whose life is constrained by the daily
hardships and traditional obligations, a quite personal
prayer for justice and beauty in the world."¹¹ This comes
back to Thành's first exhibition in 1996, in which he posed
the question: "Does happiness exist at all in this long life?"
That, he has never answered, and when asked about it,
it seems he has forgotten.



Nguyễn Minh Thành, *Beside the Lake*.
Watercolor on silk, 2017

¹Nguyễn, Minh Thành. *Seven Days of the Week*. Ink and watercolour on Vietnamese paper, 1995. Archive of Veronika Radulovic.

²Kraveskaia, Natalia. "Windows on Life: the Art of Nguyen Minh Thanh." *Art Asia Pacific*, vol. 24, 1999, pp. 49-53. Art Asia Pacific.

³Nguyễn, Minh Thành. *My Face - Installation and Paintings*. 1997. Pamphlet. Galerie Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City.

⁴Radulovic, Veronika. "54 Hang Chuoi." *Don't Call It Art! Contemporary Art in Vietnam 1993-1999*. 2021.

⁵Nguyễn, Minh Thành. *Speech at Exhibition: Installation*. State Exhibition Hall, 29 Hang Bai, 3rd November 1996, Hanoi. Speech.

⁶Devereaux, David. "An Artist's Inner Voyage." *Viet Nam News [Ha Noi]*, 12th November 1996.

⁷Radulovic, Veronika. "Nguyen Minh Thanh" *Don't Call It Art! Contemporary Art in Vietnam 1993-1999*. 2021.

⁸Nguyễn, Minh Thành. *My Face - Installation and Paintings*, 1997. Pamphlet. Galerie Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City.

⁹Radulovic, Veronika. "Nguyen Minh Thanh." *Don't Call It Art! Contemporary Art in Vietnam 1993-1999*, 2021.

¹⁰Kraveskaia, Natalia. "A Prayer: The Art of Nguyen Minh Thanh." *Art Asia Pacific*, 1999, pp. 86-101.

¹¹Kraveskaia, Natalia. "A Prayer: The Art of Nguyen Minh Thanh." *Art Asia Pacific*, 1999, pp. 86-101.