



A WATER POND
FOR THE SOUL
TO SWIM IN

By
Carmen
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Lê Thừa Tiến. SONG I
Lacquer, porcelain, glass on wood and board, 2018

Fado is a Portuguese musical genre known for the feelings of resignation it sighs and the melancholic story it tells of everyday life. But Fado, meaning fate, is rooted in the strength to push forward in the face of hardship and pain. The message of this profound genre interestingly bridges with the Buddhist teachings of impermanence. Buddhists believe that suffering is a natural yet impermanent part of our existence, so we should practice experiencing it in a calm and reflective manner.¹

Lê Thừa Tiến, a solitary and introspective artist from Hue, takes inspiration from both the Buddhist philosophy and the poetics of Fado as he personalizes them through his art. In his multi-faceted experimentation with materials such as plaster, charcoal, gold leaf, and especially lacquer over the past 25 years, he has always used literal and figurative modes of layering in his artmaking, believing that this process would help him look more deeply into his own soul.

T Tiến was born in 1964 as the youngest of
seven children. His earliest memory was
formed four years later in the New Year of
H 1968, also known as the Tet Offensive. The
Vietnam War continued to devastate Hue
throughout his childhood, until 1975 when
an evacuation of the city was ordered. Tiến
remembers sitting on the steps of his garden
on the day he had to leave. In a small plastic
E box, he put a few objects of affection,
including family pictures, postcards, and a
bullet he had found on the street, then
quickly buried the box before his father
dragged him out to the truck. Without
knowing it, Tiến was attempting to preserve
and protect the objects of his childhood
A memories. While he would grow and his life
would change, at least these items would
remain untouched by the passage of time
and the difficulties of his circumstance.

In 1982, Tiến began to attend the Hue
College of Fine Arts on the grounds of the
Imperial Palace. However, he remembers
those years most for the trips to the
countryside his class would take to observe
and sketch rural life. In 1985, they traveled
to the border of Laos and lived with the
Pacoh tribe for two months. Initially, their
interaction was limited as the Pacoh people
were always working and the Hue artists
were always sketching. When they were
together, they would just co-exist in silence.
Then, one day, Tiến was approached by the
man he lived with to draw a portrait of his
dying brother as a way to remember him.
The day after Tiến finished the portrait, the
whole village was outside his door; each
holding a tiny photograph of their loved ones
in one hand, and a chicken in the other. Tiến
and his friends spent days drawing, amazed
at how their charcoal sketches could serve
as an outlet for so many suppressed feelings
of grief.

This realization made him consider his own
shielded emotions as a young man who, like
everybody else, felt unable to talk about the
past. The experiences he had on these trips
became a large part of Tiến's artistic
identity. He had learned art's beauty from
those who hadn't come to teach him art,
from those who didn't intend on teaching
him anything at all. They only asked if he had
eaten, and spared a portion of the little that
they had for him. Since that day, Tiến has
never returned to drawing portraits, but he
continues to explore the concept of
connecting with strangers through art.

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Lê Thừa Tiến. VIETNAM-THE FOSSILIZED WAR
Plaster figures, chairs, 6 minutes video clips, 1999



Deeply touched by the silent coping of the Pacoh people, Tiến began to experiment with Installation Art as a means of strengthening collective memory.

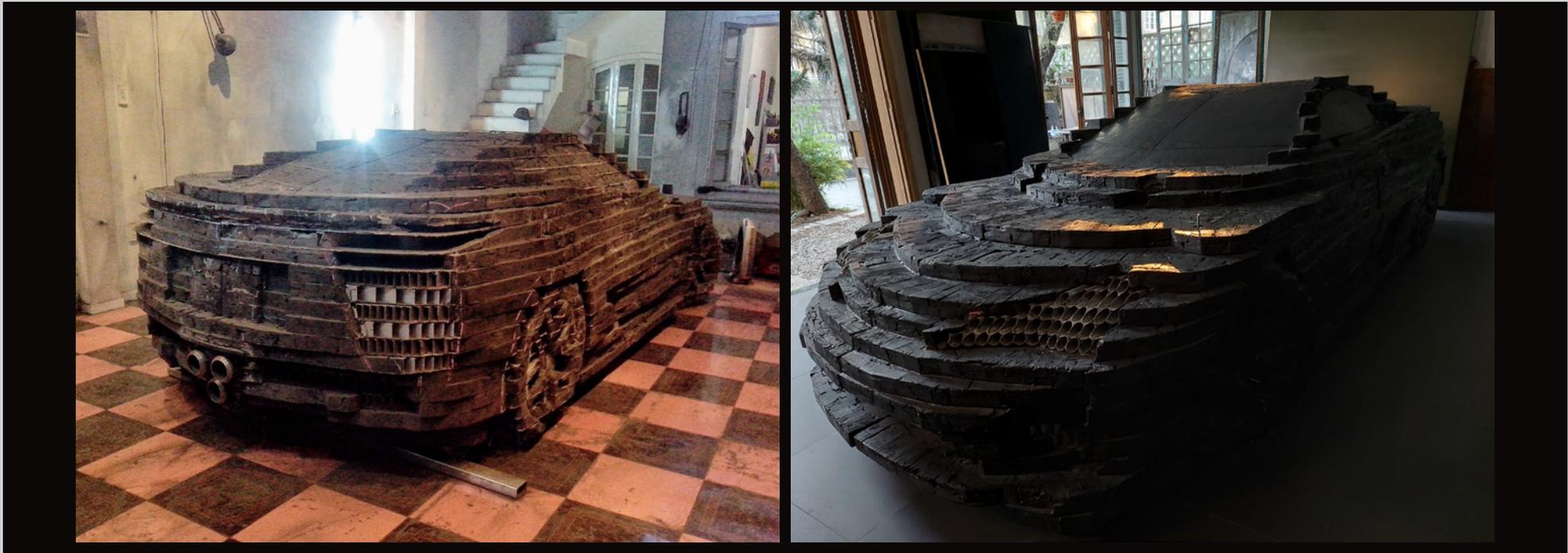
In 1995, Tiến earned a scholarship to the Rijksakademie of Amsterdam and in 1997, he went to Boston under the Indochina Arts Partnership (IAP). At IAP, he held his first significant exhibition VIETNAM - THE FOSSILIZED WAR. In a dark room, seven plaster figures on wooden chairs watch slowed-down war scenes in a continuous loop. Void of any narrative, the moving light from the screen and the shadows of the stagnant plasters orchestrate an elusive puppet show. These figures have no ideological statement or bitter speech to give.

They do not intend to haunt the living; they are nothing but air trapped in layers of plaster. At the exhibition, the American viewers were invited to sit on the unoccupied chairs in the presence of the 'lost bodies' to watch their shared history unfold. Tiến believes that even those who survived the war, must feel that some part of them has been fossilized, incapable of changing or overcoming their suffering. For this reason, in his opening statement, he asked, "Let us be strong enough to bow to the fossilized pains of war - place them on the highest altar."² Tiến removes the discussions around the rights and wrongs, winners and losers of the war, and highlights Buddhism's second precept of adopting neutrality towards all beings.

T In later years, Tiến broadens the ubiquitous
H theme of war to discuss humanity's perpetual
E violence against nature. He examines charcoal,
a product of deforestation, and exercises its
potential as a symbolic artistic medium.
Charcoal is created by heating wood in
oxygen-starved conditions, thus its outside
appearance is a reflection of a tree's suffocative
death. But on the inside, the fibers of the
tree remain perfectly intact and still allow for
air to flow through. Tiến's fascination for its
inner complexity inspired the charcoal series
– which most notably features his life-sized
rendition of the jet-black Lexus LX570.

At the 2011 LEXUS exhibition in Hue, the
resemblance to the real car was received
with a child-like joy, with people posing next
to it, trying to open the doors, and asking if
an engine could be installed. To Tiến, these
reactions conveyed the extent of modern-day
materialism and consumption - where the
image overpowers any consideration of
materiality. Charcoal is a testimony to the
human ego that feeds off the destruction of the
forest - a fact especially relevant considering
Vietnam's alarming rate of deforestation at
the height of its development.³

However, Tiến views charcoal beyond that of
a manufactured product. Inside the black
and charred appearance of charcoal, lay the
trapped souls of trees. Thus the structure of
the Lexus indeed holds traces of life that will
never cease to exist. They will silently
continue with us on our journey. No matter
where we are or how far we move away from
our origins, not even our luxury cars can
escape humanity's debt to nature. Again,
Tiến ascends this series above any temporal
theme by choosing introspective reflection
over anger and anxiety.



Lê Thừa Tiến. THE LEXUS PROJECT
Steel and charcoal, 2011

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Tiến's introspection is further manifested in his long-term commitment to the medium of lacquer; its transformative ability he embraces across metaphysical boundaries. Over ten years, Tiến developed REFLECTIONS, a series consisting of large-scale lacquer works. Standing tall at nearly 3 meters, the enormity of the black lacquer presents a strange fusion between that of an ancient gate in Hue and an alternate portal from an American sci-fi film. But unlike the reflection of a mirror or the camera of a phone, the lacquer's sheen gives the impression of a somewhat distorted and ominous reflection of the outside world. As we stand in front of Tiến's lacquer paintings, we are encountering an image of ourselves we are not used to.

The heavy silence of the lacquer gives us no clear route, nor any immediate meaning that can be deduced. As we stop pursuing, we have nothing left but to slow down and look closely at our inner world, where true substance lies.⁴ The deeper we stare at these paintings, the farther removed we are from the outside world, and the more the lacquer's reflection becomes a water pond for the soul to swim in, allowing us to see our existence beyond the petty concerns that take over everyday life. Because like lacquer, life is a process of layering moments upon moments, and then sanding them away to see the present we have formed. It can thus also be understood as a continuous cycle of collective healing based on the principle of non-attachment, where the layers of the dead build upon the layers of the living and then again upon the dead. As Tiến finally lets go of sanding the lacquer, he wishes to pass down this relationship to his viewers, who will hopefully continue the quest for intimacy with the medium.

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*Lê Thừa Tiến. REFLECTION IV
Lacquer, 2014*

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T Lê Thừa Tiến's contemporary compositions
always carry an element of spirituality that
cannot be explained, nor attributed to a
singular concept. He treats his artistic
H process as a spiritual release from the
painful memories that he shares with so
many of his generation, who like himself,
lived through the Vietnam war but have
rarely ever had the chance to express their
suppressed emotions. As he develops his
oeuvre, Tiến has learned to transform these
E painful memories into a 'mental material'⁵
that can be dissected and reconstructed into
any medium, because although he wishes to
honor the past, he does not want to become
imprisoned by it.

A Over time, Tiến has gradually transitioned to
recalling and honoring these memories in
more abstract ways, so that they are no
longer only contemplations of the Vietnam
R war or his internal wars, but of all conflicts
rooted in nihilism and hatred. The process of
personal healing Tiến goes through makes
his work more freeing when they reach his
audience, who can interact with it in any way
T they wish. When asked if people can touch
the lacquer, play with the Lexus, or sit next
to the plaster figures, Tiến has always
answered with "why not" in his humorous
yet peaceful tone. He has already peacefully
O laid each piece on the altar of his soul, now
he can only walk away and let time guide them.

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[designed by Trâm Nguyễn]

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