

A WATER POND FOR THE SOUL TO SWIM IN

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Lê Thùa 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 Thùa 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 Tiễn was born in 1964 as the youngest of seven children. His earliest memory was formed four years later in the New Year of 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. Tiễn remembers sitting on the steps of his garden on the day he had to leave. In a small plastic 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, Tiễn was attempting to preserve and protect the objects of his childhood 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, Tiễn 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, Tiễn 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 Tiễn 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. Tiễn 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 Tiễn'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, Tiễn has never returned to drawing portraits, but he continues to explore the concept of connecting with strangers through art.

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

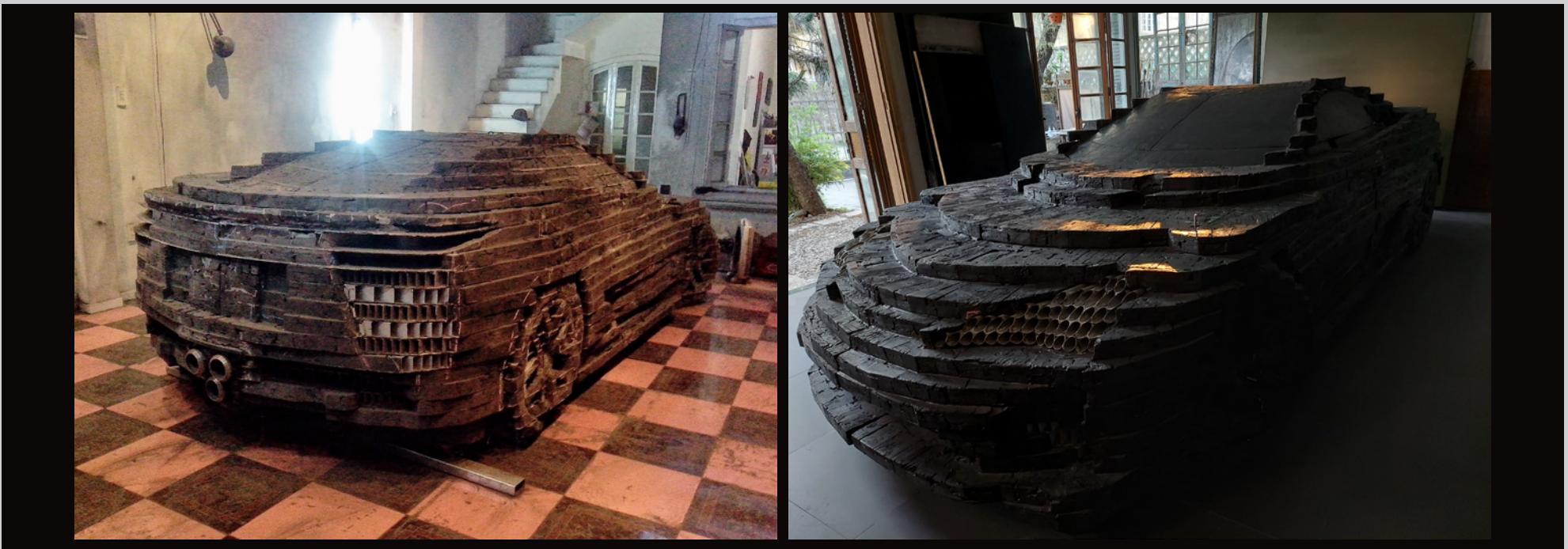
In 1995, Tiễn earned a scholarship to the Rijksakademie of Amsterdam and in 1997, he went to Boston under the Indochina Arts Partnership (IAP). At IAP, he held his first significant exhibition VIETNAM - THE FOSSILIZED WAR. In a dark room, seven plaster figures on wooden chairs watch slowed-down war scenes 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. Tiễn 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 Tiễn 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, Tiễn broadens the ubiquitous theme of war to discuss humanity's perpetual violence against nature. He examines charcoal, a product of deforestation, and exercises its potential as a symbolic artistic medium.
H 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. Tiễn's fascination for its inner complexity inspired the charcoal series – which most notably features his life-sized rendition of the jet-black Lexus LX570.
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A 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 Tiễn, 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

R However, Tiễn 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, Tiễn ascends this series above any temporal theme by choosing introspective reflection over anger and anxiety.



Lê Thùa Tiễn. 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 Thùa Tiến. REFLECTION IV
Lacquer, 2014

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T Lê Thùa Tiến's contemporary compositions always carry an element of spirituality that cannot be explained, nor attributed to a singular concept. He treats his artistic 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 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 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 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 laid each piece on the altar of his soul, now he can only walk away and let time guide them.

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