

By  
Carmen  
Cortizas  
Fontan

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**NAF**  
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# THE CONTRADICTIONARY INHERITANCE



the art of  
Bùi Công Khanh

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## The Variation

Bùi Công Khánh

Ceramic, Jackfruit wood, 2018.  
Collection Nguyen Art Foundation

Này em vang tiếng cười  
Giờ chơi không e ngại  
Trường lớp đó mới xây là nơi, là nơi  
Ngày xưa, giam bao người  
Già nua hay thơ dại  
Trại cũ đã biến ra trường đời  
Hoa hồng nở ở giữa vườn chơi.

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"The old prison is now a school. A rose bloomed in the middle of the playground." To artist Bùi Công Khánh, this part of Phạm Duy's poem *Bình Ca* perfectly conveys the melancholic irony of the post-war period – where beauty emerges from the seeds of a destructive past. Born in 1972, Khánh grew up in Hoi An during the post-war period. The only things available to him as a child were what had not been destroyed by the war, and what had been left by the Americans. In particular, he remembers how the indestructible barbed wires that had once been used to deflect B40 launchers, were re-used as fencing for everyone's homes. One day, a young Khánh noticed a small flower growing on his fence – its stem circling around the interlocked wires. This image left a profound impression on him, as it seemed to reflect his own self within Vietnam's landscape of not only conflicts and wars but also pollination and assimilation, for the DNA-like structure of the fence could also speak to the different cultural, social and political perspectives that have lapsed, interwoven and contradicted each other as history gets told.

This childhood image would return to Khánh at the age of twenty when his mixed Chinese descent was revealed to him. Since then, the interlocked lines of flowers have become a signature in Khanh's art – an omen to destruction and separation, but also a message of adaptability and hope.



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Most notable in Khánh's work is his contemporary maneuvering of traditional materials and craft techniques in order to present a more dynamic view of the deep-rooted historical conflict between Vietnam and China. In his experimentation with ceramic and jackfruit wood for example, images of guns, grenades, and tanks, which resonate most with our modern understandings of war, appear alongside age-old symbols of power, such as the dragon, which have long been incorporated into the decoration of craft and ritualistic objects.<sup>1</sup> Considering it was only in 1924, with the foundation of the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine (Fine Arts College of Indochina), that the role of artist starts to be considered, Khánh can also be seen experimenting with the significance of the artisan's role in society.

Over the past 10 years, Khánh has taken the age-old tradition of ceramic making to an unprecedented level, precisely by situating his practice in between conceptual inquiry, critical research, and a respect for traditional craftsmanship. Although Khánh lives in Hoi An, he produces his large-scale ceramics in the ancient ceramic village of Bat Trang in North Vietnam. According to Khánh, each family in Bat Trang is an expert in a specific ceramic style or part, so people can easily tell from which family a ceramic is made. Although such familial tradition may continue, the methods, materials, and styles of Bat Trang ceramics have been adapted in accordance with the times and tastes of today. One such kind of ceramic that abides by the grand scale and ultra glossiness that is often desired by today's consumer is the willow leaf vase originating from the Chinese Qing Dynasty. The misty sky, limestone mountains, and traditional temples are painted onto the vases with the same intricate detail as in the past. To Khánh, this is an advantage, for the ability to mass-produce these vases means that he can freely use and appropriate them. Rather than having to paint on top of an antique vase, he works with present-day artisans to create vases that are entirely new.

This is most notably seen in his vase series: *The Story of Blue, White, and Red*, where he seamlessly camouflages modern weapons of destruction into the serene landscapes. In his renditions, a temple may transform into a fortress shooting cannons at a helicopter emerging from the clouds, while in another part of the vase, we see tanks trying to power through the mountains. Although Khánh paints with blue cobalt - a color traditionally seen on willow leaf vases, there are faint shades of red that bleed into the scene - a reference to China's mark on Vietnam during its thousand-year struggle.

The fact that Khánh is painting on a ceramic vase that derives from Chinese tradition, once again, reinforces this reading of the work. However, oftentimes it becomes difficult to separate the cultural influence and exchange between the two nations, with their direct clashing, especially as conflict has continued to resurface in recent history with the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979, and the 2014 Spratly Island Disputes.

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## *The Story of Blue, White, and Red*

Bùi Công Khánh

Porcelain, hand-painted underglaze blue and red, 2013.  
Photos by Bùi Thế Trung Nam





T In Khánh's continuance of embracing the flexibility of traditional materials and crafts, he takes on a wood engraving technique that is characteristic of his hometown. As early as the 17th century, Chinese political refugees started to settle in Hoi An's port.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the town's architecture was largely defined by the carpentry skills of Fujian, where Khánh's great-grandfather was from.

In his 2018 installation *Dislocate*, Khánh takes ownership of his mixed heritage by designing a hybrid wooden house in collaboration with local expert wood carpenters. However, this unconventional structure is more than just a collaboration between modern-day creatives. It is indeed a physical manifestation of the interaction between different periods of history. The shape of the structure could be described as a house that caves in on itself, thus it becomes as curator Zoe Butt wrote, "both a home and a fortress, a bunker and a shrine."<sup>3</sup> On the front of the house, the door retains the holes of bullets that were shot during the American war. On the panels, images of military jackets, guns, grenades, and interlocked wires are engraved on top of traditional motifs. Additionally, at the four corners surrounding the house, there are carved watchtowers with bonsai trees disguising their launching cannons, which are meant to protect the structure.

Each part of this work is carved on a different kind of aged jackfruit wood, which signifies its historical importance to Hoi An, and more specifically to the artist. Under Emperor Minh Mạng's reign during the Nguyễn Dynasty, the jackfruit tree was widely available to the people, for it could easily grow anywhere, subsequently providing both food and materials for shelter. In parallel, during the most difficult years after the American war, Khánh remembers how his mother would formulate a variety of dishes using the only available ingredient of jackfruit. Today, the jackfruit tree has again gained its popularity – not for the purpose of building a shrine, nor a bunker, nor because people are starving, but because it provides the material used to decorate the houses being built nowadays. Again, in his architectural glorification of the jackfruit tree, Khánh is pointing out the irony of its use today.

The hybrid structure of *Dislocate* has literally been dislocated from its original ancestry and purpose; and even if it was put back to how it used to be, its bones would never feel the same. This undefined space and sense of in-betweenness reflects Khánh's own inability to feel belonged as a result of his mixed heritage. Even though over the years his bone will slowly heal, he knows it will never feel completely cured.



## *Dislocate*

Bùi Công Khánh

Jackfruit wood, cotton, acrylic, bronze, stone, 2016.  
The M+ collections.

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## Dislocate

Bùi Công Khánh

Jackfruit wood, cotton, acrylic, bronze, stone, 2016.  
The M+ collections.

As one of the first Vietnamese contemporary artists to gain international recognition, Khánh has opened himself to the vulnerable process of learning traditional methods as a way to express his relationship with history. Rather than constructing his works in his own artist studio, his process is dispersed throughout the many different craft workshops around the country where he works alongside carpenters, ceramists, and other experts.

In what is clearly a logistical and mental challenge, this decision contributes to the bridging of art and craft as a powerful union, instead of craftsmanship acting as an inferior, supporting, and outdated version of art making. Additionally, the relationship that Khánh forms with the artisans over time also strengthens the connection with his lost familial roots. Despite the fact that Khánh's compositions may appear to be fictional sceneries or satirical appropriations of the past, they are always grounded in his perception of war and culture growing up. Ultimately, we are brought to consider that culture comes from a range of indecisive and sometimes contradictory influences. As we approach Khánh's art, we should thus try to take it motif by motif, part by part, material by material, rather than incline ourselves to assign a symbol, culture or people to a singular narrative.

[designed by Trâm Nguyễn] B

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<sup>1</sup>. San Art. Impression Uneath Exhibition. 2021. [http://san-art.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/-ImpresionsUneath\\_Booklet\\_ToView.pdf](http://san-art.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/-ImpresionsUneath_Booklet_ToView.pdf)

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<sup>2</sup>. Approximately 3,000 Han Chinese refugees came to Vietnam at the end of the Ming dynasty (1644), escaping the new Qing dynasty whom they fiercely opposed. Many became successful traders in South East Asia.

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<sup>3</sup>. Butt, Zoe. Dislocate. 2016. <https://buicon-gkhanh.com/works/installation/dislocate/>

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