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the *art* of Oanh Phi Phi

# LACQUER AS A SUDARIUM

A sudarium is a sweat cloth used in the past to wipe one's face. The most well-known sudarium is the Sudarium of Oviedo, as it is thought to be the cloth that wrapped the head of Jesus Christ after he was crucified, allowing for a vague imprint of his face to be identified. The conservation of sacred memory is repeatedly exercised throughout many religions and many cultures. It honors our beliefs but also legitimizes them. Yet, why does this concept not extend to the non-sacred, to the most familiar moments, objects and materials of our everyday lives?



*Sudarium*

*(2017)*

Triptych, lacquer on wood.

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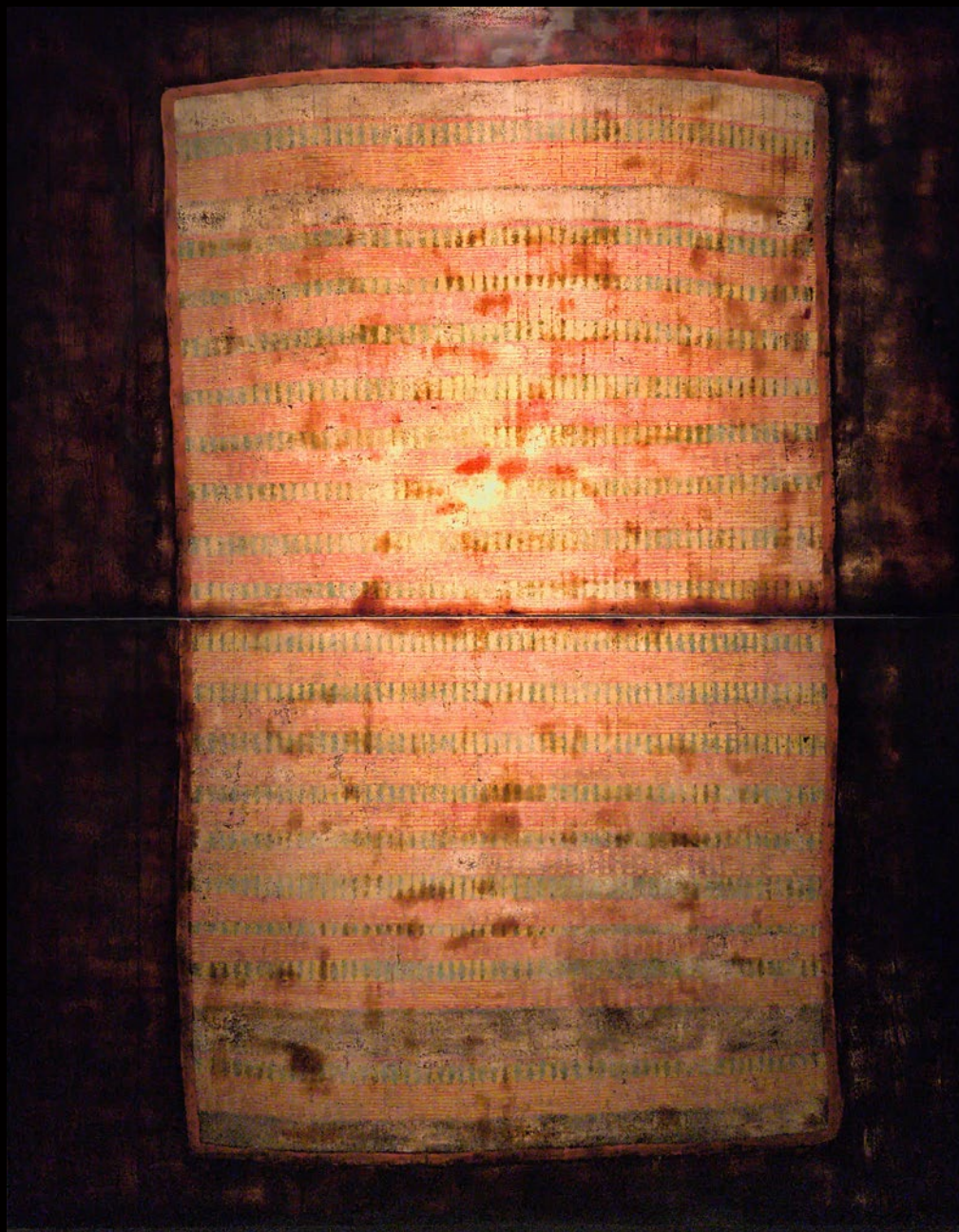
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*Untitled*

*(2023)*

Diptych, lacquer on wood.

In Vietnam, a usual object seen in homes is the straw mat. Families share this mat, sitting or lying within its square borders while the artificial white light of the room shines from above. It gets so hot, so muggy, that the sweat and weight of the body wear the mat off over time. It's rolled out for celebrations, rolled up for work, and then rolled out again in the nighttime as one prepares for bed.

Eventually, when the mat gets too worn out, when the strings start letting loose, and the double happiness symbol on the center of the mat fades away, it gets thrown out and a new mat is brought to repeat the same task of accompanying weddings, funerals and regular somber conversations that take place during certain periods of our lives. It houses everything a family has lived through. At the end of its turn, the used mat holds so much – it's full of pathos.

Artist Oanh Phi Phi looks at this mat as a sudarium. Thus, she wishes to make a material record of its existence so that it can live on in a body greater than itself, that can hold it but also allow it to live on in its own right. In her recent exhibition *Arca Noa*, a large vertical diptych stood in the center of the room, giving the illusion that a straw mat was floating on a dark plain. Using her practice of lacquer, she printed these thrown-away mats on a thick bed of lacquer, set the imprint, then when it dried, took it out, and filled it in with more layers of lacquer which she then painted over. Unlike an instant record like a photograph, or a "half record" like a still-life oil painting, Phi Phi's approach makes these mats a record of many instances that have been accumulated in the process of lacquer making.

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## *Passage (detail) (2005-2007)*

Lacquer on wood.  
From the series Blackbox.

In Baroque painting, which Phi Phi is strongly inspired by, the pivotal moment of drama is captured through the careful manipulation of chiaroscuro light effects. But in lacquer, the slow process of painting, layering, and sanding means that the result is actually an encapsulating moment defined by many moments, while still somehow communicating that baroque truth. Lacquer painting becomes a re-iteration of observation, where everything the artist does on the lacquer bed eventually gets sanded away to become one in the end result.

Curator Phoebe Scott compares sanding away in lacquer to how a gilder would burnish gold. You pour water on, then with sandpaper, you scrape the lacquer surface in a fricative manner. This flattens and removes away the above layers, revealing the encapsulation of the underlayers. For Phi Phi, sanding is a metaphor for keeping and recollecting memories through time, but also for the distance between moments, between each time she touches the lacquer. Each day she adds a new layer of lacquer to a piece, she is simultaneously sprinkling parts of herself that day. The distance between each moment she works on a lacquer piece thus collapses together at the end, where the in-between becomes indecipherable.

As opposed to oil painting, where layers are added to create the future, the final form of the painting, lacquer painting involves a process of sanding away the layers that have been painted, thus in a way, the future becomes the past. When the layers are sanded away, it congeals everything together, the tiny details that took hours to make, the mistakes that got taken out, and the emotions that carried each of those moments. Through her lacquer practice, Phi Phi shows us that painting is not about expressing the immediacy of what the artist feels, but a process, of which the artist is a part. The final image is the "total image" of many moments observed, the total of mood, chance, truth, of even boredom, transcendence.

There is a beguiling richness in the painted surface that is imbued with meaning whose intentionality belongs to Art, like the ads we see in the subway where years of advertisements have been ripped off, or the remnants of a wall of a building. But this surface is a palimpsest in collusion with the artist's intentionality that gives it its unique depth.

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This can be observed in Phi Phi's first lacquer series *Blackbox*, consisting of sixteen lacquered chests with painted imageries of simple scenes that remind us of a quieter Hanoi of the past; a corridor filled with shoes, a bulletin board with nothing written on it, or the composition of plates and dishes at a family dinner. Painted in lacquered hyper-saturation and elevated to the drama of baroque tableaus, there is a feeling that something else may be happening behind the silent surface. These moments are like impartial witnesses of everyday commotion – where discussions, disagreements, and departures take place. Each lacquered chest holds the memories of a missing body. There is a purposeful sense of withholding, of working against the human temptation to uncover what is hidden from us. The closed chests are thus sudariums. They give each moment painted the sacred silence it deserves; of a moment that has already happened and can only be kept as a record of a time, that with every passing day gets layered upon.

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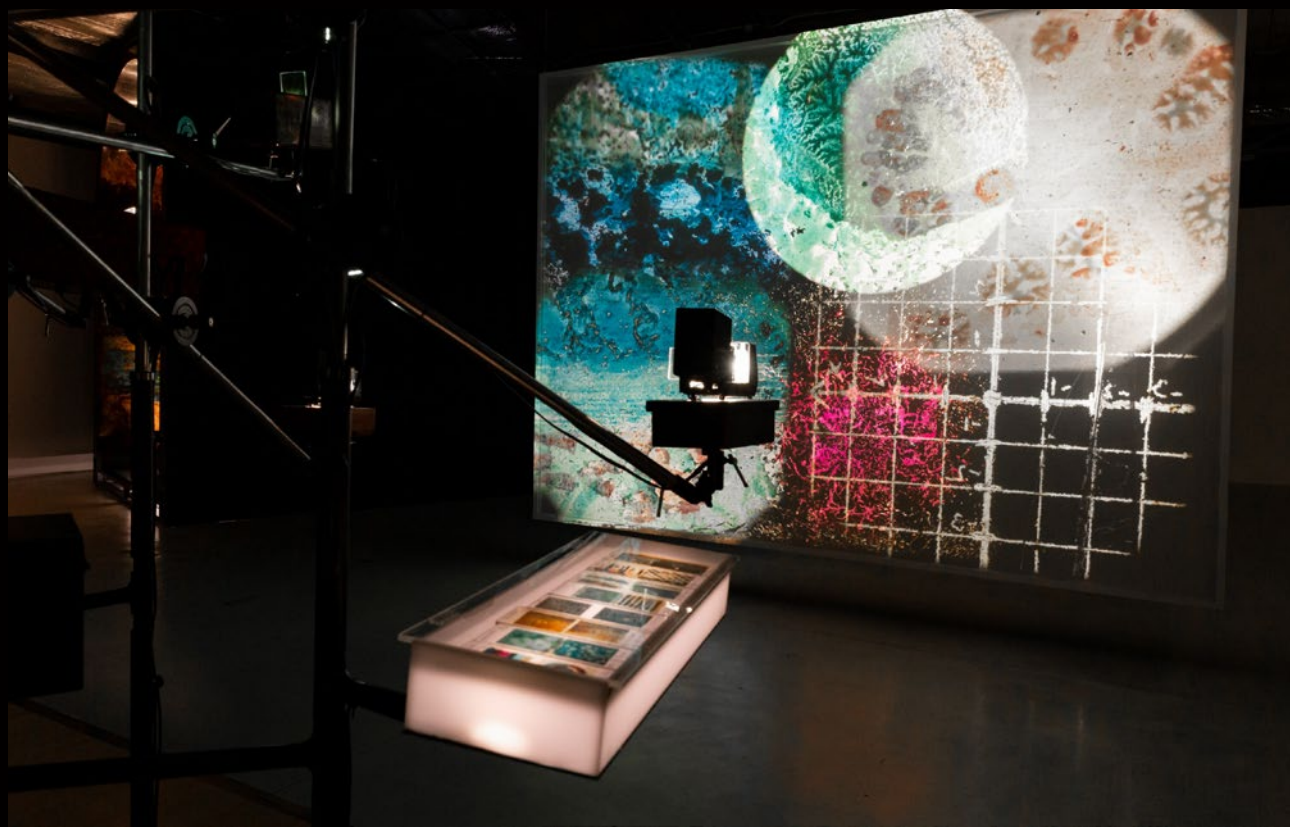
## *Blackbox* (2005–2007)

Pictorial Installation of 16 oversized lacquer chests arranged in a grid.  
Sơn Tà lacquer painting on wood.

Lacquer has many enormous agency and the potential to facilitate a contribution to contemporary art. But Phi Phi believes that because the cannon of lacquer is still so fragile, existing within such a narrow base, in order to broaden and expand it, we must go back to the first principles of lacquer. We need first to question what lacquer is before we can explore its language. Beginning as a utilitarian medium, it joins the canon of painting, and at that moment the image overcomes the function and allows for symbolic use. Phi Phi experiments with this idea with her series *Palimpsest*, in which she partakes in the active process of breaking down lacquer's body.

Through its dematerialization, lacquer is no longer a material that must be layered onto wood, but an image that can exist on its own. In this process, a coat of lacquer is painted onto a transparent slide and then projected through "lacquerscope" machines. The material's amplification reveals unseen details that vibrantly juxtapose the dark image of lacquer painting that is normally brought to our minds. The explosions of color bear resemblance to the biological world within our bodies as much as the unknown galaxies within the vast universe. Like a microscope or a telescope, the lacquerscope offers a window to a world we cannot see with our eyes.

The slide can be exhibited individually as well as with others on the same wall, but even when two are placed together, each layer of lacquer exists in its own light, trying to overlay and overtake the other in the solemn room. Such compositions form what can be considered a "virtual" lacquer painting – at least in the original sense of virtual. This series reconnects with lacquer's natural origin, yet at the same time emphasizes its ability to border on the metaphysical. Although *Palimpsest* is full of technological and experimental complexity, its result contributes to an educational view of lacquer. For those intimidated by her structures, *Palimpsest* helps show that every large and ominous surface first comes from the most simple of fibers.



## *Palimpsest*

(2013)

Light projection onto silk using handcrafted "Lacquerscope" projectors, (lacquer, iron, inox, kevlar, recycled lenses) and Son Ta lacquer on laminated glass.

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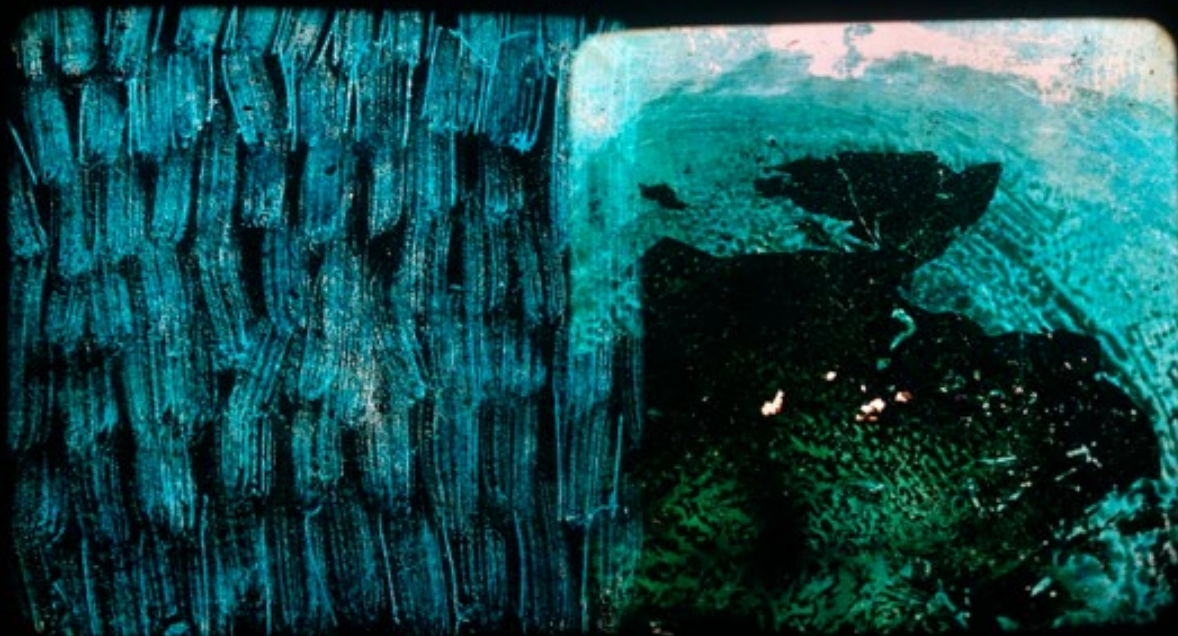
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*Palimpsest*

*(2013)*

Light projection onto silk using handcrafted "Lacquerscope" projectors, (lacquer, iron, inox, kevlar, recycled lenses) and Son Ta lacquer on laminated glass.

Phi Phi believes that lacquer as painting belongs to a post-humanist art. In which art, process, and medium facilitates the relationships between us and the surrounding world, where culture is merely a lesson in belonging, and in which human subjectivity is understood in terms of relative relationships.

In this understanding of lacquer as a sudarium, Phi Phi comes with 4 conclusions of how she finds meaning in the ecosystem of lacquer:

- 1 Where a species of tree has agency through its relationship with the artists through time.
- 2 Where the artist forms a relationship with the history and culture of a place and its natural environments through this relationship with the tree, as well as a relationship with others within this ecosystem.
- 3 Where the "Art" exists as a material record of this relationship and personal subjecthood.
- 4 Where concepts like "uniqueness" and "one of a kind" are based on the singularity of that relationship over time, and not the domination of the human genius over medium.

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*Specula**(2017)*

[designed by Tram Nguyen]

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Lacquer on epoxy and fiberglass composite panels with metal frame.  
Installation view at the Hanoi City Exhibition Hall, December 2009.

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