

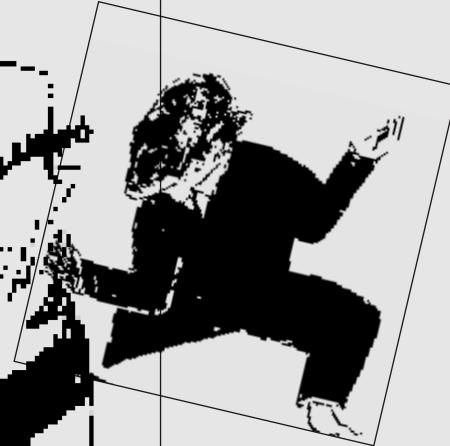
T  
H  
E  
A  
R  
T  
O  
F

# “Don't Touch On Those Specific Stories!”

N  
G  
U  
Y  
È  
N  
V  
Ã  
N  
C  
U  
Ờ  
N  
G



the Art of  
Nguyễn Văn Cường



By  
Carmen  
Cortizas  
Fontan

Supported by



T  
H  
E  
A  
R  
T  
O  
F



UNTITLED

Archive Radulovic

N  
G  
U  
Y  
Ê  
N  
V  
Ã  
N  
C  
U  
Ờ  
N  
G

*Nguyễn Văn Cường*

Watercolor on Do paper.

1998

In February 1994, as the US embargo was lifted, Vietnam started to use the dollar as an alternate currency in everyday life. Although this occurred eight years after the Doi Moi reforms, Nguyễn Văn Cường considers that year to be the true turning point for Vietnamese society. Like everyone born in the early 70s, Cường grew up in a period of overwhelming economic and social change. As a leading pioneer of the avant-garde art movement, Cường was the first artist to confidently show a sense of disturbance in his paintings. Like a game of association in a world of chaos, in his creations, Cường often intertwines symbols of popular media with sexualized bodies and screaming faces.

One such symbol is the face of Benjamin Franklin on the 100\$ bill, which has always captivated the artist. They have a love-hate relationship because although Franklin is kind to him, Cường knows that Franklin is also a two-faced character who nurtures greed, corruption, and objectification. He contributes to what Cường terms "a sick society", one that cures itself with the same thing that poisons it. His complex compositions are thus critical commentaries on society that perfectly represent the generation of young, confused, and individualistic artists that came out of Doi Moi.

T From a town in Thai Binh, Cường  
was the youngest child. As a 10-year-old,  
Cường spent his days at home while his  
siblings and parents worked tirelessly in  
what were the most difficult years of the  
post-war (1982).<sup>2</sup> He often drew propagandistic  
H images on the floor so that his parents  
would praise him when they got home. In 1991,  
Cuong was admitted to the Hanoi Fine Arts  
University alongside 30 students. They were  
E given a large 500m<sup>2</sup> room, with beds dispersed  
throughout and a broken fan to share. The fan  
never turned off, alternating day and night  
among the students. During winter, they would  
just put a blanket over it. No technician  
ever bothered to come to fix it, hence the  
fan became a memorable part of Cường's time  
A in university as he and his close friends  
Nguyễn Minh Thành and Nguyễn Quang Huy  
shared many sleepless nights alongside it -  
laughing, discussing, and coming up with  
ideas.

At the university, Cường was known  
for his photographic memory and skilled  
anatomy drawings.<sup>3</sup> But he chose to paint only  
what he knew his professors would disapprove  
of, admitting that "even if my professors  
would've told me to do something I wanted to  
do, I wouldn't have done it either." His art  
then became a process of destroying anything  
that would be considered the right way of  
creating. In part, this radical approach  
stemmed from Cường's sense that he was  
misunderstood in his capability as an artist.  
R His early sketches depict stretched-out  
bodies performing acrobatics, balancing  
T between the socially accepted lines. In a  
1997 untitled work, Cường humorously writes:  
"Paint flowers, women, and write poems. Am I  
O a painter?", alongside a headless body,  
disproportionate and disfigured, and a vase  
of pink flowers that look like melted organs.  
Both examples are clear indications that  
F Cường felt out of place within the art  
institution. So he and his friends began to  
openly experiment in a different manner than  
what was traditionally taught at school. For  
them, it only made sense. As Cường reasoned,  
"the only thing for us to do was become  
avant-garde."<sup>4</sup>



UNTITLED

Archive Radulovic

Nguyễn Văn Cường

Watercolor on Do paper.

1997

T  
H  
E  
A  
R  
T  
O  
F



12 O'CLOCK  
(EXHIBITION  
OPENING)

Having barely graduated from the university, the young artists began to show their works in Salon Natasha – a contemporary art space in Hanoi that exhibited young, experimental, and non-commercial artists. It was founded by Natalia Kraevskaia and her husband, the artist Vũ Dân Tân, whom the community greatly admired.

N  
G  
U  
Y  
Ê  
N  
V  
Ã  
N  
C  
U  
Ờ  
N  
G

In a time when the concept of curation was still unheard of, Cường initiated a lively group exhibition at Salon Natasha. The exhibition was named **12 O'CLOCK**; guests were invited to arrive at around 11:45 p.m on New Year's Eve of 1997 so they could watch all the artist-made clocks strike midnight in their different styles – an auspicious way to welcome the year 1998. With a timely consideration for the country's rapid path toward economic growth, Cường himself designed a clock that ticked around a strange character wearing a suit and tie. The literal application of the clock might as well have been figurative because it ingeniously foreshadowed the importance this character would have in the years to come, as the figure of the businessman would become increasingly prevalent in Vietnamese society.



CLOCK ———— Archive of Natalia Kraveskaia.  
Asia Art Archive.

Nguyễn Văn Cường  
Ink on cardboard, metal, clock mechanism. 1997

T  
H  
E  
A  
R

DOG MEAT AND TV

N  
G  
U  
Y  
Ê  
N  
V  
Ã  
NCollection of  
Nguyen Art FoundationNguyễn Văn Cường  
Watercolor on Do paper

1998

T  
O  
F

In the summer of 1999, Cường's mother came to visit him in Hanoi. To his surprise, his mother did not need any explanation on his often vulgar subject matter and according to him, understood everything he was trying to communicate. Her only advice was to "not touch on the specific stories." Cường understood her immediately. When he painted, he refused to follow any narrative nor base it on any scene. Instead, he would fill a 2D plane with random objects and then populate it with zombie-like characters. Recurring motifs include vacuum cleaners, hair dryers, computers, and TVs, but also bicycle pumps, wrenches, factory lines, pipes, and loudspeakers.

This seamless combination of objects that represent pre and post-Doi Moi technology is an ingenious way to showcase the contradictions that existed in this transitional period in Vietnam. The proletarian machinery remains for purely nostalgic reasons. The new technology, on the other hand, pumps 'blood' into zombie-like characters and keeps them alive. The satirical nature of Cường's paintings may resemble that of a theater play, but considering the context, it is more suited to be set in a karaoke, with Vietnamese pop songs blasting in people's ears.

Cường made it clear that he hated the concept of karaoke, naming the series **TÔI KHÔNG THÍCH KARAOKE**. He saw it as the new middle-class phenomenon for those who gladly accepted their insignificant voice in the country's political climate. Thus, karaoke becomes Cường's metaphor for a distracted and obedient society in the turn of Doi Moi.

C  
U  
Ờ  
N  
G

T At around the same time, Cường  
begins **FRANKLIN WITH THE LETTER T**, in  
H which he integrates his satirical idolization  
of the American statesman. As the symbol of  
wealth and success, Cường always places  
Benjamin Franklin's aura of greatness in the  
center of his paintings, in juxtaposition  
with the usual crowd of howling characters in  
suits. With their mouths open in adoration,  
they seem ready to laugh at anything he may  
say, or eat anything he may offer in the  
hopes of acquiring a seat at his table.

E Throughout the series, Franklin's  
appearance is altered by the cigarette in  
between his fingers, the vulgar messages on  
his clothes, and inflatable female  
mannequins placed on his lap, yet no matter  
the attempts of those around him, his face  
remains unequivocally unchanged. The silent  
superiority that Franklin poses, emphasizes  
A that the characters are praising something  
that doesn't exist, that doesn't love them  
back. This also ironically suggests that the  
cartoonish zombies are the closest  
representation of our disturbed society,  
trying to prosper and move on as quickly as  
possible from the past. In other selected  
works, Cường even replaces Benjamin  
R Franklin's face with his own on the 100\$ bill,  
calling it "Mr. Nguyen" - the last name of at  
least 40% of the Vietnamese population,  
including himself. By putting himself on the  
same level as this past figurehead, he again  
criticizes the fantasies created around this  
false symbol of prosperity.

## FRANKLIN IN THE CROWD

*Nguyễn Văn Cường*

Ink & watercolor on Do paper

1997



T Another theme central to Cường's  
practice is the portrayal of women through  
art and media. From the start, Cường was  
very critical of the way the Fine Arts  
School encouraged artists to paint the  
ideal Vietnamese woman. Even though this  
H was a representation that changed  
throughout time, it was always dictated by  
social etiquette and a general  
E understanding of taboos.

In the 2000s, the popularization  
of television and magazines in Vietnam  
inevitably brought a new way of looking at  
fashion, consumerism, and women. Of  
particular shock to Cường was the upsurge in  
beauty pageant shows, where white stickers  
on bikinis would read numbers such as 986,  
023, or 156, each representing the human  
that wore them. He felt that it was  
impossible to recreate the models' plastic  
smiles, glossy dresses, and stiff elbows  
through painting. It made him realize that  
his signature characters were outdated and  
that the new chaos was actually available in  
print. **NEW LIFE** (2006) is a collage series  
of magazine models that have been detached  
from their picturesque covers and placed in  
unknown backgrounds painted in discomfoting  
shades of orange and black.

In comparison to the previous  
series, there is much less of a relationship  
between his usual motifs of industrial  
machinery or modern technology and the  
characters. For example, in **MY LIFE 1**, the  
G painted images of the pipe, phone, or weight,  
exist on their own, making their distinction  
from the stuck-on photographs of the women.  
U This can perhaps be understood as Cường's  
gradual loss of control over his subject  
matter as he comes to terms with a world of  
infinite information being made accessible.  
Y Thus, in these compositions, the models begin  
to emit a strange impersonality and become  
increasingly out of place within this darkened  
setting. This emphasizes their portrayal by  
the media as mere subjects of consumerism or  
as sexual commodities. Under Cường's  
manipulation, they are the ultimate portrayal  
of society's "corrupted soul."



MY LIFE 1

Witness Collection

Nguyễn Văn Cường  
Collage on Do Paper

2006

T Nguyễn Văn Cường's dehumanizing and  
disturbing paintings are mythical  
celebrations of a confused society lost  
between the margins of who they are and who  
they wish to be. All his characters are  
therefore equal victims of the time they are  
trapped in. Cường often describes the impact  
H of Doi Moi as a tsunami that nobody was  
prepared for. Once it hit, he felt as if  
everybody was screaming at him or throwing  
things at his face that they no longer  
wanted. He deflected this onto his paintings,  
making each an inexplicable composition that  
reflected a fragment of his experience.

But Cường is more than an artist who  
rebelled from the accepted methods of the  
time through his individualistic character.  
From very early on, he questioned the way  
development was thought of, especially the  
development-at-all-cost method that Vietnam  
seemed to be taking since the late 1990s.  
The image of phone calls, syringes, fist  
fights, wine glasses, billiards, and  
waterslides, is Cường's way of pointing out  
the gradual loss of human connection as  
their societies undergo socio-economic  
development. For the short time between 1996  
to 2006, Cường gave an incredible testimony  
of what life was like in one of the  
country's most dynamic periods. But the  
tsunami has passed, so Cường sees no point  
in talking about it any further. He knows  
that he won't change his mind about hating  
karaoke, and everyone else won't change  
their mind about loving it.

N

G

U

Y

Ê

N

V

Ă

N

C

Ư

Ờ

N

G

☞Radulovic, Veronika. "Nguyễn Văn Cường." Don't  
Call It Art! Contemporary Art in Vietnam 1993-1999, 2021.

☞"Studio Visit with Nguyễn Văn Cường." The Nguyen  
Art Foundation, 19 Apr. 2021, www.you-  
tube.com/watch?v=Nhne\_CJ3zn8&t=911s.

☞"Mr Nguyen." Asian Art Now, asianartnow.com/Mr\_N-  
guyen/pages/mr\_main.html.

☞Murray, Sarah. "The Luck of Draw." Asian Art Now,  
www.asianartnow.com/articles/rev\_luck.html.

☞Kraveskaia, Natalia. "12 O'Clock." Asia Art  
Archive, aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/sa-  
lon-natasha-archive-12-oclock/object/clock-25219.

☞Radulovic, Veronika. "Nguyen Van Cuong." Don't  
Call It Art! Contemporary Art in Vietnam 1993-1999, 2021.

☞Radulovic, Veronika. "Nguyen Van Cường." Don't  
Call It Art! Contemporary Art in Vietnam 1993-1999, 2021.

☞"Studio Visit with Nguyễn Văn Cường." The Nguyen  
Art Foundation, 19 Apr. 2021, www.you-  
tube.com/watch?v=Nhne\_CJ3zn8&t=911s.