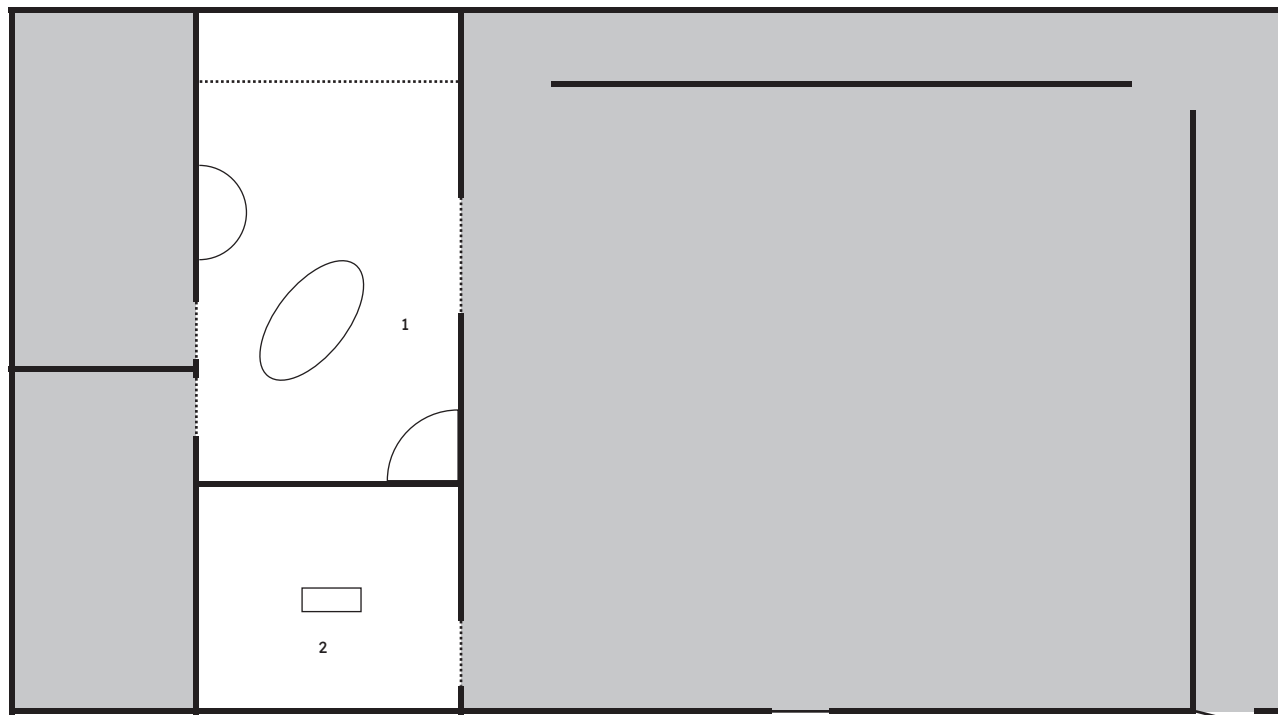


An exercise in changes,
reconciliation,
taste and smell

for /
Linh San



1. *nights* — 2022

Bat Trang porcelain

Dimensions variable

2. *Embracement #1: This wrist, that wrist* — 2022

Bat Trang porcelain

Dimensions variable

How do you choose to remember your past and the
pasts of others,
of loved ones, of those lost, of those still here?

Is it through the preservation of objects of memories,
the revisiting of records of time spent together,
the re-telling of exchanged words of intimacy?

What is left to remember one by,
when one's body has ceased to exist – their warmth
withdrawn, their scent dissolved,
and yours still remain?

Ceramic. This is Linh San's chosen medium. The voice through which she dialogues with soil and fire. The body through which she dances with time and the elements. Her testament to patience, care and attention.

Ceramic making. A peculiar journey indeed. It begins with the artist selecting and extracting fresh, raw clay from the earth, kneading it until it reaches its perfect consistency – smooth, fine, and malleable. Her hands coil, roll, tear, and shape the clay, working with a rhythm that alternates between action and rest until the desired forms appear. Once air-dried and ready for the kiln, the pieces demand the artist's unwavering attention and care, for the kiln's temperature must be precisely controlled and maintained. It is within this intense heat that the clay undergoes its essential transformation, solidifying and crystallizing into ceramic.

In a way, for ceramic to come alive, earth must sacrifice its living. Amidst its lingering scent of mortality emerges something fragile yet enduring – a testament to time itself.

In one room, white fragments of hand-molded ceramics lie scattered, sprawling across the floor. Fragile and motionless, they are flattened, balled up, stacked, wrinkled – each shape representing a different state of paper. Slowly approaching, you kneel, bow, hold your breath, focus your gaze in silence. For even the smallest movement could awaken the creatures immersed in their eternal slumber.

"At certain places, can you sense the warmth of hands that once cradled?"

Suddenly they appear from behind, moving toward the pile of ceramic paper in the corner of the room, crouching close to the floor. Were it not for the flutter of their white robes, you would never have noticed their presence.

Seek your memory; where have you seen them before?

With deliberate slowness, as if holding their breath, they lead you to the adjacent room. In the silent darkness, three small ceramic objects seem to drift in midair. With perfect finesse, they place the flashlight into your hand. The dim light flickers to life, sweeping slowly over each object, inviting your gaze to pierce the surface and explore the shadow patterns hidden beneath.

"At certain places, can you taste the salt of sweat once shed, and the smell of musty dust long settled?"

Stories. These are the substance of human life, the breath of our existence, the pulse of our imagination. As tellers of tales, weavers of dreams, seers of nightmares, we pass on stories to anchor ourselves to the whispers and wisdom of those who've come before us, to share the lessons we've gathered with those who will come after us.

The stories Linh San tells through her art are ones of personal significance – a tribute to family members both living and deceased, a means of commemorating and grieving, of holding on and letting go.

Her work *nights*, consisting of 1,096 pieces of ceramic paper*, presents the imagined letters from Linh San to her father, who passed away more than a decade ago. All empty of content, the letters contain no words to be read, no thoughts to ponder. Words unspeakable, thoughts unfathomable, for what can be said to capture the vastness of longing that has no shore, to comfort the depth of pain with no closure?

In another work, *Embracement #1: This wrist, that wrist*, the artist molded strips of clay after the collar and cuffs of a shirt her mother used to wear while working on the farm. “Soaked [in] sweat..., covered in dirt” – snippets of the artist’s memories of her mother’s resilience became physically embedded within the interior of the ceramic objects, now holding the lasting imprints of evaporated sweat bubbles and dissolved clots of dirt.**

* Out of a total of 1,096 units, only 48 units are displayed at the exhibition to ensure their preservation. The number 1,096 represents the total number of days in three years. According to the traditions and beliefs practiced in Northern Vietnam, the spirit of the deceased can only be liberated and enter a new life after a three-year mourning period by their family. This period of mourning is a time to remember and honor those who have given life and raised us, and to express grief and regret for their loss. Since “to die is to be reborn”, mourning is a way to show filial piety toward the deceased, treating them with the same care and respect as if they were still alive.

** In his book *Performing Mourning: Laments in Contemporary Art*, Guy Cools explores laments and other rituals of mourning across different cultures and times, examining their many forms as expressed through literature, anthropology, philosophy and contemporary art practices. Cools references Susan Sontag’s autobiographical story *Project for a Trip to China*, which explains the connection between Sontag’s desire to visit China and the lifelong absence of her father, who died from tuberculosis while he was working in China as a fur trader in 1939, when she was only five years old. Cools writes:

“All stories are unique, but we are particularly touched by stories that resemble our own... Sontag’s story moved me more than many others I had read. She in turn mentions that she still weeps ‘in any movie with a scene in which a father returns home after a long desperate absence, at the moment when he hugs his child!’ Her trip to China is part of Sontag’s ongoing process of mourning. ‘He died so far away. By visiting my father’s death, I make him heavier. I will bury him myself!’ His absence also marks her relationship with her mother M., whom she addresses in a letter never sent. ‘Dearest M. I cannot telephone, I am six years old. My grief falls like snowflakes on the warm soil of your indifference. You are inhaling your own pain.’ Sontag’s own son David is placed in an intergenerational triangulation with his dead grandfather. ‘David wears my father’s ring!’ ‘Death doesn’t die,’ but we can forgive the dead as well as the living for abandoning us. ‘I shall forgive my father. For dying. – Shall David forgive his? (Not for dying.) For him to decide! The death of a family member affects everyone else in the family.’”

Pain is passed on – from one generation to the next, from one person to another, until one chooses to welcome it, caress it and share it with the world through songs, dances, poems and art. Linh San is no different, her artwork a manifestation of both the lost time (she never got to spend with her father) and the shared time (she and her mother spent enduring life’s hardship). The artist shares, “Over the years, I’ve come to understand that no matter how strong and independent I’ve grown, a wound remains a wound. Yet with time, I’ve learned to view it with less pain and sorrow. When I look back on it now, there’s even a sense of warmth – like a tribute to the passing of time.”

How does one deal with the aftermath of another's passing

– grieving their loss, mourning their absence, giving the dead a presence in the living?

How can one prepare for the coming of future losses

– anticipating the inevitable yet to occur, reclaiming the remnants of lives yet to end?

How do we make peace with the body that no longer remembers – when the ears no longer hear colors, the eyes no longer see music, the tongue no longer tastes love, the nose no longer smells life, the skin no longer feels affection?

For Linh San, ceramic making emerges as transformational practice. As the artist allows herself to re-tell her stories through the crafting of the ceramic objects, grief is witnessed, memories are materialized, pain is shared. In place of the absent body, the materiality of ceramic endures beyond the materiality of the flesh; its being-in-the-world an extension of lives no longer part of this world.

Fragile, white, tender, left blank – as if deliberately erased of all sentiments – the ceramic objects now act as vessels to carry all unspoken words, unfathomed thoughts, unforgotten memories, unspoken letters, undried sweat, uncried tears. No longer one's personal mourning, they have become a site that invites collective sharing. For as long as there are voices to speak and ears to listen, stories to pass on and objects to hold thoughts, life will continue, changes will emerge, new beginnings will form.

