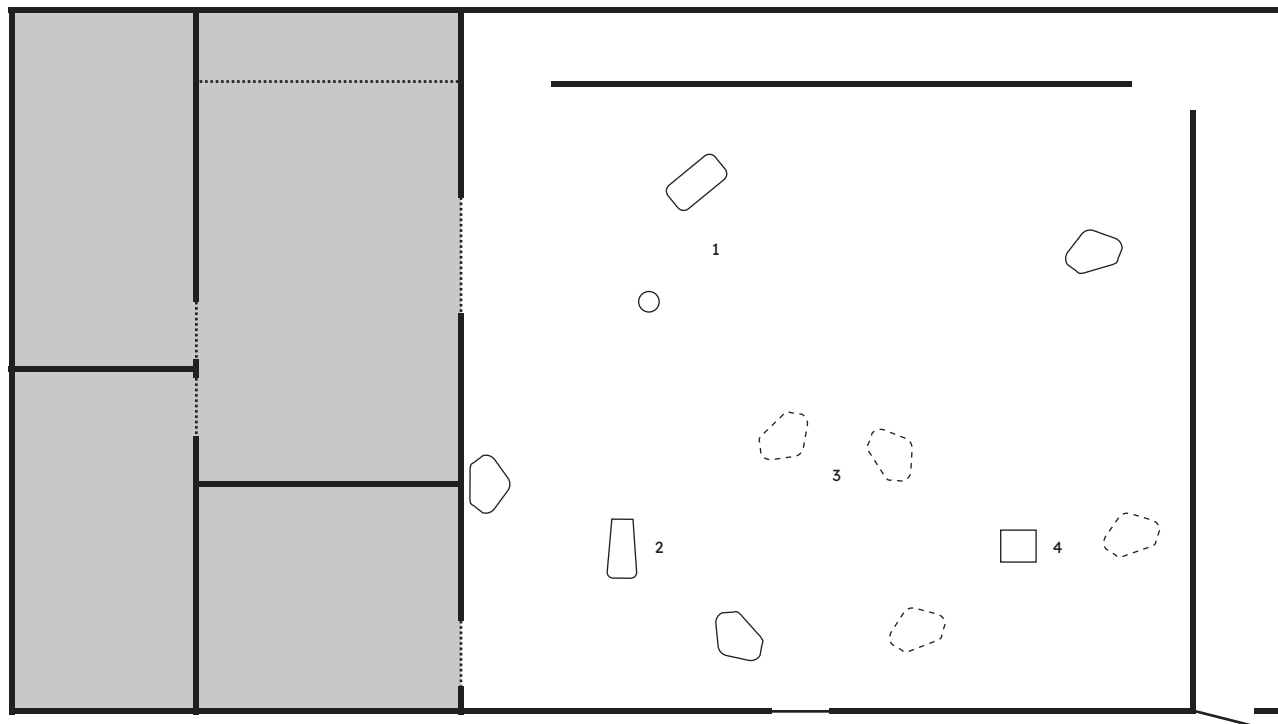


An exercise in time,  
remembrance,  
and touch

for /  
**Nguyễn Thúy Hằng**

# EXHIBITION MAP /



1. *Bowl of Sorrow* — 2019

Wooden cabinet, *bàn* paper, silver leaf, insects, acrylic  
170 x 104 x 44 cm

2. *Phoenix* — 2019

*Bàn* paper, wood, silver leaf, acrylic  
170 x 104 x 44 cm

3. *The Warriors* — 2011–2015

Muslin, metal, acrylic  
Dimensions variable (7 pieces total)

4. *The Chair* — 2019

Wooden chair, *bàn* paper, silver leaf, acrylic  
107 x 56 x 60 cm

“During the festival they called Ixnextiua, meaning searching for adventure, they said that all the gods were dancing, and thus all those dancing disguised themselves as various characters, some as birds, others as animals, and thus some transformed as hummingbirds, others as butterflies, others as bees, others as flies, others as beetles. Others, still, carried a sleeping man on their backs, and said that that was dreaming.”

Bernardino de Sahagún

Historia general de las cosas  
de Nueva España\*

\* This excerpt, originally written by Bernardino de Sahagún in his book *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (The General History of the Things of New Spain), was discovered by Thuy Hang in French author J.M.G. Le Clézio's collection of short stories titled *Cœur brûlé et autres romances* (Heartburn and Other Romances), translated into Vietnamese by Ho Thanh Van.

To sculpt, the artist must first formulate an idea, then work with materials toward a form that resonates not only with the logic and sensibility of that idea, but also with the emotions they try to evoke, or the memories they try to remember.

The hands of the artist – the translator of their thoughts and inner worlds – become activated, mediating between cognitive and emotional energy, transforming them into physical movements that advance the final sculpted form. The hands work into materials; materials get worked away. The hands remove parts that are not meant to be; parts reform. The hands layer things on top of each other; things assemble and unite.

In this process, there exists a searching for the self within, for something profound that resonates with what one has priorly experienced in this life, or probably in previous lives. It requires them to get in touch with the innate and instinctual – that unknown that lies beyond this dimension, this presence, this time – and towards a sense of recognition that's hidden in another dimension, another presence, another time.

Enduring metal and malleable fabric. Solid wood and porous paper. Veiled symbols and revealing traces. Hardcore mass and soft contours. In Nguyen Thuy Hang's sculptures, shapes twist, turn and fold; figures swell and tiptoe off-balance; materials tear, wear off and soften. Seemingly opposing forces in constant negotiation, they become wounded and healed, stagnant and transformed.

Half-man, half-animal figures with nowhere to go, their existence belonging to another time, another place. Some covered in paper, others wrapped in fabric\*, their surface akin to skin – tactile and vulnerable, they fold in on themselves in a gesture of self-protection. Or perhaps a gesture of self-burial – mourning their own decay while commemorating their immortality. Hanging mid-air, growing from beneath, sticking out of wardrobe, bed and chair, their bodies appear both organic and otherworldly, intimidated and intriguing, dangerous and thrilling.

No longer what they once were, yet here they are – called upon and transported to the present moment by the hands of the artist.

\* Muslin is a cotton fabric created using the shuttle loom weaving method. Muslin is used for making wound dressings, baby diapers, food covers, cleaning cloths, or mourning garments. To date, the origin of this fabric in Vietnam has not been clearly researched. Bân paper is made from the bark of the dướng tree (locally known as mây Sla), which grows on the hills and mountains of Cao Bang (Vietnam). Bân paper is used by the Tày, Nùng, and several other ethnic minorities to record family genealogies, folk songs and folktales, as well as for cleaning and medical purposes. Additionally, it is used for making votive paper, religious offerings, home decorations, and for writing Chinese characters.

“Can’t resist coming closer, can you?”, suddenly you  
hear a voice.

Seek your memory, where have you heard this voice  
before?

Feet moving forward, here you are, the lone actor  
amidst a work of silent theater  
about loss and against erasure.

Loss of love and loss of loved ones  
– those we grieve and shall never forget  
For if we forget, we shall never be forgiven.

Walking the space of in-betweenness,  
you traverse the materiality of daylight, into the  
spirituality of dark night,  
where suspension lingers and othered souls circle  
the path  
between the world above and the world below.

Look at them – above, straight on, centered  
Feel their presence – behind, lurking, to the edges  
Listen to their songs  
of separation, of uncried words, of a past lost but  
never forgotten,  
of loving memories, of lives lived, of hopeful  
remembrance.

Before you an army of mythical creatures  
from a distant past, or a science-fiction future?  
Fossilized bodies stranded in exile, their decay  
delayed.  
Their death – seen by you, is now carried in you  
Until one day, that death will become you.



Thuy Hang sculpts in order to remember – those she shares a bloodline with, close and far, as well as unnamed bodies who have long been gone. In works like *The Warriors*, the artist honors her mother, whose family, like countless others, had to seek refuge in Thailand during the Franco-Vietnam War in the 1930s. There, in 1940, her mother was born; her family didn't return to Vietnam until the 1960s. “Just as she had wished when she neared her final moments to have her ashes brought back to Thailand – her place of birth – [my work shall be displayed] in various places, [where I will] let them decay in time. One could picture it as a return, a reunion to Earth for my Mother.”

Though hers is an individual story of her mother's journeys, Thuy Hang's work also reflects the collective tale of sacrifice and loss experienced by *other* mothers, by *other* peoples. Using materials in varying states of deterioration and transformation, incorporating popular symbols found in folklores, myths and religious teachings\*, Thuy Hang sculpts spaces to commemorate humanity's shared struggles: of having to uproot without ever settling, departing without ever arriving, staying without ever belonging, existing without ever living.

“I want to go with them into a jungle or near a lake.  
I want to place them at some very crowded place.  
On a roof. On a barge pulled along a river.  
So that I can see more clearly of  
Exiles. Losses. Expeditions.”

\* The images of the Phoenix and the Bowl of Suffering, as depicted in two eponymous works of the same name, hold various layers of meaning in Vietnamese culture. The Phoenix, originating from the image of the Lạc bird and evolving through the feudal era into its current form, symbolizes resilience in the face of storms and challenges, the aspiration to conquer the sky, and embodies rebirth, renewal, eternity, and immortality. In contrast, inspired by the Buddhist concept of “Ái biệt ly khổ” (the pain of parting from a beloved place or person) from the “Khô/Dukkha” (suffering), the Bowl of Suffering symbolizes the separation between the deceased and the living, the changes and impermanence of all things, the suffering of illness and death, or lost love.

To view a sculpture, one ought to first imagine peeling away the work's many layers, slowly unpacking its past lives, undoing the work of time, in order to get to the core of its existence. During this act of imagination, metal may melt, and fabric tear; wood may rot, and paper burn; symbols may vanish, and traces fade, but the telling of the tales will endure beyond present consciousness and into timeless remembrance. Like ancient ruins that both witness and contain in them the passing of time, here, sculpting becomes a gesture that gives time its shape and identity, while also breathing life into the memories one might have forgotten.

As this journey back in time continues, another also unfolds, propelling us forward in time, into a future where our presence no longer matters, for we will have materially disintegrated into soil, disappeared into thin air, and become one with water. And like the ancient ruins that have survived the test of time, the work will most likely outlive us. In its physicality as well as its decay yet to come, time will continue its dance, weaving through the past, circling the present, returning to the future.

