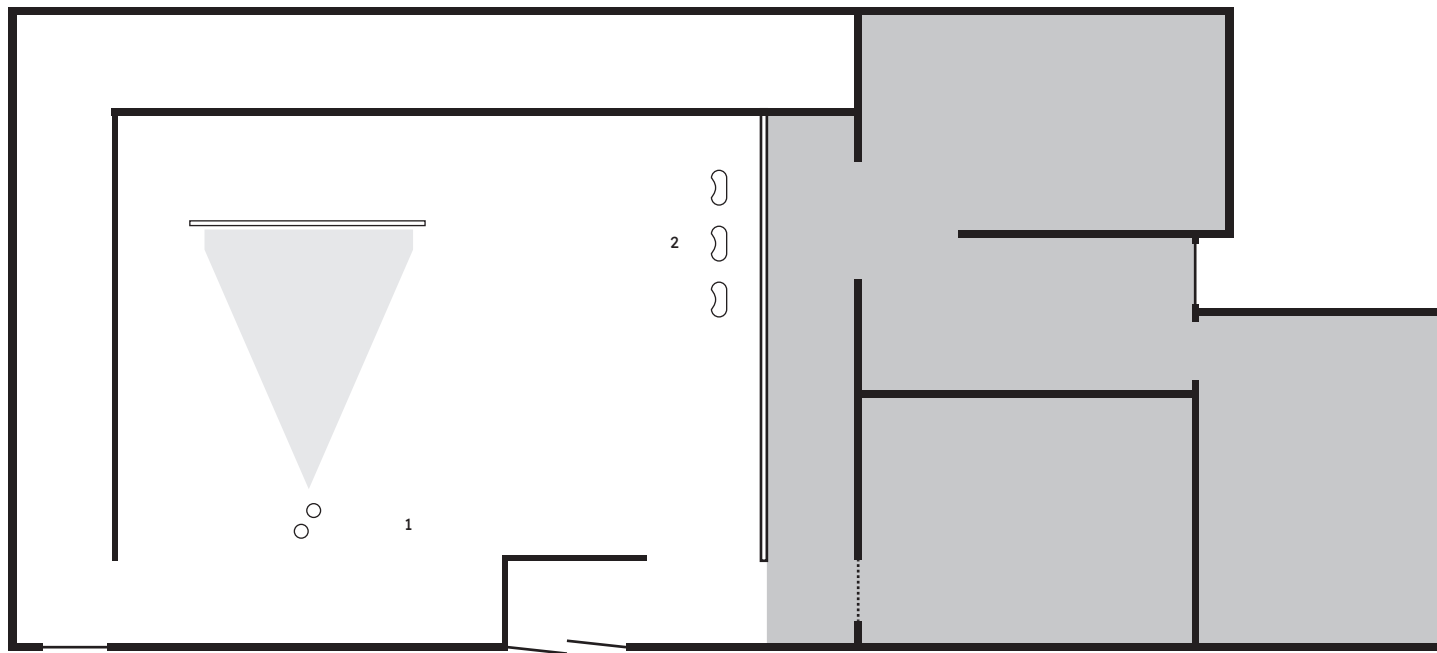


An exercise in intimacy,  
distance,  
and seeing

for /

**Oanh Phi Phi**



1. *Palimpsest* — 2011–ongoing

Glass, *sơn ta* resin, pigment, aluminum, inox, cork, aramid fiber, epoxy, gold, silver and aluminum leaf, steel  
Installation dimensions variable

2. *Inalienable Parts* — 2024

*Sơn ta* resin on carbon fiber and kevlar epoxy composite

Cuirass 1: 50 x 38 x 25 cm

Cuirass 2: 48 x 38 x 25 cm

Cuirass 3: 40 x 35 x 25 cm

Imagine carefully laying down layers upon layers of sơn ta\* onto a vóc\*\*, mixed and painted with a variety of organic substances, natural color pigments and metals.

Then, patiently allowing each layer to dry, sanding it down, continuing the painting process.

Repeat this process

over

and over

and over again

– all by hand, for months, even years.

This is what it traditionally requires to lacquer. To finish off, polishing is done to reveal the many layers applied before. To lacquer is thus to chisel time away to unfold the present; the final result of this process an accumulation of hard labour and soft love, determination and attentiveness, building up and letting go. And as we engage this embodiment of lacquered pasts, we are asked to come face-to-face with the depth of time – the test of time – the death of time.

\* Vietnamese lacquer, known for its time-consuming and laborious production process that demands the highest levels of attention, patience and skill, has a rich history of origin and changes. Locally referred to as “sơn ta”, ta; meaning we, us, ours, the substance of Vietnamese lacquer comes from the sap of the Rhus succedanea tree, one of the many lacquer-producing trees found across Asia. Once considered a decorative element in royal and aristocratic court cultures, architecture and furniture, lacquer was “elevated” from a product of craft to a Fine Art painting genre in the 1930s by the French teachers and Vietnamese students at the École des Beaux Arts de l’Indochine in Hanoi during the French colonial period. Despite its recognition today, lacquer is still often misunderstood as merely a labor-intensive craft or a tourist product, rather than as a powerful mode of image-making that challenges and enables us to re-think the way we perceive the world. For an introduction to the history, techniques and significance of Vietnamese lacquer, as illustrated through the practices of a Vietnamese master artist and his contemporary counterpart, refer to Phoebe Scott’s article *Vietnamese Lacquer Painting: Between Materiality and History* (originally written to accompany the exhibition *Radiant Material: A Dialogue in Vietnamese Lacquer Painting* by Nguyen Gia Tri and Oanh Phi Phi at the National Gallery Singapore).

\*\* *Vóc* is the baseboard on which lacquer is applied, much like a canvas serves an oil painter. As the base, the vóc must ensure durability and longevity. The process of creating a vóc alone involves various stages, many of which require repetition, including sanding down raw wood, smoothening its surface with a mixture of lacquer, wet clay and sawdust, continuously applying layers after layers of mixed lacquer, before sanding and polishing to perfection. Before a vóc can reach the artist, it usually takes between 20 to 30 days depending on weather conditions to turn a simple wooden base into a usable vóc.

Reference: <https://www.kiettacongthuat.com/cach-lam-tra-nh-son-mai-dung-cu-nguyen-lieu-quy-trinh/>

In Oanh Phi Phi's sculptural light installation *Palimpsest*, the sense of condensed time often associated with lacquer is dissolved, becoming body-less, dematerialized, almost non-physical. Dissected – dozens of lacquered “skins”, or strips of patterns painted in lacquer on glass slides, are magnified through light projectors that look like a steampunk mad scientist's creation. The shadows of the lacquered skins domesticate the surrounding space, engulfing anything that comes into contact. Porous – like the name\* they bear – the projected images breathe and melt into one another, swimming between the visible and invisible, now free of physical substance or origin, no longer having to possess material characters or qualities. “Fungal, arrhythmic, [the images] look biological, inhuman – we are looking at something grown, rather than made. In some places, we can see through the layers – they are uncannily transparent. It is as though we are looking through (our) skin, watching ourselves disappear.”\*\*

And so, bathed in lacquer we go. Into a sea of intimacy and distance, a universe of the minuscule and cosmic, interweaving science and heritage, observation and illusion, grandeur and smallness. Here, images of abstractions and metaphors dance,

reminiscent not only of the life of cells seen through a microscope, but also the lives of galaxies seen through a telescope. Neither here nor there, but both present at the same time, full of life they are.

\* Palimpsest originally describes a document, such as a manuscript page or a scroll, in which writing has been rubbed smooth so that new content can be written on, with traces of the original still showing through. Similarly, this relates to the process of producing lacquer whereby the layering upon layer of sap is required. Palimpsest can also be understood as something, such as a multimedia artwork or a city's architectural fabric, that has various types of style or different levels of meaning or that build on each other, where hints of the past are still evident among the new.

\*\* Kevin Chua, *Lacquer's Ecology, or the Swirl*

The life of cells seen through a microscope, and the lives of galaxies seen through a telescope. How can one engage such a span of perception – between something so precise, real and intimate, and another so vast and infinitive that can only be reached through imagination?

Come closer,  
see for yourself what you are seeing.

When do you think the work begins, where do you think it ends?

Is it in the minute patterns on glass,  
or their ever-glowing distant shadows?

Is it in the artist's ability to capture the fleeting vastness of space  
and the translucent depths of time through lacquer?

Or is it in our realization that what matters  
is the process of pondering how one chooses to see,  
and not necessarily what one sees?

In the blink of an eye, a whole universe awaits. So let your vision take you wherever it takes you.

Gently, we step back and return to our original position.

Suddenly they appear from behind, moving toward the lacquerscopes. Were it not for the flutter of their white robes, you would never have noticed their presence. A pale light emanates from the box containing the lacquered skins, illuminating their faces.

Seek your memory; where have you seen them before?

Slowly, as if out of breath, they run their gloved fingers over the lacquered skins, caressing them. Skin touches skin, touching skin once more. Their fingers stop at a particular piece; the chosen one has emerged. With absolute fluency, their hands quickly swap. From inside the lacquerscope, a piece of lacquered skin is pulled out; the chosen one now reigns.

And just like that, they walk away again, disappearing behind colorful illusions.



In *Inalienable Parts*, the body partly returns to its human form. Alienated from their original whole, three cuirasses are cast from the artist's own body and her mother's and her daughter's. Three generations of women from the same bloodline – each carrying the weight of their own relationship to identity, culture and history; each trying to cultivate their own self and place in time.

Skin sprouting, skin folding. Skin glowing, skin sulking. The self youthful, the self mature, the self aged. On their surface, an orchestra of symbols glisten. Dragons soaring – their flight tracing a nation's identity rooted in myths, or reminiscing a dream of power beyond reach? A beating human heart – embraced by the contours of the land, or hiding among camouflage patterns, waiting for the day to re-emerge? A page torn from a student's book – following the echoes of incomplete constitutions, or searching for the ghost of the guiding hand no longer here?

Underneath it all, the growing and decaying evidence of the human body continues to be sculpted into eternal lacquer. As the bodies of the original subjects live and die, their lacquered shadows are separated from the flow of time, frozen.

Now hollow, what are they clinging to?

Empty shells now with no insides, armours now with no bodies to defend, people now with no identity.

In the end, is the body only an impression?

A collection of data embossed on the surface of our mind; an archive of moments stored in the depths of our memory; a notion we carry for the rest of our lives?

A body lives, for their image lives on.

No longer a static object, the image becomes a process. Existing outside of itself, the image happens, taking place through a process of transmission, via a mediated medium to our perceiving eyes. This living image, disembodied from its origin, is now re-embodied in our body. Our body, in turn, becomes both the host for the living image, and a living medium itself – a site where images are produced, animated and immortalized.\*

A body lives, for their image lives on.

\* Inspired by and with references to Hans Belting's research *Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology*, particularly his exploration of the relationship between image and death, tracing picture production, including the first use of the mask, to early funerary rituals in which pictures served as tools to represent the missing bodies of the dead, or to re-embody the deceased, making them present again amongst the living.

“Can’t resist touching, can you?”, they whisper into your ear. Tempting, for the armour’s elegant skin has become too much for the eyes to bear, begging for the touch of your fingers and the embrace of your body. Something inside you advises against the inviting words.

“You are scared, aren’t you? For they are uncanny, aren’t they?”. They are not wrong, for these lacquered shadows could easily have been the ghost of your own body, or your sister’s, or your daughter’s, maybe your wife’s, or your lover’s, even your mother’s. Dead or alive, they represent no woman and all women at the same time – familiar yet strange, so close yet so far.

Her body might have become a temple,  
their bodies might have become graves.  
“But they are not mine to touch, just as I am not  
yours to tame, just as we are not theirs to control”,  
staring back at them, you speak. Your vision starts to  
blur.

