The Year Is XXXX

Words Denise Lai
Translation Doan Thanh Toan

left to right
top to bottom

Diem Phung Thi
Princess
1968
Stone, pearl, ceramic, brass
25 x 12 x 12 cm

Diem Phung Thi
The Mandarin
1970
Stone, brass
30 x 13 x 3 cm

Bui Hai Son
Universal Altar
2022
Bronze-plated stainless steel, glass
175 x 160 x 160 cm

Other Possible Endings

Where the opening chapter of *The Year is XXXX* began its adventure in the narrative structures of *giang hồ* fiction[1], in its following chapters, we have witnessed the continuing dissolution of the adventure's climactic promise. Bill Nguyen's temporal loops trap his characters in "infinite failures", "ripped from one timeline, flung between worlds, body reshaped, dissolved, reconstituted." Joud Al-Tamimi's landscapes refuse a forward momentum of heroic narratives, instead offering "a field of tension" where earth metabolizes the "surplus of the past" into forms that destabilize oppositions between the real and the dream. Sofia Thiệu D'amico's ghosts arrive to "displace and subvert the powers of the living", demanding reckoning not resolution. Each chapter has moved us further from the adventure tale's foundational promise of a climax – that movement through space and time might offer escape. Rather, in their selected artworks, we encounter repetition, haunting, and the stubborn persistence of unresolved efforts for survival.

For this final chapter of *The Year is XXXX*, I build upon my recent research into a postheroic aesthetics for postcolonial contexts, one that emerges from conditions of colonial and postcolonial displacement and its resulting chimeric cultural forms, deconstructing heroic teleologies through strategic incompletion: atemporalities, spatial dislocations, and abject heroes in productive failure. My interest relates to the pregnancy of such teleologies in the cinematic history of my home country, Malaysia, where heroic adventures are inextricable from cultural forms and ideas inherited through legacies of Japanese imperialism, British colonial rule, and Cold War geopolitics. In recent years, contemporary artists and activists in Malaysia have begun to redeploy archival footage and named heroes (or, figures co-opted into constructing imagined victories of various empires) to create spaces for alternative subjectivities that resist both imperial nostalgia and nationalist simplifications[2].

The refiguring of Vietnamese *giang hồ* fiction in *The Year is XXXX* demonstrates compelling affinities, particularly in negotiating incomplete protagonisms through such interests in spatial and temporal dislocation. In other words, these are contemporary artistic modes across Southeast Asia that imagine narrative structures beyond climax from different entry points – forms that insist on the unfinished and the cyclical as strategies of vernacular storytelling and imagination, refusing the coherent temporalities demanded by the colonial fantasy. To end by returning, this selection of artworks from the Nguyễn Art Foundation collection represents the work of attending to a necessarily ongoing process: the daily repetition of spiritual consideration, the modular reorganization of recycled parts, the cyclical return to fundamental concerns about daily survival and rebuilding.

My journey into the collection began with Diem Phung Thi's sculptures from the late sixties, one a cluster of dark, weathered stone representative of the artist's signature language of seven modules, the other her motif of the Buddhist nun enjeweled in pearls, where one module is miniatured into a belly button for her abstracted figure of multiple, stacked materials. Born in 1946, Diem left her profession in dentistry to join Ho Chi Minh's resistance movement against the French, later moving to Paris, where, during the Paris Peace Accords, she served as translator for the North Vietnamese delegation while producing works that functioned as explicit anti-war statements[3]. Whilst potentially mistaken for a shift away from political engagement, the formal translation of Diem's practice after the mid-sixties toward contemplative arrangements of a seven-module system continued to serve as her prayers of peace, expressing concerns for the war and its legacies and encouraging notions of compassion[4]. This aesthetic philosophy, oriented toward ongoing arrangement rather than final form, becomes paradigmatic of the cyclical, processual aesthetic strategies explored in this exhibition.

Bui Hai Son's *Universal Altar* anchors the exhibition's meditation on productive returns through his sustained investigation of the rice grain as both formal element and cultural witness. His practice embodies another familiar journey in Vietnam, southward, emphasizing return to one's origins through an intense formal investigation of the husk of a rice grain, what he sees as a "spiritual witness" of migratory journeys, a form that "embodies both the origin and the destination of an arduous and challenging journey"[5]. Across Bui's work, the rice grain becomes genetic and cultural memory of countless migrations, generating an aesthetic system out of its shell. *Universal Altar*, a golden cylinder of an ellipse pulled upward to cut a tower of light into space, synthesizes this formal investigation with vernacular spiritual practices from his childhood in An Giang, where makeshift altars marked daily connections between earth and heaven, dawn and dusk, through repetition. Son's single morphological unit of the rice grain merges with the altar's vertical function, creating both physical light and a materialization of ritual temporality.

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1. Tales translated and adapted by Vietnamese intellectuals reflecting efforts to formulate a Vietnamese identity in the wake of anti-colonial movements during the early twentieth century.
2. For more on this research, Denise Lai, "Au Sow Yee: The Fate of the Post-Heroic Perwira", *post*, 4 June 2025, https://post.moma.org/au-sow-yee-the-fate-of-the-post-heroic-perwira/.
3. Thao Nguyen Phan, "A Conversation on Diem Phung Thi: Thao Nguyen Phan in dialogue with Phan Dinh Hoi", in *Reincarnations of Shadows* (Milan: Pirelli HangarBicocca, 14 September 2023 to 14 January 2024). Exhibition catalogue, pp. 39–41.
4. Ibid., p. 52
5. Bui Hai Son quoted in, Nguyễn Art Foundation. "Studio Visit with Bui Hai Son - Nguyen Art Foundation (10 Mar 2023, Saigon, Vietnam)" *Youtube*, 30 January 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSGkJXGBdV8&ab_channel=NguyenArtFoundation.

WITH GUEST ARTISTS | CÙNG CÁC NGHỆ SĨ KHÁCH MỜI
BÙI HẢI SƠN, ĐIỂM PHÙNG THỊ, NGUYỄN QUANG HUY, VY TRỊNH, VŨ DÂN TÂN

WITH GUEST CURATOR | CÙNG CURATOR KHÁCH MỜI
DENISE LAI

The Year Is 2026

left column
left to right

Vy Trinh
Sketch Knock Sensor
2024
Pencil on 250 gsm paper
29 x 38 cm

Vy Trinh
Sketch Speedy Curve
2024
Pencil on 250 gsm paper
38 x 29 cm

Vy Trinh
Sketch Dream
2024
Pencil on 250 gsm paper
38 x 29 cm

right column
left to right

Nguyen Quang Huy
Untitled
2001
Ink and watercolor on *dó* paper
120 x 61 cm

Vu Dan Tan
Fashion 30
2009
Recycled cardboard
83 x 36 x 15 cm

A foundation in Buddhist philosophy threads through Diem Phung Thi and Bui Hai Son's works, which is further explored by a neighboring watercolor by Nguyen Quang Huy. In this untitled painting on *dó* paper, illegible script spirals into an abstract face for a figure of a woman, suggested only tentatively by fields of subdued wash. There is no fully formed story or speech for our protagonist here, only writing that circles endlessly like a prayer wheel. Representative of the artist's practice when he was a fresh graduate from the Hanoi University of Fine Arts, Nguyen Quang Huy credits the painting's abstracted quality to his search for balance through his earliest exposures to the image in religion and Buddhism (growing up near the Thay Pagoda in Ha Tay) and a radical position to "destroy the old and build the new"[6]. When balance and transformation occur as simultaneous conditions, what we find enacted here is the rhythm of Nguyen Quang Huy's consciousness when under meditative attention to possibility, of what fails to/has yet to be articulated.

Vu Dan Tan's *Fashion 30* (2009) pushes this investigation of cyclical practice toward questions of material survival. The work, a cuirass cut from discarded cardboard, sits within the artist's sustained pursuit of transformation through reuse, a practice central to his late work at Salon Natasha, Hanoi's first independent experimental art space where "the most varied forms of art thrived, regardless of what was expected"[7]. The piece evokes armor, a form associated with the heroic figure, yet its fragile construction displaces any illusion of permanence or protection. What remains is a shell patched from the everyday and given new purpose through endless cycles of cutting, folding, and recombination to mirror the processes of urban survival in a rapidly transforming city. The work's formal properties register the historical pressures that produced both the necessity for such resourcefulness and the aesthetic possibilities it generates, asking fundamental questions about cultural continuity, of how to build and rebuild with what remains, how to endure through repetition rather than accumulation. Vu Dan Tan, self-taught and working largely outside institutional frameworks, made of this practice a reorientation toward the possibilities of the provisional, a recognition that art might thrive by inhabiting the very materials discarded by society.

In the works of Vy Trinh, the fantasy of a climatic endpoint dissolves into a contemporary reality of perpetual navigation. The three drawings presented here from her 2024 solo exhibition, *ON DA DREAM*, develop an aesthetics out of an impossibility of stillness in the city, one that involves the artist following the traffic or material ecology of reappropriated vehicle parts, enlivened by suspended movement traced in the air by Trinh's metallic threads. Her drawings present these ideas as a field of competing energies held in uneasy suspension. Linear elements (ribbons or cords?) seem to pull against their own boundaries while textural masses assert weight and resistance across the surface. The question is not where things are but how they move, how they connect, how they repeat and transform through contact with other elements. Her drawings exemplify this kind of multidirectional thinking that has become essential to survival in contemporary conditions, so constant, so evasive of mapping. What sense of navigation can be found is more akin to a mode of survival when "pausing is not an option"[8], when staying alive means staying alert to multiple simultaneous pressures, ready to adjust, redirect, and respond without the false comfort of predetermined outcomes.

"En route to a failed struggle, you need daydreams." Indonesian artist Agung Kurniawan offered this reflection for his recent solo exhibition at ROH, our gallery in Jakarta, describing a decades-long practice in art-activism that repairs itself again and again to develop visual strategies for memorializing state-censored histories, even when (and especially when) these messages are lost[9]. Where we have been historically denied adventurous conclusions, it seems necessary today to pay attention to artists across the region who share attitudes of ongoing engagements with daily survival, rooted in real hopes and fears that make possible the reimagination of new forms of solidarity and manoeuvring. We breathe in cycles, arrange and rearrange the elements we have been given, find meaning not in destination but in the quality of attention we bring to other possible endings, slightly changed by the journey.

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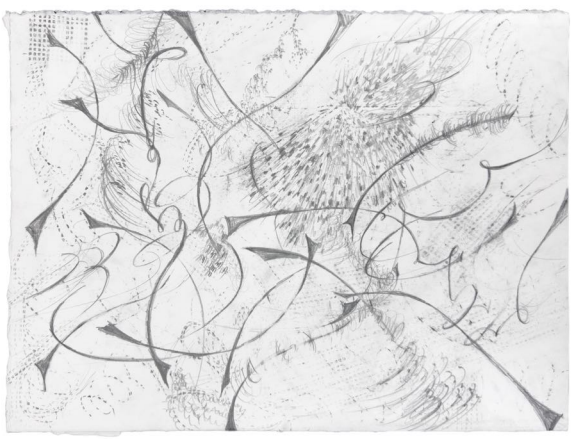
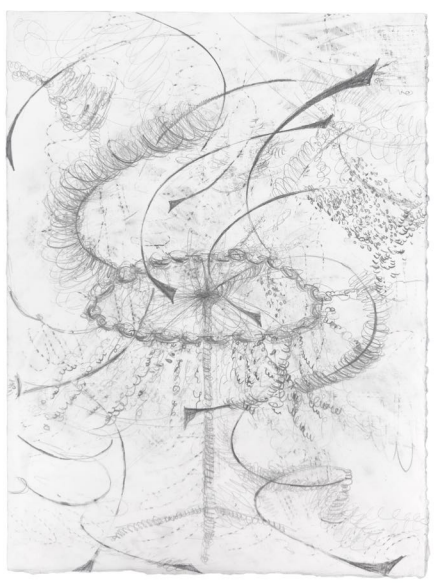
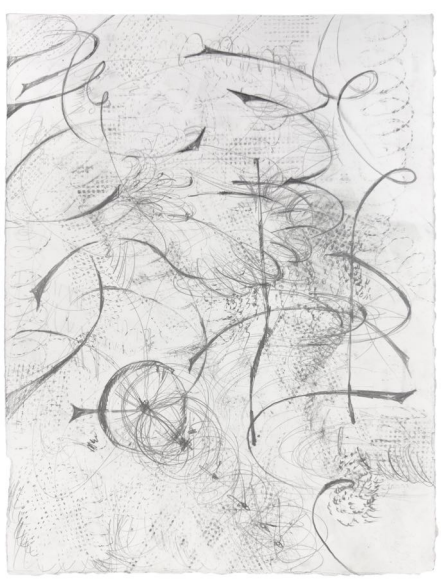
6. Nguyen Quang Huy quoted in, Nguyễn Art Foundation. "Studio Visit with Nguyễn Quang Huy - The Nguyen Art Foundation (20 Apr 2021, Hanoi, Vietnam)" *Youtube*, 6 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsKLlYzt0ik&t=123s&ab_channel=NguyenArtFoundation.
7. Veronika Radulovic, "Everything can happen between now and then ..." in *Essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese Art* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009), pp. 189–97 (p. 190).
8. Vy Trinh, *ON DA DREAM* (Saigon: Galerie Quynh Contemporary Art, 10 August – 12 October 2024). Exhibition statement. https://www.galeriequynh.com/exhibitions/137-on-da-dream-vy-trinh/.
9. Agung Kurniawan quoted in, Mira Asriningtyas, "The Curse of Bearing Witness", *Agung Kurniawan: Whoever Stays Until The End Will Tell The Story* (Jakarta: ROH, 2 August - 7 September 2025). Exhibition essay. https://rohprojects.net/exhibitions/whoever-stays-until-the-end-will-tell-the-story.







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