

'MUTED CONVERSATIONS'

A solo exhibition by **ĐẠT VŨ**

10/8 – 17/9/2017

*'Muted Conversations' 2011- ongoing
 Inkjet print on paper
 43 components: dimensions variable*

INTERVIEW BETWEEN ĐẠT VŨ AND ZOE BUTT

Zoe Butt: Your artistic practice appears to focus on photography. Why?

Dat Vu: *I started photography for very different reasons but over time I found myself mature with it - in thinking and seeing. As I shifted my practice in an artistic direction, I realized photography's potential for experimentation because of its flexibility and immediacy. I want to further examine the nature of photography and the relationship people have with it, from viewers to practitioners.*

What kind of camera do you use?

I use a Nikon D800 to make all of my photographs.

Why did you call your exhibition 'Muted Conversations'?

Looking at many different spiritual and religious practices, I have come to regard these as a form of communication for the people who perform them. I am drawn to the forms of these rituals and the relationships between the performers and the rites. They constitute a subconscious part of our daily lives as we perform our societal roles. The people who perform these rites are in conversation with not only some kind of entity, but also themselves. 'Muted Conversations' refers to such acts.

Are you a spiritual person?

I am trying to understand the concept of spirituality, or at least my own relationship with it in the context of Vietnam. Where and how do I personally find meaning, connection and value?

Many of your photos have been taken on your travels throughout Vietnam. Would you say that travel is a mode of thinking for you, artistically i mean, like does the experience of travel prompt inspiration between you and the lens? Do you travel alone?

Traveling definitely has shaped my artistic thoughts because of this constant sense of exploration and engagement. It is about the process of adapting and familiarizing myself to different people and environments. I am stimulated visually and critically at the same time as I try to understand the happenings in these unfamiliar places despite being a Vietnamese myself. Sometimes I travel alone and sometimes with company. This also largely influences my thinking.

In looking at your photos i can see three strong themes engaged. You as an observer of human behaviour, spending time at a location and watching how the 'situation' unfolds. You as a documenteur, aware of the socio-political context in front of you and how your 'image' can capture a particular dilemma. Then finally, you as a participant, aware of yourself and your own human bonds to family and friends. All of this is tied to an examination of ritual and superstition - can you share a little on why this topic is of interest to you and how you came to approach the subject from these three different perspectives?

I grew up in a rather unconventional family, with my father's side being Catholic and my mother's being Buddhist. Being exposed to both systems of belief was very confusing, but also sparked my curiosity about the underlying significance of religious elements within my family, my neighbors, my friends and society at large. During my time living abroad over the years, I have become somewhat out of touch with Vietnamese traditions but these thoughts remain imprinted. Perhaps it's a part of myself that I never fully understood, and therefore, by weaving together the nuances in between these perspectives, I could also see myself in a bigger picture.

One aspect of your photography that I am particularly drawn to is the 'found' installation. I mean the scenarios you have 'found' - an unusual staircase with a raincoat hanging off its unique step; or a billboard signboard with its silver lining left blank and hanging in the winds; or a green plastic dagger stuck point down into a dry river bed - all of these 'scenes' you have found naturally but they remind me of famous artists' work, such as Francis Alys and Doris Salcedo whose art similarly takes advantage of found moments, of a careful composed 'stage'. Can you share the artists that have inspired your thinking and how they have influenced you?



Left: Francis Alys 'Ambulantes' (detail of photography series) 1992-2006; **Right:** Doris Salcedo 'Shibboleth' (installation detail at Tate Modern, London, UK) 2007-2008

When I first saw the book "Evidence" by Larry Sultan & Mike Mandel, I immediately resonated with it on many levels, visually and conceptually. The book is a compilation of photographs selected from different archives of the Bechtel Corporation, the Los Angeles Police Department, the Jet Propulsion Laboratories, the US Department of the Interior, Stanford Research Institute and a hundred other corporations, American government agencies and educational, medical and technical institutions. These photographs were taken out of their contexts and brought together in this book form, presented in a very different manner.



Left to right - Top to bottom: Untitled Evidence 1977; Untitled Evidence 1977; Untitled Evidence 1977; Untitled Evidence 1977

They embody a kind of aesthetic and meaning that pioneered the blurring of the distinction between documentation and imagination. This inspired me to critically think about functions and intentions of photography, about the 'found' versus 'staged' quality of this visual vocabulary that is so abundant around us. It drove me to make pictures that aim to challenge the viewers to derive their own meaning without relying on any textual information about the contexts of the photographs.

Can you share a particular experience that stands out for you with this body of work? Like, did you experience something specific in developing this idea, via travel, that had a significant impact on how you approach the idea of a 'photo'?

Towards the end of my traveling, I chanced upon an event at Thuận An beach outside Huế. By the water, a group of people were gathering under a makeshift tent next to a temporary shrine looking out to the sea. I later learned that it was meant for a young man who had just been dragged into the sea by a rip current. People were hoping to find the body soon, so they performed several rituals on the beach that day. It was a very unexpected tragedy that prompted me to develop thoughts about collective grieving in public settings, how folks assign functions to certain spaces by performing certain activities. The first photograph of the exhibited series was made there, and I intended for it to be uncanny in some way.

Another aspect of your project that I find alluring is your method of displaying your photos.. Can you share a little about your decisions in displaying your work like this?

I display my photographs in an irregular manner, meaning they will be hung at different height levels and printed at different sizes. Such display method breaks the monotony of a conventional narrative and suits the theme of spirituality. The exhibition space itself is irregular, so I intend for my work to respond to that attribute by having them work together almost like a sculpture speaking to the space. The viewers travel through space and the body of work simultaneously, looking at photographs of different proportions in relation to their content, their sizes and the perspectives based on height level. I want to simulate the experience of floating through another dimension, in between the photographs and the physical space they occupy.

You have also chosen to display video documentation of a few 'scenes', these small narratives I presume to be a few of the 'sites' to which your photos are from. Why did you feel this video was necessary to include inside this exhibition?

I feel the need to include sound and some motion images to better illustrate the happening in relation to this central theme of spirituality. It is also my first experiment with video and installation ever so mostly I just want to see how this plays out in the gallery space.

What do you have planned following this exhibition? Will you continue to work on this series?

Following this exhibition, I will try to finish editing all my materials and possibly work on producing a book. The series perhaps could be better refined with newer images or narrowed down in terms of scope, but this exhibition will be an overview of a bigger ongoing body of work.

Do you consider it important to hold exhibitions of your art? What kind of experience do you hope to give your audience?

I think it is important because I would like to see how Vietnamese audiences respond to my work in this gallery setting and to understand better their relationship with photography. I invite them to experience photography in a different but familiar manner, asking them to question and engage their own meaning based on their personal experiences.

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