

## PARADISE LOST

A solo exhibition by  
 HOÀNG THANH VĨNH PHONG  
 10/8 – 17/9/2017

### INTERVIEW BETWEEN HOÀNG THANH VĨNH PHONG AND BILL NGUYỄN

**1.**  
**You tend to use various media in your work, from painting, photography, print, to sculpture and installation. Can you share more about your relationship with this media?**

I believe that each material has its own language, and each media is suitable to express a specific idea; all of these are intimately bound to daily life. Sometimes, I would start with one material at the beginning. But when the concepts start developing, I might switch to another material that is more sufficient and satisfactory. Other times, my decision is based on emotions or a memory. For example, the time when I traveled with my Father to order gravestones for my grandparents, I would observe the artisans at the grave stone factory print portraits of the deceased onto ceramic tiles, as if to find a way for their children to remember them for as long as they could. I find these portraits rigid and monotonous, as if those people were cast out of the same mould. I wonder, 'Would this technique be useful in developing artworks?' Or when I visit local carpentry factories, watching the carpenters mass-carve products, with fine-tuned techniques but still at the level of craft, I ask myself, 'Can this technique be combined with the mentality of an artist - to reorganize and transform objects, imbue them with a different narrative and spirit? Everyday I search for new materials and experiment with them as if this is a daily experience, a part of my nature.

**2.**  
**But the frequency at which traditional materials like lacquer and wood-carving appear in your work is also quite often, right?**

I try to maintain a critical inquiry of traditional materials. In painting for example, I question conventional ways of painting by expanding its boundaries and merging it with other practices. You can see in the series 'Portraits', instead of using oil and paint on canvas, I use lacquer to draw the details and patterns of a (real-life) mattress on a life-sized wooden sculpture of that same mattress. And now we have a work that intertwines painting and sculpture. I didn't start practicing multimedia when I first graduated from Hue City University of Fine Arts. I actually spent a long period making ends meet by painting commercial decorative art. But about ten years ago, I decided to put that practice behind me, and up until now, I am still trying to find my own way into the art world, determined to create works with diverse concepts and methodologies.

**3.**  
**Lacquer is known to be a medium that is difficult to work with and requires a high level of delicate skill from the artist. By employing these "assumptions" about lacquer, you have generated a surprisingly interesting dialogue with the mattress series - like you are playing with the audience's perception of what they are looking at (like you think it's a mattress but then we realize it's actually a sculpture). This is a technique that**

**seems to be repeated throughout your exhibition - can you share more?**

By weaving sculpture, carpentry, with lacquer techniques, I want to experiment with other possibilities in the language of lacquer by moving beyond its traditional style. Suspended on the wall, the works at first appear to the audience as stereotypical objects with their ordinary visual and functional characteristics. But when looked at more closely, they turn out to be not so simplistic. Thus, we can deduce that an ordinary object that is beautifully made, but does not stand within its typical function, can be considered an artwork. Here, I also want to question, 'If a normal object can transform into a subject of art, then what other forms can art take?' Conceptually, I personify the mattresses and view them as humans, because they are objects that are most intimate to us. Most of us grows up on a mattress - they bear witness to the ups and downs of our life - our final wish is also to depart this world on such a soft and gentle medium. The mattresses that I create draw inspiration from those that belong to my family, which makes them symbols for members of my family. But also, they can be seen as reflections of members of other families, or in a larger scale, members of society.

**4.**  
**Can we also consider the two acts of "personifying" and "objectifying" as simultaneously co-existing in your practice? As seen in this exhibition for example, objects would sometimes replace, even "consume" humans (in 'Perfect Illusion' and 'It's About Time'), or the human presence would fade into the background and become secondary (as in 'Happily Ever After')**

I always intertwine the human body with daily objects to evoke a sense of "realistic fantasy", somewhere between real and unreal, normal and abnormal. This aspect of my practice is partially influenced by Surrealism, especially by the works of Salvador Dalí or René Magritte; Carl Jung's theories of individualization (the process of unifying opposite facets of our psychological system - 'unconscious' and 'conscious'); and the ways in which conceptual artists like Marcel Duchamp and Ai Weiwei utilize objects. But different

from these artists, who consider objects as a subject in and of itself (and perhaps this is the essence of conceptual art), I consider each object found in everyday life unique with its own narrative and meaning. For me, if the meanings of ordinary objects are restructured (as in combined with other objects or human images), this will give birth to new values, new interpretations. This is the point when conceptual art becomes metaphorical, multilayered, and symbolical. But the most essential thing in the end is how I can create artworks that speak about humans the most. For example, in 'Perfect Illusion' and 'It's About Time', the everyday objects become the focus (the subject of art), while the human body is merely a 'frame' (the background for the 'art'). To me, this combining of object and image is what helps my work express the real face of humanity.



Marcel Duchamp  
*Fountain*, 1917  
Glazed ceramic



René Magritte,  
*The Son of Man*, 1946  
Oil paint

**5.**  
**You once stated, "Art is the inner reflection of our perception on the outer world." How do the works in 'Paradise Lost' carry out this reflection for you?**

Art reflects the essence of an artist - it would mean nothing if the work doesn't come from the artist's individual essence. That individual essence consists of his private psyche and his worldview. My works could only attain any success when, and if, they show some aspect of my emotions, perspectives, and responsibilities towards life. Even though each artist differs in his or her artistic methods, I believe that we all aim towards three unchangeable values: Truth, Goodness and Aesthetics. Everyday, everyone wakes up to work for the jobs they have to do, but if what you do is what you love, and what you create is what you want, then that is true happiness.