



**PRESS RELEASE**

**Gang of Five Chancing Modern**

20 Jul - 07 Sept 2018 (Opening 6PM Fri 20 Jul 2018)

Curator: Lê Thuận Uyên

The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre (HCMC) and Art Vietnam (Hanoi) proudly co-present ***Gang of Five Chancing Modern*** - an on-going art project initiated by curator Lê Thuận Uyên, surveying over three decades of artistic practice by five of the most important figures who brought about changes and re-introduced ideas of abstraction in the art scene of North Vietnam: HỒ VIỆT DŨNG, HÀ TRÍ HIẾU, ĐẶNG XUÂN HOÀ, TRẦN LƯƠNG and PHẠM QUANG VINH. Featuring nearly forty paintings and numerous original historical materials (including reviews and interviews, archival images, exhibition guest books, two short film documentaries, and a timeline tracking the conception, development, and reunion of Gang of Five), this is one of the few retrospective exhibitions staged in Vietnam that thoroughly documents the lives and preoccupations of local artists at the turn of the 20th century. Not only re-introducing the Gang of Five to the audiences of Ho Chi Minh City and studying the group's position as one of the first artist groups to form in post-war Vietnam, the exhibition also offers visitors an opportunity to rediscover the transformative phases that Vietnamese art went through during the period of post-Đổi Mới\*.

The Gang of Five was established in Hanoi in the latter half of the 1980s. Upon their graduation, and under the name 'Gang of Five', this group of artists grew and developed their practices amidst the significant socio-historical changes of the post-Đổi Mới era. Being in the right time, at the right place has helped lead the Gang of Five to their success, as they were able to cast away the constraints of Vietnamese Socialist Realism, considered the official artistic style of the time, which subjected Vietnamese art to limited ideological and geographical boundaries. Within this context, the works of the Gang of Five detached themselves from the rigid orthodoxy and indoctrination of Socialist Realism where propaganda and illustration art - depicting glorious views of the motherland, of economic and political triumphs; favouring figurative representations of workers and peasants; promoting citizen

responsibilities and contribution towards nation building; conveying the strength and wisdom of its leaders - which dominated the art scene in North Vietnam until the mid 1980s.

In contrast, the paintings of the Gang of Five are expressive, bold and original, at the time opening up new horizons for a richer visual vocabulary that inclined towards depicting personal emotions and individual perceptions. Through their efforts to explore different artistic languages (mostly Abstraction and Expressionism), breaking away from what was commonly taught and understood as painting, they reconstructed reality based on how they felt, capturing the everyday life of the human psyche as the country was going through one of its most significant transitional states. However, it is equally important to keep in mind that underneath this so-called 'modern era', there still existed undeniable old values, behaviours and mind-sets; and that behind the Gang of Five's myriad of opportunities there was still uncertainty and conflict in methodology, perspective, and practice. Integral to their formation and development, these opposing forces actually contributed to the advancement of their practices, even after they temporarily halted their collective identities and activities (from 1997 to 2017) to pursue their own different paths.

The first rendition of *Gang of Five Chancing Modern* took place in Hanoi in October 2017, presenting the artists' latest bodies of works. After more than twenty years apart, it was their mutual respect and understanding of one another that brought the five friends together again for this endeavour. In July 2018, The Factory proudly hosts *Gang of Five Chancing Modern* in Ho Chi Minh City with a bit of a twist. This second rendition of the exhibition presents not only a selection of the Gang of Five's paintings from the period between the 1990s to the 2000s - considered essential signifiers of their artistic characteristics and careers - but also an extensive historical archive which will give visitors insight into the context of 1980s Hanoi.

*Gang of Five Chancing Modern* is the second project of The Factory's on-going program *Spirit of Friendship*, endeavouring to be a historical archive documenting the role and contribution of artist friendships in furthering the development of experimental languages in Vietnam, since 1975.

[\*] Referring to the structural Economic Reform introduced in 1986, which transformed Vietnam both economically and socially.

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#### Notes to the Editor:

**Gang of Five** is a group of Hanoi painters who rose to prominence in the early 1990s in Vietnam. Composed of five members: Hồng Việt Dũng, Hà Trí Hiếu, Đặng Xuân Hoà, Trần Lương and Phạm Quang Vinh, they are perceived as amongst the most promising artists of their generation, and the first group to gain international acclaim in post-Đổi Mới Vietnam. The Gang of Five are known for creating bold works conceptually depicting personal emotion as well as exploring different forms of artistic

expressions (in terms of theme, colour palette, materials) that departed from the Social Realist tradition in Vietnamese art prevalent until the mid 1980s.

Stemming from what was initially a large group of young graduates in the early 1980s (from the University of Fine Art and the University of Industrial Fine Art), the Gang of Five was most active with their independent artistic careers. They carried on painting tirelessly after finishing their day jobs; arranged frequent gatherings at home to discuss art, commenting on each other's works, and facilitating conversations that sustained their passion for painting. Their first public debut as a group of five young artists was in 1990 in an exhibition commemorating Vincent Van Gogh at Gallery No. 7 Hang Khay (Hanoi). Shortly afterwards, the group received their 'rebellious' nickname\*\* and became known as the Gang of Five in 1993 after showing together at the premise of the Fine Art Association (Hanoi). Following their official inauguration, each member attended to different pursuits - with Trần Lương's emergence as a contemporary visual artist and curator; Phạm Quang Vinh's further development in the publishing industry; Hồng Việt Dũng, Hà Trí Hiếu and Đặng Xuân Hoà's establishment in their own specific areas of the art scene and in the international market. They remain close friends and colleagues, regrouping again in late 2015.

**Lê Thuận Uyên** is an independent researcher and curator currently living and working in Hanoi. Her work investigates alternative histories of Vietnam, bringing to light personal narratives rendered absent, unknown or undesirable by the official historical record. Her projects often involve close collaboration with artists and investigate current socio-political contexts and their impact on artistic production in Vietnam. From 2014-2016 she was general manager of Nhà Sàn Collective – an artist-founded institution that aims to create room for new forms of expression, production and exchange. Her curatorial projects include: Gang of Five Chancing Modern (Hanoi, 2017), Sindikat Campursari (Jakarta, 2016), Embedded South(s) (2016), Miền Méo Miêng (Umea, 2015), Skylines With Flying People 3 (Hanoi, 2015-17) etc. Lê holds a BA in Politics from the University of York and a MA in Cultural and Creative Industries from King's College London. She was a resident curator at Art in General (NYC) from April-August 2017 through a fellowship with the Asian Cultural Council.

**Art Vietnam Gallery** was founded in Hanoi by Suzanne Lecht who was compelled to move to Vietnam in 1994 because of an article written by art historian Nora Taylor on the legendary Gang of Five. Lecht has been working and exhibiting Vietnamese artists locally and internationally for over 20 years. The first public Art Vietnam Gallery was established in 2002 and has had several locations in the old quarter of Hanoi. It has mounted exhibitions extensively in Vietnam and internationally in Hong Kong, Paris, London, NYC, Miami, San Francisco etc. Working with emerging to well-established artists, the gallery is dedicated to discovering exceptional artists who are singular and passionate in their expression. In January of 2017, Lecht decided to close her public gallery and return to her origin, Art Vietnam Salon, a gallery/house that she built in Hanoi with the help of her artist friends in 1994. An intimate, creative reflection of the culture of Vietnam, the salon is open by appointment only and offers private parties; art consultations; poetry readings; and music, educational and cultural events. Lecht continues to curate shows in Vietnam and other cities worldwide to expose artists in the international art world.

**The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre ('The Factory')** is the first purpose-built space for contemporary art in Vietnam, established April 2016. As an independent private initiative, it creates and hosts interdisciplinary activities in order to introduce and expand knowledge of contemporary art and cultural trends, both past and present, in Vietnam. As a social enterprise, The Factory also offers a publicly accessible reading room of art-educational resource; workshop and co-working space; replete with café, bar and restaurant. All profit from the sale of art and business on-site supports the running costs of its Arts Centre. <http://www.factoryartscentre.com>

[\*\*] Dubbed by their senior and mentor Nguyễn Quân as 'bè lũ năm tên' and translated into English by Dương Tường as the 'Gang of Five' - a name that was inspired by, but didn't have any core affiliation with the political Gang of Four in China.

Image: Gang Of Five, circa 1993, image courtesy by Gerhard Jörén.

