

A conversation with artist Nghĩa Đặng
by Lê Thiên Bảo

1. The name of the exhibition is 'Scenes of the imago'. Are the 'scenes' that we see in this exhibition fiction or non-fiction in nature?

The scenes that we see in this exhibition are located somewhere between fiction and non-fiction. Their external appearance might seem fictitious as they are constructed from imaginative and metaphorical images such as a deer, wooden doors, an earthen statue. However, such a scene is at the same time non-fiction, in that they represent the way my subconscious instinctively confronts and resolves information: images, experiences, or energy that exists within itself. There's a passage that Carl Jung wrote, about the images that make up such scenes that I really like: 'The primordial image might suitably be described as the instinct's perception of itself, or as the self-portrait of the instinct.

2. Upon entering your exhibition, my initial impression is a feeling of being out of place and ambivalent. I'm lost between objects that feel very familiar - a table, chair, door, etc. I want to know where these objects come from? Did you deliberately intend to evoke these feelings in me (the viewer)?

I think the feeling of being out of place and ambivalent comes from both the familiarity of the objects, and the confrontation with the strange elements that are modified/added to them, making them unfamiliar -like a shrunken door on a wooden frame, or a tall table made entirely of metal. Being in between familiarity and unfamiliarity, reasonability and abnormality gives rise to an ambiguous feeling, as if on the verge of recognition/rediscovery. These objects are all reconstructed from my memory - I think of them as shadows that only exist in my mind. Therefore, they often don't match the ratios of the original objects, or the material of that object. Sometimes when I stand next to the artworks, I myself am surprised by their scale - some too tall, some too short, some too small, some too big. The element of surprise also occurs when I attach other objects to them - a leather string, a piece of fabric from a blanket, a wooden ear,... Their formation, thus, are both deliberate and reliant on chance.

3. The names of your artworks, why do they often start with a letter?

For me, the letters at the start of the titles represents an act of naming and memory (an object, a day, a character) in its most basic and purest form. Like when we teach a child the alphabet - for instance, when 'A' is associated with Apple, it doesn't just create a memory of the sound of the letter 'A' but also a link between the sound and shape of the letter and the entity which is the 'Apple', which is a very instinctive externalized process.

4. Scattered around the exhibition are a couple of prints and a notebook full of text and sketches. Where do they come from and how did you pick out which details in these 'notes' to include in the overall presentation of artworks in this exhibition?

These notes are my recordings of dreams and the remnants they leave behind upon waking. I drew them unconsciously, as automatic movements on paper, leaving all decisions to the reflex of my hand and eyes.

5. In contrast to the violence of blood, bones and skin, your practice of 'sewing and patching' is healing and gentle in nature. What is the purpose of this action?

Sewing, if one thinks of it as an act of healing, is a process of healing that is somewhat painful. Other forms of healing are often more gentle, like gluing things back together, but the act of sewing can only happen after piercing through the surface, especially with materials like skin, and my feelings towards piercing is always that of pain.

From a more practical angle, the act of sewing is a time-consuming process. My artworks are led by images and dreams that appear and disappear, and there are times that I can't quite reach them. The act of stitching gives me a period of concentration, and from there evokes and rediscovers the remnants of my dreams.

6. Skin, bones and flesh are the images that you emphasize in your works. I see a rather violent act of peeling away the bodily 'layers' of a living being (maybe human, I'm not certain). Do you have any explanation or response to this observation?

Skin, bones and flesh, (although it sounds quite violent), but I think of them as the most basic units of the body. My blood runs through my body, my bones support my posture, my skin and flesh give me my external appearance. They are the most real thing in my existence, and experiences relating to them - pain, fear, hunger, joy - are the most real experiences and often most remembered, in one way or another. Moreover - skin, bones and flesh - also record contact and memory with other bodies in a most fundamental way. Some of the ideas that I'm influenced by - namely those of Baruch Spinoza and Julia Kristeva- revolve around the links between the body's bodily responses (pain, vomit, excretion) and the relations between personal identity and peripheral bodies.



Artwork 'H is for He Who Hides in the Leaves', Nghĩa Đặng, 2018

7. The way you mentioned 'Father' and 'Mother' in your works makes me feel like they are 'characters' in a play (along with 'Protector', 'He Who Hides in the Leaves'), rather than a close relative. How does this alienation and lack of intimacy in your family affect your works?

I think, one of the ways that the concept of 'family members' can be built is through memories and experience. Like the way a character is constructed in a story--through events, behavior, continuous interactions between said character and other characters in a definitive segment of time. Through this process, such characters will have a more convincing, more 'real' presence in the story. My personal experiences do not meet the requirements to construct that kind of 'characters' for my subjects (my 'family members'). My lack of memory and physical distance from my family members means my imagery of them lacks clarity. That does not mean however, that the 'family member' is not present in my subconscious; rather, it is processed differently - through archetype, larger models of male/female energy, of relationships between father/mother/child and other instinctive experiences shared by the collective consciousness. The subconscious patch together and link these archetypes with the fragments of my personal experiences (for example a memory of seeing and being obsessed with a velvet rug in my old house), and from there constructing representative 'characters'/'events' (imagoes) of 'family members' - in this case 'father' and 'mother'. My artworks focus more on the representation of my subconscious as a way of engaging my fragmented relationship with my parent.

8. Your previous practice seems to be more involved with paintings and drawings. Why do you think the use of daily objects (as sculptures and installation) expresses your ideas better than the use of a 2-dimensional format? Who are your influences in developing this practice?

Actually, although my previous artworks were often objects that hung on the walls like 2D paintings, they more or less contained 3D elements. For example, a painting with big bundles of fabric sewn onto its side or a painting with sedge strings and a wooden stick stretching out from its surface. I prefer to call them painting-installations. In the process of creating the work, I'm always more inspired by the objects that exist in the same space as me, rather than those displayed in a separate space. My practice is influenced by a few different artistic movements, but primarily from the conceptual artist Joseph Beuys and the Post-minimalists, such as **Eva Hesse, Ida Applebroog, Doris Salcedo**. I really like the way they invoke the sense of touch, scale, and interactions in general.



Artwork 'Lightning with Stag in its Glare', Joseph Beuys, 1958-85

9. The order of the objects in space makes me feel as if I'm in the memory of their creator. Which fragment of memory / period is this in your life?

I think the presence of objects in the exhibition does not belong or reflect any specific period or order of time. I can only say theoretically it began from the moment I looked into the mirror and registered the presence of the self until now, and so forth.

10. The 'Shadow'⁸ is a part of one's character that the 'conscious self' does not recognize (or deliberately reject). Because we often repress or remain ignorant of the part of our character that we do not wish to exist, 'shadow' often carrying a negative connotation. How do you perceive your 'shadow'?

Regarding shadow, or darkness, whether my own or in a more general sense, I think of it as a neutral thing. This suppressed part of the subconscious is mainly a storage of instinctive experiences, and the nature of instinct is neither good nor bad. It is simply my instinct's reaction to external influence. The quality of being good or bad is determined by the social consciousness, which uses prejudice and images to frame and guide the instinct's response. In the occasions that instinct is suppressed by such frameworks, it will react 'faultily', creating experiences where we reject and push into what we label 'the shadow'.

⁸Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939), 'Totem and Taboo (1913), chapter I and III.

11. The entire exhibition is arranged like a stage, and we see each artwork as a character. So do you think the artwork itself can carry a strong enough meaning and stand alone, separated from this setting?

I see each of these artworks as a slice/excerpt from my stream of consciousness, and they can totally stand alone. The primordial image (that Jung said about the 'scenes' as I mentioned in question 1) already carries a self-reliance and has to be strong to overwhelm and leave a mark on our consciousness. I wanted to bring that sublime self-reliance into each individual work. However, when we look at them as a group of works, they invoke other interactions and other readings.

Thank you for your sharing.

Nghĩa Đặng (sn.1994, Hanoi) is a young artist who's received the 'Distinguished Scholarship' from the Art Institute of Chicago, USA (2015-2018). He received a Bachelor of Arts (2018) from this school. Up until this point, the focus of his practice revolves around the intricate relationship between the interior and exterior, reality and the mind's imaginations, and power relations in today's society. Through personal experiences, he wants to question what's hidden in the transition between intimacy and distance, revelation and concealment. Đặng often use a wide variety of materials, combined with found objects in order to create curiosity about the presence/meaning existing in them and experimenting with the way they communicate with each other. Most of his artworks are assemblage of 2 dimensions, 3 dimensions, various sizes, utilizing all corners of the exhibition space in order to propose multiple intimate and persuasive interactions with 'the observer'. A few of his select group exhibitions include: Đục Dây/Lấp Rỗng, 2017, Nhà Sàn Collective, Hanoi, Vietnam; -Ology, 2017, Sullivan Gallery, Chicago, IL, USA. Nghĩa Đặng currently lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

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 sale of art and business on-site supports the running costs of its Arts Centre. <http://www.factoryartscentre.com>

The Indochina Arts Partnership (IAP) is an American non-profit organization that conducts programs of cultural development and artistic exchange between the United States and the countries of Southeast Asia, with a primary focus on Vietnam. IAP offers various activities through three core programs: 1) organize exhibitions and promote art education, 2) providing artists' support through residencies and career development program, and 3) fostering development via partnerships and collaborations. IAP has formed partnership with museums and art institutions, as well as independent art spaces in both the US and Vietnam, to create strong partnerships and support for artists and cultural programs. <http://indochinaartspartnership.org>

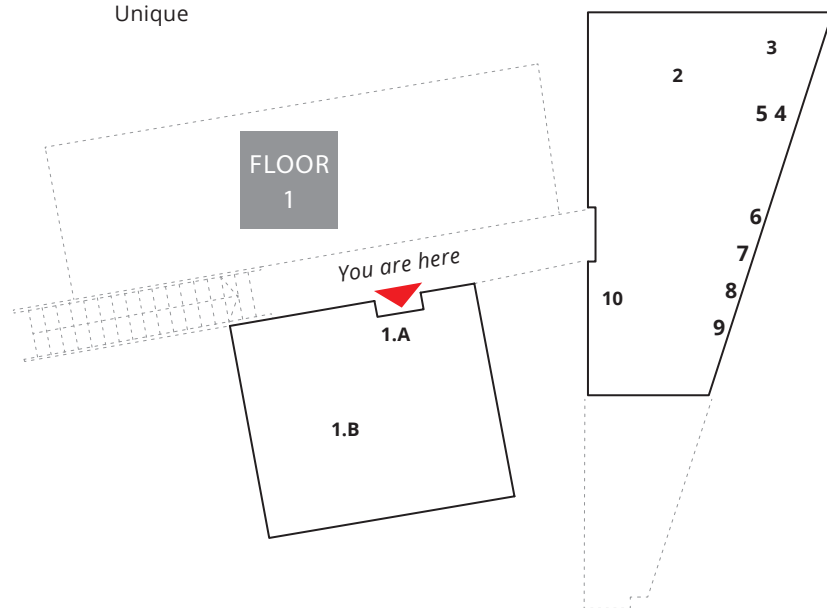
- 1.A

C is for Sunday Dining, Door, 2018
Wood, iron, shredded iron scrap, pigment
81 x 6.5 x 212 cm
Unique
- 2

H is for He Who Hides in the Leaves, 2018
Iron, wood, leather, red thread, found object
92 x 65 x 180 cm
Unique

- 1.B

C is for Sunday Dining, Table, 2018
Iron, mirror
130 x 80 x 97 cm
Unique



- 3

C is for Caesar, A life, 2018
Wood, leather, red thread
81 x 5 x 176 cm
Unique
- 4

Box of Protector, 2018
Cardboard, wood, clay
31 x 22 x 24 cm
Unique
- 5

Box of Aching Bones, 2018
Cardboard, wood, found fabrics, clay.
31 x 26 x 46 cm
Unique
- 6

Disappearing into Luminosity, 2018
Unique print, acrylic, wood
46 x 23.2 x 5.5cm
Unique

- 7

Numinosity, 2018
Unique print, wood
30 x 23.2 x 5.5 cm
Unique
- 8

Heirloom of the Father, 2018
Unique print, wood
46 x 23.2 x 5.5 cm
Unique
Text on artwork: "Heirloom of the father, a bone I hold in my left hand"

- 9

Flesh of the Mother, 2018
Unique print, wood
30 x 23.2 x 5.5 cm
Unique
Text on artwork: "Drips into my right hand"
- 10

Deer and Pomegranate, 2018
Dó paper, ink, charcoal, pencil, leather
27.5 x 23 x 1cm
Unique

SCENES OF THE IMAGO

A solo exhibition by

NGHĨA ĐẶNG

Curated by Lê Thiên Bảo

14/12/2018 - 27/1/2019

'A child enters into the world in a state of chaos, fabricated and dominated by its faculty of the senses and its impetuous instinct: a state of existence akin to that of animal is poor in the world'. Only when it is witness to the first lights of an ideal self in the mirror, the child begins to make its steps through the boundaries between that unattained state and the world of language and symbols. At the threshold, the child departs, taking with it only the remnants from that world of instinct, that order of the real, which it hides in barred compartments alongside memories, archetypes² and other peculiar constructs of the mind.'

- excerpt from **Nghĩa Đặng's** artist statement.

In the exhibition **'Scenes of the imago'**, Nghĩa Đặng sets a stage where images, and a glimpse of disconnected scenes of shadow³ in his subconsciousness are intertwined and revealed. This stage is akin to a game, an intersection between instinct-object-ritual on the threshold between animal and man during the construction of the 'self'.

The entire 'stage' serves as an entrance into the 'shadow' of the artist's mind. Most of the artworks' titles begin with a letter, both a game of poetic rhyming, and an act of naming and remembering in the purest and most basic form. The room in which *C is for Sunday Dining* stands is an installation of quiet furniture, of remnants from a ritual. The installation takes place in a room with a large glass window in its front, evoking a sense of security without privacy. The setting seems mundane, but when observed through a narrow peephole, it becomes something forbidden.

Building on the history of *readymade art*⁴, Đặng's sculptures are constructed from materials that are almost devoid of their own history, borrowing the form of objects that bear the familiarity and intimacy of a house. These domestic objects are scattered around the gallery like characters from a story. In the right corner of the room,

¹Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), *M. The Fundamentals of Metaphysics* (1938), chapter III, Indiana University Press (1995), pg.185-213

²*Archetype* is directly related to the theory of the *collective unconscious* by the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961). Jung consider archetypes as operating elements that create the collective unconscious, as 'universal, archaic patterns'. In that sense, Jung not only did not reject the role of individual experiences in the structuring of human personality but also asserted its role in the process of 'triggering of the archetype potential' that exists in the self. He considered the human psyche not simply a product of individual experience, but it is submerged in the ocean of humanity's collective unconscious, including things that are outside of individual experiences.

³According to Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), in the process of growing up, human are forced to hide a part of their personality. The hidden aspect, both positive and negative are either rejected by the self or remain ignorant plays a contradictory role to the image that we project to other people (persona). This is what he called 'shadow'.

⁴Readymades is a term coined by Marcel Duchamp (1887-1986) in 1915 to describe a type of art that takes ordinary objects (with anti-art function) in their original (or with slight modification) and transforms them into artworks.

the diary *Deer and Pomegranate* and sketches, surrounded by a series of prints that seems to have no link to each other. One might think of 'rapid jottings' of dreams that appear and disappear, or of a fictional scene from the artist's imagination. On the stairs-like pedestal sit the *Box of Protector* and *Box of Aching Bones* — internally lined with an old blanket, hiding bone-like objects peeking out through ripped holes. They silently bear witness to the world, and we observe them in their secluded, nest-like space. In the left corner of the room, the installation series engage the viewer in a game of 'hide and seek' full of riddles and symbols: a pair of scissors emerging from a sewing box like a keloid scar, next to a lone antler, a string attached to a wooden pole behind an unusual sized door. The two doors present in the exhibition do not entirely function as dividers of worlds. Their varying sizes rather attempts to provoke the viewers' inquisitive nature, like Alice in Wonderland, who opens a door as small as a rabbit-hole out of curiosity. What lies behind?

Curiosity set the course for action: bending down, squinting, exploring, observing and smelling as one navigates through the artworks. The objects in the exhibition are not the distant, apathetic decorations that only seek to satisfy our retinal demand for realism (retinal art⁵), as in the case of still-life paintings. In the space, the viewers are not only the on-looking spectator but also an integral part of the work – with their acts of peering in, and bending down. Their interaction, discovery and interpretation breathe life into the works, because the game cannot happen if the ones hiding aren't accompanied by the seekers.

'Scenes of the imago' offers an initiation for approaching the ideas of 'shadows', a leeway for explorations of the continuum of the mirror stage⁶ in the personal history of the artist, to the most primordial state of his self. The setting seeks to evoke an uncanny⁷ atmosphere of the liminal space between violence and healing, between familiarity and alienation, between the unconscious and the conscious.

This exhibition is part of the program 'Materialize 2018' initiated by The Factory and co-sponsored by Indochina Arts Partnership. This program aims to provide exhibition opportunities for Vietnamese artists over the age of 25, living in Vietnam and have not had a lot of chances to showcase their works. The applications round for 2019 ended on November 15, 2018.

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⁵An expression and concept used by artist Marcel Duchamp in the 1950s to refer to the arts that are only considered (and appreciated) to much on the face of it - while avoiding confrontation with 'difficult' matters as this, but also a too penetrative personality of the artist. Art like this could be described "retinal", only to trigger irrational and emotive processes, to be attractive and to comply to the demand of the mass public. Source: <http://www.abandon.nl/thinker.htm>

⁶A concept in psychoanalysis to indicate the formation of self through an infant's recognition of its reflection in the mirror. Further reading on the 'mirror stage' in The Seminars of Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), *'The Mirror-Stage, as Formative of the I, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience'* (1949), IPA congress, Zurich, Zwiss.

⁷A psychoanalysis concept by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) to describe a state / kind of fear relating to objects or events we've known for a long time and have been familiar with but in certain context create a disharmony in our cognition, an unsettling and fear.

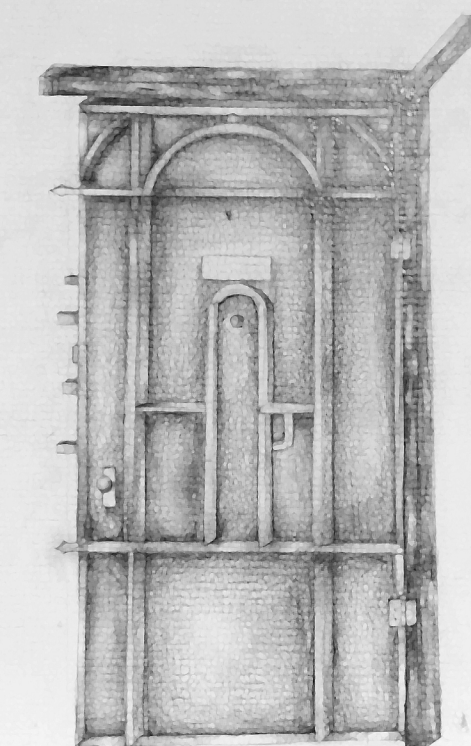


Image: sketch by Nghĩa Đặng, 2018