

TRIỂN LÃM CÁ NHÂN | SOLO EXHIBITION BY

VÕ TRÂN CHÂU

**NHẬT LÁ
RỪNG XƯA**

LEAF PICKING IN THE ANCIENT FOREST

**TIỂU LUẬN GIÁM TUYÊN
CURATORIAL ESSAY**

‘Leaf Picking in the Ancient Forest’, a solo exhibition by Võ Trần Châu, narrates a chronicle lost in time, delicately woven by threads and fabrics, continuing her interest in history and its legacies. By re-imagining architectural sites and cultural symbols that are predominantly forgotten - erased or lost from view - Võ Trần Châu contemplates the fragility of the vessels of history in their odyssey through time and space, in the dilemma of fact between personal and collective remembering, amongst the power struggle between social control and foreign influence. This exhibition also reveals Châu’s persistent investigation into the depth and breadth of fabric as a medium, engaging with its particular history of circulation (its production, trade and function) while presenting myriad possibilities for artistic deployment.

Within the exhibition space, we encounter ‘Leaf Picking in the Ancient Forest’—a series of nine large ‘mosaic’ paintings hanging suspended, figuratively diverged into two architectural forms. On one side, like drapes and curtains, five large-scale works flap ghost-like in the air mesmerizingly in abstract recall of Ba Son Port (the premises of Ba Son Shipyard built in 1864 - demolished in 2016); Trà Cổ Cathedral, Quảng Ninh (1857 - demolished for new construction in 2017); Thương Xá Tax, Sài Gòn (1880 - demolished in 2016 in preparation for the construction of a new business-service centre); Saigon’s old tramway (1881 - dismantled in 1957); and Gia Định *École des Dessin*, or Gia Định Drawing School (1913 - rebuilt as it is today in 1981). Adjacent stands an irregular square room composed of four mosaics facing each other, together echoing the presence of four weaving mills across Vietnam. At first glance, Võ Trần Châu’s selection of architectural and cultural symbols are emblematic of the French colonial period of Vietnam in the late 19th and 20th century—however it is in fact the economic, migratory and religious histories of Vietnam’s modernizing trajectory. For example, Ba Son Shipyard has undergone several transformations in its 225 years existence—from Gia

Định's naval workshop "that may vie with many of the naval establishments in Europe"⁸, to the French Navy's *Arsenal de Saigon* that, with its 168 metre dry dock and regularly upgraded facilities, could accommodate heavy cruisers and battleships, "meeting all demands of the squadron of the Far East"⁹; to the "cradle of the working class movement in Saigon"¹⁰, led by naval mechanic and revolutionary activist Tôn Đức Thắng. Ba Son Naval Shipyard is known as one of the most significant maritime sites that contributed to the trade and economic prosperity of the whole nation under different political systems¹¹. Despite this reputation, it was sacrificed to make way for high-rise residential wealth to overlook Saigon river - regrettably all that remains of this shipyard is found as remnants in the Tôn Đức Thắng Museum, or scattered in imagery on the Internet.

Võ Trần Châu shares she was not conscious of her method of selection of site or imagery from the beginning, but there was something that intuitively drew her to Saigon, her dear hometown - perhaps an innate need to know more of the city that has nurtured her since birth. On view you will find such historical fragments as Saigon's old tramway, the first and one of the largest urban tramway networks in Southeast Asia; Gia Định Drawing School (where she fondly recalls her youth) and Thương Xá Tax or Saigon Tax Trade Centre (once the largest and longest-running shopping mall center), a cultural and architectural symbol of the pre-1975 Saigon splendour. Located at the heart of three boulevards in District 1, Saigon Tax Trade Centre was born into the fancy name of *Les Grands Magasins Charner* (Charner Department Stores) in 1924 as the first French colonial department store. With its

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⁸ American mariner John White wrote in his memoir 'A Voyage to Cochinchina' (1824) after a few visits in Gia Định starting from 1819.

⁹ 'Situation de l'Indo-Chine de 1902 à 1907', ed Imprimerie M. Rey.

¹⁰ Quoted from 'Di Tích Lịch Sử-Văn Hóa Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh' (Youth Publishing House, 1998).

¹¹ To read in-depth about the history of Ba Son Shipyard, refer to the series of articles on Tuoi Tre News titled 'Ba Son - Trăm năm chìm nổi' or Tim Doling's article called 'Dating with the Wrecking Ball: Ba Son Shipyard' on Saigoner.com.

later adornments of Art Deco architectural style fused with Eastern flair, it became not only home to the most luxurious goods imported from Western countries for the elite class of Saigon and the Cocochinese landowners to consume, but also a metaphor for “the pride of the French industry” that the huge crowd in its inauguration had to gather outside to peer within¹². In its present day, Saigon’s District 1 is currently being bandaged in endless corrugated iron sheets to make way for a new urban railway system. But the history of public transportation in Saigon is first marked by Saigon’s old tramway, in operation until the 1950s. This was the first colonial steam-hauled tramway system in French Indochina, operated by *Compagnie française des tramways de l’Indochine*, opening to the public in 1881. Other routes within the city and the first time linking to other provinces like Gò Vấp, Lái Thiêu, Hóc Môn started to be extended soon after, using the newly rebuilt electric tramway as the technological advances had allowed for it to catch up. However, as nothing could ever escape the the sword of war, the tramway system was heavily devastated, especially by the Allied aerial bombing and the August Revolution during 1943-1945, leading to its permanent closure in 1957¹³.

The significance of such historical sites is of personal importance to the artist, for such buildings and machines represent a circulation of people and goods, not merely articulating a mode of transit, but also structures / materials providing a function. Treating textile and fabric similarly, artist Võ Trần Châu investigates the history of textile production, particularly its socio-political role during wartime and the Renovation period¹⁴ in Vietnam, in addition to its questionable consumption (and excessive waste) in the developed capitalist world of today. Born into a family of traditional embroiderers,
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¹² Refer to Tim Doling’s article on the inauguration of *Grands Magasins Charner* at: <http://www.historicvietnam.com/grands-magasins-charner-inauguration/>

¹³ Refer to Tim Doling’s article on Saigon Tramway Network at: <http://www.historicvietnam.com/sai-gon-tramway-network/>

¹⁴ The Renovation period (or *Đổi Mới* in Vietnamese) refers to a period of economic reforms after 1986 in Vietnam, which sought to transition Vietnam from a command economy to a socialist-oriented market economy.

during her university years, Võ Trần Châu helped out in the family's studio under the guidance of her mother, and her female workers. Thread, fabric and garment thus organically entered Châu's artistic practice, reflected in her quilt-like technique and the sentiment of craft as a memento of personal memory. The environment of the textile studio - a continuous process of measuring, stitching and dyeing (with chemicals) - permits Võ Trần Châu the chance to observe the never-ending cycle of textile production. In her art, instead of using new fabric, Châu recycles second-hand clothing (predominantly found in abandoned containers from Cát Lái port). For the artist, this process of collecting clothing dumped in Vietnam by developed countries and fabricating them into her own work is an artistic intervention into the supply chain of the global fashion industry - a sector notorious for its excessive distribution of overproduction and overconsumption. Châu's act of gathering and re-purposing such material mirrors her collection of stories of demolished architecture that are central to her works in this exhibition. Looking further into the past, the artist surveyed the four factories of textile production—Nam Định Weaving Mill (known as the largest textile factory in Indochina, located in Northern Vietnam), March 8th Weaving Mill (a textile factory in Hanoi), Phu Phong Silk Weaving Mill (the only textile factory in Central Vietnam) and Phú Lâm Weaving Mill (the very first textile factory in Southern Vietnam)—in her chamber-like installation of the works in 'Leaf Picking in the Ancient Forest' series. Here the size of the installation, that represents these sites, is 8 metres square, referencing the average size of a low-wage worker's room in industrial zones across Vietnam. Ironically, most of these zones are owned (or invested) by foreign corporations, the living conditions these workers and their families endure here are a gross comparison to the price these luxury brands accrue.

While Châu has worked predominantly with textile and fabric in her practice, this time she continued to push her artistic language further by involving methods of photography. Working with the digital archival photographs of these sites, Châu turned these into pixel graphs, which she uses as a foundation to recreate these

mosaics by sewing color-coded fabric squares together. Collected fabric is disassembled, cut into small squares and divided into a system of colour coding. Each of those squared fabric pieces resembling the smallest visual unit/stroke/ a patch of colour in what she describes as her abstract paintings. Châu's practice, though technically manifested in the language of photography and textile, is thus argued an extension of painting - a more 'logical' and fact-oriented way of recreating images as a two dimensional surface. An array of diverse sources, formats, colors and materials populate her photographic archive (most of the photos being found online) — ranging from postcards, illustrations in textbooks, film and digital photographs, black and white, sepia or colored. The differing visual qualities of these sources provides hints of the timeframe and the context in which they were taken. For example, we could make a guess, based on the sepia colour, the framing of the photo, the French line underneath, that the archival image used for 'Leaf Picking in the Ancient Forest - Saigon Tax Trade Centre' could be a postcard taken in Cochinchina to send back to France to showcase with pride the modernization they helped spread. In looking at Châu's installations, we might try to guess what fact was not documented, sitting beyond the frame. Cultural critic Susan Sontag once said, "Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality. One can't possess reality, but one can possess images—one can't process the present but one can possess the past." Should we assume that what is documented within a photograph is more important than what remains unrecorded? Does the drive to capture reality within a photograph come from a consciousness that such subject matter will eventually be lost one day? Or is the impetus to record rather a result of doubting our human ability to recall memory? Châu's process of image appropriation - utilizing existing photographs - allows the participation of various players: the photographer; the researcher who contextualises the images; and the artist who fabricates and recreates such images as her own method. The final visual presentation can be seen as an amalgamation of more than just one personal memory, an effort to 'collectivize', to give a broader social meaning to the relevance of such site and symbol, a means

of subverting her own training to adhere to a fixed narrative of history. Interestingly, it is also her use of pixelation, that enables a different way of experiencing Chau's art - seeing, not only through the naked eye, but through a digital device. Using a camera to 'view' the work one will find the subject of the image is with a different density. This shift in perception also reflects the way in which the majority of humanity today reads History. Whilst the artist owes the virtual her access to the past, equally our youth rely on their smartphones to 'remember'. Especially now in the technological era, the popularity of text-based histories has lost its hegemonic power to the more tactile, virtual and oral approaches to historical expressions of the real, which yields other forms of knowledge.

Buddha, taking a few leaves in his hand, said to the monks: "All that I have seen and encountered are numerous, just like leaves among the grove, yet my teachings which I have revealed to you are but little, just like this handful of leaves in my palm...". Inspired by this tale, Võ Trân Châu titled her exhibition 'Leaf Picking in the Ancient Forest' (also the title of a book by Minh Đức Triều Tâm Ảnh, a Buddhist monk), providing an analogy on how she chose to engage in the discursive representation of heritage preservation. Like leaves in the forest, Võ Trân Châu acknowledges that the histories featured here are not exhaustive, only just a few in the forest of historical myths and tales. A Buddhist herself, the title also reflects a philosophy of life in which impermanence, where all conditioned existence is subject to change, destruction and eventual rebirth, is at the core of her everyday perception. Many heritage sites that were once so sacred and important are now being demolished, one after another, which has caused great reaction from the public imbued with anger, regret, and sadness. Understanding that everything is impermanent, the works of Võ Trân Châu do not aim to criticise, nor call for resistance, to the wheel of change, rather her art is to observe and know the way change comes and goes, to explore a way in which she can record history's hidden legacies.

In addition to this looking back at particular colonial architecture

and landmarks of Vietnam's early industrialisation, Võ Trân Châu turns her study also to more domestic affairs. In one smaller area of the exhibition space, arranged in the style of decorative household picture frames are smaller sized works. Titled *It was someone's home*, this series includes mosaic images framed inside wooden cabinet doors, which Võ Trân Châu found in several antique shops, dumpsters found all over Saigon. Similar to the larger works occupying the central stage of the exhibition floor, the found images here are of old residential houses that no longer exist. Unlike the more famous symbolic sites, many of these domestic houses do not have public record of use. *It was someone's home* is therefore presented as a more intimate space, a tribute to the micro-narratives that have contributed to the resilient social fabric of Vietnam - the hidden stories of people and their households, their strategies for survival that define the character of cities and their communities. Within this gallery, visitors are invited to sit at a table where exhibition materials (consisting of photographs, conversation notes, reflections) revealing Châu's art-making process. One corner of this exhibition invites viewers to sit at a wooden chair and table, in which the exhibition materials partly reveals the art-making process, yet also it encourages audiences to reflect with the artist and curators, not only looking back but also forward.

Over a century ago, the emergence of colonial power and their eventual control of Vietnam gave way to significant cultural change - arguably present in the advent of Catholicism, adherence to French economic models and their lifestyle values (evident in the fashion of the time for example). Now Vietnam advances into a global economic hierarchy, instead of letting herself get carried away by the wind of change, Võ Trân Châu takes a step back, looks at her own personal and collective memory, re-recording, repurposing materials so as to better understand her relationship to society's obsession with the 'new'.