



# OTHER FUTURES

solo exhibition by  
**THY NGUYỄN**

opens from  
**19.6 - 4.10.20**

AS PART OF

**materialize**

Lying at the heart of Thy Nguyễn's practice is a deep interest in printmaking – an artistic language that requires labour, time, a sensitive understanding of different materials, and trained hands that can work in a systematic way. Triggered not only by the rich history and various techniques of printmaking, but also by its ability to record, reflect, and re-shape our experience of the everyday, Thy strives to catch the impression of what once was in his works. A faint memory, a shadow, a fleeting moment – of the people, objects and events depicted.

Silent human beings in desolate environments – across the surface of Thy's works on paper we feel a sense of solitude; a life lacking human touch. His art, however, is certainly not sentimental; rather it honestly captures the anxiety of modern life and its inhabitants. For Thy, 'What you see is what you get', for he is an artist who is less interested in the abstraction of the everyday, than in what the everyday reveals itself to be. In one work, a series of almost-identical clouds glide heavily, as if dreading the shifting of time. In another, light and shadow play their tricks – is it an empty hallway, or a lonely balcony we see? More characters creep into our vision: a man sits still, staring straight at us, beside him dancing feet appear to move joyfully. A shadow stands alone, swamped by interiors devoid of people, is he speechless or deep in thought? A woman looks out a window, tirelessly waiting, as if worn out by time. A couple with their backs to each other, with no words between them.

Viewed from the side or behind (is someone casting their voyeuristic eyes over them?), these figures seem trapped, in a state of suspension, as if anticipating something to happen. But, nothing ever really happens for, like stills from a movie, Thy's characters are forever 'frozen', either in the aftermath, or in the lead up to, a significant event. What that 'event' is, is not suggested. It is thus beyond our

capacity to comprehend, for we belong to a different time and space. Nonetheless, we can still empathize with these fictional scenes a possible vision of what our future may look like: as silent human beings in desolate environments.

Hung from above, these works on paper sporadically float around the gallery space at different heights, thus deepening the feeling of suspension. Our conventional, linear (left to right) mode of 'reading' is challenged by a more immersive experience. At times, the same images seem to multiply, appearing both here and there, as if the ghosts of yesteryears are back to haunt us. Our vision becomes jarred; our eyes required to move from ceiling to floor, from foreground to background, as characters, objects and their environments switch places and planes. The unfolding of events in Thy's works thus occurs no longer just in time, but also through space, for we are invited to walk into, inside and in-between the works in order to really 'see' them. Here, time becomes interrupted – as past, present and future co-exist, and reality, nightmares and dreams weave into one.

## 1 At the position of the clock 1

2020  
Linocut, ink on silk  
200x88 cm

## 2 At the position of the clock 2

2020  
Linocut, ink on paper  
169x75 cm

## 3 Video projections

Length: 4:30

## 4 Interface

2020  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
56x75,5 cm

## 5 Contemporary habitat

2019  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
38,5x56 cm

## 6 Introverted space

2019  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
28x38 cm

## 7 Before the screen (series 1)

2020  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
50x65 cm (each)

## 8 Before the screen (series 2)

2020  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
38x56 cm (each)

## 9 Mezzanine (series)

2020  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
24x30,5 cm

## 10 Outsider

2020  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
15,6x23 cm

## 11 Insider

2020  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
24x29,5 cm

## 12 Agency worker

2020  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
27x24 cm

## 13 Deep desire

2020  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
18x13 cm

## 14 Notification ( series)

2020  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
50xcm

## 15 G. is typing (series)

2020  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
65x50 cm

## 16 Allegory

2020  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
15x21 cm (each); installation variable

## 17 Adam is on the left, Eva is on the right

2020  
Silkscreen, ink on paper  
23x30,5 cm



# THY NGUYỄN & BILL NGUYỄN IN CONVERSATION

**Thy Nguyễn** (b.1992, HCMC), born and raised in Saigon and a graduate from the Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Arts with a major in Graphic Design in 2017, Thy Nguyễn uses printmaking as his dominant artistic medium. For Thy, printmaking is both a way to explore the different aspects of life, a creative means of visualizing particular perceptual phenomena. Select exhibitions include: the '5th Bangkok Triennale International Print and Drawing Exhibition', Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, Bangkok (2019); the '2nd International Print Biennale Yerevan', KulturDialog Armenien, Yerevan (2019); the 'International Graphic Art Festival UNI Graphica', Kovalenko Art Museum, Krasnodar (2019); the '3rd International Biennale of Miniature Art', Mansarda Gallery, Timisoara (2018) etc.

**Bill Nguyễn (BN): For you, the medium of printmaking is a means to collect and recreate, in a realistic and multidimensional way, different images and information taken from daily life. In today's world our reality is saturated and inundated with the mass production and consumption of images and information - through social media, various apps on computers and smartphones, to name but a few. This is a fairly heavy topic that you've put upon your art practice. But that was also what intrigued me about your work. Where did your passion in printmaking come from? What serves as a compass to guide you in your practice?**

Thy Nguyễn (TN): In order to satisfy me, art has to contain aspects of myth and mystery. For me, printmaking - from the conception of idea to the production of the final printed image - contains all of that. Looking from the outside, printmaking is more of a craft. To create a print one has to follow strict steps, and apply various mechanisms and materials. First, the initial ideas are expressed in draft sketches, which are then developed into different matrix (print plates). Each matrix creates a layer of color, therefore if a work consists of many layers of colors, it'll require that same amount of matrix. The combination and order of the matrix is a math problem the artist has to solve, in order to achieve the final image they want. Depending on the printing technique, one needs to follow certain procedures. For example, with the silkscreen technique that I used in my work, the final image is created when ink moves through the openings in the silk, and soaks onto the paper through the silk. The process of covering the opening with ink, how much ink to use, how much force to apply, etc. affects the final result. Thus, depending on the purpose of the work, the mood or intent of the artist, the final work is almost always unknown. Like what Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik<sup>1</sup> said about the future in their discussion on postmodernism: the possibilities of the future are created in the present moment. The unknown outcome of printmaking, therefore, actually influences its making.

Similar to our usual perception of time (as something that moves from the past, to the present and towards the future), the printing process is also supposed to occur step by step, from beginning to end. However, each step in that process can act as a 'cabinet' containing different ways of creating, thus, different possibilities for the outcome. For example, you can use different ink options for the same engraving, or different kinds of paper for the same design. Each decision then impacts each other. Let's take the series 'Before the screen' as an example. There were four matrix made in total to produce this series. Normally, some matrix are used to print lines, some are used to 'color in' the details and the background; and they have to follow a particular order. With 'Before the screen', however, the matrix were combined in a manner that disregards the beginning to end order. Many prints only used two out of the four matrix, which leads to the fact that some details only show up in one edition, and not others. This helps to create different 'atmospheres' for the same subject matter. So you see, printmaking is thus a way of story-telling - you can tell a story in one way, and then tell it in the reverse, or from different angles. The content might not change, but the experience will certainly change, because we can have endless possibilities for the same idea.

Printmaking is interesting to me for it is both a passive and active art form. It is passive because it is impossible for the

maker to entirely control the print process, or assume in advance what the final printed image may look like. On the other hand, the mark of material, color and method falls on the experience of the maker, as they are the one in charge. The reproducibility of the print might have some believe that all prints are equal, but in fact, the hand also has impact on the image despite its mechanization. And this is what's important to me, that printmaking - whether intentionally or by chance - can allow for different ideas, perception and methods of image-making to come together, correlate and produce infinite possibilities (for the final printed image).

**BN: The parallel existence of different possibilities of the same idea is clearly shown in this exhibition through your effort to create and present the many different (emotional, physical or spatial) states of the figures and scenes that appear in your work - states that also reflect the changes of time. This is very interesting, because it contrasts with what people often think of printmaking, as a static form of art; that like painting, printmaking only 'catches' and reproduces a certain moment in time. What do you think about this observation?**

TN: What I'd like the audience to experience is a sense of time unfolding, precisely in seeing the subtle changes in the colors, lines and compositions of the work - an effect I present by placing works side by side that look seemingly the same (but with differences that one has to pay careful attention to notice); or scattering elements of the same work in different corners of the exhibition space. In other words, the different variations of the same image (or the different possibilities of the same idea, as we spoke of earlier) help to realize the passing of time.

Here, printmaking becomes deconstructed, in the sense that the usual printing process is suspended and altered; the steps in the making of the final work are intervened at certain stages; and the final work co-exists in its many versions, all at the same time. In the two works 'Insider' and 'Outsider', for example, if you choose to only describe the emotions of the figures, then a representational approach serves the purpose well. However I want to insinuate emotion by 'toying' with the deterioration of the material of the print itself. After each layer of color is applied, I would deliberately leave the matrix of the print to deteriorate (reflected in the erosion of the background), creating a larger ink spot (seen in the bulging clouds). We can consider the changing ink spots as a measurement of the transformation of material, as an effort to break away from the usual printing process, and as a stimulation/visualization of time. My refusal to fix the matrix (and thus a refusal to create identical prints) in fact expresses my understanding of the effect of time on the printmaking medium. You can choose to depict a room following the tradition of realist representation; or you can choose to depict the same room in the morning, and then in the afternoon - which opens up other ways for us to feel, see and understand the said room. For me, these perspectives reveal the poetry of not just this medium, but also the idea (not just the hands) of the artist.

**BN: One of the interesting things about this first solo exhibition of yours is the use of printmaking to produce a kind of animation (displayed as projected videos). At the same time, we also see the same images, hanging from the ceiling as an installation of prints on paper. The viewers can stand in front**

**of the animation, and let the moving images create a linear narrative for them; on the other, they can move through the installation, individually seeking a narrative to make sense of it. Can you share more about your decision to use print and video?**

TN: I wish there was a more accurate word, instead of 'animation' or 'video', to talk about the projections I have made. I want these projections to be an accumulative meeting point of the printed works. If each printed work is perceived as an alteration (a version, a possibility) of the people and things depicted, then these projections can be seen as summaries which extend the act of looking. You can treat them as my attempt to synthesize the prints into a unified spirit, not to return them to singular works, rather to unpack the questions of how to unify differences, and whether it is possible to do so.

I believe the printed variable editions I have made needed to be developed into something else; they needed to be viewed differently. Printmaking today is experienced on and offline. Today's visual culture is predominantly digital, much of which are projected images. Why then, can't we have another form of 'printing', one that exists digitally on screens, besides printing on paper, fabric and other physical surfaces? The projections presented here could then be seen as my response to this question.

What I'm always trying to achieve is to diversify the possibilities of a work, an idea. The projections were also made in this manner. By changing the order, sequence, speed, and size of the component images, different variations of the same animation come to life. The moving image can sometimes turn us into passive viewers. But I think in this case, when presented with many variations of the same image, the viewers will experience a sense of distortion - the differences between the various versions will hopefully urge them to re-think what they are seeing, and this act of questioning I find liberating.

**BN: The figures in your works often appear alone. Sometimes they ponder, or converse with themselves (see 'Contemporary Habitat', 'Insider'), or hoping for something that doesn't seem to arrive ('Interface', 'Notification'). Other times, they attach themselves to the virtual world, poring over tools (i.e. laptop, smartphone) that give us the feeling that they are connecting with others ('Before the screen', 'G. is typing'). You also depict them from an angle, or from the back, making them almost faceless. Even when facial details are described in detail ('Agency worker', 'Deep Desire'), the subjects still seem to be feeling ill-at-ease and restless. Why are they trapped in such a psychological state? What do these subjects then say about yourself as an artist? For me, in order for an artist to speak to the world, they first need to talk about/to themselves. In dealing with their personal psyche, they then get to step out to observe and think about the outside world. And sometimes, artists get to, or can, do both at the same time. Is this relevant in your case?**

TN: It is true that an artist is the first audience of their work. But because the artist's creative power and ability to influence the work is too great, Mikel Dufrenne<sup>2</sup> insists that to have a pure aesthetic experience, we must try to consider from the point of view of the audience (and this should not include that of the critic or curator). This lesson has strongly influenced me. It's helped me to try to get rid of all emotional factors and memories (attached to, and accumulated through, the process of making the work), and enabled me to view the work from outside of myself. And at this point I would laugh, because, for example, the work 'Interface' looks as if it's a shop selling TVs - am I making an artwork, or making advertisements here? Or in 'Deep desire', we see a person with an iPhone 11 (which now

has 3 camera lenses) - is the phone their desire? Or is it to take a perfect selfie with the latest technology? Here I am reminded of David Hockney's quote 'People have a deep desire to make pictures', and perhaps, the real desire here is to create images in order to show off something else.

At the beginning of our conversation, you mentioned about the mass production and consumption of images and information. I think images nowadays exist in order to blur the difference between reality that has been digitally enhanced and its true experience (there is no 'Agency worker' nor advertising agent who does not know how to beautify their online persona!). Digitally produced images also help people forget about reality, ignoring the fact that the speed at which they consume images and information also means that their interests and topics of discussion also change drastically on a day to day basis. And sometimes, they themselves become the 'talk of the town', whether they want to or not.

To create a story, and for that story to popularly spread, it has to be 'hot'. If a person is glued 'Before the screen' (so as to not miss anything trending), their eyes and ears must also be on alert mode. Information today travels even faster than time itself. Each person sitting alone, is no longer truly alone, because ironically, this is the optimal state for information to traverse. As the saying goes, 'Here the walls have ears, if you have secrets do not say them out loud,' but hey, texting them and sharing online is ok.

Don't you think that the lack of frontal view in the depiction of these subjects, the fact that they are often viewed from behind or through the shoulder, is saying something about the creator? Isn't this the perspective of someone who's trying to get in on a story? But maybe all of these interpretations come from the perspective of a social media addict, which in this case, is me. I don't think it is my intention to deliberately express approval or disapproval of reality, or of life. That is probably asking too much of Art. Art also does not need to play an illustrative role either. Because in our everyday, the smallest things and actions can reflect bigger problems. On my artistic journey, I'm simply seeking, organizing and uniting images and information, in an attempt to have a fuller, more meaningful understanding of life.

For me, art-making stands somewhere between staying true to your individuality, and looking out towards the world. It embodies both the qualities of being passive and being active. I believe that each person, when trying to follow their creative drive, has to make an effort to balance different emotions and various states of awareness, understanding the different possibilities in life, so that from there, they can choose a future for themselves.

2. Further reading: 'The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience', Mikel Dufrenne, 1989, Northwestern University Press

**The Factory Contemporary Art Centre** (The Factory) is the first purpose-built space in Vietnam for showcasing contemporary art in Vietnam, established in 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 community space for hire; replete with café and restaurant. All profit from the sale of art and business on-site supports the running costs of its Arts Centre.  
**factoryartscentre.com**

1. Further reading: <http://dis-magazine.com/discussion/81924/the-time-complex-postcontemporary/>