

Thu Van Tran

Mountains are like the bones of the earth. Water is its blood.

7 September - 14 October 2017

The geography of Vietnam is meandering. From the outset, some would say that its unusual configuration raises the question of the oneness of the country. Vietnam extends for 1600 km, from the Chinese border in Upper Tonkin to the tip of Cape Camau in the far south. This elongation of the territory, this symmetry running from the northern mountains to the waters of the south, passing from one delta to another, and which is separated from fine soils in its centre could introduce a certain bipolarity into people's view of my country. But in reality, this is a simplistic vision, as the two extremities have been linked since the dawn of time by the flow of the currents and natural energies. The country's skeleton is the undulating and luxuriant land that we know from North to South, nourished by the waters that come down from the high plateaux to flow abundantly into the Southern Delta, its lifeblood. Filling the country's entire geography with life, sound and magic.

The nature of Vietnam is what has returned it to what it is. It is nature that, with equilibrium and strength, enabled some to cope, and forced others to retreat. Vietnam's bipolarity comes from its occupation. From the dual ways of thinking that intervened on its soil with the Western presences. Whereas the uniqueness of its geology, the equilibrium of its resources and the beauty of its nature form an integral whole.

The French occupation of Vietnam took various forms, sometimes barbaric, sometimes ridiculous. Dedicated to the city of Paris, a 'monument to the glory of French colonial expansion' completed in 1920 stood in front of the Palais des Colonies following the colonial exhibition in 1931. It was moved to the Tropical Garden of Paris (in Nogent-sur-Marne) much later, amid the ruins of the pavilions of other colonised countries. Today, this fragmented monument is still on display, although hidden from view, since it is now a ruin acting as a reminder of the decline of the colonial empire: the glorious cockerel is missing a foot, fungus is eating away at the face of the Republic and the grey of the stone is overgrown with moss.

I felt it was important to take a plaster cast of the feet of the Republic and photograph the dimension of the ruin in black and white. A film sublimates the sculpture, whose capacity to reveal history is weighty but powerful: substance as evidence. It also shows a contemporary aspect of this garden, as its users take back ownership on a daily basis, with some of them reacting to the site's past.

In fact, there is nothing tropical about this tropical garden: the bamboos there are stringy and not very green, and there are no glasshouses. On the other hand, local Kung Fu clubs come here to train, and veggie Oriental Yoga courses are proving a great success in this setting, and crews come here to film RAP or R'n'B videos. The only thing that is tropical about this garden is the feeling of a voluntary, contrived exoticism.

Why, when a Vietnamese firm, involved in the construction of a new urban landscape in Saigon, the former capital of Vietnam, was decorating its site, did it decide to adorn the outside walls with tarpaulins printed with scenes depicting the West? Why, right in the middle of Saigon, should we be seeing Miami Beach, Swiss mountains or French formal gardens? Why should these oversized photographs (sometimes up to ten metres long) reign supreme in the city? I recovered several of these tarpaulins to exhibit them as evidence of a political reality (decline of communist thinking and a reminder of the past occupation) as well as a physical reality (fading due to sunlight, worn fabric). These tarpaulins, after just a few years of exposure to daylight, were turning blue. These pallid landscapes that we were supposed to find appealing are outdated, obsolete, as if belonging to old dreams or hopes. A blend of nostalgia and envy. The Western ideal turned out to be just a distant memory, an illusion, something that fades away, like these eroded, worn out landscapes, increasingly inaccessible.

Renamed Ho Chi Minh City, my city will always remain Saigon, the colonial city.

Thu Van Tran, July 2017

Left-hand room

Jardin exotique, 2017
Plastic, water, plants
ca 32,5 x 33 x 12 cm

Les pieds de la République, 2017
Print on Baryté paper
61,7 x 41,7 cm
Edition 1+1

Right-hand room

Peau blanche, buste indigène, 2017
Plaster, mass-coloured MDF
35,5 x 77 x 108 cm
Edition 1+1

Peau blanche, corps indigène,
2017
Plaster, mass-coloured MDF
187 x 78 x 44 cm
Edition 1+1

Peau blanche, drapé, 2017
Plaster, mass-coloured MDF
14 x 42 x 39 cm
Edition 1+1

Peau blanche, la patte du coq,
2017
Plaster, mass-coloured MDF
8 x 31 x 28 cm
Edition 1+1

Peau blanche, la queue du coq,
2017
Plaster, mass-coloured MDF
26 x 88 x 130 cm
Edition 1+1

Peau blanche, main, 2017
Plaster, mass-coloured MDF
10 x 28 x 40 cm
Edition 1+1

Peau blanche, orteils, 2017
Plaster, mass-coloured MDF
12 x 20 x 24 cm
Edition 1+1

Peau blanche, petit pied, 2017
Plaster, mass-coloured MDF
6 x 24 x 27 cm
Edition 1+1

Peau blanche, petite queue de
coq, 2017
Plaster, mass-coloured MDF
26 x 54 x 110,5 cm
Edition 1+1

Peau blanche, pied, 2017
Plaster, mass-coloured MDF
13 x 34 x 39 cm
Edition 1+1

Peau blanche, talon d'Achille, 2017
Plaster, mass-coloured MDF
70 x 40 x 21 cm
Edition 1+1

Peau blanche, visage indigène,
2017
Plaster, mass-coloured MDF
26 x 46 x 63 cm
Edition 1+1

The yellow speaks, 2017
Video and subtitles
5'35"

Rear room

Saigon, 2017
Livid print on plastic cover
335 x 565 x 4,5 cm
In collaboration with Eric Baudart

Saigon, 2017
Livid print on plastic cover
270 x 410 x 4,5 cm
In collaboration with Eric Baudart

Saigon, 2017
Livid print on plastic cover
335 x 270
In collaboration with Eric Baudart

BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1979 in Ho Chi Minh City, the artist lives and works in Paris. Thu Van Tran's work is shown at the 2017 Venice Biennale in the exhibition Viva Arte Viva, curated by Christine Macel. In autumn 2017 a big sculpture will be presented at FIAC in Paris by Meessen De Clercq, an installation will be unveiled at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm (Sweden) and at FRAC Franche-Comté (France). In 2016 she had solo exhibitions at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin (Germany), the Macleay Museum in Sydney (Australia), at Ladera Oeste, Guadalajara (Mexico) and at the library of les Abattoirs, FRAC Midi-Pyrénées, (France).

In a recent past her work was shown in the Centre Pompidou Metz (France), the Lidice Museum (Czech Republic), at the Kunsthalle Mulhouse, the FRAC Ile-de-France, the Centre Pompidou of Paris, the Centre d'Art Villa du Parc of Annemasse, the Galerie Art et Essai de l'Université de Rennes (France), L'Espace in Hanoi (Vietnam), TANAS in Berlin (Germany), Kimusa in Seoul (South Korea) and La Maison Rouge in Paris (France). It is her third solo exhibition at the gallery, Meessen De Clercq has also presented a solo presentation of her work at Art Basel in 2013.