Walking Through Mist

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Exhibition Dates:
December 5th, 2020 -
January 22nd, 2021

Gallery Hours:
Tues - Fri. 10AM - 4PM

Location:
141 Kalakaua St.
Hilo HI 96720

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Artist Statement

This series is about my life in Vietnam from 1946 to 1969.

The art materials are cheesecloth, bamboo, silk, thread, paper, and drywall. In Vietnamese culture, cheesecloth is used in making mourning clothes. For me, this mourning cloth embodies an eternal sadness. Its sheerness is mystical. I want to share with people in this community the experience of tending the family water buffalo or making firecrackers for the New Year celebration.

I want to share stories about living amidst war, poverty, and corrupt government. But most of all, I want to return to this part of my life to see if there is anything incomplete, unsaid, or undone. I know it will bring tranquility to my spirit. In the last 30 years, my art has been about how I can heal myself and help others to heal.

In this new series, I used haunting images from the past, untangled some emotional issues, and honored my parents and people who were kind to our family.

Art for me is a temple for the inquiring soul. Through art, I am searching for wholeness.

Flower Offering -- (floor installation), 151” x 37”x5”, flowers and leaves of the season, paper, mourning cloth, 12 ceramic bowls, 12 candles, 2020.

Once a year, Aunt Bao organized a performance in October, which Catholics dedicated to honor the Virgin Mary. They called it *Thang Man Coi.* She rounded up a group of 20 young girls from 7 to 15 years of age, all from Tu Chau Village. Naturally, my sisters and I were recruited. The ritual was called *Dang Hoa,* Flower Offering. We practiced and learned the lines every evening for a month at Aunt Bao's house. There were a few dress rehearsals. A shawl of white cotton cloth secured with blue ribbons, draping down below the shoulders, covered our heads. We wore long white dresses of the same fabric, with a blue ribbon tied in a bow around the waist over white pants. It was the exact style of the Virgin Mary’s dress we saw on the statue in Subdivision One Church.

The most enjoyable part for me was gathering flowers with my friends on the morning of the performance. In pairs, we were given two everyday ceramic rice bowls. Each pair was told to find flowers of a certain color. Marigolds for yellow, tuberose for white. The abundant flowers from the male papaya tree for green. Purple was easy since there were plenty of bougainvillea. All the blossoms were trimmed and arranged on top of the bowls after a sprinkle of water. The flower dome and the shape of the bowl created a completed circle with a tall candle secured in the middle.

Finally, the long-awaited evening came. An altar for the Virgin Mary was situated in front of us in the middle aisle of Subdivision One Church. Twenty of us sat on the reserved benches, with an entourage of around fifteen young women who were there to sing and support us in every way. The church was filled with proud parents, relatives, and villagers. After the evening mass, our candles were lit, and we lined up in pairs. The youngest, my sister Van and our cousin Chong, sat in front. Chong’s name meant “fast.” Her real name was Phuong (Royal Poinciana), but we used her nickname. If a child’s name happened to be the same as some elder in the village, the parents would give the child a nickname out of respect for the elder.

Everyone oohed and aahed when they saw Chong in her costume. Her oval face resembled *trai soan,* the fruit of the Star of India tree. On this *trai soan* face, her light silky complexion and long eyelashes framed her big brown eyes. A perfect nose led the eyes to her pink lotus petal lips. They said she looked exactly like the young Virgin Mary.

Van and Chong proceeded to the front of the Virgin Mary’s altar, each holding a bowl of white tuberose blossoms, with arms extended in an offering gesture. Next to the undulating candlelight, they appeared mysteriously angelic. They chanted: *Dear Mother, we have here*

the Man Coi flowers, *just picked from the garden of sheer beauty and fragrance. Sincerely and respectfully we are presenting them to you.*

After placing the flower bowls on the altar, Van and Chong walked back on each side and stood behind the last pair of girls. We all moved forward while the whole group sang: *In the flower season, when evening falls, bells toll slowly, deep meditative sound – fall – falling, abating, sinking like the soft music of a dream – dreamy.* This went on for over an hour and a half, until the last pair had their turn. The altar now appeared magically stunning with multiple colors and fragrances – marigold, tuberose, jasmine, plumeria and more, floating on a sea of lit candles.

Ricefield, Early Dawn -- 8 panels each 77” h x 26” w, mourning cloth, dyes, 2018

Mourning my Father -- 11 panels each 62” x 15”, mourning cloth, plastic bags, ashes, thread, 2020.

As told by my sister Vinh:
They did not tell us where they took Father. Our neighbor Mrs. Mot’s boyfriend, a high-ranking cadre in the Communist Party, was recruited to help. After many requests, we finally got formal permission in writing to visit Father.

Mother, Huong and I traveled by bus, by train, then bus again – plus a walk of a couple of kilometers on a trail through the forest – to reach the camp where they kept Father and thousands of others.* We crossed streams and monkey bridges. I lugged the bag of food for

father while Mother carried Huong on her back. Mother fell off a bridge made of two tree trunks. Luckily it was a dry creek, so they were not hurt badly and we continued the journey.

When we got to the camp, we were not always allowed to see Father. Huong, age four, was treated with more kindness because she was a child, but Mother and I were guilty of being the wife and daughter of the prisoner who served the “Puppet Regime.” We told Huong to run to Father, as she cried and handed him a bag of food and extra cash. Huong was reluctant to make these tiresome trips with so many layovers, so every time the bus stopped, we bought her sugarcane sticks, boiled sweet potatoes, and rice crackers, *banh da.* She enjoyed the rare treats which she would not have had otherwise.

We tried to visit Father once every two months, only when we could afford it. I was 18 then and every time I saw Father, lurking in my mind was the thought that this could be the last time. He was not looking well at all.

The camp was in Nam Ninh Province in the beginning, but it was relocated several times over a year and half. We had to ask Mrs. Mot for help again. Father was in the prison for over a year in the South, then transferred to North Vietnam. He worked as an office assistant for the prison’s doctor, who was a Northerner. The doctor returned home after more than a year, and requested to have Father transferred to the North to work for him again.

During the time Father was in the North, we could not visit him or have any form of communication. We could not find anyone to help locate him. We did not contact Father’s brother Uncle Ket or Mother’s brother Uncle Hang. The truth was we just did not know how. Without Father we were lost. We had to deal with so much – getting food for the family, deciding the right thing to do so the government would not force us to move to the New Economic Zone, and finding someone to help us locate Father. There had been no communication with relatives in the North since 1955, when the country was divided after Dien Bien Phu, a total of 22 years.

On one of those visits to Father when no one was watching, he tucked a piece of paper in my hand. It had the names and addresses of families of some prisoners who wanted Mother to contact their loved ones. She found five families. Prisoners relied heavily on food and medicine supplied by their families. They endured hard labor, inhumane treatment, and inhumane living conditions. Each prisoner was given a fifth of what they needed to survive each day. Without family assistance, many died in prison. When Habitat for Humanity International made their visit, Father was among the group of prisoners ordered to go hide in the forest. This corpse-like group of prisoners would give the Communist government a bad reputation for treating the prisoners inhumanely.

After almost two years in the North without any contact with the family, Father mustered all of his courage to ask his boss, the doctor, to help him ask the government to be released since he was just too weak, and he feared he would soon die in prison.

A driver took him to *Ga Ha Noi*, Ha Noi Train Station, bought him a train ticket, and gave him money for food and bus fare to head home to the South.

*****It was estimated that around 1 to 2.5 million people, including former officers, religious leaders, intellectuals, merchants, employees of the old regime and even communists, were put in re-education camps.

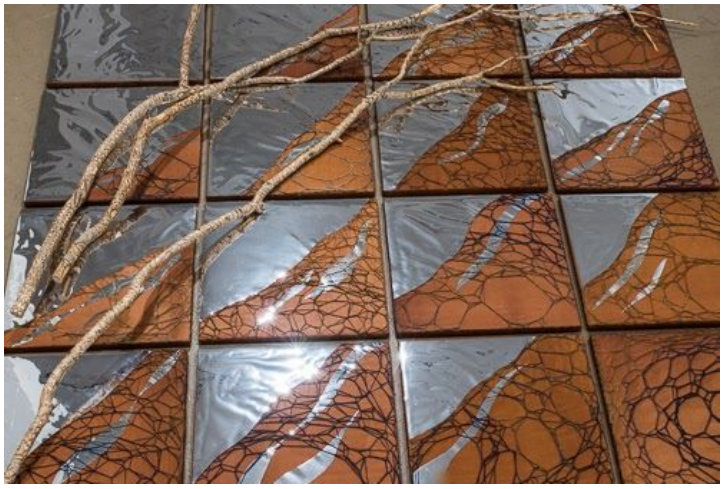
Paint Brushes for the Day -- 68 pieces approximately 10” x ½” x 4”, black bamboo, variety of leaves and seed pods, threads, telephone wires, yarn, beads, linen cord, 2020.

I do not remember the other parts of the exam to enter L’Ecole des Art Applique de Bien Hoa (The School of Applied Arts of Bien Hoa), but the most memorable task was to sculpt a toad. There was a live toad in a cage and a group of five students sat around it. We were provided with a square of wood a half-inch thick, a lump of clay, and some wood and metal tools. The only time I had had the experience of working with clay was in grade three, when I had to create a bas-relief map of South Vietnam emphasizing the Hong Ha River and its nine tributaries.

My score on the entrance test was the third highest, and I received a scholarship of 400 *dong* per semester. If I kept my grades up, this would be my reward for the entire four years. The school arranged for my father to receive the 400 *dong*. The school supplied most art materials, and in exchange they kept all our finished products and designs. But we had to buy our own paintbrushes and watercolors. Father was not always fast in giving me the money. He was quiet when I asked and, in those days, you did not ask a second time. You did not whine, you did not demand, nor complain or bargain. You just got what you got and if you did not get it, you did not.

I cut a lock of my own hair; I had an endless supply. I trimmed the hair evenly and then I used thread and carefully wrapped it around a bamboo stick or inserted it inside hollow bamboo after dipping the hair in tree sap. After I secured the hair on the handle, I tied a few knots, trimmed the hair into a round or a flat brush, and voila: a paint brush with my own hair. It was adequate. I learned in Co Thu Nguyet’s (Miss Autumn Moon) literature class: *Tha thap mot ngon den dau leo let con hon ngoi nguyen rua bong toi.* "It is better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness."

After the Rain -- (floor installation, 16 panels) Total measurement 50” x 50” x 17”, drywall, silk, dye, thread, mylar, branches, 2020.



I was six years old. The year was 1954. When the rainstorm had passed, I ran outside circling the backyard,
to the garden. It was still a bit breezy, but the sun peeked out. From the garden by the little fishpond, I looked back toward our water tank that was on the other side of the yard. What caught my attention was the way the sun had dried half of the tiles, revealing their brick red color, but the other half of the tiles looked as if

they were laid with mirror. Branches here and there, the leaves and purple flowers of the chinaberry scattered everywhere. I saw the triangle mirrors against the brick red of the tiles, then I noticed the reflection of all the debris in the triangle mirrors.

My father was around, I was sure of it. “Where are you, Father?”

While Father was Away -- 88” x 15 ½” x 15 ½ “, bamboo, reed, mourning cloth, thread, yarn, wire, paper. 2020.

After my mother passed away, my father could not carry on with farming, so he let people sharecrop the land and got a job teaching in the nearby town of Voi. He came home on Saturday evenings, lugging delicatessen goods such as condensed milk, French bread, and *gio*, a sausage made of lean ground pork wrapped in banana leaves and steamed to perfection. After Sunday Mass, it was heavenly to have hot milk and French bread with pork sausage for breakfast, a meal painstakingly prepared by Father.

When Father was away in Voi, we hung around Uncle Keng’s property which was a mile away from our home. He was my mother’s older brother. I never knew when Uncle Keng’s wife passed away, but he lived in a big red-tiled roof house with two sons, Keng and Truc, and a daughter, Hang. For some reason no one was ever home. So we spent time climbing the jackfruit tree in their backyard. A Vietnamese saying – *nha ngoi cay mit, nha lau xe hoi* (red-tiled roof house, a jackfruit tree; two-story house, an automobile) – describes the affluent scene. Uncle Keng was well off. We ate the young fruits, each the size of a big toe. It tasted bitter and acrid but was edible if one was hungry enough. A full-grown jackfruit has an oval shape and is magnificent in size. In the fruit kingdom, it may be the biggest of all fruits. An average mature jackfruit easily measures 15 inches in diameter and is 20 to 25 inches long. It has an incredible fragrance for some and may be offensive to others. The fruits are so big that they only hang from the main trunk or a big branch.

Another form of entertainment on Uncle Keng’s property was catching dragonflies. We squeezed a big chunk of old jackfruit sap on one end of a long bamboo pole, the longer the better. We stood quietly, patiently waiting for the dragonflies. When we saw one who seemed to be looking for a place to perch along the edge of the pond, we held the sticky end of the pole in front of it. Sooner or later, it would perch on the pole and stick to the sap. We tied a thread loosely around its neck and walked around, the proud owner of a pet dragonfly until the insect tired and died, or we pulled the head out as a part of the dissecting game. Then there was an opportunity for a funeral ceremony.

Once we ventured to my mother’s older sister Aunt Chiet’s house. Aunt Chiet was not very friendly, and she was home all the time. We sensed she did not want us around. Her

sizable house was dark and cold, and so was she. We visited Uncle and Aunt Khiet occasionally, as they were the relatives to both Mother and Father – *Chau ong lay chau ba* (her niece married his nephew). Their property was huge and full of fruit trees – guava, orange, mountain apple, jackfruit, starfruit, grapefruit, and more. It was a big estate surrounded by a brick wall. We played and swam in the pond with our cousins.

Father's employment in Voi lasted less than a year. After that, our family and half of the villagers of Tu Chau made the journey to South Vietnam with our priest, Father Du.

To my father—The stories he told were the seeds he sowed -- 89" h x 16" x 16", bamboo, reed, mourning cloth, dye, seed pod, thread, plastic bag, ashes, 2020.

My father, Nguyen Giao Huan, was born in 1923 in Tu Chau, Ha Dong, North Vietnam. He was one of four sons of the village herbalist. After my mother died, he gave up farming and became a teacher at Tu Chau elementary school. Being the first-born son, he inherited the house that his grandfather built. It is a beautiful house with intricate carvings here and there. This hundred-year-old house still stands.

In 1955, my father, my two sisters and I moved South when the country was divided. Our first settlement was in Cu Chi, and again he taught school for six years. In 1961, we moved to Bien Hoa. Father got a job as policeman while attending night school, and earned a high school diploma. He was promoted to lieutenant. In 1975, the communists took over the South and Father was among hundreds of thousands of people, including officers, monks, priests and civilians, who were put in prison "re-education camps." He was freed after three years.

In 1984, he and my whole family came to the United States. He passed away six months later in Oklahoma City. Even today, my father is well known to the Tu Chau villagers as Mr. Teacher or Uncle Teacher.

Remembering Great Uncle and Aunt Tuyet -- 60" h x 42" x 42", bamboo, paint, mourning cloth, thread, seashells, 2020.

Among all our relatives, we were most comfortable spending time at our Great Aunt Tuyet's mud house. It was just a quarter of a mile from our house. The property was located adjacent to the village church. The two properties were connected by a huge pond full of water hyacinths, lotus, water lilies, and weeds of all types.

One of our favorite spots for hanging out was by the fig tree, with branches that hung over the water. We picked the thumb-size figs, dropping them in the pond to watch the ripples, or we threw them at each other. The green ones were good for dipping in salt; the ripe ones were sweet if we found them before the bugs did. There was a whole mysterious world inside a fig – as if somebody had arranged all these tiny pearls of amethyst inside a perfect sphere, then sprinkled the whole fruit with pink-purple juice.

We played in the bamboo forest, where clumps of giant bamboo surrounded a 20-acre pond. The bamboo grew so tall and dense that no one could walk through the forest. We liked to pluck the youngest leaves. If one looked carefully, there was a tiny hole at the end of each leaf, into which we inserted the pointed end of another leaf. We made awfully long necklaces, earrings, and headbands out of these green rings – an opportunity for us to stage a wedding ceremony.

The vegetation inspired us to play a game called “See who has the most leaves.” Each kid dashed around for five or ten minutes to collect as many leaves as possible until the leader called out “time’s up.” We all gathered in a circle. The leader pulled out one leaf at a time and asked, “Do you have *rau sam* leaf?” The one who had the largest accumulation and variety of leaves won. We did not always know the names of the plants, but we recognized the texture, shape, color and scent of the leaves.

One day, my sisters and I found a dead sparrow, its body still warm. Big sister Luyen said, “Let’s pluck all the feathers and cook it.” So we did – we pulled off the feathers, removed the innards and rinsed and stuffed the bird with limes leaves. Sister Luyen stuck it on a bamboo twig and we ran to the kitchen to hold it over the fire. The smell of roast meat mingled with lime leaves was divine. There were only three bites for three girls, mostly bones, but the aroma was worth the trouble.

The most enjoyable time was when we sat with Great Aunt Ba Quan Tuyet and listened to her stories – Bible stories, the Quan Yin story, and village ghost stories. She was a small, thin, and blind woman who had no teeth and weighed about 50 pounds, or so it seemed. She always wore black, as black was a practical color when soap was not available. Her head was always wrapped with a scarf and tied in the back. She looked ancient.

While we were playing, Great Uncle Tuyet wove bamboo baskets in the yard. He was tall and thin and dark as a bronze statue. His hair was rolled back into a bun. He wore nothing but a loincloth wrapped between his thighs and around his waist. With a sharp knife, he skillfully stripped the bamboo paper-thin in a variety of lengths and widths for baskets. The finished products were for daily use in the kitchen. The wide, shallow baskets in various sizes – two, three, or five feet in diameter – were used for processing rice.

In preparation for weaving, Great Uncle cut the bamboo stalks down, trimmed all the branches and soaked them in the pond for months to kill bugs and spores and to keep the bamboo pliable for weaving. The finished baskets were hung on the ceiling in the kitchen. The

smoke and heat from the burning fire aged the baskets, strengthened the bamboo, and gave them their golden color. The heat also killed any larvae and insects left in the bamboo.

Tu Chau Firecrackers Unconditional Guaranteed -- (*a collaboration) 106” h x 101/2” x 101/2” Bamboo, paper, multiple paint media, nylon cord, linen cord, 2020.

We lived in a big community of villagers who emigrated from the North. We followed our priests, Father Du and Father Bau, to the South in 1955 when the country was divided. Cu Chi was the first lasting settlement for all of us. We had been moving from one temporary shelter to the next since abandoning our home in the North. Cu Chi is a part of Binh Duong Province, 25 miles from Saigon.

This vast land was divided into numbered zones. Zone 1 was for my village, Tu Chau. The government allocated each family a small amount of money and one acre of land. We slept in army tents while waiting for our huts to be built, with two or three families sharing one tent.

With the help of friends, neighbors and a few paid builders, we erected a duplex hut following a given design. The main structure of the dwelling was constructed with raw, unfinished tree trunks. Other materials were gathered from the surrounding forest. The roof and walls were made of thatch, tree branches, and mud. It was adequate for us, considering we had not lived in our own private space since the day we left North Vietnam. To give the mud walls a smooth surface and some color, we used cement and lime wash – white or gray, with light blue trim if we chose to decorate our new home.

We were advised to grow sweet potatoes, tapioca, tobacco, or peanuts, which all thrived in the sandy soil. The villagers from Tu Chau were rice farmers in the North, where they had been growing wet rice for many generations. But the only soil they were familiar with was heavy soil, not the sandy soil of this region, so many families struggled with the crops and gave up. They let the Southerners who lived close by work the land. After several years, one by one, they left Cu Chi to look elsewhere for work. Most of them moved to Saigon. My family – father, stepmother and four daughters (Luyen, Phan, Van and Vinh) – stayed in Cu Chi for six years. My father taught school, cultivated bananas, and raised hundreds of chickens. Our mud house greeted visitors with a purple morning glory trellis and rows of perennials. After my father lost his job at Cu Chi Elementary, we too moved away.

For the first few years in Cu Chi, the Tu Chau Villagers made firecrackers instead of growing crops. Some families knew how and taught others. They made labels for all the packages: TU CHAU FIRECRACKERS – Unconditional Guarantee. They were very proud of the product and Tu Chau gained a reputable name.

This business was a mixed blessing. It produced work for everyone in the family aged four and up. The income was good enough to support everyone for a year working only three months. But making firecrackers was a dangerous business. I saw houses burn down, including my own. I saw the next-door neighbor's hired helpers carried out to the ambulance – black bodies on stretchers with skin dangling from their limbs.

Sharing the duplex hut with my family was the Su family. Mr. and Mrs. Su had four children – Sứ, Sự, Hiep and Nghiep. It was customary that the parents were referred to by the name of the first born; their real names were not used out of respect, as was the Northern tradition. The two young men in their early twenties, Sứ, Sự, were handsome – tall, and smooth-skinned with the look of college students. Hiep was the only daughter and looked just like her mother, round-faced with freckled skin. Nghiep was a boy of eight.

The firecrackers were all handmade from beginning to end – an intricate process. The tool that made the crunch on the neck of each little firecracker was metal. A worker would put each firecracker shell in a slot, one at a time, with a small hole on the top and bottom of the blades. To make the crunch at the neck, they would place the firecracker shell a quarter of an inch from the top and pull the handle down at a steady pressure. The purpose of this crunch was to hold the fuse in place and create a container for the explosive material to be infused later. This action had to be done carefully. One must not crush the fuse, which was inserted at the top of each shell, or sparks would ignite and then set fire to other pieces nearby.

Other workers, only a few feet away, were also working on highly flammable material. This was how the fire started at the Sus. Since we shared the duplex hut, most of our belongings were burnt. After the accident, the Sus family left for Saigon, leaving half of the ruin still connected to our newly fixed-up home. This explained the loss of my family's birth records. They were all burnt, along with clothes, a table, two benches and three beds. To revise the birth certificates, my father relied on his memory and invented some details. My sister Van got a pretty middle name, Thanh, added to her name. Now, it was Thanh Van – Blue Cloud, instead of just plain Cloud. Everyone in the family gained or lost a couple of years in their ages.

Bearing Witness -- (*a collaboration) 120" x 56", mourning cloth, human hairs, plastic bags, 2003.

In 2003, the United State invaded Iraq. I knew it would be a no-win war and it would be another Vietnam. I had to do something, so I sent a letter asking friends, family, acquaintances to give me a piece of their hair. I wanted to create an artwork with as many participants as I could get. And we would be WITNESSES to the mistake of invading Iraq. I gave it the name BEARING WITNESS. A hundred and forty participants were from all over the US.

WIN = LOSE -- 156” h x 37”, kozo paper, mourning cloth, paint, 2020.

For me, there was no winning the war – both sides suffered casualties.

I wish the United States had helped the Vietnamese build roads, schools, hospitals. Helping us to fight the war was directly making it bigger and thus causing more casualties. War destroys a country in so many layers – physically, spiritually and emotionally, for many generations.

Poem for my Mother -- 35” x 31”x 3”, haole koa branch, banana fiber, cotton linter, matboard, 1994, (from the series *The White Mourning Cloth*).

This work comes from the seven-year-old girl that my mother left behind. In a language unknown to the physical world, a daughter expresses her love and sorrow to her mother – the sorrow of a child who never said “I love you,” the sorrow of growing up without her love and care; and an apology for not wanting to wear the white mourning dress made from cheesecloth at her funeral. Materials used in the construction are reminiscent of the mud house my family built after our long journey from North to South Vietnam. The look and feel of the branches, the mud and straw like walls, represent shelter and home. I find them soothing and comforting.

A Poem for my Mother was in an exhibition AN OCEAN APART, Contemporary Vietnamese Art from the United States and Vietnam, by Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service Washington, D.C.

Temple for the Wandering Souls -- 53” X 38” x 5”, haole koa branch, banana fiber, cotton linter, paper, mourning cloth, thread, matboard, 1994, (from the series *The White Mourning Cloth*).

In January 1992, I returned to Vietnam with an American woman journalist friend. After a 23-year absence, I was able to reestablish relationships with my sister, my nine nieces and nephews, and their children. I took my sister back to our village Tu Chau in the North to visit our uncle and cousins, who we had not seen in 37 years, and to burn incense at our mother's grave.

On my return home to Kona, I dealt for months with the overwhelming emotion stirred by the trip. The White Mourning Cloth series of works was about my unresolved feeling for my mother's land, about mourning the souls that died in the Vietnam War, and about healing the wounds – mine and others' – of those whose lives have been affected by the war.

Walking Through Mist -- 91" x 37", mourning cloth, cotton fabric, thread, ashes, woodcut printed paper, bead, silk, dye, paper, 2020.

I wanted to make this trip, knowing that young women just do not travel here and there in Vietnam. Except for taking the bus to Saigon to visit the families of my sister, Uncle Chung, and Uncle Thuoc in *Xom Moi*, I had never gone anywhere, much less gone alone to Da Lat. That would be so daring, and I was not sure if I was up for it.

I had to go. I knew that sooner or later I needed to find out the truth. Did I really love Thanh, or I was just in love with the idea of being in love? Through all the letters we exchanged for six months, the feeling seemed real to me. But I wanted to be sure. The idea of having a boyfriend who was going to be a *Si Quan Da Lat* (Da Lat Officer) and the prospect of marrying him was great for any woman in my social class. I had never met him even though we both attended my friend Nguyen's wedding. There were hundreds of people there. After the wedding, Nguyen told Thanh about me, and Thanh wrote to me afterward. I needed to make the decision whether to stay in Vietnam and marry Thanh after he graduated from the Political Warfare College, or go to America.

I thought that if I asked Father for permission to go see Thanh he would never permit it. In my family, young girls were not allowed to date, and most marriages at the time were arranged. I left the house for work at 6 every morning while the whole family was still asleep. I stopped by my friend Oanh's house, then the two of us walked along the railroad to the Bien Hoa Air Base gate. We might grab a quick bowl of pho for breakfast, then take the bus or get a ride to the

office. I was the clerk typist/interpreter for the Driving School at the 3rd Transportation Squadron – a division of the United States Air Force based on Bien Hoa Air Base.

Each morning, I took some clothes in a bag and left them at Oanh's house. One morning I carried a suitcase with shoes, toothbrush, and makeup. After five days, I had collected everything. Lucky for me, just a few months before I had asked Sergeant Lungren to order some clothes from the Alden catalog from America. For my sister Van, I bought a blouse and a forest green jumper and for Vinh and Hanh I bought dresses. For me, I picked a beautiful turquoise all-weather reversible light coat, perfect for the cool high mountain climate of Da Lat. I also got a jumper with black and gray stripes and a white, light sweater to go with it. A pair of white shoes with three-inch heels were a perfect match for the jumper. The American clothes were so exceptionally beautiful, well-tailored with quality fabric. It was unbelievable; I had never been so happy.

Then I left one morning, just as I would to go to work. I asked Van the night before: “Van, would you do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Wait until evening, after dinner, then tell Father where I am. OK?” “Alright, I will.” Van said reluctantly.

Tu Chau Village Church -- 91” x 37”, mourning cloth, cotton fabric, thread, woodcut printed paper, hand dyed silk, paper, 2020.

The Tu Chau village church was a small French-style cathedral with a lofty bell tower. Shrouded by the eternal gray of time, it was beloved by all the villagers. It was the center of our life. We could hear its bell from our home – it rang three times at five-minute intervals, starting at 4 o’clock, both morning and evening.

Rows of paklan and plumeria trees lined both entrances to the church. The fifty-foot paklans with their big leaves and tiny white flowers, smaller than a pinky finger, had an indelible aroma.

My friends Thiem, Gan, and I spent most of our time playing in the church yard. We had a ritual after entering the gate. We would stop by the plumeria trees, pick the blossoms, feel the satiny texture of the yellow petals, and deeply inhale for the heavenly scent of *hoa dai*. We walked to the larger-than-life statue of St. Peter, with a key in his hand as if he would be ready to open heaven’s door at our first knock. Standing in the middle of the church grounds, he was always quiet, as a statue was supposed to be, but somehow we felt that we were being watched over. After we greeted St. Peter with the sign of the cross and bowed our heads, we meandered toward the pond, took the ten steps down to the edge of the water, washed our grubby bare feet as we saw the adults do, and continued on our route.

On the right side of the church building was the Virgin Mary’s grotto. Here the Mother of Jesus, in her white dress with blue trim, stood in earnest, hands clasped together in front of

her heart, face toward Heaven. Beyond the candles lit daily and a vase of white tuber roses, she was surrounded by thousands of purple bougainvillea blossoms.

One afternoon, my friends and I were transfixed by the deep purple color that did not otherwise exist in our world. We were familiar with the rich brown color of freshly plowed fields, the chartreuse green of the young rice fields, the golden fields at harvest time and the earthen red tiles in our yard after the rain, but we never experienced this deep purple hue of the bougainvillea. We stood in awe, and suddenly the wind picked up and started to blow all the petals every which way. As in a dream, the grotto with Mother Mary and the three of us was in a purple whirlwind. I thought she might, at any moment, appear in person. It was miraculous.

Part of our ritual was checking out the interior of the church. We dipped our hands in the holy water, again made the sign of the cross, and bowed our heads. My friends dropped some of the holy water in their eyes. I saw dirt and tiny creatures swimming in the water. "It is holy water and will make your eyes brighter," Thiem said, and I trusted her.

Around five o'clock the next morning, Father woke us up to get ready for Sunday Mass. My eyelids were glued together. Father set me down on the veranda and washed my eyes with warm saltwater. There was no pain, but my eyes were pink and so was the skin around my eyes. This went on for a few months. We never made the connection between the holy water and the pink eyes until years later. Conjunctivitis was a common chronic infection among villagers.

Just about this time a year earlier, on this veranda, under the watchful eyes of my mother, I was given half of a banana and told to dip it in a black powder that looked and tasted like ground charcoal. I did as I was told, enjoying the rare banana treat to cure my bedwetting habit. My father had to walk a six-mile round trip to an adjacent village to purchase the black medicine from Mrs. Suy. When she saw my father for the second time, she said: " There is no need for you to walk this long distance, Mr. Huan. You can make your own cure. Catch a toad and place it inside a covered clay pot and bury it in the cooking fire for several hours. When it cools, the toad will be charcoal. Pound it until you have a fine powder." Whether Mrs. Suy's bedwetting remedy worked or not, I outgrew the bad habit.

A couple of times a year, our church organized processions. One of these was in the month of the Virgin Mary, *Thang Man Coi*. At three o'clock in the afternoon we could hear drumming from our home – boom, boom, boom, slow at first then faster and faster. At four o'clock, hundreds of people lined the village's red brick path. Boys carried colorful banners; men carried the statue of the Virgin Mary on a palanquin lined with white and blue fabric and decorated with fresh flowers and vines. There was chanting, singing, and drumming. Several large paintings were strung over the hedge on the right side of the village path, depicting Jesus playing with children and the Virgin Mary with Bernadette. The painter was none other than my father. The procession started from one gate, wrapped around the pond, continued to the school and community building on the opposite end of the church, then returned to church by the other gate.

When the French soldiers came to our village, the church also served as a safe refuge. Father Du ordered all women and children to stay inside the church building until the soldiers left. The villagers feared the foreigners, who were big men with reddish white or black skin. They smelled strange and their hair was any color but black like ours. Their mouths twisted this way and that when they spoke, and we could hear hissing sounds, but were unable to

understand a word. "Only Father Du can communicate with them. What would we do without father?" said one old man.

(I am now in America, oceans away from my motherland, but whenever I smell the plumeria or paklan flowers, I am instantly transported back to that time of my childhood and the beloved churchyard, infused with feeling safe and protected.)

Peaceful Dragon -- 82” X 37”-- mourning cloth, woodcut printed paper, paper, 2020.

My two years at Ngo Quyen High School were a waste. I was lost and so was my classmate Lieu. She and I had been in the same class at art school. After graduating, we both went to Ngo Quyen. Lieu quit and went home to help with the gift shop that her family had just opened in Tam Hiep. After the second year, I took Part I of the Baccalaureate test and failed. I went to visit Lieu. She said a family friend had found us jobs working in the evening at the officers’ club in Long Binh, five miles from where I lived in Bien Hoa and just over a mile from her home.

Long Binh was a tent city of forest green tents by the thousands. *Long* means dragon, *Binh* means peace – a peaceful dragon. This was where the American GIs lived. I was sure this was the scene all over Vietnam. My friend Lieu, her sister and I started our job at the officers’ club.

Among the hundreds and hundreds of army tents, one was the officers’ club; its small sign said so. A soldier picked us up from Lieu's house at 5 pm. We were hired to serve drinks at the Red Horse Squadron Officer’s Club. We knew a few words of English and were beyond shy. This was my first encounter with the Americans. They were big people. They smelled *gây* – like dairy fat or butter.

We just stood behind the counter, avoiding all eye contact. About 25 officers were at the club. My first time being asked to bring a drink out to an officer I thought I would die, but I was committed to work, and this was a job. I weighed 75 pounds and was 5 feet 2 inches tall. My insecurity weighed about the same. There were no curves on my body – just straight lines.

The officers of the Red Horse Squadron were pilots. They were kind, gentlemanly and did not make any remarks or tease us. They knew that we were "good girls” and we were just shy. They sang songs; one was “I want to go home.” Well, so did I.

The second evening, as the song was going strong – "Oh, oh, oh, I want to go home, I want to go home, I want to go home" – suddenly there was an extremely loud explosion. The ground shook and rumbled. The tent swayed. About a mile north from where we were, a gigantic column of fire and smoke mushroomed up. I felt someone grab my hand and pull. Seeing that everyone in the club was running outside, I tried to follow the person that pulled me, in my high-heeled wooden shoes.

When we were outside, he helped me get down into a ditch, three feet deep. We sat for 15 minutes. I prayed hard. Then I heard, “Okay, come on back.” The American helped me up, and we returned to the club. That was Captain Blake. I never forgot his name and kind face.

Our driver was waiting to take us home. That was our second evening at work and our last. The Long Binh ammunition depot had been blown up, according to the paper the next day. So much for the Peaceful Dragon.

Mother’s Chores -- 82” h x 56” x 46” mourning cloth, paper, thread, 2020.

I am incredulous at all the work my mother had to do as a rice farmer. Rice farming was very labor-intensive year-round work. Winter in the north could drop into the mid-40s. My mother, like other villagers, worked the field barefoot and in a thin layer of clothes. The Tu Chau villagers grew wet rice, which meant that they stood in water and muddy soil all day.

Her chores: planting rice; weeding, watering, harvesting rice; processing rice; gardening; making soy sauce several times a year; taking care of father and us children.

Wartime Lullabies -- 76” x 39”, mourning cloth, cotton fabric, paint, paper, thread, ink, 2020.

In 1967, I got a job working for the USAF on Bien Hoa Air Base. My stepmother was also working in the kitchen for the US Army. My father bought a two-room house, with a loft. We moved out of the filthy and crowded police compound. I worked six days a week. Sundays, I volunteered to be the interpreter for Father Major James Cain, communicating with the orphanage in town.

Before moving into this two-room house, my sister Van and I washed, scrubbed, wiped every inch of this house. To conquer the heat of the night, we slept on the cool tiled floor. I listened to Trinh Cong Son music on a cassette player every single night.

Trinh Cong Son was a well-known songwriter and musician in the 60s. Some say we lost the war because of his powerful music.

The Moment that Changed my Life/Remembering Father Major James Cain -- 37” x 38” x 50”, bamboo, mourning cloth, paint, paper, thread, shells, leather cord, 2020.

I remember standing by the desk of this official at the Ministry of the Interior in Saigon. I just stood,frozen, feeling hopeless*. I am not going to America.* It was the end of my one-and-a-half-year dream and a lot of effort – traveling back and forth from Bien Hoa to the Ministry of the Interior in Saigon, running around gathering this form and that form. The red tape was endless. Time stood still. I was lost in despair.

A year and a half previously, David Looney from Marmet, West Virginia came through our office at the Driving School, 3rd Transportation Squadron, at Bien Hoa Air Base, just for a visit. I worked there as the clerk typist/interpreter. He was beaming with excitement; he was going home to America. “Phan, you can buy anything you want, no need for the black market like over here. Gigantic grocery stores with all types of food, detergents, candies, big department stores with clothes, shoes, hats, jewelry. You name it. You should go to America! I will help, I have an uncle who owns a business, he will give you a job.”

I said, “Ok, I will investigate that.” Thinking…*sure, I believe you.*

I did investigate, by making a trip to Saigon. I took a crowded bus. All the seats were filled, and all the produce in burlap bags, chickens and ducks in cages, were piled high atop the roof. I made several trips to the Ministry of Interior, filled out the application, then waited – only to be told by letter that if you have an incredibly special skill, it might be possible.

Then one evening just like any other, when I came to the base chapel for evening mass after work, Father Cain said, “Phan, you have been helping us so much, and we really appreciate it. Is there anything we can do for you? Do you want to go to America to attend school?”

“Yes, I very much would like that.” I could not speak fast enough, fearing he might change his mind. I told him that in our country, going to a foreign country to study only happened if you were the son or daughter of a high-ranking officer or a very rich person. It would never happen to someone of my social status. I told him about my first attempt with the help of David Looney. Father said we should try again, and we should find a school that would accept me.

On my Sundays off, I had been volunteering as the interpreter for Father Major James Cain in his civic action work with the Bien Hoa orphanage. A week later, he had arranged for my acceptance at Lamson Business College, a private school in Phoenix, Arizona. Now I had to apply for a passport and a student visa. There was no problem with a student visa from the United States, but the passport was a big problem. The Vietnamese government did not want to issue passports. They did not want anyone to leave the country, knowing everyone would leave if they could.

Then I heard a soft voice: “You know what you could do?” said the man behind the desk.

“No, I do not.”

“You could just apply to the government for a visitor’s visa. Then get an extension as soon as you arrive, at the San Francisco Vietnamese Consular Office. I have seen that done many times.”

Like magic, my body and spirit came alive. Something in his voice made me believe he was telling the truth, and that was exactly what I did, with the help of Father Cain.

Finally, I was leaving on Pan Am to America. Father Cain picked up me and my family in a big van to head for Tan Son Nhat International Airport in Saigon. I wore a brand-new Vietnamese dress. My father and my sister Van came with us. We met with my older sister and family at the airport. I was so excited, somewhat nervous. I had the feeling that I was walking on air or maybe water.

We got to the airport only to find out the Pan Am flight was canceled due to a strike.

Oh God! My visa had expired. Yes, I had 30 days to leave the country and I picked the last date. Thinking…what was I thinking? I was thinking that I doubted I would ever want to return to Vietnam, and I may never see my family again, so I picked the last day. Now we had to return to the Ministry of the Interior to renew my passport.

In my brand-new orange dress, I presented my visa to an official and told him my story.

“Do you have the tax clearance document?” he demanded.

“No sir, I do not. I gave you that form the last time I was here.”

“You must give me that form or we cannot renew your passport.”

I was hitting that rock wall again, and I did not see how I could break through.

That hopeless, helpless feeling returned – the feeling that I often have of a mosquito standing in front of a buffalo. Except this time, the powerful feeling burst open the gate of all my emotion and tears. I stood there sobbing loudly, feeling hopeless, letting the pain transform into tears. The anger, resentment, despair came up, and I felt somewhat released, too.

I felt lighter and lighter as tears streamed from my eyes. People were staring, but I did not care. The official left his desk and came back a moment later with my folder. He renewed my visa, giving me another 30 days to leave the country.

Before leaving the office of the Ministry of the Interior, Father Cain shook hands and thanked the official while trying to tuck some money in his hand, but the official refused. Father Cain told me later that when he saw me crying, he knew we would make some progress.

A week later I was leaving Vietnam on Pan Am, heading for Phoenix, Arizona.

Taking a last look at my motherland through the window – this I remember vividly. Here is my birthplace—*chon nhau cat run*, the place where my umbilical cord was cut and buried. I mumbled: I will never return to this sorrowful place ever again, feeling a lump in my throat combined with a sense of victory.

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-Phan Nguyen Barker

Biography

Phan Nguyen Barker was born in Tu Chau, Ha Dong Province, North Vietnam, and went south with her family when Vietnam was divided in 1955. She came to the United States in 1969 and attended Lamson Business College, Phoenix College and Arizona State University. In 1975 she received a Bachelor of Art in Education. For many years she did not want to return to Vietnam. In her mind, it was a place of death and sorrow.

In January 1992 she returned with Jeanette Foster, an American journalist friend. After a 23-year absence Phan was able to re-establish relationships with her sister and her sister's nine children and grandchildren. She took her sister to their native village north of Hanoi to visit their uncle and cousins and to burn incense at her mother's grave.

Upon returning to her home in Kona, Hawai'i she dealt for months with the overwhelming emotions stirred by the trip. The White Mourning Cloth series of sculptures, made of Haole Koa, cotton linter and banana bark, was about mourning the death of her mother and about the pain of growing up in the war seeing suffering, death, violence and corruption. When the series was completed, Phan created a healing ceremony for herself and her community.

To support her sister's village in Giang Dien, 30 miles from Ho Chi Minh City, Phan created Seedling of Peace, a not-for-profit organization, which built two classrooms for Giang Dien Elementary school, fixed the village's road, provided a well with a filter system for drinking water and awarded gifts annually to encourage students to excel in school.

Phan's exhibitions over the years – The White Mourning Cloth series, Women's Beauty/Women's Fate, Landscape for the Souls, Temple for the Wandering Souls, The Garden's Within, and Temple for the Inquiring Souls – have been about the search for healing herself and others. According to Phan, "Through art, I am searching for wholeness. Art is my spiritual path."

Chronology of Phan Nguyen Barker's life from 1946 to 1969.

1946 Phan was born in a Catholic Village Tu Chau, Ha Dong province, north Vietnam.

1954 Phan's mother passed away.

1955—1960 Vietnam was divided. Phan, her father, and two sisters moved to South Vietnam with their priest Father Du and the other people in their village. After staying at numerous temporary shelters, they settled in a mud house in Cu Chi, Binh Duong Province. Her father taught school, raised chickens and cultivated bananas. The family made firecrackers for several years during this period.

1960—1965 The family moved to Xom Moi for one year while her father was in training at the Police Academy in Saigon. In 1961, they moved to Bien Hoa Province where her father was assigned. Phan passed the entrance exam to enter L'Ecole des Art Applique, The School of Applied Arts of Bien Hoa, with a scholarship for four years. She graduated in 1965 with honor.

1965—1966 Phan's father vetoed the idea of her attending the College of Fine Art in Saigon but allowed her to transfer to Ngo Quyen High in Bien Hoa. She thought if she could pass the national exam Baccalaureate I and II, she could become a teacher after three years. She failed part I.

1967—1969 Phan got a job as clerk typist and was then promoted to interpreter for the USAF 3rd Transportation Squadron on Bien Hoa Air Base. She worked six days a week, attending English class at night and doing volunteer work on Sundays for Father Major James Cain.

1969—1972 With help from Father Cain, she applied for a student visa and came to the United States, attending Lamson Business College for two years, passing all requirements except shorthand and Dictaphone.

1972—1975 Phan transferred to Phoenix College to study art and then to Arizona State University. She graduated in 1975 with a BA in Art Education. On April 30, 1975, the Communists of the North took over the South. Her father and hundreds of thousands of former officers, religious leaders, intellectuals, merchants, and employees of the old regime, were put in re-education camps.

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