

2024



TRẦN THẢO MIÊN

Portfolio

Have a good rest!

2024

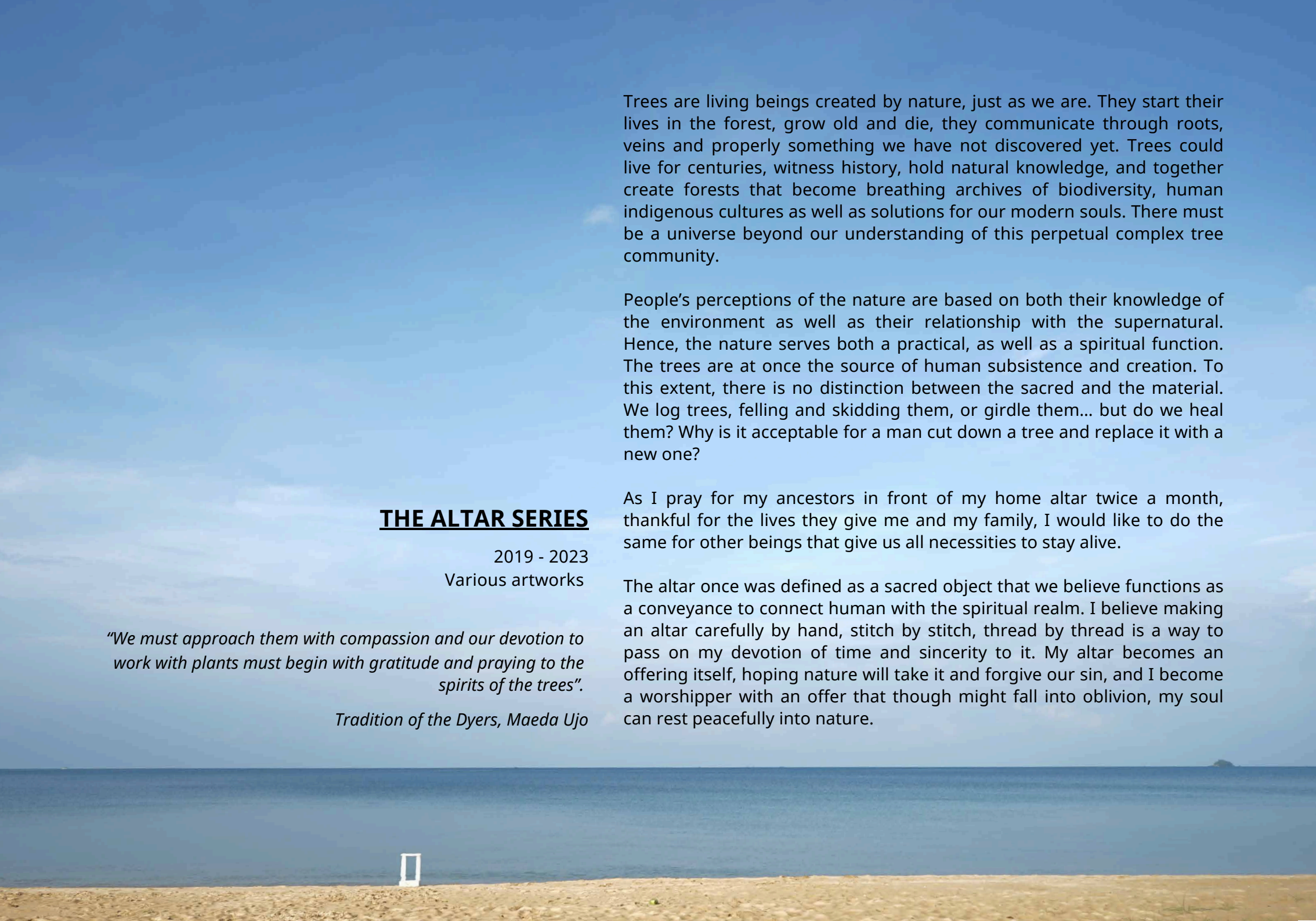
30 x 60 x 180 cm

Hand embroidered with used-to-be nomad clothes, fashion waste, Sơn-ta-lacquered leaf skeleton

Means of Production Exhibition, New York

From the bustling fashion scenes of London and Hanoi to the serene path of solo travel spanning Iran to Timor-Leste, since 2016, I have been embracing the ethos of "Busy Living Slow." In a world of fast-paced art industry, I realized the resonance between my Busy Living Slow lifestyle and Karl Marx's ideologies of work and the timeless wisdom that lies in Sei Shonagon's The Pillow Book. "Have a Good Rest" is my ode to this unrushed pace, reminding us of the power of rest as both rejuvenation and resistance. Lay your head on my pillow book, and rest as you protest.





Trees are living beings created by nature, just as we are. They start their lives in the forest, grow old and die, they communicate through roots, veins and properly something we have not discovered yet. Trees could live for centuries, witness history, hold natural knowledge, and together create forests that become breathing archives of biodiversity, human indigenous cultures as well as solutions for our modern souls. There must be a universe beyond our understanding of this perpetual complex tree community.

People's perceptions of the nature are based on both their knowledge of the environment as well as their relationship with the supernatural. Hence, the nature serves both a practical, as well as a spiritual function. The trees are at once the source of human subsistence and creation. To this extent, there is no distinction between the sacred and the material. We log trees, felling and skidding them, or girdle them... but do we heal them? Why is it acceptable for a man cut down a tree and replace it with a new one?

As I pray for my ancestors in front of my home altar twice a month, thankful for the lives they give me and my family, I would like to do the same for other beings that give us all necessities to stay alive.

The altar once was defined as a sacred object that we believe functions as a conveyance to connect human with the spiritual realm. I believe making an altar carefully by hand, stitch by stitch, thread by thread is a way to pass on my devotion of time and sincerity to it. My altar becomes an offering itself, hoping nature will take it and forgive our sin, and I become a worshipper with an offer that though might fall into oblivion, my soul can rest peacefully into nature.

THE ALTAR SERIES

2019 - 2023

Various artworks

"We must approach them with compassion and our devotion to work with plants must begin with gratitude and praying to the spirits of the trees".

Tradition of the Dyers, Maeda Ujo



The Benign Offering 1

2019

Embroidery with found rayon yarns

7cm x 8cm

Thai Nguyen, Vietnam

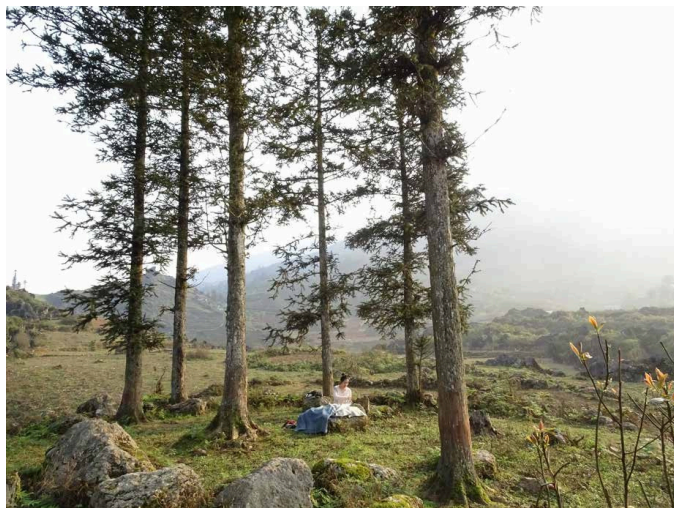
The forest has been 'home' to us, offering their lives for our sake, protecting us from evil spirits to gun bullets during the war, sheltering us through storms and rain, floods, and wind.

When I was working in fashion and textile industry, people were hyped about sustainable wood pulp-made fabrics such as rayon, viscose and lyocell. Then I heard the news that high demand for such materials in China led to severe deforestation in Indonesia. Eventually, once I visited the small knitting factory, there were 150kgs of yarn and thread ready to be burnt as their daily process, I rescued some yarns, dropped the work and never went back to fashion.

I create this first altar from rayon yarn I saved that day. These yarns are part of nature that human took, modified, traded and then discarded. This altar is made for those forests that have died for the needs of humans. It is my devotion to slowly embroidery each leaf, hoping to approach nature with compassion and gratitude.

This fragile altar is placed in a remaining spider web in the forest opening as a sign for visitors to slow down and behold. As textile master Shimura Fukumi has said: "If we still our heart enough for the lives of trees, and grasses to reach us, we will realize of our own accord how precious they are".





The Benign Offering 2

2022
Embroidery with found yarns
various sizes
Tả Phìn, Sapa, Việt Nam

Once, a stand of towering pine trees adorned the landscape of Tả Phìn, their shadows dancing alongside table-sized quartz stones that adorned the earth. Amidst this serene tableau, my collective sought solace, retreating to this sacred space during our indigo dye research and development expeditions.

One year's passage cast a poignant transformation. I returned to the healing grove to discover an altered reality – half of the sentinels felled, their presence forgotten by many, their guardianship dissolved into anonymity. In the footsteps of time, their origins blurred, and the essence of these trees dissolved from local memory. Who were the architects of their demise? What stories did these trees shelter within their embrace? The very essence of their silent voices now hangs in the balance, carried by the wind to distant corners.

Through these meticulously embroidered leaves in red, I conjure a vision of their plight – the arteries of their existence bleeding as their roots cling tenaciously to the earth, even in death. Their remnants stand as whispers of the resilience of life, an echo of the beauty they once embodied.

The altar series





The altar series

THE ALTAR

2021

Embroidery with silk organza, leaf skeletons, death insect, monofilament yarn and mica

65 x 40 x 40cm

Vinpearl Resort, Phú Quốc island, Việt Nam

In the sprawling Vinpearl Resort, a massive retreat area born from the remnants of a once-vast rainforest, the whispers of leaves linger. I contemplate the essence of trees that relinquished their dominion for the expanse of this resort. Do their spirits, still tethered to this realm, echo through the passage of time? Amidst the laughter of visitors and the hum of life, the question arises: Should the souls of these trees be venerated by those who now flourish in the shadows they once cast?

Within the heart of Vietnamese business enclaves, the legacy of devotion endures through altars honoring the Spirit of the land (Thổ Địa). However, my altar embodies a narrative not only of nature's silent sacrifice but also of humanity's symbiotic hope with the dissolving forests. An age-old tradition, rooted in the belief that spirits of lands wield influence over the prosperity of the soil and commerce should be extended with reverence to forest and trees spirits as well.





The altar series

8100:1

2022

Found leaf skeletons, monofilament yarn,
fabric and metal frame
300 x 270 x 270cm

The Folliage IV, Vincom Centre for
Contemporary Art, Hà Nội, Việt Nam

Different from site-specific altar works which are dedicated to the trees and forests that were fallen for human needs, this altar is placed in white-cube space for the first time attempt, giving the artist the opportunity to observe how the audience would interact with the work.

Spending 5 hours daily in a month, Mien offers a generous exchange of her 8100 minutes of leaf embroidery and building works, with 1 minute from each audience to still their heart, step into this human-size altar to pray for the spirits of trees. Because a dead tree should not be easily covered by replanting a new one, since the whole bio-knowledge of the lost ones was gone.





The altar series

Untitled (the memorial)

2023

Fabric, corset bond

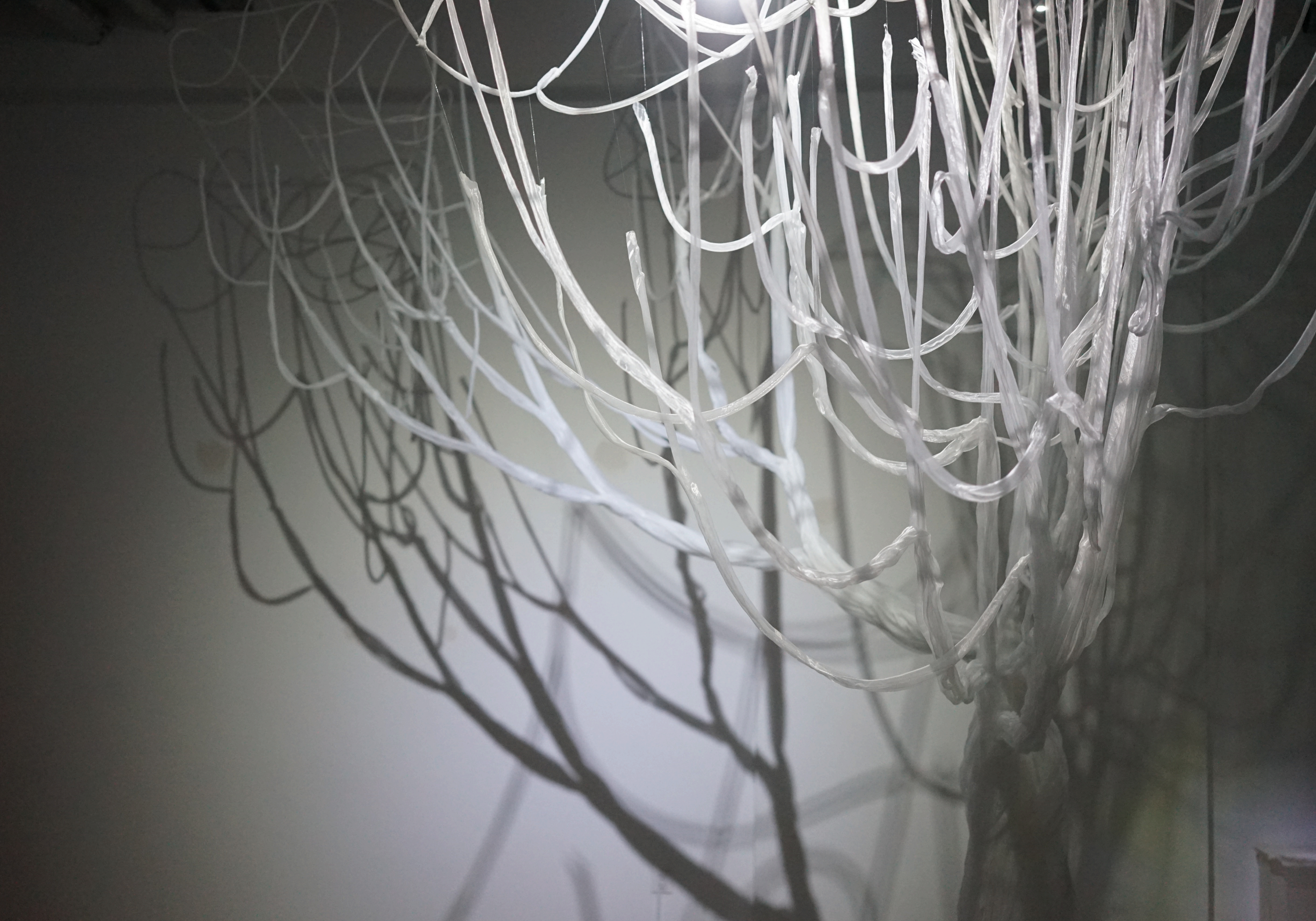
500 x 500 x 400 cm

Open studio at Sàn Art Studio Season 2

Hồ Chí Minh, Việt Nam

In San Art Residency, I learnt how to grow a tree. A tree embedded with my spirits grows not against, but in harmony with a wide white space. How does the tree become sacred? The tree had its spirit first, then people worshipped it, or did it happen in the other way?

Recycling leftover materials from my previous works, I reverse the process of making a tree, starting with embroidering twigs and branches, and then forming its trunk by connecting boughs altogether. The process required extreme meticulousity, and as the sculpture evolved into a living presence, a symbiosis evolved, I inhabited the space, and in turn, my creation inhabited me.





Untitled (cemetery)

2023

Hollong babies, concrete, incense

80 x 100 x 100cm

Open studio at Sàn Art Studio Season 2

Hồ Chí Minh, Việt Nam

In the labyrinthine city of Saigon, where concrete trumps soil, a haunting sight emerged – the Hollong baby seeds strewn along every street. Their fate, sealed by circumstance, spurred a silent cry for a burial ground – a sanctuary where their dreams of towering alongside their forebears might endure.

The altar series





Just-in-case

2023

Tracing paper and metal frame, paper maché with recycled calender and leave skeletons

250 x 200 x 130cm

Mind and Machine Exhibition, Vietnamese Women's Museum, Hà Nội, Việt Nam

"Just-in-case" imitates the display of immersive gaming station with full surround screen and chair as a conversation between the seem-to-be-perfect AI realm and the human imperfect creation. Tracing paper - the cellulose fiber material used to be a key for percisely copying art and design works that are soon superseded by technology - are used to transfer Mien's conversation with ChatGPT about making altar for spirit of the the tree and the visual result generated by Adobe Firefly. Opposit is her paper maché altar made of recycled calendar, the man-made time record system, which incorporating perspectives from her research on lost ancient rituals and indigenous knowledge. "Just-in-case" questions the way we preserve and revive cultural practices in this AI era. This altar is also foldable, light weight, easy to put in case for carrying in case of emergency.



GATE 300

Nov 2021 - Mar 2022

In collaboration with the 300-year-old Bodhi of Văn Miếu

Embroidery with found leaf skeleton, monofilament yarn.

300 x 400 cm

Temple of Literature: Văn Miếu - Quốc Tử Giám

In a testament to the profound impact of time, GATE 300 emerged as a tribute to the rich history and dynamic transformation of the oldest university. This leaf-skeletons-installation was born from the opportunity granted by the absence of tourists for nearly two years, allowing the 300-year-old Bodhi tree to experience the changing seasons in solitude. Its leaves gracefully descended to the ground, transforming into intricate skeletons, adorned in myriad shades of brown.

Adjacent to this venerable tree stands the Khue Van Cac - Constellation of Literature pavilion, crowned by open-air circles atop its structure. These symbolic hollow circles represent the boundless path of knowledge, free from constraints and open to diverse origins. Inspired by the significance of this historic site, I crafted a circular gate using the delicate leaf skeletons from the Bodhi tree itself, an entity that has undoubtedly borne witness to the sweeping transitions of the past three centuries. This gate beckons all to explore the potent heritage of the university, originally conceived as a sanctuary of learning and personal growth for Vietnamese students.

Yet, as the main gate opened to welcome the public, my gate remained unfinished, silently awaiting its unveiling. The very gate that had absorbed months of careful effort, collecting and embroidering leaf skeletons in unison with the Bodhi tree, was taken down prematurely, eclipsed by the bustling arrival of humanity. The rush of eager visitors, long overdue in fulfilling their everyday routines, swarmed in, capturing moments, exercising, and engaging in prayer within the temple's embrace. This bittersweet culmination underscores the cyclical nature of change, a reminder that time, history, and human experience converge within the spaces we inhabit and the stories they carry.



PASSING FANCY

2021

Embroidery with leaf skeletons,
silk organza and monofilament yarn

70 x 200 x 120 cm

Phu Quoc United Center, Phu Quoc, Việt Nam

Within the scope of Phu Quoc United Center Art Residency, I ventured into the world of vanishing forests that surrendered themselves to luxurious resorts. Amidst these carefully tended, pesticide-protected trees, I discovered delicate skeleton leaves, residing in an oasis untouched by nature's trials.

These trees, along with the resort's visitors, seem to embody an existence detached from the mundane busy cycles of life. "PASSING FANCY" delves into this paradox. Do these trees truly find contentment in their sheltered existence? Do visitors immersed in this manufactured paradise find fulfillment detached from nature's rhythms?

Passing Fancy prompts reflection on constructed perfection's allure and its fleeting nature. It contrasts human aspirations with earth's enduring ecosystems, capturing the interplay between our ideals and profound truths.





HOLOBIONTS

2020

Embroidery with old fishing net and monofilament yarn

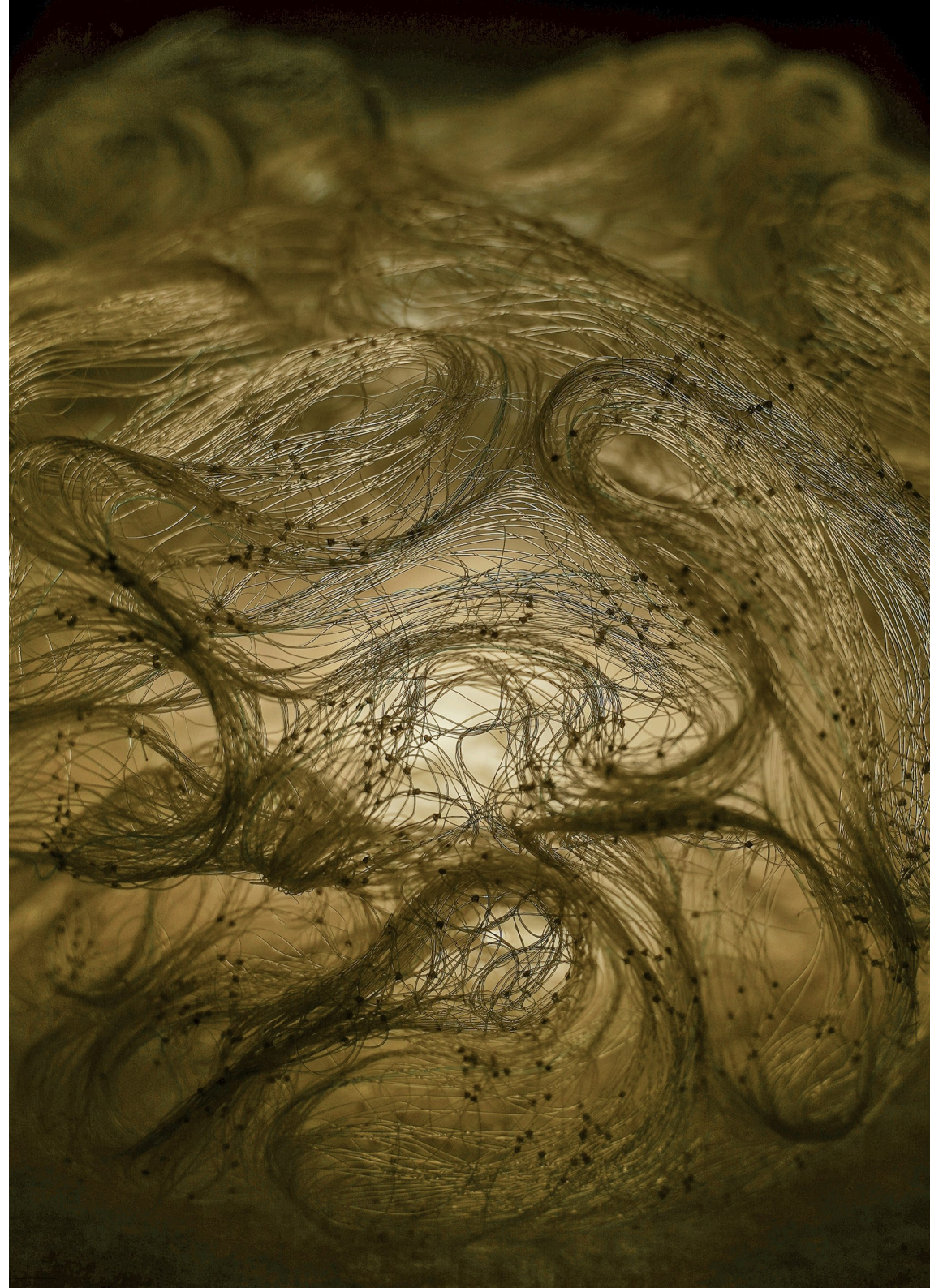
Citizen Earth exhibition

Hanoi Museum of Biology, Hanoi, Vietnam and

A holobiont is an assemblage of a host and the many other species living in or around it, which together form a discrete ecological unit. Well-studied Holobionts include coral reefs, soil and human.

Scientists start to gather more evidence showing that the microbiome can affect the blood-brain barrier, which controls what comes in and out of the brain. Gut microbiota also can influence the production of 80% serotonin - one of the main chemicals that control our mood. According to holobiont theory, the brain-derived neurotrophic factor which is important for learning, memory and high-order thinking is also influenced by microflora. Does it mean our characters, behaviours, and even my fate are rooted in these microorganisms living on and inside me? There is also a chance that the human five senses are dependent on the types of microbiota that stay on our skin, in our oral and nasal cavities. Vaginal microfloral plays a major role in the physical and mental health of our children.

The Covid-19 pandemic shows us the power of just one microspecies. The number of microbiota inside us is 10 times more than our cells, so imagine how much power they have over us. Are they the owner of our bodies?





THOUGHTS

15 x 20 x 60 cm

Citizen Earth exhibition, Hanoi Museum of
Biology, Hà Nội, Việt Nam

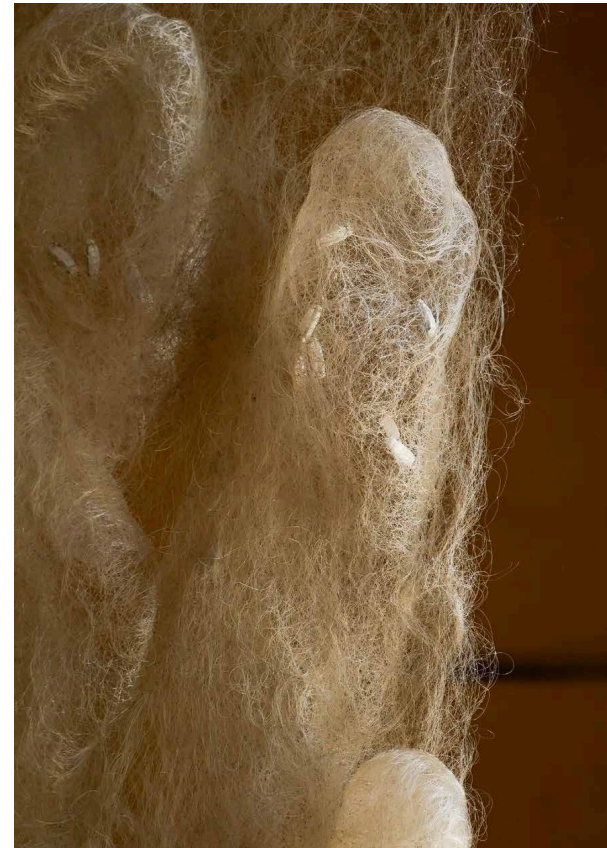




TOUCH

200 x 100 x 50cm

Citizen Earth exhibition, Hanoi Museum of
Biology, Hà Nội, Việt Nam



In this project, I reassume the power of those almost invisible communities living in and around us. All three soft sculptures are made with human waste - fishnet collected in Sam Son, Vietnam - to remind viewers what we are doing with our own health. Our lives would change based on the environment that those organisms live in, meaning the air we breath, the water we drink, the food we eat and also the soil that nourishes our food.



BIRTH

120 x 60 x 7cm

The International Centre for Interdisciplinary Science
and Education (ICISE) Quy Nhơn, Việt Nam



CREATIVE ACTION FELLOWSHIP - Mekong Cultural Hub

2024

Happening

with Wu Wei Wei, Soksopha Monthatip , Noutnapha
Soydala and Lynn Nandar Htoo

Mekong Cultural Hub (MCH) Meeting Point, Hanoi 2024

The Creative Action Fellowship Program invites 2 co-curators, artist Tan Vatey and art organiser Sinta Wibowo, and 5 artist Fellows to collectively co-create experiences for the participants at Meeting Point.

The selected artists are coming to Hanoi early, and from 12th-20th March will be in full-time residency and preparation for the creative actions they wish to develop. During this residency period they will explore and exchange their own perspectives from the grassroots and then through art, creativity, physical action, or emotional sensing, collaboratively develop one or more 'creative actions' that they will facilitate during the Meeting Point.

The aim of these 'actions' will be to bring the Meeting Point participants into conversation and exchange on Meeting Point's theme Perspectives from the Grassroots by making an experiential connection to the topic and the dialogue, as a contrast and a complement to the more traditional presentations, panels and intellectual dialogues that will also be included in the program.



SIGN CHORUS

2022

Embroidered textile banners

In collaboration with Moi Tran, teachers and students of Central Deaf Service (CDS)

Various sizes

SIGN CHORUS (2022) came into existence as a response to the original concept of 'Civic Sound Archive' by artist Moi Tran, as a gesture of reparation to the initial exclusive of non-verbal communication. Sign Chorus is made in collaboration with teachers and students at Central Deaf Service in Da Nang, Vietnam, importantly aims to represent communities where non-verbal expression is the dominant form of communication. This multimedia body of work looks to ask questions about the sonic worlds we register and recognise and those that are under-heard.

SIGN CHORUS manifests as a set of textile banner instructions for a non-verbal performance, replacing the conventional paper score. Installed in such a way that the audience is invited to engage, participate and perform the sign score as a gesture of communication and learning beyond listening.

The creation process of a textile installation led me to think about the under-heard trees and plants used as kind-of-hanger stuff, poll points, etc. for various purpose in our bustling cities. In between exhibitions in Da Nang and London, I try to install these works at neighbourhood park in Hanoi, watching people interact or ignore the signs while retaining their activities. Suddenly, I realize these installations somehow align with my practice of bring more visibility to these resilient trees and nature.

Collaboration works

Cosmic Wander - Đạo Mẫu

2019 - 2021

Full set costumes

for Cosmic Wander project by Choy Ka Fai

Exhibited at CosmicWander: Expedition, Singapore Art Museum, Feb 2021 and Tanz im August, Berlin, Aug 2021

Throughout the 600 years of Đạo Mẫu, there were many new Gods and Goddesses has 'entered' the religion. We imagine if new Gods with new power entering the religions



God-tex for The Uncle





Prosperity Goddess



1979





Thank you.

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