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HK \$166 JP ¥2172  
KR ₩24000 NZ \$30  
SG \$27 US \$20



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The ~~Interview~~ Room

## The Mistake Room

## Where the Sea Remembers



Installation view of selected works from TRUC-ANH's *Ink Kingdom* series, 2015–, ink on paper, dimensions variable, at “Where the Sea Remembers,” The Mistake Room, Los Angeles, 2019. Courtesy the artist and The Mistake Room.

Unlike their predecessors, the 14 Vietnamese artists and one collective featured in “Where the Sea Remembers” do not dwell on the trauma of the Vietnam War. Rather, they belong to a younger generation—many from the war’s resultant diaspora—who have returned to Vietnam from abroad in the past decade, bringing with them refreshing perspectives on the country’s past and present. Staged at The Mistake Room in Los Angeles, the show served as a personalized cultural dispatch from a lesser-known Vietnam.

Trong Gia Nguyen touches on how technology and media operate within a rapidly developing Vietnam in his sculpture *Cracked Mobile No. 5* (2019). The artist welded iron within a raw frame of gypsum and enamel paint to mimic the glass cracks of a shattered cell phone. Referencing the traditional window grates of colonial homes in Southeast Asia, the black iron fissures radiating from the bottom right corner of the frame allude to the darker aspect of globalized communication and

media that have flooded into Vietnam’s urban centers, in turn causing the erosion of local, traditional values.

Another section of the gallery was dedicated to explorations of Vietnamese history. For *Voyages de Rhodes* (2014–17), Phan Thao Nguyen purchased on eBay a first-edition travelogue on Vietnam by 17th-century French Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes, who is credited with establishing the Romanized Vietnamese script. On excised pages of the book, Phan painted watercolors that are by turns fanciful (children glide around a water tower), strange (children kneel with black chopsticks extending from their mouths into the ground), spiritual (villagers bow to a blindfolded deity enshrined within a lotus flower), and even anachronistic (businessmen ascend and descend escalators). Eighteen of these paintings were displayed within glass frames nailed perpendicular to a small white partition, forming a charming reel of imagery. By juxtaposing the missionary’s text with her own fantastical paintings, Phan creates a reflective case study that reclaims the power of the colonizer’s language, while gesturing at the inherent unreliability of narrative and artistic representation.

Elsewhere, artists grappled with how the diasporic body registers collective trauma and conflicted histories, and reconciles its placement in the world. Truc-Anh’s *Ink Kingdom* (2015–), a series of 27 differently sized portraits, alluded to isolation and otherness. In one acrylic painting, a man’s wrinkles are distorted into exaggerated forms and lines that render his expression moody and ambiguous, while a postcard-

sized piece of paper depicts the faint contour of a Buddhist monk. Lined up on a back wall, these portraits of seemingly random subjects nevertheless gain an odd sense of unity. Meanwhile, Thinh Nguyen’s installation *Across the American Plains* (2014–15), comprising the artist’s journal and photographs documenting their journey hitchhiking across the United States, probed notions of home and alienation. On one wall of an L-shaped partition was a small, low-resolution photo of the artist and their family at their old bamboo farmhouse in Vietnam, while six pairs of photographs taken in the US adorned the other. The faraway placement between the walls seems intentional, alluding to the geographical and psychological distance experienced when one moves to a new country. In one pair of photographs, a blurred snapshot of a forest captured from a moving car accompanies an image of a crumpled comforter graced by the halo of a lens flare. Another pair juxtaposes an image of a hazy lake and that of ruffled bedsheets. The obscured landscape photographs are gray and cold, producing a sense of alienation that is heightened in contrast to the sharpness of images capturing their imprint on the empty beds.

“Where the Sea Remembers” displayed the intellectual, emotional and creative breadth of Vietnam’s returnee and diaspora artists, providing a rich and unforgettable visual context for understanding the country and its people’s complex histories.

RUBEN LUONG