

MORTIMER-HAYS BRANDEIS TRAVELING FELLOWSHIP

# MUTED CONVERSATIONS

## VISUAL EXPLORATION OF SPIRITUALITY IN VIETNAM

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Image 1 - Cao Bang, 2016

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In September 2016, with funding from Mortimer-Hays Brandeis Fellowship, I started traveling across Vietnam to work on a photographic series about sites of trauma that were not officially recognized. While my initial plan was to traverse Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia because of these countries' intertwined histories, I came to realize that it is more insightful to focus on one country, especially the one in which I am a native. That aside, the Laotian and Cambodian sites of old concentration camps were beyond my access due to political barriers. The history behind these camps is bad publicity for the respective governments. As I carried on traveling, my project shifted towards looking at spirituality within Vietnamese contemporary culture. Towards the end of my travel, I was provided with an opportunity through the Materialize Grant to put up an exhibition at the Factory Contemporary Art Center in Saigon, Vietnam. The Materialize grant aims to showcase bodies of work done by emerging Vietnamese artists. Though the project is ongoing, the exhibition was an opportunity for me to consolidate my findings and develop a concrete concept for my vision.

From September to November 2016, I was staying at several sites that used to be concentration camps in Northern Vietnam, such as Cam Nhan (Yen Bai) and Quyet Tien (Ha Giang). I located these sites before my trip by reading interviews done by retired army officials and prisoners from the Republic of Vietnam. There were lots of restrictions and obstacles as many of these sites are under military management. I started to look into the relationships between local residents and the deceased that were buried around there. Observing the daily rituals performed by the locals prompted me to process the idea of spirituality in a larger context. With a whole year of traveling to do across Vietnam, I decided to examine the roles of spirituality and superstition in contemporary Vietnam, the

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attitudes people have towards these practices and how they are transformed along a changing socio-economic landscape.

I recognize how the time of the year affects certain practices and rituals in each region of Vietnam, due to different weathers and economic agricultural activities like harvesting. During the year-end months in the North of Vietnam, I was particularly drawn to the act of burning because of its commonality, from straw in the rice fields to hell money<sup>1</sup> and votive objects at almost every household. This practice has been carried out from time to time and holds a symbolic meaning, delivering the offerings through the act of burning. While the act itself is rather universal, I was drawn to the context, the backdrop of these activities. In image 2, I juxtaposed it with a political propaganda banner to hint at another layer of meaning: burning is also symbolic of dissident and protest.

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<sup>1</sup> Hell money is a form of joss paper printed to resemble legal tender bank notes. The notes are not an officially recognized currency or legal tender since their sole intended purpose is to be offered as burnt-offerings to the deceased as often practiced by the Chinese and several East Asian cultures.



Image 2 - Cam Nhan, 2016

Burning straws after every harvest is an age-old agricultural practice in Vietnam, but in recent years there have been more articles pointing out the environmental harm in these activities. Attaching such visual imagery of burning smoke with political message about nationalism, I begin to examine my national identity in relation with the Communist party and traditional practices.

Aside from the political subtext, I am drawn to how people adapt and incorporate these practices into different aspects of their life. What is their understanding towards the different system of beliefs and values that overlap with one another? Where do Vietnamese people find their identity in this flux of historical legacies and contemporary movements?

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While these questions refer to a collective mindset, the observations are within my personal context. I grew up in a household that is half-Buddhist, half-Catholic and my relatives fought on both sides of the Vietnam War. So are many other Vietnamese people, whose identity is the legacy of conflicting histories, values and beliefs. Besides photographing strangers, I photographed my family across Vietnam extensively over several ceremonies, from a funeral of a family member to an exhumation of my grandfather's remains.

In the beginning of 2017, I traveled across different towns and provinces from South Vietnam to Central Vietnam and continued to observe the ways in which people express their spirituality, from the ways they decorate places to the performance of specific rituals in different occasions. With more images being made, I gravitate towards staging certain pictures based on the ones I found or re-enacting scenes based on memories. I want to add an element of fiction into this narrative because the topic of spirituality deals with myth and mysticism. If my photo series aims to explore this theme within my personal context, it shall explore the imaginative aspect by offering a half-believable narrative. At the same time, I want to question the attitude that people have towards photography, especially when most audience expects a straightforward narrative. I intend to create a sequence of images that resemble a dreamscape of bizarre reality.



Image 3 and 4 - Saigon, 2017

The backstories of these images would explain how they tie in with the ongoing societal changes. My family had to exhume my grandfather because the city authority was planning to clear the cemetery where he was buried in order to build new residential areas and parks. My family made it up as we went. We booked a monk who recommended us a “good date” to exhume my grandfather’s body and to cremate him. Such contemporary changes in modern progress challenge traditional values and practices. I wonder what would happen to the graves whose families can’t afford to move, and how reburial will be carried out for different families of different religions.

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I see these stories as part of a bigger picture, and want to construct a more conceptual narrative instead of a straightforward documentary project. I want to understand better not just the significance of traditional cultural practices but also myself as an observer, a voyeur or a provocateur. I therefore plan to make images that embody moments in between of concrete and abstract ideas, without much contextual information.



Image 5 and 6 - Thua Thien Hue, 2017 and Hanoi, 2016

As I started out with a focus on death and its meaning, I soon recognized it as a driving point for many systems of belief and mysticism in Vietnamese culture. Perhaps due to the country's history of bloody warfare and conflicts, most Vietnamese people carry a

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strong attitude towards spiritual beliefs and have an affinity to mysticism. While I cannot collect data to back up my point, my photographs attempt to observe something that is not quantifiable, which is how visual representations translate perceptions that people hold towards the immaterial. I veer away from just describing the rituals and focus on moments that I deem visually inquisitive.



Image 7 - Ninh Binh, 2011

Most importantly, I want to produce a body of work that is not visually guided or motivated solely by Western standard. Returning to Vietnam after years of studying overseas, I understand my position as an insider-outsider with regards to the changing culture. I utilized my personal knowledge of Vietnamese culture based on my upbringing as



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guidance for my project. I examined symbols, imageries and icons that dominate Vietnamese lores and myths and how they are situated in modern Vietnam.



Image 7 & 8 - Da Lat, 2016 and Da Lat, 2016

What stood out to me were how animal imageries decorated various spaces, from religious to non-religious spaces. Mythical creatures like a dragon to comical ones like a kangaroo wearing a red scarf (a required item for Communist youths) are adopted and presented under colorful neon lights, invoking an uncanny and surreal atmosphere. At the same time, these representations of religious figures come off as kitschy in their shapes and details. I add these photographs into my series as part of an imaginative and

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explorative process. I will decide how the images connect with each other, through their content or form or both, with consistent or contrasting colors and lights.

Towards the end of my fellowship year, I was offered to exhibit at The Factory Contemporary Art Center in Saigon, Vietnam. The process of preparation for the exhibition enabled me to critically edit my photographs and refine my concept. I recognize that the project is very much about my Vietnamese identity in the flux of global influences and how I develop a visual understanding through the theme of spirituality.

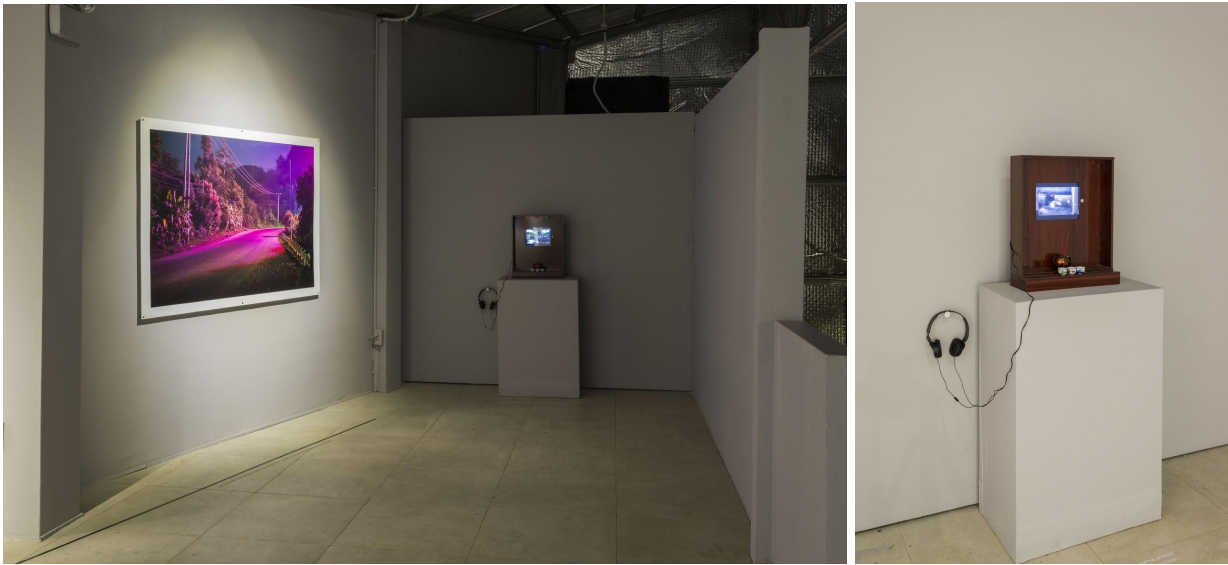


Image 9, 10, 11 & 12 - Installation photos from the Exhibition

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The above images from my exhibition illustrate how I work with an irregular space to install my photographs. They are presented in a non-linear format and an irregular layout because I want the viewers to float through the body of photographs. The group of images on the walls work together as a web of consciousness that pieces together moments from various events and landscapes. The photographs are printed at different sizes so as to emphasize on certain details and the proportions of different subjects, objects. These still images build on top of one another towards a sculptural installation of a short looped video. The video is part of my experimentation with visuals and audio. I put together several footages that are visually coherent and contains specific sounds. The exhibition was open to public in Saigon, Vietnam from August 10 to September 15, 2017.

My exhibition engaged with the Vietnamese public and sparked discussion about national identity as defined by spirituality and modernization. This outcome was a core goal of my Fellowship. Through both conversations at the exhibit and a three hour artist talk on August 25 2017, viewers provided detailed feedback on how they interpreted, understood, and related to my work. Bearing this in mind, I will continue the project. I am also in discussion with a local, Saigon-based publisher to potentially develop the series into a book.

I credit the Mortimer-Hays Brandeis Traveling Fellowship as a foundational experience in my emerging photography career. Through the Fellowship, I realized a body of work that has been in conception for a long time, dating to my pre-college period. I am hopeful that this project will mature in content and form as I continue to refine it in the next stage of my career.