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One Planet

by Arlette Quynh-Anh Tran

"H is humorous if and only if P finds it funny under certain appropriate conditions and P is the right kind of person."

(Ted Cohen's formula of Humor¹)

If this formula asserts Nguyen Manh Hung's artworks as 'H', many of us – the receiver 'P' – will find Manh Hung one of the most humorous visual artists in Vietnam, for he uses essential elements in Vietnamese living and historical conditions to create punch lines. The Hanoi-born artist is known for his surrealist paintings, which depict droll combinations of military mechanisms and everyday objects; for his self-mockery through digital photography; or even for his playful experimental music composed by mixing children songs from revolutionary eras with electronic treble tunes. In the exhibition *One Planet* at Galerie Quynh, Manh Hung pushes his humor beyond a harmless zone.

The exhibition includes four bodies of works: *I've Been Here, Keep My Planet Clean, The Barricade* and *Go to Market*. Among these pieces, *I've Been Here* seems to be grounded in the most traditional form of art: oil painting. Yet, as warned previously, the convention is not safe under Nguyen Manh Hung's filter.

I've Been Here is a large-scale painting; its width reaches to almost two meters and belongs to Manh Hung's series *Mauvais Goût*. At first glance, we may mistake it as one of the thousands of souvenir pictures sold in tourist galleries, for the scenic landscape of a verdant forest, white waterfall, snowy mountains and deep pinewood. These types of pictures, introduced to Vietnam in the late 1980s, can be found in numerous households. They are considered of late to be 'kitsch', like the eponymous title. *Mauvais Goût* in French translates literally as 'bad taste'. However, how is 'kitsch' actually defined? Based on early terminology since the 1920s, 'kitsch' indicates aesthetic inadequacy. Does this imply that Vietnamese people have such bad taste? This definition of 'kitsch' exists so

broadly. They fill up empty walls in living rooms and bedrooms, together with bohemian crystal chandeliers as the symbol of an opulent lifestyle. Kitsch can satisfy any aesthetic need or expectation without complication; thus it meets the Vietnamese' hunger for copious beauty.

But Nguyen Manh Hung makes a humorous unexpected change to this kitsch European landscape, which was originally produced by a souvenir gallery's craftsman. After purchasing the decorative painting, Manh Hung added a standing figure by the bank of the waterfall. The slender man in khaki pants, white shirt and flip-flops resembles Hung, nevertheless is not an artist. He is an imperious civil defender with a red band on his arm and a stick in hand. Viewers are forced into an interesting confrontation: whereas the defender is looking down on us, we still find the whole situation laughable. It is the reverse in the usual humorous context, when the person in a position of superiority would make fun of someone who is more infirm. Incongruity is here indeed the joke. The misplaced man trying to be assertive in vain towards nature, the incorrect human – the background scale and the contrast between the kitsch scenery and violence suggest a bitter humor to viewers. *Mauvais Goût* also reminds us of a French proverb in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's famous Sherlock Holmes crime fiction series, namely "Le mauvais goût mène au crime" – "Bad taste leads to crime." What crime is there to be found in the winsome landscape? A layer of humor is woven through uncertain fear of danger. The explicit danger from *Mauvais Goût* becomes more pronounced in the other works in the exhibition.

"Le mauvais goût mène au crime" makes a coherent transition to *Keep My Planet Clean*. The sculpture is a huge artificial stone made from composite on which polymer clay figures comprising a group of riot police and a pig engage in brutal action. The soldiers are armed with shield and sticks, like the defender in *I've Been Here*, wearing dark uniforms and helmets, and identified with the number sign '6776' – signature digits created from Manh Hung's birthday. The stone suggests a new planet floating in the cosmos. Yet what kind of planet is this when it is only as small as a big rock or a meteoroid? We find here again the artist playing with scale and perspective like he applies in *I've Been Here* as well as in his surrealistic paintings.

Keep My Planet Clean sounds like a propaganda slogan and meanwhile immediately raises multiple questions. What needs to be cleansed from the planet – the pig, un-intelligence, infirmity or bad taste? The commanders' violence is represented explicitly. There is no hidden truth. Every gesture is exposed in action, in three dimensions. Everything confronts the viewers' eyes. If

violence is deliberated in Plato's Republic that fighting is for social justice, narratively told in mythology and taught in religion's martyrdom, what should be understood in *Keep My Planet Clean* as the logic of violence? Manh Hung's scenario breaks out a morality puzzle: does the pig represent injustice, which should be expelled, or does it embody the impotent class that is too weak to contribute to the planet's establishment? Respectively do the commanders strive against the vandals for their planet's righteousness or do they banish the powerless, who are considered as obstacles? Although it would be hard to locate any sense of humor within such brutality, a wicked mind can still chuckle to observe how unstable this primitive planet is floating and struggling to maintain its balance.

From the vulnerable defeat in *Keep My Planet Clean*, Nguyen Manh Hung introduces a new form of stable defense – *The Barricade*. The sculptural installation is constructed from miniature models of Soviet-style apartment blocks, which were built in Hanoi in the 1960s and 1970s for the state cadres, employees or workers, and also seen in many post-Communist countries in East Germany, Central and Eastern Europe. But these blocks in the exhibition room are very Vietnamese for their lifestyle adaptation. Manh Hung assembles the miniatures exactly like the buildings still existing in Hanoi. More than half a century has passed; accordingly the apartment blocks still carry on traces of both time and three or four generations of inhabitants. We see faded yellow walls, caged balconies, old-fashioned green wooden windows, red brick vents as the former architecture language; in between are glossy white window bars, cubic air conditioning units and metallic steel water tanks revealing the signals of modern life.

It would otherwise be a normal state of daily life in Hanoi until the artist turned these apartment blocks into a military blockade. Layers of burlap bags filled with sawdust are piled up on the building complex. The surreal and comical scene is a combination of Manh Hung's memories growing up in Hanoi and a depiction of current urban circumstances. They indicate incongruity – the state of mind when panic blends with drollness in the painting *I've Been Here*, as we see ordinary Hanoi's modern urban conditions under threat. Separate elements that have no relation to each other are fabricated into one whole structure – a barricade. Alone this forcing aggregation is already one violent act. *The Barricade* is built up to defend against occupation. Contradictorily Manh Hung uses the inhabitant's housing occupation to block off external occupation. Inhabitants are employed to defend for themselves. They are forced into a situation to survive or to be replaced. Such continuous flow simultaneously

under life threatening conditions evokes Hanoi history during the American bombing in the early 1970s, when the citizens had to learn how to save their lives by makeshift shelters and tunnels. In this installation, violence is not visible. It resonates through the scene's vulnerability. If a dollhouse is a playful game for bourgeois little girls, an apartment complex for defense serves as a satirical game of an adult artist.

Nguyen Manh Hung was born in 1976, one year after the war ended. He never witnessed its real violence, but became aware of it through his father's service in the air force as a pilot before and following the war. Aerial warfare is consequently Manh Hung's perception of the Vietnam War. His interest in military aircraft is reflected in much of his art. From aircraft images in surrealistic oil paintings, Manh Hung sculpts them into three-dimensional objects, as in *Go to Market*. It is, however, not the first time he has extracted painted airplanes into physical objects. In 2006, Manh Hung collaborated with American artist Bradford Edwards to realize a giant model made from paper and bamboo, amalgamated from American and Russian devices, which was then burned to the ground. This time, Manh Hung treats his aircraft less violently, rather with amusement.

The work is a mini aircraft, painted fashionably in silver gray, numerated 6776 in red, which launches powerfully from the wall releasing spongy white smoke in a quarter-parabolic shape behind itself. While in principle, the military is something unfamiliar to daily life, it is still very much embedded in the consciousness of many Vietnamese generations. Manh Hung renders this relationship between the Vietnamese and warfare by playing with their elements literally. He takes the most basic objects from military and everyday life, and then unifies them into one. A sturdy machine is exploited to carry goods from the market back home. Colorful fake tropical fruits in sheer plastic bags hung on the aircraft's wings make the work's appearance quite endearing. But is Manh Hung playing it safe with *Go to Market*? Viewers would rather not be tricked by his candied fruits. One may wonder: where does this aircraft lead to, back home or straight to heaven? In addition, the molded fruits are not real – gifted bombs might be camouflaged under aesthetic beauty. The aesthetic expression with vivid tints and accelerating speed to a faraway future in *Go to Market* is much too similar to cheerful propaganda posters.

Nguyen Manh Hung stages Vietnam's past and present like a distinct planet in his unique way, never tragic to crave sympathy or mercy but always with the uttermost satire. In a society constituted by morality, norms and unwritten regulations, humor from the anomaly like his becomes humor of freedom,

especially when laughter can triumph over another's aggression, or at least it happens in a surrealistic world.

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ⁱ Ted Cohen on 'Humor', *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Berys Gaut and Dominic Mclver Lopes, 2001, 375-381, New York: Routledge.