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## NGUYEN MANH HUNG

REVIEWS BY RUBEN LUONG FROM MAY/JUN 2013  
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For his first solo exhibition in Ho Chi Minh City, “One Planet” at Galerie Quynh, Vietnamese artist Nguyen Manh Hung presented a bold and humorous selection of new, three-dimensional works. The show was a testament to the aesthetic maturity of the Hanoi-born surrealist, whose playful, irony-laden work has been turning heads in the contemporary art scene of Vietnam, while also earning praise internationally.

“One Planet” featured four installations that expand on Nguyen’s prior two-dimensional works, which have mostly centered on his fascination with military aircraft (inspired by his father who was a pilot). Born in 1976, a year after the American-Vietnam War, Nguyen grew up observing its effects on daily life and reflecting on them through paintings. As a multidisciplinary artist, he became interested in sculptural formats as a way to three-dimensionally realize concepts taken from his existing paintings. Not shy of visual punch lines that convey his wry sense of humor, Nguyen’s newest installations present immersive environments with droll juxtapositions that cleverly allude to national and cultural realities in Vietnam.

The first installation, *Go to Market* (2013), combined prominent archetypes of Vietnamese culture, which resulted in an amusing twist. Incorporating Nguyen’s signature militaristic motif, a small aircraft carrying bags of plastic fruit appeared to launch from the back wall of the ground-floor gallery, with a semi-parabolic trail of exhaust rendered in wisps of cotton. Market fruits dangling from the missiles of a hostile jet fighter reflect an odd clash of territories, yet Nguyen’s understanding of their respective prevalence in Vietnamese society is apparent. Inscribing a palindromic “6776” identifier on the jet, he adds an homage to his birthdate—an impish stamp that immortalizes his tutelage under the air force and daily markets.

Perhaps the kitschiest installation of the exhibit was *I’ve Been Here* (2013), an oil painting Nguyen commissioned on the streets of Hanoi, where many clichéd landscape paintings are churned out for the tourist market. Part of a series of six paintings that he calls “Mauvais Goût” (2004), or “bad taste,” *I’ve Been Here* depicts a freshwater stream cascading down a riverbank lined with grassy knolls and verdant trees. In this overly picturesque scene, Nguyen superimposes the figure of a Vietnamese patrolman whose hands are placed behind his back, gripping a long, domineering stick, with his chin imperiously pointed upward. While Nguyen pokes fun at the garishness of Hanoi’s landscape-painting industry, he also mocks figures of power. The patrolman becomes the subject of ridicule, his false sense of sovereignty lampooned through the awkward utopian vista in which he wrongfully resides.

Attached to a corner of the upstairs gallery, *Keep My Planet Clean* (2013) continued to satirize authority with Nguyen’s trademark directness. A meteor-like rock formed of clay and resin seemed to hover in the air, atop of which stood five action figures of riot police (whose uniforms were labeled with “6776”) beating a subdued swine. The raw rock provides a gritty podium that emphasizes the barbaric absurdity of society’s plastic,



**NGUYEN MANH HUNG** *Go To Market*, 2013. Wood, nylon bags, plastic fruit, metal tubes, cotton, 220 × 400 × 60 cm. Photo by Bui The Trung Nam. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City.

indoctrinated task forces. Derived from a painting Nguyen created in 2012, the scene is a reference to revolution and the struggle to maintain balance and order.

Nguyen's exhibit ended on a more poignant note with *The Barricade* (2013). Burlap sandbags blanketed a large diorama of a Soviet-style apartment block (resembling urban housing built in Hanoi from the 1960s to the 1980s), which stretched along the gallery's back wall. The result was a shantytown-turned-fort that reflected the congested lifestyle of a Vietnamese community, as experienced by Nguyen, figuratively oppressed by the trauma of war. For the artist, the irony of a community living like rural villagers in an urban setting is a recurring concept, which was first visited in *Living Together in Paradise* (2011), a three-meter vertical model of an apartment block in Hanoi.

Keeping the militaristic themes that are prominent in his earlier paintings, Nguyen exercised greater freedom in transforming previous concepts into resonant, three-dimensional installations that are redolent of Vietnamese life. Making witty references to his Hanoi upbringing, Nguyen's interpretations were unabashed and direct, transporting audiences to a world in which everything is made bare through his biting humor.

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