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### **Less is More**

by Bradford Edwards

Establishing a fresh identity for within contemporary Vietnamese art has been a major challenge for many artists who are trying to eschew the popular, commercial imagery of their country. Nguyen Manh Hung has taken up the challenge and has succeeded in making work that is fresh and often provocative.

If Nguyen Manh Hung, 27, is a sign of things to come to the Vietnamese art community, then the horizon is bright and full of light. This young artist is bringing a fresh and personal vision to the public through many different forms of artwork. While he has mostly concentrated on painting, he has also recently been making sculpture, installations, and performances. There is a surprising and unexplainable dearth of strong artists in their twenties right now in Vietnam, which makes Hung the more interesting.

Perhaps his entering Hanoi Fine Art School as a relatively older student had a strong influence on his work. After failing the entrance examinations and portfolio submission six times, he was admitted finally at the age of 22. Failure and rejection can be an effective teacher. Rather than adjust his work to the standards of the institution, Hung doggedly kept applying until they recognized his undeniable talent. It is this persistence and focus that is clearly evident in his art today.

One approach that distinguishes Hung from most of his contemporaries is that he insists on making art about his own life, his own interest and experiences. Instead of towing the expected party line of visually describing idealized notions of nostalgia ad nauseum (village scenes, old Hanoi streets, traditional folklore, women in traditional *ao dai*, for example), Hung pursues his own ideas. For instance, he grew up as a "military brat" as his father is one of a few highly trained jet pilots in the Vietnamese Armed Forces, and some of the inspiration for a recent large series of paintings came from the view outside his window while

he was growing up.

When he peered down through the pane of glass, Hung saw most of motor scooters, cars, trucks, and workers constructing buildings. Industry is what he saw – a country rebuilding itself a breakneck speed with all the accompanying byproducts of prosperity. What better simple of all that frenetic activity than trucks, long trucks, old trucks, full buses, rusty jeeps, huge lorries? So, when he learned how to paint and wanted to paint something that mattered to him, something that he grew up with, he turned, naturally, to vehicles.

He has now completed a substantial group of vehicle painting that, in style, betray very recognizable art historic influences. One can unmistakably see Edward Hopper (1882-1967) and Rene Magritte (1898-1967) with occasional splashes of Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) and Salvador Dali (1904-1989). Having said that, this blatant homage to late art icons could have had the potential to serious hamstring his message, yet because he is so good at painting and forthright in his emulation, it somehow works. Hung is a deft painter and an accomplished draftsman, and that is key to how the paintings function. They are a warm, sincere, and attractive expression of his personal connection to certain objects-in this case, vehicles.

One of his better compositions is a straightforward portrait of a 1940s pickup truck with the bed full of flags and placards from a rally. The viewer is not told what kind of rally and there is no information displayed – only red flags wrapped around poles for transporting and mostly the backside of large signs. This lack of specificity was a sly and disarming decision because it allows a kind of wonderment and curiosity about where the truck has been. Then there is the contracting shapes of the rounded bulbous truck and the shape points and corners of the flags and signs with the deep shadow of midday cast beneath the chassis. It becomes a hybrid sculpture, a creature simultaneously familiar and unexpected.

Another piece of Hung's is a tall stout bus chockablock with what appears to be deer heads adorned with antlers or maybe skinny bulls with horns. The time of day is late afternoon, shadow thrown to the side and it is bright shiny day somewhere out in the rice fields. Again, it is the introduction of a new shape using commonly known objects that beckons and pleases the viewer. Hung can employ irony or humor and this is best expressed in a few paintings where he presents implausible scenes that look initially normal or ordinary. A composition

where he couples two old, large trucks going in opposite directions seem simple and somewhat dull at first glance. Only after actually pondering the reality of the scene - two trucks pulling against each other resulting in a stalemate – does the chuckle arrive.

So what does all this really mean? It is substantial on a few fronts. It is a rare example of a Vietnamese artist stepping resolutely outside the dominant Vietnamese/Oriental aesthetic and dealing with more current symbology rather than reaching into the past for visual vocabulary. Importantly, he is and his art is pure Vietnam. He has lived nowhere else and all his subjects are located inside the country's borders. The adoption of past painting styles (they happen to be Western in this case) is a conscious strategy – not a copying or readjustment to cater to a current trend or taste. This is smart painting, well executed and loaded with meaningful signifiers.

Being energetic and restless, seemingly innate Vietnamese characteristics, Hung is also conducting forays into installation and performance. It seems that during the past two years these two art forms have exploded in popularity in Vietnam. This is both good and bad, as is the resultant art. The country has been playing catch-up, art historically speaking, and with barely 15 years of the recommencing of contemporary art – making they are still in their infancy. The context is one of exciting discovery as well as the flip side – hasty and sloppy execution.

Hung, though, has wisely chosen the path of simplicity and understatement. He appears to be a strong proponent of generally not providing titles (or simple obvious titles), which can sometimes be frustrating in dealing with installation and performance in general. He has draped 30 black shirts and trousers soaked in a high gross resin in a room to demonstrate his appreciation for the common workers. In a statement written by Truong Tan, an influential artist and former art teacher, the clothes symbolize the workers being given a rest, their clothes worthy of display, an alternative museum piece. In a performance Hung wore typical office worker's clothes, black trousers and white shirt with black tie, while thoroughly washing himself with soap and water. This suggests an apparent attempt to clean the outside, but not being able to purify the inside or cleanse the soul.

The few but telling examples of sculpture Hung has made might provide the most intrigue. He lovingly crafted, life-size baby's milk bottles out of marble, steels, wood, and lacquer ware. Again, simplicity reigns here and allows a certain

stark beauty to sing- the pleasing shape and the glow of the material is an affirmation of growth and life. Vietnam is a young country demographically speaking, over 50 percent of the population is under 25, so there are certainly copious amounts of baby bottle to be seen.

Hung talks about what he surrounded by, the fabric of his daily existence is his ultimate source. He is Vietnamese making artwork about his personal experience of the country while pandering to no one else's taste. This is obvious because his work is highly original and resembles no other Vietnamese artists working today. Hung is very much at his own beginning, yet the start has been nothing short of breathtaking.

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