



TRƯỜNG CÔNG
TÙNG

TRAIL DUST

CANAL PROJECTS

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Trail Dust features recent work by Vietnamese artist Trương Công Tùng (Đak Lak province, b. 1986), exploring the artist's ongoing interest in the histories, rituals, and mythologies of land stewardship.

Akin to the way a gardener nurtures a parcel of land, Trương Công Tùng tends to his work over time, allowing it to evolve, change, and iterate in response to the specifics of each site. Combining natural materials with found objects of an inorganic, disruptive, or incongruent nature, Trương Công Tùng reflects on the interruption of Indigenous practices by the forces of modernity, colonialism, and conflict. Rather than lamenting what has passed, Trương Công Tùng's poetic sensibilities find resilience in a reimagining of the land as a site of communion between the physical and spiritual worlds.

At Canal Projects, Trương Công Tùng reimagines a living garden as a heavy beaded curtain. Draped along the edge of the gallery, the curtain is woven with beads that originate from forest trees including those that were introduced to Vietnam during the process of industrialization, such as coffee, avocado, rubber, and cashew trees.

Alongside the curtain are a series of low platforms filled with dirt and seeds, each

containing an installation of heavily lacquered gourds connected through a web of clear plastic tubing, bubbling as water is pumped between them. Lacquer is also utilized in a series of paintings, *Shadows in the Garden #3* (2023), in which natural and bodily forms are obscured by layers of thick lacquer tree resin sanded to a smooth, nearly glowing surface giving way to a spectral quality. Lacquer, a traditional craft material in East Asia, underwent a transformation into an art form during the French colonial period. This elevation established lacquer as a unique art medium that Trương Công Tùng now uses as a metaphor for the region's own complicated narrative—layers of history being applied, erased, and rewritten.

According to Vietnamese folklore, it is believed that the last things seen by an animal before their death are permanently captured in their eyes. In accompanying video, *The Lost Landscape #1* (2021), viewers are taken through the Natural History Museum in Paris, honing in on close-up shots of the glass eyes of taxidermied animals. Trương Công Tùng's works on view trace this journey of loss and metaphorically suggest a new path to new ends.



1. The Gourds

A wayfarer-artist was here. He moved like the wind. He hardly released a word. Sudden as he came, he is already gone. From where he arises, to where he has vanished, nobody knows. Now all you see are his black gourds scattered at your feet. Hollow gourds. Brimming, bubbling, with reddish water. Something desolate in the air. Something forlorn about these dry, homeless fruits. Something crimson-dusty.

This is a vision that often crosses the back of my eyes each time I revisit the bottle-gourds of my friend, the artist Trưòng Công Tũn. Tũn has been tinkering and making installations with gourds. The gourds are from the villages of Gia Lai and Đăk Lăk, provinces in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, where he grew up in a poor farming family. Before they are uprooted, exported, or exiled to a gallery in Ho Chi Minh City or some Euro-American museum, these hard-shelled fruits are properly emptied, dried, and often adorned-protected with brown, black lacquer. In a recent exhibition, the gourds are strewn all over a gallery floor, under a vault of dim, sparse light. Some are lying down, some standing up, and some slightly tilted as they slant into the cool, dark space, as if waiting for a hidden exit, some door to the outside.

Winding through the gourds are long, strong irrigational tubes made of soft plastic. A mechanical echo of the vines of forests, the veins of bodies, or the slender bamboo stems with which the Highlanders drink their wine. Now these tubes transmit, from gourd to gourd, an incessance of water, air, seeds, dust, and perhaps pieces of insects and bits of moth wings that come with the soil of Tũn's turbulent homeland. A land that holds the devastation of past wars, the aggravation of ongoing destitution. These tubes of strange nourishment, these flows of a nonhuman bloodstream, are regulated by a homespun engine that allows the succession of tiny vitalities from elsewhere to drift from vessel to vessel, mimicking the rhythmic transmissions of agrarian routine and elemental life. Sometimes the flow vigorously gushes, sometimes it softly trickles, depending on the artist's design. But no matter how slow or fast the conveyance, the seeds are there, running, revolving in the flow of froth. Seeds of great wars, seeds of small wars, seeds of haunted dreams, seeds of recurrent unrest, seeds of fragile peacetime, seeds of the real, seeds of the phantasmic.



2. The Pulsations

The roundness of a seed-holding gourd can rhyme, for Tùng, with the sphere of a mother's womb. This bond between uterus and fruit perhaps sprouts from the felicity of the Vietnamese language. The same bulbous word, *bầu*, can simultaneously mean "gourd," "pregnancy," "bulging plumpness"—like that of a child's lovely cheek, "circular vault"—like that of a vast astral night sky. In a more material and mundane sense, gourds are practical vessels for the Highlanders. Their firm shells can hold various things: seeds for gardening, water for drinking, jewelries for ceremonial occasions. Gourds can also be a sacred vessel in the tales of village elders. In the highland versions of the great flood myth, when a deluge arrives to wash away all life on earth, the last two beings often end up seeking refuge inside a giant gourd. Some say this couple are a man and a woman. Some say a man and a man. Some say a human and a beast. No matter their genre of twoness, the couple interfuse in blissful union. They melt into the euphoric oneness that harmonizes heaven and earth. They release a thousand newborn beings into life. Divinely protected by the magical gourd, they reboot and rebirth the world.

The rotundity of a gourd; the rotundity of a world. A quotidian vessel among the

Highlanders can hold a whole cosmogony, an entire cosmology. The Greek *logos* in "cosmology" can mean a wide vault of ruled-lined things, from "word, discourse, reason" to "number, calculation, price."¹ Yet gourds, with their magical roundness, can defy the abstract angularity of strictly *logos*-based rationales and narratives. A spread of foreign gourds on the floor, without statements, without meanings, can baffle the reasoning, measuring habits of mind that seethe behind all our modern procedures of civilization and progress.

Gourds can soothe the cold rational brain and guide the heart toward a rounder, warmer atmosphere—some stranger music. Gourds serve as the resonator of various musical instruments across Vietnam. There's the *đàn bầu* zither of the Kinh people; the *đàn tính* lute of the Tày; the *tìng nìng* of the Bahnar; the *đinh năm* of the Ê Đê, the Raglai, and the M'Nông in the Central Highlands. That is to say, long yarns of music have been released and amplified by the inner emptiness of gourds across the centuries. These are breeds of music that elude systematic notation, their lilting seductions bewitching and strange. Melodies that ring from a gourd can ease our will to rational judgment as they intensify the tremors, the

life, of the heart.

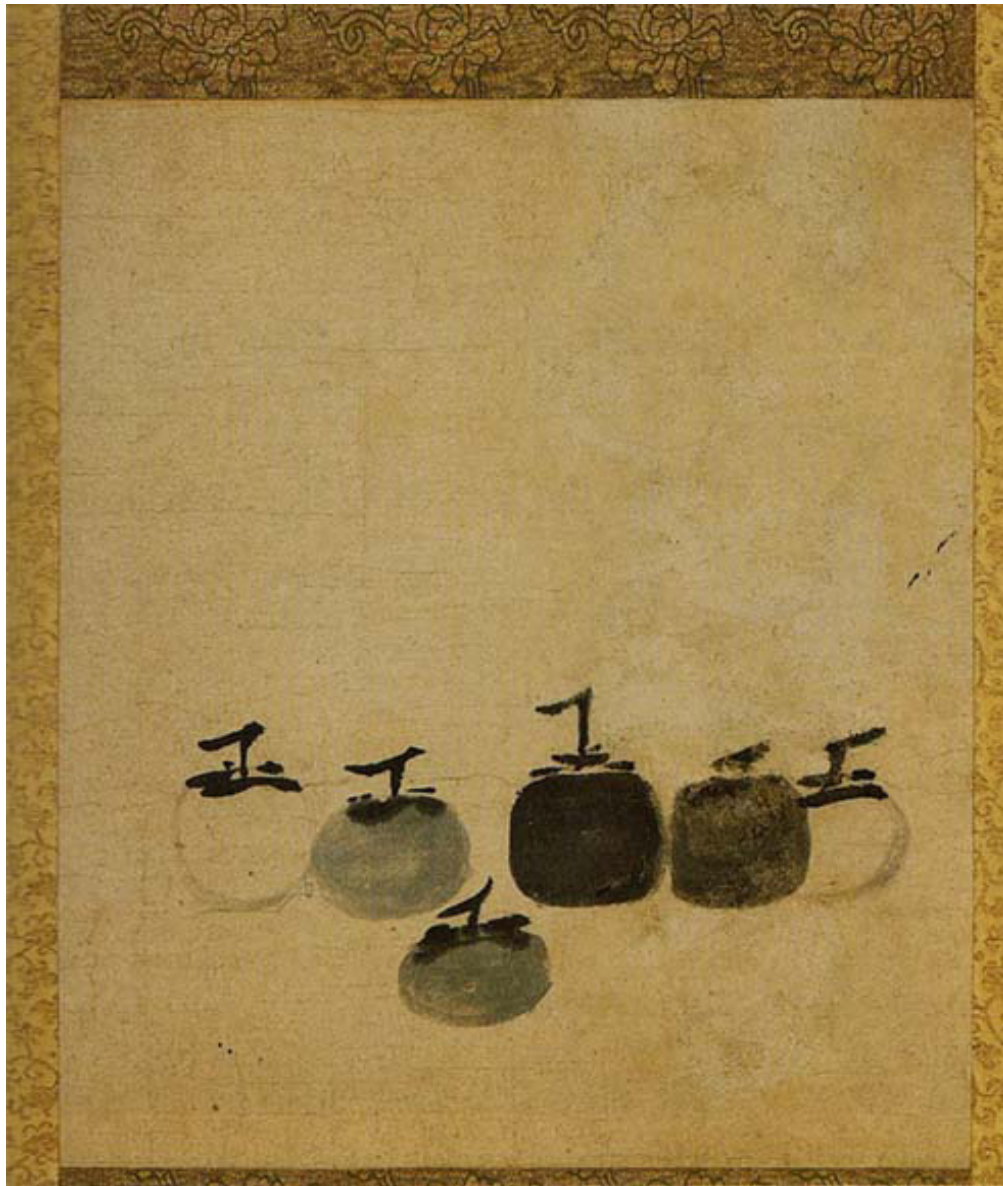
The *đinh năm* is a mouth organ whose variations have appeared often in Tùng's installations. Its wind chest is a gourd speared by six bamboo tubes. Bamboo and gourd are thickly joined by golden layers of beeswax. In the myth of the Ê Đê, the six tubes belong to six orphaned siblings, who made funeral music with their *đinh năm* to sweetly send the spirit of their parents to the other world. These days, the sounding of the *đinh năm* is reserved for not only funerary rites but special ceremonies like rain-invoking rituals, new-rice festivals, or new-home feasts. The instrument rejoices and mourns with the humans in these moments of intensest reality, where the living commune with the dead, with each other, with sun, with rain, with grain, with wind, and with earth.

Whenever I visit Tùng's home in the Papet village, I often dream a recurrent dream. In the dream, indigenous men are walking downhill after a long day of sun-scorching work out in the terraced fields or on some coffee plantation. Sun sinks. Moon rises. Unhurriedly the laborers walk over to Tùng's new home and gather around a fire in his front yard. They loosen their tense, muscular

bodies into the cool mantle of evening. The women bring out green stacks of banana leaves, piled with hot rice and freshly-grilled meat, sprinkled with fragrant herbs from the garden and forest. The men drink. They tell tales of ghosts and gods, both old and new. If ghost-possessed or deity-inspired, or if the wine in the earthen jug is simply excellent, they start to sway to an ancient inner rhythm, their faces incandescent around the dancing fire. Some exhale into the curved neck of their windy gourds. Some raise and wave their crooning bamboo tubes into the moonlight. Some listen out for the chimes of old bells resounding from afar. Some sing. They sing of joy; they sing of grief. Their raw voices swell heavenward before plunging back into the embers of fire. All through the night, intoxicating vibrations and incantations keep blowing and heaving and ringing from the bellies of humans and the womb of gourds. Music for the living; music for the dead.



3. The Persimmons



Muqi, *Six Persimmons*, mid-to late thirteenth century. Ink on Paper. 36.2 x 38.1cm (14.25in x 15in). Daitoku-ji, Kyoto, Japan

Let us take a brief rest from the sound of indigenous gourds and visit the silence of another sorcerous set of bulbous vessels called *Six Persimmons*.² *Six Persimmons* is a small ink painting by Muqi 牧谿, a Song-dynasty Chan (or Zen) monk from the thirteenth century. It is famous for its aura of unintellectualizable enigma, emanating from six delicate fruits fashioned out of succinct inkstrokes across an unpainted background. Some persimmons appear darkly ripe, so full they want to drop from the paper, as a poet would say.³ Some look vaporous, as if all but vanishing into the air. Gary Snyder calls these fruits the best persimmons in the world. Arthur Waley dubs this image a scene of stupendous calm. What can be so stupendous about such filmy, foggy persimmons? Perhaps it is the fact that they can float. There is no ground, no tabletop, no perspectival orthogonals cutting across Muqi's painting. It has no bottom. Its ground is an immense vacancy. In their immeasurable unperspectivalism, these buoyant persimmons are their own vanishing points, their own disappearing haloes. Floating in a dream zone of levitational serenity, they tease the eye, they haunt the mind. Many viewers are entranced because they are confused by

these attenuated persimmons. Just what do they mean?

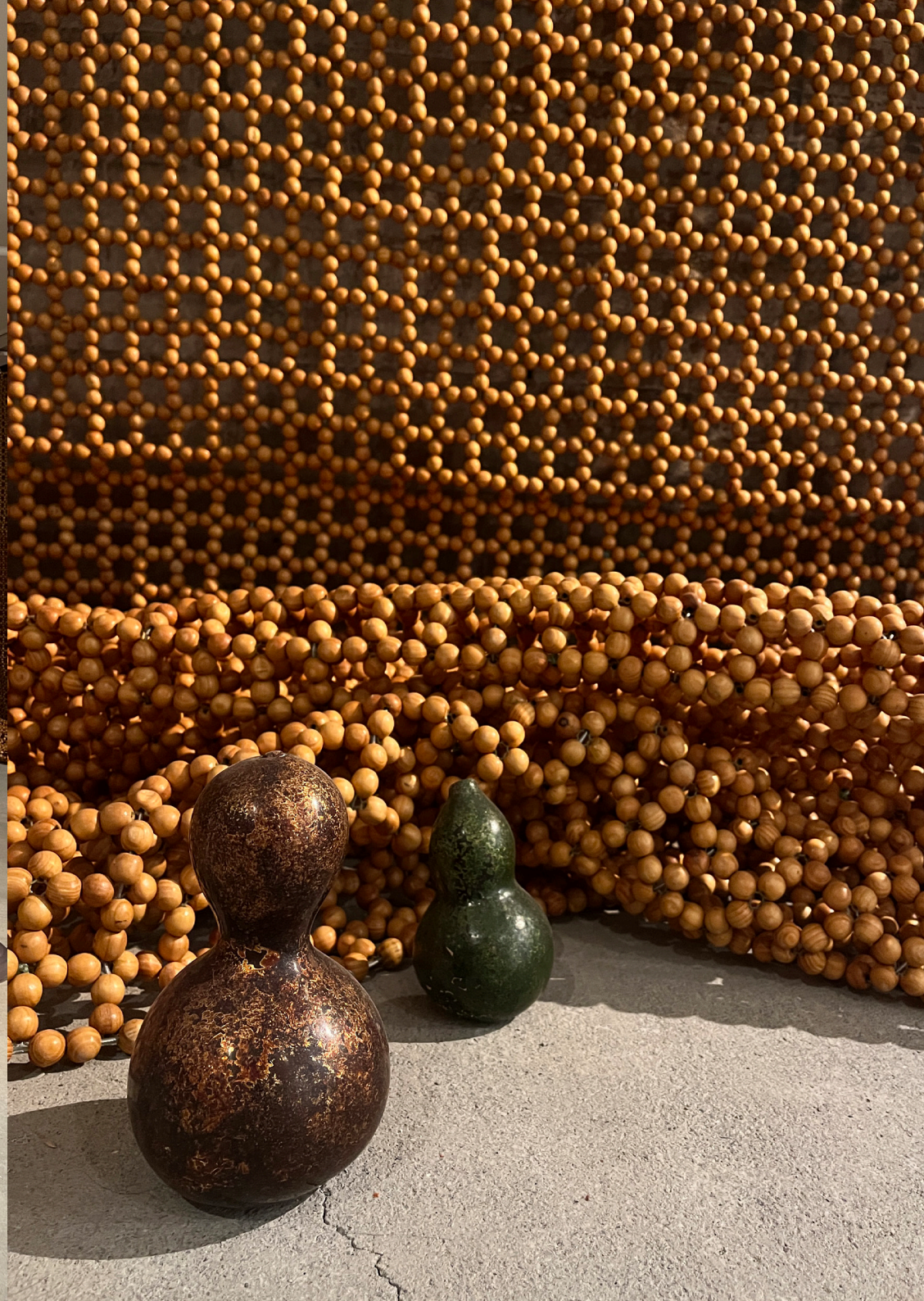
Muqi's *Persimmons*, rarely shown to the public, lives among those who strive to be unhaunted by the feverish pursuit of meaning. It resides in Daitoku-ji, the Temple of Great Virtue, in the Murasakino district of Kyoto. Isolated from a longer handscroll, *Six Persimmons* is ceremoniously mounted with gold-brocaded silk and hung on the wall of Ryōkōin, a subtemple within the larger precinct of Daitoku-ji. Ryōkōin was founded by Kōgetsu Sōgan, a Rinzai Zen monk born into a family of affluent merchants and tea practitioners. Kōgetsu entered priesthood at fifteen, attained enlightenment at thirty, founded Ryōkōin at thirty-three, and is remembered as an eminent Zen priest and tea connoisseur of seventeenth-century Japan.⁴ At Ryōkōin, *Six Persimmons* is often hung in a *tokonoma*, an alcove reserved for the quiet rhythms of tea ceremonies. In the breeze of autumn, when a monk has the leisurely pleasure of pausing awhile to sit and sip his tea beneath the *Persimmons*, I imagine their scentless perfume winding their way into his stilling, clearing mind.

Six Persimmons clarifies the mind with its

sheer economy of the brush. The painting is free of doctrinal discourse, unencumbered by spectacular brushwork. It is blithely unoccupied with technical control, resistant to bantering narrative. Muqi's critics of the Song and Yuan era might think it plain, unimpressive, even vexingly bland. Yet, its capacity for Chan wisdom lies in this blatant blandness that holds infinite calm. These monastically abbreviated, buoyantly apparitional persimmons can entice the mind with their vapor of unfussy, unbombastic enlightenment. They hang in the air like clouds inseparable from their afternoons, as Wallace Stevens once wrote.⁵ They refuse the hyper-granularity of geometric sharpness.⁶ They abstain from the minutiae of meticulous details. They carry, and become, both stillness and transition in their diaphanic cloak. The ink strokes, now faint, now bold, give these persimmons the permission to loosen, to dim, to float with the subtilized motions of the light. It is as if

they are emerging and submerging in the widening solitude of an afternoon passing into darkness—the down-rising and up-falling of a largeness without end.

In other words, these vanishing fruits, in their modest and merry retreat from the mimetic drama of representation, serenely send us into a more ethereal, more Taoic logic of art.⁷ A logic centered on the blur, the haze, the fog between calculated form and incalculable emptiness. The weight of stale sermons, heavy doctrines, and binarized judgment seems dissolved under the light touch of Muqi's brush. All impositions of desperate explication, both inner and outer, are free to float into the air like the haziest persimmons of the fall.



4. The Dark Haze of Remembering-Forgetting

In his poem *"In Praise of Darkness,"* Jorge Luis Borges,⁸ describes the dimness of old age as a time of deep peace and deep intensity. The "I" speaker in the poem has entered the late twilight of his life, having lost most of his vision. Yet he does not long to remember his youth in knife-sharp detail. The bliss of aging, for him, is the blur of forgetting. *"In my life there were always too many things,"* he sighs. *"Now I can forget them."*⁹ Paths, echoes, footsteps, women, men, agonies, rebirths, days, nights, dreams, all the yesterdays of the world, all the deeds of the dead, and love, and words, and Emerson, and snow, and so many things. Now he can forget them all. In his life, he has gone south, gone east, gone west, gone north. The going and the forgetting have led him to a "secret center." In this hidden center, silent like the tokonoma alcove of *Six Persimmons*, his soul lives happily among *"vague, luminous shapes that are not darkness yet."* His eyes, torn out by time, can sense the dim way things flow *"along an easy slope and is akin to eternity."* In the secret core of life, friends are faceless, street addresses are interchangeable, and *"on the pages of books there are no letters."* All this should make him uneasy, *"but there's a restfulness about it, a going back."* He is reaching his center, his algebra without numbers, his key without locks, his threshold without gateways. *"Pronto sabré quién soy,"* he whispers. *"Soon I shall know who I am."*





5. Gourds, Again

Let us reenter into the seasonal cyclicity of the months and years, the mysterious roundness of living and dying, the ceaseless streams of remembering and forgetting, all of which are perhaps held within the globular plumpness of persimmons and gourds, now hollow, now full. Let us fold back, go back to a poem by the mythic Tang-dynasty poet-hermit Hán Shān 寒山, known in English as Cold Mountain. It is an untitled poem that ends with a bottle-gourd. Or rather it ends with another ancient recluse, Xǔ Yóu 許由, who deliberately forgets his gourd. This man of mindful oblivion was widely venerated for his virtuous aversion to name and fame. When the legendary Emperor Yao made a trip to Xǔ Yóu's hut with a wish to abdicate and offer the sagely hermit the throne, the latter nobly said no. Xǔ Yóu refused the courtly realm of managerial politicking and all the rest of worldly excitations. He insisted on absolute peace. He preferred his smiling wanders among mountains, his singing recreations along rivers and streams. When thirsty, he bent down by a lakeshore and drank water with his cupped hands. A passerby saw this, felt sorry for Xǔ Yóu, and gave him a hollow gourd as a dipper to drink with. Xǔ Yóu took the charitable gift but drank from it only once. Then he hung it on a tree nearby and

went away, leaving the gourd to sway and swoosh in the wind. Here are the last lines of Cold Mountain's poem, in the temperament of Xǔ Yóu:

拋除鬧我者
歷歷樹間瓢¹⁰

[I leave behind a thousand earthly weights,
my gourd-dipper on a branch rattling, rattling.]¹¹

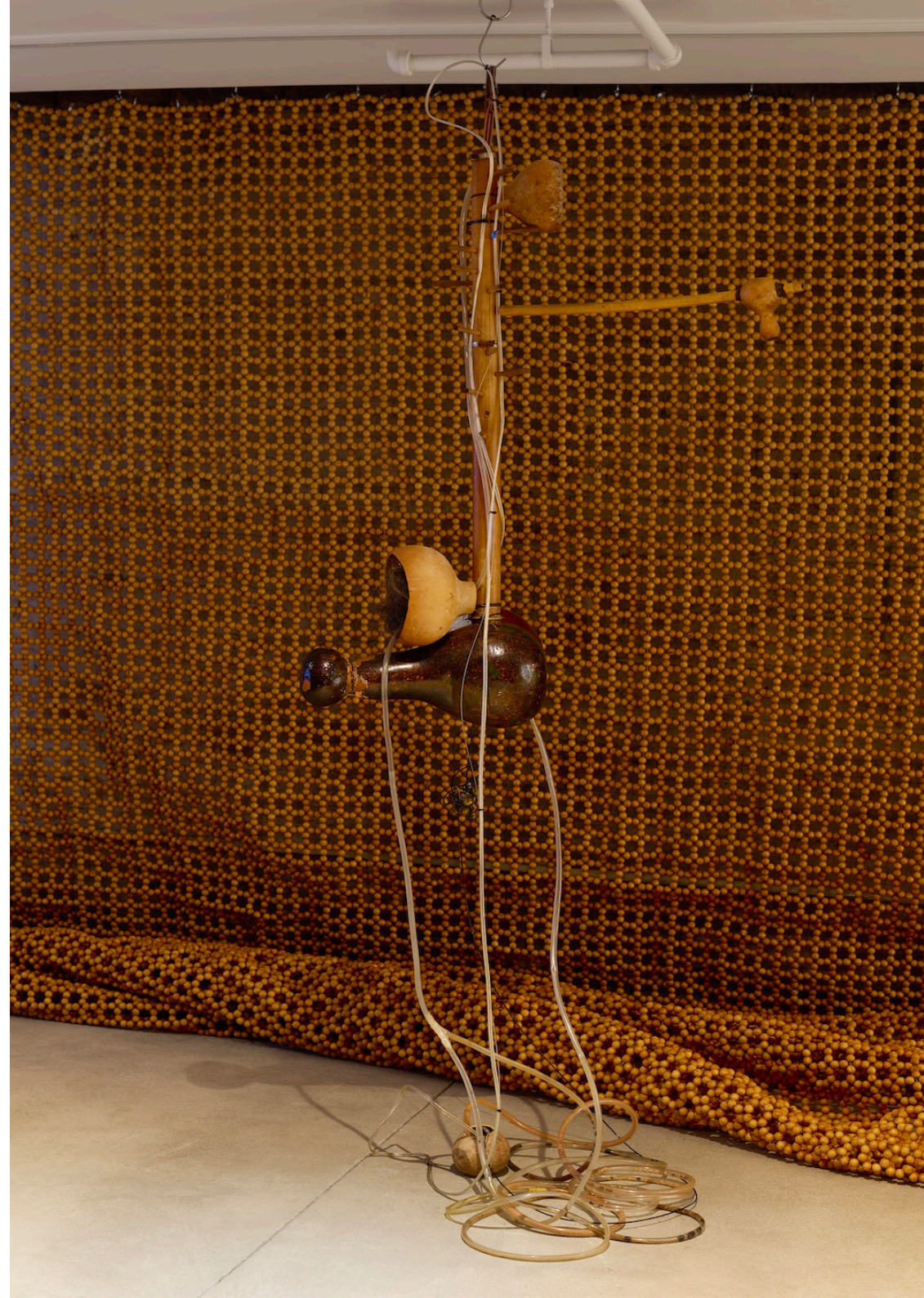
All his life, Xǔ Yóu lived alone by enfolded cliffs, walked under fugacious clouds, lay down to rest in a dusky hut, had a mind that held no noise. To keep his dreamy consciousness clear of clamor, he chose poverty, casting away all seeds of trouble. The click-clack of a gourd was just as distracting to him as an emperor's rustling offer of officious power, policy, and decorum. Peacefulness is to hang up the burdensome gourd, renounce its loud usage, forget its worldly noise.

Trương Công Tùng, also in some kind of pursuit of peacefulness, does not spurn but embraces the gourds. He gathers them. He cares for them. He lays them down, letting them rest and forget their usual, transactional, humancentric usefulness. Unlike the ancient recluse, Tùng does not

disdain their noise. He remembers and returns the gourds to the airy zone of primeval music. He lets them sing their gurgling songs on the floor. He turns down the gallery's loud, harsh spotlights so that the visitors are compelled to bend down, perhaps kneel a bit, to see, and smell, and hear the bubbling flow of water, seeds, and microbial vibrancies running through this network of gourds. Túng names this web of vessels, with its murmuring music of foam and froth, "The state of absence... Voices from outside."

Like the so-called "living words" of Zen *kōans*, as opposed to the tiresome statements of our daily exchanges, these flowing noises, softly and robustly alive, are a reservoir of echoes and shadows. A sonic spring of some formless Outside. These soil-scented sounds of burbling water make no sense, yet their purl can restore a listener's mind to a state of animate invigoration. Their babbling music rouses our eardrums to simmer outside, and trickle under, the regime of machinic cities, productive time, polite exchanges, clinical

discourse. It sends our mind to the faceless pulsations of the unseen, the mythic, the muted, the elsewhere. The foam surging and bursting in each gourd sings of a land most museum-goers cannot see or know. A land of humble gourds, musicking gourds, miraculous gourds that revive the earth. A land far from the exacting, bright world of art institutes, art history, art vanities, art vexations. A land destined to carry, to harbor, to haul, to swallow the rage of the ethnic, the exotic, the exiled-at-home. A highland of dilapidated huts, of skinburning labor, of long, long legacies of violent uprisings, perpetual struggles, and brutal suppressions. Still, a land of delicate singing and quiet drinking around a ring of night-piercing fire. A land of plain music that soars and sinks among endless mountains and valleys, gushing cascades and bubbling streamwaters.







6. The Breath of Dream

Bubbles of revolving reverie are also central to the concluding *gatha* of the *Diamond Sūtra*.¹² The monk-translator Kumārajīva carried this four-line verse from Sanskrit into Chinese as:

一切有爲法
如夢幻泡影
如露亦如電
應作如是觀¹³

[all conditioned phenomena are just like
a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a mirage,
a drop of dew, a bolt of lightning—
thus you should scan this vanishing world.]

All birthable and perishable phenomena are emptied of a constant self, subject to ceaseless cycles of blossom and decay. Kumārajīva's translation gives six examples of this dharmic truth. Things and beings on earth are nothing more than a fugitive dream, a magical illusion, a sparkling bubble, a fleeting mirage, a falling dewdrop, a flash of lightning. Despite his translation's stunning beauty, its thrilling economy, its easeful depth,¹⁴ some commentators have critiqued that Kumārajīva, to preserve his

vividly spare poetics, left out three out of the nine total examples given in the original Sanskrit. The Sanskrit set of nine twilit mirages includes changeable stars, delirious eyeballs, flickering lamps, phantom magic, sinking dews, transient bubbles, frenzied dreams, sudden lightning, fugacious clouds.¹⁵

Indeed, Kumārajīva's translation omitted some clouds, some lamps, some stars, and some eyes. He wrapped them all into one whirling *yīng* 影, which can be translated as "image," "shadow," or "mirage." The full Sanskrit title of the *Diamond Sūtra* is *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, which means *The Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra that Cuts Like a Diamond Thunderbolt*. Thích Nhất Hạnh translated this as *The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusions*. The way I see it under my nightlamp's wavering light, once the madness has passed, and the mind is swept clear by the sharp blades of *śūnyatā*, the lawful emptiness, then perhaps the human will to calculate, to collate, to critique will also sink away, evanescent like dewdrops at dawn. Nine mirages can then be a hallucination of six illusions. Six illusions can be an apparition of one delirious eyeball. Muqi's *Six Persimmons* can thus also be

six passing gleams, six turning bubbles of one transitory world. They float between fullness and emptiness, "as if there were, as if there were not,"¹⁶ as Wang Wei once wrote in the eighth century. The persimmons levitate on the vagueness of the "as if" mode. As the sinologist François Jullien would driftingly put it, they float on the aerial logic of vital respiration. Ethereal forms appear-disappear, rise up-sink down, flowing outside the sharp-edged logic of comprehensive knowledge and Albertian-gridded representation.¹⁷ Like the mist-shrouded groves and disappearing temples of the Song-dynasty landscape painting series known as *Eight Views of Xiaoxiang*, the persimmons can seem to at once shine-vanish.¹⁸ Like clouds of fog that hold the echoes of an evening bell, their tenuous form promotes the constancy of transition and transformation. These fruits, these soft-edged dreams, belong to a world of brevity, changeable as stars, fickle as fates, which is also, always, a world of ceaseless animacy, a world of constant renewal. World without dramatic beginning, world without desolate end.

At several of his recent exhibition openings, Tùng has delivered an impromptu

performance that, too, runs on the logic of an endless world, a long breath of dream. He puts on a long, black, disheveled wig and a military camouflage jacket—the cheap, durable kind that both laborers and rioters wear in the red-dusted Highlands. While gallerygoers are reaching for their wine in a merry climate of civil pleasantries, Tùng begins to crawl around the floor on all fours, causing the cultured crowd to worriedly glance down, looking intrigued or vaguely disturbed. It is a performance, Tùng said, inspired by, inspirited by, the homeless he saw on the streets of Los Angeles when he was there to install a show once. He recognized their look of destitution, their odor of exile, their air of silent alienation. They are not unlike his upland neighbors, the nameless individuals known by generic ethnic group labels, usually landless and unschooled, who can't speak, or won't speak, the Kinh-majority tongue of Vietnamese. Tùng too chooses not to speak during his crawl. He creeps slowly, like fresh vines, or some kind of sickly insect, into the shadows of the twilit gallery. He winds his way from gourd to gourd, sometimes sitting down on the floor, with his back against the wall, gently blowing into a wind instrument on display. The whispered soundtrack of his

performance is the language, and logic, of breath.

In his wordless performance-lecture known as the Flower Sermon on the Holy Peak, the Buddha spread the extinction from all sorrows by holding up a flower without speaking. His transmissive silence was thunderous as a lion's roar. The whole *sangha* was deeply befuddled by this sonorous silence, except for Mahākāśyapa, who smiled. The Buddha also smiled, for Mahākāśyapa, in some inner way, saw that the great teaching has no words. It has no form, or rather, no fixed form. It flows outside all scriptures, against all rational logic, as a separate stream, a cessation of needless speculation and superfluous debate. It can take the mercurial shapes of a simple smile, a fresh-cut lotus, some dreaming persimmons, some singing gourds. For his instinctual comprehension of fugitive forms, Mahākāśyapa received the transmission of ineffable wisdom, became one of the Buddha's ten principal disciples, and carried on the dharmic dissemination of the marvelous law.

Artists, too, have been guided by the Blessed One's chimerical sermon in their

separate ways. Muqi raised a persimmon and smiled it into six misty dreamstrokes, now fugaciously faint, now darkly bold to see. Whereas Tūng has lowered himself, and us, into an atmosphere of gourds. For once we can hear the sound, the song, of water—a buoyant, foamy flow, summoned on a low, liquid frequency. Its bubbles, so thin, so frail, so soon to burst, are the vaporous fables of a damaged land, and the effervescent music of its exilic vessels. Like the mirages in the sutra that cuts through lies, or like the singing-vanishing angels of the Talmud, these fragile bubbles are *"born anew every instant in countless numbers,"*¹⁹ like the heavenly halos of stars swirling across an ancient dreamsky. The rustle of bubbles fills the gourds with an urgent incessance of music whose center is the deep calm of air, of water, of dust. Together they ring out, sing out, passing into the half-light of their evaporation, as if there were, as if there were not.

Endnotes

1. Christensen, Inger, Anne Carson, and Susanna Nied, “‘Epilogos,’ from It: A Special APR Supplement.” *The American Poetry Review* 35, no. 6 (2006): 35–40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20683341>.

2. This section comes from my unpublished writings on Muqi’s *Persimmons* and apparitional painting.

3. Li-Young Lee, “*Persimmons*,” in *Rose* (New York: BOA Editions Ltd., 2013).

4. Kumakura Isao, “*Ryōkōin*,” in *Zen Path to the Heart*, trans. Yoshizawa Tomo and Melissa M. Rinne (Kyoto: Ryōkōin, 2023), 46.

5. Wallace Stevens, “*The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician*,” in *Harmonium* (New York: Knopf, 1923).

6. Lucy Alford, “*Modes of Transitive Attention*,” in *Forms of Poetic Attention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

7. François Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form, or the Nonobject through Painting*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 23.

8. An author whose *Fictions* Tūng reads.

9. This section references two translations of Borges’s poem *In Praise of Darkness*, by Norman Thomas di Giovanni and Hoyt Rogers. See Jorge Luis Borges, *In Praise of Darkness*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (Dutton, 1974), and Jorge Luis Borges, “*In Praise of Darkness*,” trans. Hoyt Rogers, in *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

10. Hanshan, Shide, and Fenggan, *The Poetry of Hanshan* (Cold Mountain), Shide, and Fenggan, ed. Christopher Nugent, trans. Paul Rouzer (de Gruyter, 2016), 55.

11. The imperfect translations in brackets throughout the essay are mine.

12. A Buddhist sutra Tūng has mentioned.

13. Thích Nhuận Châu, trans., “*Kim Cang Tông Thông*,”

Thư Viện Hoa Sen, 2006, <https://thuvienhoasen.org/images/file/Rj70qp1G0QgQACoQ/kim-cang-tong-thong-thich-nhuan-chau-dich.pdf>, 654.

14. “*Với lối dịch thượng thượng của Cư Ma La Thập*, kinh *Kim cương Hoa vân quả thật ý càng cao mà từ càng giản, giản mà hoa. Đọc cảm thấy tiêu sái, khoái sảng, thấy chẳng có gì mà không bỏ nổi, chẳng có gì mà không làm được*.” Hòa Thượng Thích Trí Quang, trans., *Kinh Kim Cương* (Ho Chi Minh: NXB TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1994), 24.

15. My translation follows and gently modulates Thích Nhuận Châu’s Vietnamese translation from the Sanskrit. See Thích Nhuận Châu, trans., “*Kim Cang Tông Thông*,” 657.

16. Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form*, 8.

17. Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form*, 156.

18. “*Groves and springs vanish-shine through*,” wrote the art theorist Jing Hao (c. 855–915) in his *Bifa Ji* (“Notes on Brushwork”). See Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form*, 11.

19 A line from Walter Benjamin’s “*Announcement of the Journal Angelus Novus*.” See Annie Bourneuf, *Behind the Angel of History: The Angelus Novus and Its Interleaf* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022), 71.



For whom the gourds sing

Do Tuong Linh
June 2024

"It is said that on August 10, 1961, a helicopter flew along Route 14, following the Truong Son Tay Nguyen Trail through the Vietnam - Cambodia - Laos border... Carving against the sky, the aircraft was tailed with a beautiful strip of color... People, trees, grass, insects, hills and rivers below were bathed in a colorful rain. At that moment, none of those beings knew that it was the beginning, that it was a signal for a dream shared by many generations to come..." - Trương Công Tùng, 2023

How can a Vietnamese artist exhibit their work in America without invoking the layered contexts of the Vietnam War and the complex memories Americans associate with that distant land? For his debut solo exhibition in an American institution at Canal Project in 2024, Trương Công Tùng's show *"Trail Dust"* confronts a harrowing chapter of history through a lens that is both poetic and magical. The title *"Trail Dust"* itself holds deep historical significance; it was the codename used in classified messages for herbicide operations during the Vietnam War. The US military sprayed toxic chemicals to defoliate forests, aiming to incapacitate the camouflage tactics of the Southern Liberation Army and the Vietnam People's Army. This operation resulted in long-term

ecological destruction, affecting life above ground, underground, and in water bodies.

Growing up in Đắk Lắk among various ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, Tùng's personal history is interwoven with themes of displacement and cultural conflict. His family's move from Central Vietnam to the Central Highlands was part of the Southern Vietnamese government's strategy to divide and control the indigenous community back in 1961. Tùng grew up as an accidentally witness to the subtle violence stemming from the North-South divide and the ethnic tensions between the majority Kinh and various minorities. Despite this, Tùng emerged as an artist—a storyteller whose intimate sensibility and sharp observations continue to captivate audiences. Describing Tùng's multisensory artistic world is challenging; in one of his recent solo exhibitions in Vietnam, the catalog comprised poetry, writings, and memoirs contributed by his beloved art community, attempting to capture the essence of his artistic realm. Yet, analysis often feels unnecessary, as Tùng's work opens up new ways of feeling, listening, sensing, smelling, and tasting the world.

Tùng's profound affinity for gardens has infused his artistic journey ever since his early creation, *"Magical Garden"* (2012–ongoing), marking his initial foray into the realm of video art. Trained traditionally in fine arts, specializing in lacquer at Ho Chi Minh Fine Art University in 2010, Tùng discovered in video a newfound avenue of creative liberation. This medium resonated deeply with his fixation on the temporal dimensions of landscapes—past, present, and future—enabling him to delve into these realms with greater depth. Returning frequently to his homeland, each visit becomes a tapestry woven from disparate fragments of memory, enriching his artistic narrative. It was here, amidst this fertile ground, that the Art Labor Collective took root, founded by Tùng alongside Phan Thảo Nguyên and Arlette Quỳnh Anh Trần. Their collective endeavor mirrors a global indigenous art movement, profoundly influencing young artists, cultural workers, and curators within Vietnam. Central to the ethos of the Art Labor Collective is a collaborative spirit that extends beyond

borders and disciplines. Over the years, they have consistently invited artists, intellectuals, architects, and indigenous cultural figures to travel to Tùng's homeland and participate in their ongoing projects. Their work serves as a catalyst, urging individuals to reconnect with their ancestral origins and to explore realms beyond the confines of urbanity—a journey of rediscovery, reimagining, and collective becoming.

"The State of Absence – Voices from Outside" is the title of the gourd installation, conceived during the pandemic as a response and reflection on the current state of human existence. The pandemic, a period of global upheaval and introspection, served as a catalyst for Tùng's creative process, prompting him to explore themes of isolation, connectivity, and resilience. While the works originally comprised collected objects from his homeland, as they traveled to different contexts, they integrated local materials and energies, synthesizing and evolving independently. This organic





evolution highlights the fluidity of cultural artifacts and their ability to adapt and transform in new environments, mirroring the adaptability of human cultures themselves.

Tùng blurs the boundaries between various materials and media, aiming to evoke his personal experiences from the land and draw inspiration from the magical realism found in the writings of French anthropologist and missionary Jacques Dournes. During his 25 years (1946–1970) living and studying the Jarai and other Highland ethnic cultures, Dournes chronicled the ongoing struggle between humans, nature, and the modern world, a theme ever-present in Tùng's work. "*Forest, Women, Madness*" and "*Minorities of Central Vietnam*" are two pivotal books that have profoundly influenced Tùng's understanding of the land. Originally titled "*Forêt, femme, folie: une traversée de l'imaginaire jorai*" (1993) and "*Populations montagnardes du Sud-Indochinois*" (1980), these texts delve deep into the psyche and spirituality of the Jarai people, exploring their intricate relationship with the natural world and the socio-political forces that shape their existence. The integration of nature and machinery in the installation also reflects the dual reality faced by many Central Highland inhabitants, who

navigate between the wildness of nature and the modern world of technology and machinery. This juxtaposition speaks to the broader human condition, where the advancement of technology often contrasts with the primal, untamed elements of our environment. Tùng's art challenges viewers to contemplate this balance and to recognize the interdependence of these seemingly disparate worlds.

Contrary to the romanticized urban myth of escaping to nature for solace and peace, the reality of growing up and interacting with nature is far less idyllic. It involves a learned harmony and balance, adapting and crafting one's world in conjunction with the environment. For the indigenous communities of the Central Highlands, this interaction is characterized by a deep-seated respect for the land and its resources, tempered by the practicalities of survival and modern development pressures. Tùng's work captures this nuanced relationship, portraying nature not as an untouched paradise but as a living, dynamic force that shapes and is shaped by human activity. In the writings of art historian and curator Quynh Nguyễn-Hoàng, particularly in "*Gourd Music*," Quynh elucidates how the rounded form of a gourd, a seed-bearing vessel, metaphorically resonates with

the shape of a mother's womb for Tùng. This symbolic connection arises from the richness of the Vietnamese language. The word "*bầu*," meaning "*gourd*," also connotes "*pregnancy*," "*plumpness*" akin to a child's rosy cheek, and "*vault*" like the expanse of the night sky. This linguistic richness reflects the deep cultural and spiritual significance of gourds in Vietnamese and Highlander folklore. Gourds, in their practicality, serve Highlanders as vessels for seeds, water, and ceremonial jewelry. They also hold sacred significance in local folklore; during mythical floods, they become sanctuaries, sheltering remnants of life within their sturdy shells. This metaphor can be linked to the matriarchal society and the critical role of women in Jrai culture, where the gourd symbolizes fertility, protection, and continuity.

Tùng's engagement with a diverse array of materials—including gourds, rubber beads, coffee wood, steel wire, as well as the elements of time and temperature (in his ongoing work "*Long Long Legacies*," 2021 – present)—along with lacquer, time, and temperature (in the lacquer painting series "*Shadows in the Garden*," 2021 – present) signifies a deliberate departure from instrumentalized relationships with

nature, embodying themes of tranquility and interconnectedness. For Tùng, time and temperature are not merely conditions but essential materials integral to the process and creation of his works. By reintegrating those materials into a realm of "*primeval music*," Tùng's artistic world encourages contemplation of natural rhythms and harmonies often overlooked in urbanized settings. The lacquer painting series "*Shadows in the Garden*," created in harmony with musical notes (Do, Mi, La, Sol), further emphasizes this connection. This series illustrates how Tùng's artistic practice intricately intertwines visual and auditory experiences, fostering a multisensory engagement with his work. Each note corresponds to a specific element in the paintings, creating a synesthetic experience that invites viewers to both see and 'hear' the natural world.

In essence, Tùng's role transcends that of a mere artist; he serves as a mediator between human civilization and the natural world, prompting a profound reassessment of our relationships with everyday objects and the environments they inhabit. The quiet, persistent work that Tùng has meticulously honed over the years resembles a journey, piecing together fragments from realms

lost and drifting through uncharted territories—a process akin to archiving and documenting a world that seems almost impossible.

To conclude, I turn to curator Mary Lou David, co-curator of Tùng's solo exhibition *'The Disoriented Garden... A Breath of Dream'* at Sàn Art, HCMC in 2023, whose poetic interpretation encapsulates Tùng's artistic essence:

"If Trương Công Tùng's garden is an (ongoing) archive of human and non-human forces (past, present, ancestral, and living), then this archive has the potential to do two things. It first acts as a visual and emotional reminder of our (also ongoing) errors and inherited social systems through countless chapters of human and ecological violence. It also reminds us how we are a constellation of living networks, for better or worse. How the micro impacts the macro and the macro impacts the micro, with every decision affecting us all but also re-grounding us to one common entity: the earth. While it is still difficult to address these histories of land and territory head-on, the indirect observations of an insider-outsider are also suggestive and leave their imprints on us. And long past this exhibition, and its future editions around the world, this mutable archive and organic artwork-installation will continue to morph and grow in Trương Công

Tùng's mind and studio."

It was indeed a painful and vibrant rain that once fell upon the people, trees, grass, insects, hills, land, and rivers. Yet, it was through these struggles that new seeds and dreams of the gourds began to grow and evolve. Coincidentally, Trương Công Tùng's *Trail Dust* also marks nearly five decades since the American army departed from the land.





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Trương Công Tùng

(b. 1986, Đak Lak province; lives in Ho Chi Minh City) has exhibited extensively in Vietnam and abroad, both as a solo artist and as part of Art Labor. Recent exhibitions include the 58th Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (2022) and others at Manzi Art Space, Hanoi (2021); San Art, Ho Chi Minh City (2018); Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City (2018); Para Site, Hong Kong (2018); Dhaka Art Summit, Dhaka (2018); Kadist, San Francisco (2016); Nhà Sàn Collective, Hanoi (2016); as well as the Taipei Biennial, Taiwan (2016). He is also the recipient of the inaugural Han Nefkens Foundation—Southeast Asian Video Art Production Grant 2023, in collaboration with Sàn Art, Vietnam; Sa Sa Art Projects, Cambodia; Jim Thompson Art Center, Thailand; Museion, Italy; Busan Museum of Art, South Korea, and Prameya Art Foundation, India.

Quỳnh Nguyễn-Hoàng

Quỳnh Nguyễn-Hoàng is a writer-translator born in Việt Nam. Her recent publications include Masked Force (Sàn Art), a bilingual pamphlet on a set of propaganda photographs by Võ An Khánh, and Chronicles of a Village (Penguin SEA), her English translation of a novel by Nguyễn Thanh Hiện. Her work has appeared in Poetry, the Margins, and various other venues. She studied at Stanford University.

Đỗ Tường Linh

Do Tuong Linh is a curator, art researcher, writer based between Hanoi (Vietnam) and New York City (United States). Linh holds a BA in Art History and theoretical criticism from Vietnam University of Fine Arts and a MA in Contemporary Art and Art Theory of Asia and Africa at SOAS (University of London). UK with the prestigious Alphawood scholarship. She is a part of Bard Curatorial Studies program class of 2025 and is part of the curatorial team of 12th Berlin Biennial.

Linh has engaged in various art exhibitions and projects in Vietnam, Southeast Asia, Europe and beyond since 2005. She is a fellow researcher for Site and Space in Southeast Asia – a research project run by the Power Institute, University of Sydney, Australia funded by Getty Image Foundation, USA. She participated in many international cultural arts programs such as Asia Cultural Council research fellowship 2023, Ljubljana Graphic Art Biennial 2019, Slovenia; Association of Art Museum Curators conference, New York, USA; Mekong Cultural Hub 2018 – 2019, Taiwan; CIMAM International Museum Workshop 2018, Oslo, Norway; Asia Culture Center (Gwangju, Korea) 2018; Tate Intensive 2018, Tate Modern Museum, UK; French Encounter at Art Basel in Hong Kong 2018. ... Some of her notable curated exhibitions include Means of Production 2024 (NYC, USA), The Foliage 4, Revived at Hanoi Photo Biennial 2023, Citizen Earth 2020 (Hanoi, Vietnam), The Foliage 3 (VCCA, Vincom Center for Contemporary Arts, Hanoi, Vietnam) 2019, Geo-Resilience of the All-world at La Colonie (Paris, France) 2018, No War, No Vietnamexhibition at Galerie Nord (Berlin, Germany) 2018, SEAcurrents (London, UK) 2017.

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