



Liên Trương
*From the Earth Rise
Radiant Beings*



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Under the Canopy of a Pink Palm, 2020, mixed media on canvas, diptych, 84 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe, NM.
Photography: Peter Paul Geoffrion

With the support of the Herb Jackson and Laura Grosch Gallery Endowment and Davidson College Friends of the Arts, the Van Every/Smith Galleries at Davidson College are pleased to present *Liên Trương: From the Earth Rise Radiant Beings*. The exhibition presents recent works by Trương that examine, illuminate, and interrogate notions of heritage and the influences that form belief systems. Exploring these artworks in the current moment – a year and a half marked by illness, death, anxiety, isolation, division, and increasing racial injustices, including recent attacks on Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders – adds another dimension to an already physically and conceptually layered artistic practice tied up in social, cultural, and political histories.

The exhibition presents works from several different series and demonstrates Trương's ability to expertly weave together various references, such as American landscapes of the Hudson River School, Orientalist paintings, historical textile designs, military tactics, geopolitical history, and CIA propaganda, along with the artist's personal experiences and her family's memories of war and colonialism as part of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Trương aims to create a type of Asian Futurism through narratives that simultaneously refer to, reject, and reframe oppressive epistemologies. In her earlier paintings, Trương focused more on landscape, gesture, and materiality. Her process – fracturing, combining, and layering the landscape

Introduction

with a mix of canonical Western and Asian painting techniques, antique Japanese fabrics, painted silk, and, in more recent works, representations of the body – ties in with her concept, articulating the complexity and confusion of identity and heritage, further complicated by war and colonization. Juxtaposing Western and Asian painting techniques, materials, and philosophies also questions the hierarchy of the former over the latter within the art historical canon.

Trương's incorporation of silk and historical textile designs highlights the worldwide textile trade, a centuries old, entangled narrative of colonization, migration, and power. But her interest in utilizing textiles, particularly Vietnamese silks such as the kind treasured, worn, and collected by her mother, aunts, and cousins, is also a powerful personal rejection of Orientalist ideologies associated with these materials, particularly those of a sexualized or fetishized nature.

Three never before seen paintings from Trương's latest series, *From the Earth Rise Radiant Beings*, use landscape, gesture, figuration, and, at times, specific portraits of individuals, to underscore the strategies and acts – moral, ideological, military, and legal – employed by the United States to justify expansion and imperialism and the widespread influence of American policies as related to colonialism, immigration, and citizenship. Figures are sourced from Orientalist paintings in which women in particular were portrayed as

submissive and sexualized. Painted as silhouettes in a pale yellow hue, Trương's figures, "born from the violent histories descended from Orientalist ideologies, repudiate their origins ... transcending geopolitical and generational boundaries to create narratives of resistance and autonomy."

All of Trương's works – well-researched, complex narratives that connect a range of influences, including historical references, and Asian and Western painting practices – speak to perceived representations of culture and the complications of identity. For works that, at their core, are about transnational and generational trauma and violence, they are remarkably optimistic. Trương helps us imagine new worlds where from our violent past, strength, determination, and love spring forth and help propel us forward to shape the world we want to live in.

We extend heartfelt thanks to Lien Trương for her remarkable dedication and her willingness to partner with Davidson College on this beautiful, poignant exhibition of her work. We are also grateful to Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander for her insightful essay, *Future Pictures from the Yellow Pages of History*. Thanks to Hồng-An Trương, Turner Carroll Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Patricia Sweetow Gallery in San Francisco, California, and the Cameron Art Museum in Wilmington, North Carolina, for the loan of works to make this exhibition possible.

– Lia Newman, *Director/Curator*



Future Pictures from the Yellow Pages of History

Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander

Anne Anlin Cheng's 2019 book *Ornamentalism* critically considers the plight of the "yellow woman"—a woman of Asian descent – who, throughout history, has been racialized in a manner inextricably connected to objecthood and aesthetics. For the yellow woman, her adorned, exoticized, and hypersexualized body has been the subject of art and fantasy since the idea of the Orient became part of the European and American imperialist project in the 19th century. In Lien Trương's painting *From the Earth Rise Radiant Beings* (2021), from which this exhibition draws its title, the yellow woman and her sisters are given new lives and representations, their silhouettes only providing a suggestion of their forms. Historically, Asian women were seen in "the West" primarily as aesthetic beings, but these silhouetted figures resist our gaze. Across the center of the work, a slash of electric yellow reveals the face of Teresa Magbanua (1868–1947), a Filipina military leader who helped lead resistance movements against Spain, the United States, and Japan. Throughout the painting,

From the Earth Rise Radiant Beings, 2021, oil, silk, acrylic, copper pigment, enamel on canvas, 72 x 96 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe, NM. Photography: Peter Paul Geoffrion

disembodied hands reach, stretch, and gesture in all directions, calling us from the forgotten annals of Asian and Asian diasporic record, demanding recognition. How do we attend to the calls of our neglected ancestors, the yellow women of history, like Magbanua?

Liên Trương's diverse artistic practice hears and responds to these ancestral calls by imagining a future in which such ancestors are liberated across time and space through splintered, concealed, and poetic representations. This exhibition, which brings together different bodies of recent work, showcases Trương's range as an artist, archivist, and art historian. Her paintings and the collaborative work with Hồng-An Trương, *The Sky is Not Sacred* (2019), reveal her investigative eye towards history and deep understanding of the various mythologies that serve as the foundation for the American artistic canon. Moreover, she weaves elements of her lived experience as a Vietnamese refugee into her pictures, allowing for dialogic visual encounters between the personal, political, and global.

Trương's family fled Vietnam during the Fall of Saigon, when she was eighteen months old. Like many artists who were born elsewhere but call the United States home (or



Liên Trương and Hồng-Ân Trương *The Sky is Not Sacred*, 2019, single-channel video, color with sound, TRT 8:00. Courtesy of the Artists.

some approximation of it), Trương has a critical fascination with American landscapes and their histories of representation. Perhaps it can be said, as many of her works suggest, that displacement can serve as a premise for lifelong meditations on the importance of land and the freedom (or lack thereof) with which people can occupy it. In

According to the *Spectre of Blood and Water* (2019) and *Blessed is the Black Silk on Your Dark Little Head* (2021), Trương grounds the works with ghostly landscapes of her mother's hometown, Đà Lạt. In both paintings, the landscape is rendered in a palette that recalls infrared photography – suggesting surveillance, military presence, the mechanical gaze, and all the havoc these forces can wreak. As Ariella Aïsha Azoulay suggests, photographs such as these become “petty sovereigns,” serving the watchful eye of imperialism. How can a land and its inhabitants flourish if outsiders are watching and dictating the terms of existence? What does freedom look like in such a landscape?

Speaking of landscape: in the darkened lecture halls of art history classrooms throughout the United States, what stories are being told about Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt? How do these stories – often portrayed as benign fact – perpetuate harmful myths about American exceptionalism and who has the right to thrive on American soil? Nowadays, critical students of art history understand that paintings by Hudson River School artists helped solidify arguments in favor of American expansion and imperialism, which Trương references in the *Translatio Imperii* series. In this series, Trương harnesses the style of 19th-century American landscape painting to represent sites bombed by the United States after World War II. She covers these paintings with black paint, save for a window in the shape

of a brushstroke – a nod to the 1960s *Brushstrokes* series by American artist Roy Lichtenstein. We are meant to view these landscapes through the lens of modernism, a reminder that Abstract Expressionism was weaponized by the CIA during the Cold War to symbolize American individualism and freedom. On each frame, Trương affixes a bronze plate with the location depicted and year of its bombing. Laos, the most bombed country in the world, is represented from an event in 2013. These intimately sized paintings are powerful in their directness: in picture after picture, it is clear that the United States has inflicted immeasurable global harm. This series provides an answer to the question: where are the paintings that confront this history of American imperialism?

Mythologies are built through allegories, symbols, and metaphors. The language of textiles often provides colloquial metaphors to describe the United States; think, “the fabric of American society,” or the use of “tapestry” to signify cultural diversity. Trương uses fabric in her practice to confront and challenge this metaphorical association. In the two series *Mutiny in the Garden* and *From the Earth Rise Radiant Beings*, diaphanous strips of hand-painted silk cascade down the paintings’ surfaces. The artist transfers imagery from historic textiles, ranging from an 18th-century George Washington design to various representations of chinoiserie, onto large panels of fabric, which she then cuts

into smaller strips that render the pattern less legible. Historically, these source textiles circulated throughout the Western world, literally laying the mythologies of empire upon white bodies in the form of clothing, furniture, and household items. In disassociating these designs from their original, purportedly benign uses, Trương exposes their often nefarious meanings and implications.

In the history of the Asian diaspora, specifically that of women, textiles have played a significant part in their racialization and forms of representation, a fact that Trương is specifically referencing in the aforementioned series. Textiles have historically marked difference for Asian Americans. In the 1875 “Case of Twenty-Two Lewd Chinese Women” (*Chy Lung v. Freeman*, 92 U.S. 275), a group of women arriving in San Francisco from China was not allowed to disembark the ship, because their attire was interpreted as unsatisfactory, immoral, and debauched. These women were sexualized vis-à-vis their dress – bright silk garments and ornamented hair – rather than nude bodies. In acknowledging this troubling history, Trương is also looking to transcend and reclaim it. For both the artist and this writer (Thai American), traditional Southeast Asian textiles hold special places in memories of our upbringings. Deeply saturated silk patterns and glittering gold threads remind us of our grandmothers, mothers, and special occasions during which such textiles were worn



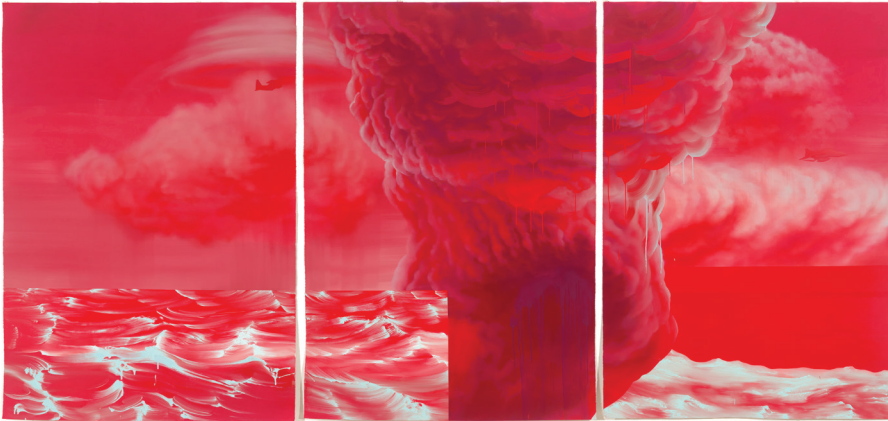
and displayed. While such fabrics were used against our Asian American women ancestors, Trương's paintings provide a space for the diasporic descendants of these women to luxuriate in the intergenerational beauty of this important textile history.

In *The Peril of Angel's Breath* (2018), a haunting portrait of Fred Korematsu, the late Japanese American civil rights activist, who refused to be interned during WWII, floats above the surface of the work. Around his visage we see a constellation of imagery: barracks of the internment camp Manzanar, plumes of a bomb explosion, Southeast Asian midcentury textile designs, and water rendered in a style that recalls Edo period Japanese painting. Rather than reading this work purely in mournful, tragic terms, Trương's deft intermingling of multiple histories on a single plane points to a future in which such narratives can be openly discussed, acknowledged, and built upon. Trương's paintings are sites where Asian American and Asian diasporic history are centralized and rendered anew in complex visual vocabularies that articulate melancholy, compassion, and hope for an unbounded future.

The Peril of Angel's Breath, 2018, oil, silk, acrylic, 19th-century cotton, antique obi mourning cloth, antique 24k gold leaf obi thread, 96 x 72 inches. On Loan from the Cameron Art Museum, Wilmington, NC.
Photography: Peter Paul Geoffrion



Translatio Imperii, 2019, TOP ROW: *Iraq*, 2016, *Tora Bora*, 2001, *Beirut*, 1983, BOTTOM ROW: *Laos*, 2013, *Yemen*, 2004, *Afghanistan*, 2018, oil on paper, vintage frame, acrylic, brass, 7 x 8.5 inches each. Courtesy of the Artist and Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco, CA.



Liên Trương and Hồng-Ân Trương,
The Sky is Not Sacred, 2019, oil on Arches
paper, triptych, 72 x 153 inches.
Courtesy of the Artists.

Liên Trương

Trương was born in Vietnam and emigrated to California when she was just eighteen months old. She earned a BFA from Humboldt State University in Arcata, CA, in 1999, and an MFA from Mills College, Oakland, CA, in 2001. Her work has been included in exhibitions at the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC; North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC; the National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Moscow, Russia; Nha San Collective, Hanoi, Vietnam; and Art Hong Kong; among others. She is the recipient of several awards and honors, including the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant, Whitton Fellowship

from the Institute from the Arts and Humanities, and the NC Arts Council Fellowship. Residencies include the Oakland Museum of California and the Marble House Project, Vermont. Trương's work is in several public collections, including the Linda Lee Alter Collection of Art by Women at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia; DC Collection, Disaphol Chansiri, Chiang Mai, Thailand; North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, NC; Cameron Art Museum, Wilmington, NC; and Post Vidai Collection, Vietnam.

Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander

Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander is Assistant Curator of American Art at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University. With Marci Kwon, she is a founding co-director of the Asian American Art Initiative, which seeks to make the Cantor and Stanford a leading academic and curatorial center for the study of Asian American and Asian diaspora artists. To this end, she has helped acquire more than 150 works of art by Asian American artists for the Cantor's collection, including pieces by Ruth Asawa, Chiura Obata, Michael Jang, and Bernice Bing. Alexander came to Cantor in 2018 after completing her tenure as a Jane and Morgan Whitney Fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and receiving her Ph.D. in art history from the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has been invited to present her research and writing at the Harvard Art Museums, Metropolitan Museum of Art, American Folk Art Museum, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; her scholarship has been supported by the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, the Center for Craft, Creativity, and Design, and the American Craft Council.

Lia Newman

Lia Newman has held the position of Director/Curator of the Van Every/Smith Galleries at Davidson College since January 2013. From 2002 to 2012, Newman was Director of Programs and Exhibitions at Artspace in Raleigh, NC. She earned a BA in Art History and a BFA in General Studio with concentrations in sculpture and photography from Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC, and an MA in Liberal Studies from Duke University, Durham, NC. Newman is responsible for curating exhibitions, developing exhibition-related programming, and overseeing and growing Davidson College's Permanent Art Collection, including the campus sculpture program.

OPPOSITE: *A Mute Cacophony Inside the Womb*, 2021, oil, silk, acrylic, copper pigment, enamel on canvas, diptych, 84 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe, NM. Photography: Peter Paul Geoffrion

ON THE COVER: *From the Earth Rise Radiant Beings*, detail, 2021, oil, silk, acrylic, copper pigment, enamel on canvas, 72 x 96 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe, NM. Photography: Peter Paul Geoffrion

INSIDE FRONT COVER: *According to the Spectre of Blood and Water*, detail, 2019, oil, silk, acrylic, vintage Japanese textile, gold and copper pigment, 72 x 96 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe, NM. From the collection of Jim Whitely and Adrienne Johnswegner.



This publication was produced in conjunction with ***Liên Trương: From the Earth Rise Radiant Beings***, presented in the Van Every Gallery at Davidson College, August 23-October 3, 2021.

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