

**Thu Van Tran**  
**Novel Without a Title**  
**11.9.–15.11.2020**

*“Disappearance leaves traces, it is the passage that is intense.”* (Thu Van Tran)

Born in Vietnam, Thu Van Tran (\*1979, Ho Chi Minh City; lives and works in Paris) fled with her family to France — her current home country — in 1981. In 2018 she was nominated for France’s prestigious Prix Marcel Duchamp. Tran completed her studies at the Glasgow School of Art and the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts in Paris.

For many years the artist has been creating a body of work that includes photographs, drawings, and videos, as well as sculptures and installations, which are brought together in situ to form a grand narrative—a narrative that raises questions about our ability to remember the history, rituals, and legacies of countries or even nations. In her works, the artist addresses Vietnam’s postcolonial relations with France and the USA. She is interested in how yesterday looms over today, and how historical consciousness and collective consciousness interact with each other.

Thu Van Tran’s practice is consistently inspired by literature, history, architecture, and nature, focusing her attention on the ways in which the cultural concepts of contamination, identity, and language are explored within these fields. For the exhibition at the Kunsthaus Baselland—the artist’s first solo show in Switzerland—speech, or rather speechlessness, plays a central role. The exhibition title *Novel Without a Title* is an explicit reference to the Vietnamese writer Duong Thu Huong and her novel *Novel Without a Name*. At the heart of this reference is the question of our ability or perhaps our inability to narrate and transmit stories and tragedies. Can we speak about the unspeakable?

A pivotal element of the extensive display at Kunsthaus Baselland is Thu Van Tran’s two-channel video installation from 2019, *24 Hours in Hanoi*, in which she leads a protagonist through the city of Hanoi, revealing her own experiences from her last visit to this city, which is both familiar and strange to her. At the heart of the tour is a visit to the Temple of Literature, a cultural and spiritual center dedicated to Confucius that houses, among other things, eighty-two stone turtles bearing inscription plates. The texts on the plates are in Old Vietnamese, a language that has now been almost forgotten since the introduction of the Western alphabet by French and Portuguese Jesuits. How quickly can the language of a country, a culture, an individual, or a collective disappear? How can the knowledge and history it contains be preserved?

In her series of photograms, *Maids Day*—the artist’s deliberate choice of title makes our thoughts vacillate between Maids Day and Mayday, the international distress signal—Thu Van Tran succeeds in creating a delicate form of memory. Inspired by a silent gathering of a community of women, witnessed by the artist on the streets of Hong Kong during a journey to Asia, the series brings to light those who work in the shadows every day: the female cleaners (mostly Filipina) who mostly work in open-plan offices at night. On Sundays, they gather to spend the day sitting together on pieces of cardboard in a public space, defined by transit. A silent female fight forming a massive, immobile presence in the public, visible once for everyone. With this series, which recalls traces of the past, the artist seeks opportunities to reproduce and thus capture the fragility and beauty of these women but also their strength and power.

Striving for poetry, beauty, and also sensuality in her works, despite—or perhaps even in light of—what is reflected and portrayed within is the common thread that runs through the entirety of Thu Van Tran's work and her exhibition in Basel.

With her new series of large-format graphite drawings, *Trail Dust*, the artist makes reference to one of the saddest chapters in the history of Vietnam: *Trail Dust* refers to a military operation by the American army during the Vietnam War, in which they used the poison Agent Orange on an enormous scale, spraying it over vast swathes of Vietnam. A dust that settles, contaminates, kills. The large bronze rubber tree leaves are also a reminder of how many tropical forests were contaminated by this military operation and how many people were robbed of their food and health. To create her sculptures, the artist purposely uses a wax-melting process that destroys the green leaves used, subsequently producing a bronze sculpture that will endure. A symbol of Vietnam's lush rubber tree and banana plantations, these leaves preserve this history for many years and decades. Above all, it is the history of a country whose raw materials have gone through long, violent, and exploitative extraction processes.

Thu Van neither accuses the viewer nor allows them to become melancholy. Instead, the viewer joins the artist in a poetic, delicate search for traces through language, materials, and different themes as they walk through the space. A search for traces of the forgotten, the lost, the past; not only are we able to comprehend the pivotal moments in the culture and history of a country and its inhabitants, we can also live and experience them. (IG)

The exhibition is curated by Ines Goldbach, Director, Kunsthaus Baselland.

The work *Arirang partition*, 2016 was activated three times by the pianists Andres Talimaa and Andrea Roggo.

Thu Van Tran is represented by:

Almine Rech (Paris, London, New York, Shanghai), Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle (Munich) and Meessen De Clerq (Brussels).

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