

For Immediate Release

Solo Exhibition by Minneapolis-based Artist Teo Nguyen Shines Light on Vietnam Beyond the War

Teo Nguyen's photorealist paintings, multimedia works invite contemplation and reflection on the Vietnamese people's struggles toward peace

July 18, 2022

MINNEAPOLIS--The Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) will present "Việt Nam Peace Project," a solo exhibition by Minneapolis-based artist Teo Nguyen. Nguyen's photorealist paintings and other site-specific works invite contemplation and reflection on the Vietnamese people's struggles toward peace by reclaiming the narrative of Vietnam and shining a light on the country beyond the war. The exhibition, curated by Dennis Michael Jon, Mia's associate curator of Global Contemporary Art, in collaboration with the artist, will be on view from July 30, 2022, through June 8, 2023.

Born in 1977 in a small coastal town in Vietnam, Nguyen (pronounced "when") moved to the United States when he was 16. He quickly realized most Americans think of Vietnam as a war, rather than a country. In creating the works for this exhibition, Nguyen considered what he wanted viewers to know about Vietnam. The exhibition is centered around a series of more than 40 paintings inspired by iconic news photographs from the American war in Vietnam (1954–75); however, Nguyen reimagines the scenes without the violence, omitting the helicopters, victims, fallen soldiers, and instruments of war to reveal the country's diverse natural beauty.



Teo Nguyen (American [born Vietnam], 1977), *I Only Wished to Sit with You to Say a Word or Two*, 2016, acrylic on vellum, mounted to aluminum. © Teo Nguyen

Other works in the exhibition focus on experiences of loss and separation, offering alternative narratives on the war from a Vietnamese perspective. *My Being* is a short film inspired by the poetry of Nguyen's mother, Duong Anh Loi, who, like many Vietnamese, was displaced during wartime. The artist returned to Vietnam with a film crew to tell the story of his mother's life, recreating details from four of her poems. A selection of his mother's handwritten poems will be on view in an adjacent display.

A site-specific installation of stacked paper, *Untitled* (2022), visually depicts the enormous human cost of the war in Vietnam, particularly on the Vietnamese people. Nguyen contends that, though the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., pays tribute to the over 58,000 U.S. soldiers who died in the war, many Americans have little or no awareness of the estimated over 3 million Vietnamese people, both soldiers and civilians, who also died in the conflict. Sixty stacks of white paper approximate the total number of Vietnamese lives lost during the war, while one stack symbolizes the number of Americans who died, illustrating the relative disparity in the death toll between the countries.

The centerpiece of the show is *Lotus Pond* (2018–22), a 10-panel, larger-than-life mural of white lotus flowers, the national flower of Vietnam, which grow in its muddy ponds and shallow lakes. To Nguyen, the lotus pond symbolizes the country's multigenerational transition from war to peace, presenting a message of optimism for the future.

A photo-based assemblage titled *Agent Orange* (2022) represents what Nguyen calls the "politics of worthiness." The work explores the legacy of Agent Orange, the tactical herbicide U.S. military forces sprayed over the Vietnamese countryside to clear vegetation during the war, which left lasting effects on the health of the people and the environment. Nguyen abstracted images of Agent Orange and its devastation,

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superimposing them onto clear panels that are suspended from the ceiling. Nguyen wanted the installation to mimic the way the chemical agent rained down on Vietnam for years; its placement in the Target Wing stairwell adjacent to the galleries evokes the feeling of being trapped, similar to how the people of Vietnam may have felt, with no way to escape the toxin.

“Peace is a practice,” Nguyen said. “This exhibition is a peace practice for me, and hopefully for viewers as well. To me, as an artist, this show is my way of preventing future conflicts. These works I’ve created are intended to promote understanding and foster empathy, so we can all move forward together.”

“Teo is a highly accomplished painter and conceptual artist,” Dennis Jon said. “The works of art he’s created for this project bring a global perspective to the American war in Vietnam, while encouraging greater understanding of Vietnamese history and culture.”

“Việt Nam Peace Project” is a free exhibition. More information about the exhibition and an upcoming event with the artist can be found at artsmia.org.

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About Teo Nguyen

Born in 1977 in a small coastal town in Vietnam, Teo Nguyen moved to the United States at age 16. He studied art and design in San Francisco, Fresno, and Paris. For the past decade, he has lived and worked in Minneapolis. Two of his paintings are in Mia’s permanent collection, both landscapes representing the American Midwest.

Press Contacts

Minneapolis Institute of Art

Allie Johnson

allie.johnson@artsmia.org

+1 612 870 3171

PAVE Communications & Consulting

Kat Harding

kat@paveconsult.com

+1 440 759 8148

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Minneapolis Institute of Art
2400 Third Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55404