

Assimilation Assassination: first step

a site-specific installation

Basement 10, 511 Federal Building

Portland, OR

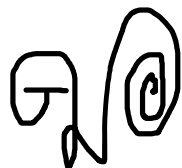
Vũ Tiến Thành | Thanh Tony Vu

Pacific Northwest College of Art

BFA Photography Thesis: Fall 2020

Mentor: Rachel Wolf

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Thesis Proposal of Vũ Tiến Thành

“Go back to your country. You fucking chink! Can you understand English, ding dong I’m talking to you? Those are the type of statements (directed at me) that used to make me boiling upset when I first moved here from Vietnam when I was 16. I spent unaccountable hours on Youtube utterly trying to learn the proper pronunciations so I could cover my identity as a Vietnamese. I remembered having problems saying no to my American “friends” when it came to, anything at all; so that I could fit in and be a part of the American “culture”. In ways, I had nonchalantly attempted to murder my culture within myself.”¹

Coming to America on my own when I was 16, I felt this burning agency to “adopt and adapt” as quickly, smoothly as possible. This self-sabotaging, xenocentric procedure happened throughout my high school experience as an exchange student.

I consider *my memoir of 2010* a jumping-off point to my thesis project. Is cultural assimilation inevitable? What are the differences between cultural assimilation and cultural adaptation? What is the relationship between assimilation and xenophobia? If one is assimilationist, aren’t they debatably a xenophobe? This topic of cultural assimilation is truly intriguing to me, in terms of where, geologically the work will be presented (Portland, Oregon, USA) and whom the work will be made to/for (non-imperialists).

I am aware of the indescribably fucked-up history of United States of America; of how it was made, whom it was stolen from for and at what cost. I am aware of the cultural assimilation and displacement towards communities of Indigenous folx. I’m aware of the historical timeline of my country, Vietnam in the role of *the colonized* by China, France, and the United States of America.

“adopt and adapt” the biggest slaps to your face

A choice, to only assimilate with consent

Fluidity in hybridity.

¹ Memoir of 2010, 2019

I am planning on constructing six containers / spaces / environments/sites for at least 6 pieces of work that I will be creating. They shall be seen as horcruxes in order to stop assimilation from spreading over. I will be actively using reference specifically from Vietnamese idioms, folk games, songs, grandma's bedtime stories, ma's superstitious lifehacks. I think it is necessary to treat these sites as installation, as to referring to mediums. Two hybrid intaglio plaster sculptures, two paintings collections of writings, super 8 footage projection and camera obscura, a mixtape for mom will be featured.

I am a troubled Vietnamese multi-disciplinary artist who happens to currently dwell within the u n i t e d states of america. I have been here for a third of my life. I am surrounded by childhood imagery, memory, repetitions, family, shadows, light, and by the various states of my fellow beings. I am willing to use any medium available in hopes that my point can bridge the broken gaps. I am striving to dispatch a message(s) with which I often have a hard time putting into words, both physically and mentally. I am inclined to whispering rather than shouting. I am my work.

Artist Statement

I am

- a troubled Vietnamese multi-disciplinary artist who happens to currently dwell within the united states of america. I have been here for a third of my life.
- surrounded by childhood imagery, memory, repetitions, family, shadows, light, and by the various states of my fellow beings.
 - willing to use any medium available in hopes that my point can bridge the broken gaps.
- striving to dispatch a message(s) with which I often have a hard time putting into words, both physically and mentally.
 - inclined to whispering rather than shouting.

I am my work.

- TV

ABSTRACT:

Taking references from a range of once familiar things, from Vietnamese landscape, Vietnamese TV gameshow to Vietnamese folklores, Vietnamese idioms, proverbs, the artist presents a site-specific installation that deals with cultural assimilation, cultural loss, cultural reclamation as a born and raised Vietnamese dwelling within the U n i t e d States of America. The work, which consists of photographic sculptures, found sculptures, and plaster cast copper etchings, can be viewed as Assimilation Assassination Plan.

Thesis Defense Speech

Thank you all for being here and welcome to my thesis oral defense.

At my thesis proposal, I had proposed 6 different site-specific installations at 6 different locations. However, Covid-19 in 2020 suggested that I should only create a site specific installation at Basement 10 at 511 Federal Building. SO I LISTENED.

This site will be one of the six site specific installation that I will be continuing working on after my time here at PNCA.

“Assimilation assassination within the self: first step”. My thesis project is about personal exploration on cultural assimilation, hence cultural loss and cultural reclamation as a born and raised Vietnamese moving to America on my own when I was 16. I’d like to be marinated in once familiar viet games, viet imageries and viet memories that are belong to me. Countless hours of binge watching once popular vietnamese gameshow that are available on youtube that I had remembered watching when I was a kid such as Vườn Cỗ Tích, Chiếc nón kỳ diệu (Wheels of Fortune), Hãy Chọn Giá Đúng (The Price is Right), Ai là Triệu Phú (who wants to be a millionaire) etc concludes my research (jk). Now I strictly use celsius degree instead of fahrenheit, replace inch ruler with centimeter ruler, kilometer instead of miles, write the date first, the month and the year.

The first step to execute assimilation, to me at least, is to be aware of these self-assimilation that I had caused myself and choose to forgive myself and to heal.

Images of ceramic tiles to me, are engraved in my childhood/teenhood memory being raised in Hanoi, Vietnam; greatly because of its popular utilitarian use in vietnamese household. To me, when you visualize a Vietnamese home, you can not help but think about ceramic tiles.

Before I had moved to the states (Oregon State), I was living on Nghi Tàm road. Nghi Tàm, along with Trần Quang Khải, Trần Khánh Dư, Yên Phụ, Âu Cơ are the continuing streets that run parallel to the Red River. These continuing streets make up “Hanoi Ceramic Road”, which is a ceramic mosaic mural along the walls of The Red River Water dam system in Hanoi. This mural runs about 6.5 kilometers in length. while half of the work is done by Nguyen Thu Thuy, a Vietnamese artist; the project was participated by many Vietnamese artists along with other artists in the world from different cultural centers.

Ceramic tiles instantaneously signifies “home”, “warmth, somewhere grouted/grounded. Here are a few fragmented tiles that I had made in the beginning of the semester. I’m calling them as “fragmented” tiles as they are a portion of the big image. They serve as test strips for me to indicate the exposure time. The underlayered texture of these ceramic tiles look as if they were blood vessels that help circulating these photographic memories to the heart of home. Wherever home is.

Growing up, I think I have always been a person who seeks and craves spending time with my family. To me, the memory of us having very simplistic dinner and going about how our days were with the background being gameshow that is projected on a box TV never fails to bring (now)me joyous reminiscence. One of the gameshows I remember us watching while eating was *Đuổi Hình Bắt Chữ*.^[1] The gameshow shares the same original format of a U.S gameshow in the 80s called *Catchphrase*. The objective of *Đuổi Hình Bắt Chữ* is rather simple and straight to the point: solving these “catch phrases” before other participant(s). The catch phrases are most often phraseological, meaning that the catch phrases can be anywhere from popular verbal expression to idioms, proverbs, though sometimes they are simply just a name of an object/thing. The hint to guessing the catch phrases is representative animated illustration.



Example: catch phrase - idiom: Một miệng thì kín, chín miệng thì hở (translated: One lip is closed while nine lips are opened). This idiom mocks ones who cannot seem to keep a secret.



Another example: Here, the illustration shows multiple x(es) in the background, along with the two “x” in the foreground being separated by a space in between them. The “x” registers on people’s mind as multiply/multiplication, which translates to “nhân”. “<- ->” represents distance, a blank space or space bar; which signifies “cách”. All together, the catch phrase for the illustration above is “nhân cách”, which means personality.

I applied the same methodology as used in the show *Đuôi Hình Bắt Chữ* in the making of the landscape tiles and also in the found sculptures that are in the final installation. The imagery on the tile is the visual cue /still illustration and for each tile there lies idioms/proverbs that go with it.



Tile #1: “Thăng cánh Cò bay” (Storks fly comfortably in an open field) + “Đôi mắt là Cửa sổ của tâm hồn” (the eyes are the windows to the soul/mind)

“Đồng Tháp Mười cò bay thăng cánh

Nước Tháp Mười lóng lánh cá tôm”

(Thăng cánh Cò bay) is an excerpt from the proverb: ““Đồng Tháp Mười cò bay thăng cánh Nước Tháp Mười lóng lánh cá tôm” praising the resourceful Đồng Tháp, a province by the Mekong Delta in Southern Vietnam. The proverb translated: In Đồng Tháp, the storks get to fly comfortably in the grand open delta, fish and shrimps get to swim in the sparkly water.

The birdlike characters that appears to be flying (on the upper part of the tile) represent the storks. My nickname at home is Cò. My family calls me Cò (stork). -> Nhíu mắt nhìn ra khung cửa sổ, tôi nhìn thấy tôi đang bay. (Squintingly looking outside the window of my house, I see myself flying).



Tile #2: Quay đầu là bờ (Turn my head around, it's a dock) / Thuyền ơi có nhớ bến chăng, bến thì một dạ khăng khăng đợi thuyền (dear boat, do you miss the dock? The dock persists in waiting for the boat)

Quay đầu là bờ refers to a lesson in Buddhism in which it means no matter what wrongs one has done, it is okay to leave everything where it is and return to the dock to heal.

Thuyền ơi có nhớ bến chăng, bến thì một dạ khăng khăng đợi thuyền. (Dear boat, do you miss the dock? The dock persists in waiting for the boat)

By subverting metaphorical, yet conventional relationship between the dock and boat, a relationship that is often talked about in Vietnamese literature to describe a couple relationship, I intended to use the metaphor to express the relationship between grandson and grandma. Boat is the grandson. Grandma is the dock. Boat gets to excitedly go to wherever the water takes it while the dock is stable, solid, steady, secure, strong, sturdy and stout. Boat's objective is to swim away while the dock's objective is to wait.

This piece expresses the nostalgia in waiting and reaffirming promise in a return to the dock.

"When are you gonna be home?" the dock'd ask everytime whenever they face time..

I printed on these tiles using Liquid Light Emulsion. In short, it is a conventional black and white darkroom process. I'd start off degreasing the tiles by intensely scrubbing these tiles in a solution of hot water and baking soda. Then I'd add Knox's gelatin powder into water, letting it swell, and cooking the solution to bring the temperature up to 60-70 celsius degree. Then I'd pour the hot gelatine solution onto the degreased tiles to create bedding in order for the light sensitive emulsion to lay onto. Then the tiles will be exposed (with light) under an enlarger and processed accordingly, somewhat similar to how darkroom b/w paper are processed. This heavy processed base procedure is in line with the handling/constructing of a space that is called "home". To me, it is both suiting and soothing in creating these "pocket fitting" landscape. The landscape that I treasure, I keep them close in my pocket. These photographic memorabilia taken in the form of 0.092903 square meter (1 square foot) mosaic tile

represents my memories about Vietnam: “fragmented”, partially disintegrated puzzle pieces that make up my representation of the “homeland”.

Referencing “Sự tích Bánh Chung Bánh dày”, a vietnamese folklore story aids my decision in keeping the landscape tiles in square format. Square represents the land.

However, with the self-portraits tiles, however there isn't guidelines but one formula. Improvisation + Intuition = composition.

With often playful approach, I utilize mundane everyday objects that i come across, often by chance to create a visual moodboard of how I'd feel that specific day. The self portraits are all taken in the land of the deflated dream while the landscapes were sleeplessly taken in the homeland.

Plaster:

Other material choices for my thesis project include copper and plaster. To be specific, I work on this hybrid printmaking - moldmaking technique called “Plaster cast etching” where I'd ink up a ferric etched intaglio copper plate, wipe it with tarlatan and hand, the same treatment to conventional printing by the press onto paper. Then, I'd construct a mold, put the inked up copper inside the mold upfacing and pour the mixed plaster over it. After the plaster hardens, I'd carefully remove the copper out and wait and wait and wait.

These plaster etching are riffing off kids drawings and influenced by a Vietnamese kid game (Trón Tim).
5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55 66 65 70 75 80 85 90 95 100

Copper and plaster share the same common denominator: both being high-demand material that is heavily used in constructing a space. Copper is a commodity. Copper is representational of “the free market” (of importing/exporting) and having incorporated copper metaphorically speaks to my experience of a daydreamer. I utilize plaster for its inherent properties: smooth, pristine, sharp, white, fragile. Tinting the plaster might/might not hint @ an attempt to get into the ring with Asian Inferiority complex and the constant longing for acceptance. “I will be accepted if I fully assimilate” It is a society where people despise/ you when you don't know English and then they shame you when you forget some of your native tongue.

Once Again, this installation is a site-specific installation, specifically located @ Basement 10 @ 511 Federal Building, Portland, Oregon.

Part one and part 2 in *A History in Five Part - Persons, Places, Things from pnca.edu* said: “How does a building become more than a mere assemblage of steel and stone, metal and masonry? When materials interact with peoples, cultures, times, and environments, they become something greater than of the sum of their component parts. When this happens, they become a *place*. A pile of bricks is not a place, and a pile of bricks under a pile of metal under a pile of marble is no more a place than that first pile of bricks was on its own. *Place* is something intangible: a certain ambiance, a gravitas, a presence. The 511 Building has it... There is a reason the 511 Building doesn't look like a low-budget alternative. It doesn't look cheap. Its size is imposing, its details, to our eyes, ornate.”

Sure, it's known without a doubt that mesmerizing luxurious ornamental decoration fascinates parental visitors on the surface when they step in the lobby. The convenient failure from PNCA, to mention the 511 federal building used to house U.S Immigration and Custom Enforcement right before PNCA took over the building in 2015 is not a surprise to the student body. Though let us never ever forget that when the building housed ICE, people were being detained in the basement and they were kept in holding cells. If you have been to the basement before, you must have seen a metal stool with lots of graffiti in different languages scratched onto the stool. There's a room in the basement that stores artifacts from the ICE era. I wanted a lick of that freedom and it was why I decided to move here when I was 16 with no family.. And after being here for 10 years, it is mind-boggling to see how much my perception of America has changed. To put my experience being here in America in one sentence: it is as if I

was an excited kid who just got offered a drink which was promised to be soda pop but the drink turned out to be vodka. This balloony dream has holes in it. My deflated American dream.

This concludes my speech and now I'm ready to take questions that you may have! Once again, thank you all for being here; it means a great deal to me.

Annotated Bibliography of Vũ Tiến Thành

Fall 2020

Baldwin, James. *Another Country*. New York, New York: Vintage International, 1993.

Despite that *Another Country* wasn't directly in line with my thesis project, I still chose to read it. As I continue my path to my deflated American dream, this book touches base on America as a racist, classist and individualistic society and how systemic racism trickles down and harms community of color (specially towards black and indigenous community). I am interested in the theme of interracial romance from personal experience. I appreciate Baldwin for not sugar-coating the complexity of interracial romance but blatantly expressing the giant hardships, almost impossible to break through (via the portrays of romantic relationship between Rufus and Leona, Vivaldo and Ida).

Hoang, Cuong Manh, dir. "06/19/2014 episode". "Đuổi Hình Bắt Chữ". Hanoi Radio Station, 2004

"Đuổi Hình Bắt Chữ" (translated: running after images, capturing words) is a Vietnamese gameshow that Vietnamese audience was/is familiar with. It shares the same format as a TV show in U.S in the 80s called "catchphrase". During my research phrase, I came across episodes of the show on Youtube and started binge-watching them all. This show was a staple to my childhood as a Vietnamese. It was a simplistic show, yet mesmerizing and reminiscing. The show aided me in re-remembering idioms, proverbs and popular sayings that I had forgotten. It is quite quintessential to my making of the photographic pocket-fitting landscape tiles.

Mehta, Suketu. *This Land Is Our Land: an Immigrant's Manifesto*. New York, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.

This book was the first book that I had read upon my thesis proposal. The book is insightful in making sense to an immigrant's *raison d'être* by breaking the read into four parts: "The immigrants are coming", "Why they're coming", "Why they're feared?" and "Why they should be welcomed". Reading the book was an enraging, frustrating and validating experience. The feeling of I am not alone. "...Mehta also stresses the destructive legacies of colonialism and global inequality in large swaths of the world: when today's immigrants are asked, 'Why are you here?' they can justly respond, 'We are here because you were here' "(foreword)

Nguyen, Anh Nhat. *Cho Tôi Xin Một Vé Đi Tuổi Thơ*. Ho Chi Minh: Tre Publishing House, 2008

This novel by one of the most celebrated Vietnamese authors, Nguyễn Nhật Ánh. Upon my thesis proposal, I got the chance to re-read both in Vietnamese and English. The title translates: Please give me a ticket to childhood. Narrated with often simplistic, not so big words, the novel cradles my mind with familiar folk games, banal kid games, Vietnamese cultural tradition and friendship.

Nguyen, Anh Nhat. *Ticket to Childhood: a Novel*. Translated by William Naythons. New York, New York: The Overlook Press, 2014.

This novel by one of the most celebrated Vietnamese authors, Nguyễn Nhật Ánh. Upon my thesis proposal, I got the chance to re-read both in Vietnamese and English. The title translates: Please give me a ticket to childhood. Narrated with often simplistic, not so big words, the novel cradles my mind with familiar folk games, banal kid games, Vietnamese cultural tradition and friendship. The reason for reading both version (in English and

Vietnamese) is to see if there is loss in translation. The decision also intentionally speaks to experience of me, as a Vietnamese diaspora experiencing cultural loss.

Nguyen, Hung Dinh. *Tuyển Tập Thành Ngữ Tục ngữ Ca dao Việt – Anh thông dụng*. Ho Chi Minh: Ho Chi Minh City Publisher, 2007

This book is helpful in terms of providing the closest English translation for Vietnamese phraseological terms that I bring in for my thesis project work. I get to learn a lot more idioms/ proverbs that I did not know. Definitely a good read!!

Nguyen, Ngoc Van. *Tục-Ngữ Phong-Đạo*. Vietnam(?): Vĩnh Hưng Long, 1928

This book can be considered to be the encyclopedia of Vietnamese idioms/proverbs at the time. While they provided me a lot of idioms that I did not know/ did not remember, I sometimes had hard time understanding certain words because of generational difference in word using. However, having checked out this book first gave me directions/curational cues to which idioms/proverbs that I would use. I was also aware of the binary/ gender-conformity use in Vietnamese words while I was reading this book.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *The Sympathizer*. New York, New York: Grove, 2015.

The Sympathizer provides multifaceted inlooks / outlooks of the war between Vietnam and the U.S through the eye and mind of a half Vietnamese half French undercover communist agent. It speaks on accumulation of contradiction of a Vietnamese being towards the end of Vietnam War/ Resistance war against the U.S. (i.e the Fall of Saigon). As a reader, I was very drawn by inherent contradiction of the narrator. The contradiction, just to name a few, includes: being a mixed race (half Viet, half French -> colonized v. colonizer); being a communist mole and making actual friendship with

individuals from the opposite side, and being a Vietnamese born and raised but attended university in the U.S (assimilation v acculturation)

Trinh, Minh-Ha T. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. London: Routledge, 1992.

This book written by Trinh Minh-Ha is provocative, expressive, intuitive and lawless. At times, reading it was confusing because of its structureless and non-linear approach.

Regardless, it was super helpful to me under the perspective of a fellow navigator (in my work and also in my life) as a multi-culturalist and also as a Vietnamese diaspora. I think this book has my full attention due to its fearless critics/ challenges to the binaries that we as human beings, intentionally/accidentally create. To me, it is also highly relatable in terms of topics such as representations, subjective/objective ideas, Colonialism, Totalitarianism, to Film Studies and Poetry. It is very highly relatable to me as Trinh is also a Vietnamese diaspora.

Vu, Son Hong, dir. "Episode 1: Sự Cố Buổi Ban Đầu". "Đội Đặc Nhiệm nhà C21". Vietnam Television. 1998

This was a Vietnamese kid television drama in the late 90s that I fortunately got to re-watch upon my thesis defense. It is about a group of "smarty pants", "know it all" pre-teen Vietnamese kids who, both are in the same class and share the same hobby of being detectives. They work together in order to solve crimes in their community. I specifically picked episode 1 for the reason being good introduction to main characters. Watching the television drama feeds me classic dishes of visual representation of very familiar settings in Hanoi such as: always crowded streets with people honking for nothing, the classrooms, the street barbershops, etc.

Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: a Novel*. New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2019.

To me, a painful but tender read. Essentially written in the form of a letter from a Vietnamese American queer son to his illiterate mom, the novel was an absolutely a must read for me in terms of relatability, as a Vietnamese son. The novel shares deeply personal stories, incidents, experiences between the son (the author) the non-English-speaking mother in the most brutally honest and compassionate way. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a letter from Ocean to his mom and my thesis project is one that dedicates to my mom and my grandma, those who do not speak English at all.

