

# RED RIVER RISING

Dinh Quan



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Curator: Shireen Naziree

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# FOREWORD

**Jørn Middelborg**

Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and art exhibition *Red River Rising* with contemporary lacquer paintings, lacquer sculptures and a video presentation by the Vietnamese artist Dinh Quan.

Dinh Quan is probably Vietnam's most important lacquer artist, applying a technique that has ancient roots in Asia, and which has been taken to new and exciting levels in Vietnam by innovative techniques and methods. Transparent, reflective and opaque all at once, the lacquer paintings of Dinh Quan flirt with contradictions as he stretches his limits using his unique style of painting.

I have known Dinh Quan for almost fifteen years, and this exhibition is Thavibu Gallery's fifth exhibition of his works in Bangkok. His style and techniques have developed over the years, and recently he has experimented extensively with new ways of expression. In some way, his works have become simpler, drawing on the essence of emotions and his own inner feelings. Just one simple colour on a black board of lacquer can carry a lot of meaning.

*In Red River Rising*, questions of subjects and viewpoints undergo subtle inflections toward their material, spatial and historical dimensions. Though his dialogue is not overtly political, he has seamlessly moved from the surreal to the everyday with an open-ended conclusion. Whether autobiographical or drawn from the lives around him, he continues to focus on relationships, always keeping the current socio-political situation of Vietnam in mind.

The exhibition is curated by the independent curator and art historian Shireen Naziree.

I take the opportunity to thank Dinh Quan for his collaboration and Shireen Naziree for her contribution.

# RED RIVER RISING

**Shireen Naziree**

Curator

What can we learn about Vietnam through the works of visual artists emerging after *Doi Moi*—Vietnam’s market liberation in 1986—when artistic liberty also took on added meaning? It seems there is much to learn as this generation of artists have since become internationally prominent. Their early works were spurred by a general fascination with both Vietnam’s geopolitical history and with contemporary art from the West. While their creative output presented a gloss of normalcy, however fragile, to the casual viewer, beneath that smooth surface rested the reality of a society caught up in the cycle of social change. Their art, especially lacquer painting, provides some of the most informative and exciting evidence of the Vietnamese cultural psyche and arouses critical interest beyond Vietnam.

Dinh Quan, who graduated from the lacquer department of Hanoi Art University in 1990, occupies a distinctive place in Vietnam’s modern art history. Regarded as one of Vietnam’s foremost lacquer painters, he has always centred his art on his homeland, treating it as his primary inspiration and focusing on the specifics of culture, place and people.

Born in the coastal port city of Haiphong in 1964, Dinh Quan’s early years were typically defined by the stark and rigid socialist ideologies of Communist North Vietnam. Despite the abject poverty of his childhood and his distance from the far-flung world of art, Dinh Quan was enveloped by the visual aesthetics of Vietnam’s cultural traditions. These offered him a generative manual that would ultimately become part of his artistic tapestry. His fascination with the rich colours often associated with festivals, the ornate embellishments and artifacts in pagodas and temples, as well as with traditional song and storytelling enriched an otherwise repressed existence in a totalitarian environment.

The early 1990’s was also a period in Vietnam’s art history that afforded reflection and a renewed interest for artists in the country’s French Colonial art heritage. Romanticism, Impressionism, Abstract Expressionism and many other Western art movements were coded in the Classicism inherent in European art strains and were newly minted or rediscovered in the years that followed *Doi Moi*. In contrast with prior Social Realist idioms employed in Vietnamese art, which were propagated during the country’s cultural revolution and which plunged viewers into a narrative without hope of exit, Classicism required artists to imbue their art with emotional appeal.



**My Golden Dream, 2010**

Lacquer and gold leaf on fiberglass

114 x 45 x 45 cm



Dinh Quan felicitously adapted this sensibility as both a natural development from the traditional forms of lacquer painting and as an opportunity to reconcile these with experiments in modern techniques and styles. Though lacquer painting was cultivated into a fine art form under the auspices of the *École des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine* in 1925, its application remained traditional with a distinct national character, just as the graceful *ao dai*-clad Vietnamese woman was portrayed as an object of tender and detached melancholy. Amongst the sheer ubiquity of such classical templates, Dinh Quan's embracement of newer modes of artistic rendering in lacquer painting made his work stand out the more, reflecting as it did the developments of the period that would coincide with the rapid economic growth of Southeast Asia.

Dinh Quan's strong fresh interpretations with lacquer painting provided new frameworks for the tradition and offered different screens through which to view the artist. Transparent, reflective and opaque all at once, the new lacquer paintings of Dinh Quan flirted with contradictions as he stretched the limits of his technique to develop a unique style. He still embraced the traditions and disciplines of lacquer rendering, but it would be through technique, subject matter and colour that he was able to project his creativity with his own spirituality. At the same time, he never lost sight of the distinctions that the process of layering possessed. For beneath every layer of lacquer lies a fragment of Dinh Quan's inner self—sometimes fragile and patient, at other times resilient and strong like the female forms that became fundamental to his earlier practice.

While he remained a steadfast proponent of art as both a moral and aesthetic enterprise, it was his conviction that the task of the artist was to transmit this sense of commitment to the world. Though aware of the formalities of Vietnamese artistic sensibilities in all its manifestations, he persevered in expressing his views in a figurative mode quite contrary to the stereotypical romanticism associated with the Vietnamese aesthetic.

Adopting a dominant Abstract Expressionist style, he imbued his early female figures with a voluptuous and restless quality filled with creative energy. The physicality of Dinh Quan's paintings also reinforced the importance of his gestural brushwork, a lesson he had learnt from his own experimentation with abstraction and lacquer painting.

Contemporary art often says more about the present than might otherwise be inferred. Over the past two decades Vietnam's economic and physical outlook has shifted and changed dramatically. But these shifts often take place within the cloaked depths of power closed off from the echoes of the present. The consistency and rigor of Dinh Quan's more recent approach to his art brings to the fore shifting resonances between his source material and his formal treatment of it. Dinh Quan had made his mark with the Romanticism of his early work, in which his explorations of identity were often meditative escapes from everyday reality. His pictures were softly luminous, with rhythmic lines portraying the Vietnamese identity as Edenic.

*RED RIVER RISING*—Dinh Quan's latest exhibition— is an impressive showing of works, a hybrid body of work that ties together his interest in video and sculpture with his lacquer paintings. In *RED RIVER RISING* questions of subject and viewpoint undergo subtle inflections toward their material, spatial and historical dimensions. Though his dialogue in *RED RIVER RISING* is not overtly political, he has seamlessly moved from the surreal to the everyday with an open-ended conclusion. Whether autobiographical or drawn from the lives of others around him, he continues to focus on relationships.

As the clear-cut governance of Vietnam's Communist years gives way to the increasingly boisterous atmosphere of Vietnam's current market and economic activity, the ponderous political advocacy of Communism has largely stagnated. These distinct elements coalesce to astound and entice with intimations of paranoia, power and powerlessness in the face of governmental control and corruption is precisely the unstable yet persistent phenomenon that currently prevails in Vietnam. Acutely aware of this, Dinh Quan has now engaged himself and demonstrates that his works can trigger more debate while transcending their formal and historical anchors.

*RED RIVER RISING* offers many glimpses into the personal landscape, seldom discussed and rarely portrayed, which gave rise to his artworks. Dinh Quan articulated that after a narrowing of his career in 2002—a period that allowed for reflection and reassessment—these artworks give a palpable sense of a new cultural context in his work. 'I built these images in order to give a space to things that, in our inner selves, can have huge impact, but have no form outside.' Dinh Quan has approached these elements not as a mode of concealment but rather as a form of private knowledge and experience that may be rendered in visual terms and shared with others. It is a reminder that the textures of everyday life may also be the makings of art.

While nostalgia is not the platform on which Dinh Quan has built this body of work, it is clear that several currents in Vietnam's modern reconstruction run counter to the traditional values, ideals and order that Dinh Quan's generation regards as the anchor of Vietnam's social environment. If economics is impacting Vietnam today, it is happening insidiously as those in power are soothed by materialism.

*Doi Moi* has finally changed the order of things, propelling artists of his generation to acknowledge their national identity, even as they view it and themselves with new eyes. Working in large formats, Dinh Quan achieves a controlled anarchy with fearlessness and diversity as he underwrites reflections on both his personal experience and the contemporary history of his country. At times, Dinh Quan's colour field is distantly reminiscent of his earlier works, but his built-up surfaces have an equally exacting nature and an even more insistent physical presence. Though the glossy finishes of his works are enticing, it is his skilful layering technique and adept use of colour—an unsettling mix of bright pigments—that are the real draw.





**Red River Rising:** Video stills

As Dinh Quan explores the limits between individuality and sociality, the self and his external world, *RED RIVER RISING* addresses the theme of human frailty. Setting the tone for the exhibition is his video title *Red River Rising*. Consisting of an installation on the banks of the Red River, the scenery holds a tension that is both poetic and eerie as it interweaves history and reality. The installation can be understood in relation to Vietnam's changing social environment. Despite its symbolic charge the work does not have an esoteric edge. Rather it demonstrates the artist's ability to create places that now follow no laws but their own. This notion translated into artistic practice has become an important parameter in his expression.

Instead of his sensual visionary collections of the past, Dinh Quan exhibits a new awareness of established codes and limits. *A Duet* (p.18) is an overwhelming demonstration of the notion of the *ao dai*-clad persona, which in Vietnam's current state most often signifies the outward manifestation of ego, a mask facilitating social interaction while concealing the individual's true nature. Shameless yet gentle, his figures mirror the frenzy of their external world. However they remain strangely contemplative and intimate amid their loudness.

The questioning of Dinh Quan's characters is typically mirrored in *Speechless (3)* (p. 28) as he addresses their interwoven mental and physical spheres. For the spatial intervention of his subject, he exaggerates facial features and his palette is rebellious as he intentionally omits details such as ears. Colour is defined by applications that mimic the tensions and frustrating struggles to have your voice heard; the current socialist order allows freedom of opinion but rarely freedom of speech.

As a painter, Dinh Quan touches various styles of the modernist tradition, but his sardonic blend of romantic allegory and vernacular imagery is particularly expressive in his self portraits. *Self Portrait (1)* (p. 16) takes the form of a large mask-like face, whose text incites disorientation. *Self Portrait (2)* (p. 17) on the contrary is perennially silent. The luminous face is in fact a metamorphosis of *Self Portrait (1)* (p. 16), hinting that Dinh Quan might be his own best muse and that as the artist he has taken on a survey of his own sensitivities and the idea of art itself. Yet any realism that may be found in these citations encourages literary parallels as he probes his own human consciousness, where his deepest thoughts lie. This spate of meanings is indicative of his humble regard for himself as 'part peasant, part urban' and how he describes himself in various physical spaces.

While Dinh Quan's colour field works are distantly reminiscent of his earlier paintings, his built-up surfaces have an exacting nature and insistent physical presence. Ever conscious of the emotional content of his works, he has described feelings of social displacement when in the company of Hanoi's social elite. Such qualities are enhanced in several pieces in which he reveals his process by disrupting those very surfaces. The decadent, glossy finishes of his works are enticing but it is his layering technique and use of colour that are the real draw. Dinh Quan certainly looks back to formal antecedents, but his combination of improvisation and control continues to broaden the definition of lacquer painting. In *Vague Hope* (p. 23) Dinh Quan describes his persona simply as vague: 'At this stage of my life, thoughts of the future are vague.' Rarely working in greys, the overlapping strokes in the work enhance its expressionism.

Dinh Quan has arrived at this point in his new work with admirable velocity and tenacity. These works look back to 2002 when he endured a major shift in his personal life, the experience of which propelled him to look back to his own past while observing the current world around him more closely. Dinh Quan has always embraced a life of spirituality although he has rarely articulated this openly. In *Praying* (p. 29) his contemplative gaze, though deeply haunting, is introspective as he imbues the work in silence with his hands in red folded upwards towards infinity.

Red is deemed the most auspicious colour in many oriental cultures. In a series of paintings Dinh Quan uses red to symbolise hope. He explains: 'I am often influenced by the people I meet and am considerate of human destiny. As such faces are often deeply embedded in my mind and expressed through this series of paintings, I feel that I can see them through my mind's eye.' With such emotion as his reference point his brushstrokes reside broadly within the layering of lacquer, turning it rich and agitated in its upper layers.

*RED RIVER RISING* offers many glimpses into the personal landscape from which Dinh Quan's artwork arose. In this way, his pictures give a palpable sense of the emotional pulse of contemporary Vietnam. With the clear-cut atmosphere of Communism giving way to socialist capitalism, Dinh Quan maps the shifting conciliations with acute awareness. *Eyes Wide Shut* (p. 21) is a typical portrait of the social shifts of the now quotidian life that envelops not only Vietnam but many developing nations. In *Follow Me* (p. 20) he presents a vivid portrait that questions social and artistic categories with enduring acumen. While he has mastered the distortions of modernism, Dinh Quan renders his subjects with sincerity.

However it is his experiments in large formats that bring the monumentality of Dinh Quan's two-dimensional work into focus. Not just mere studies, these works allow for a parallel practice that liberates and helps him to bring his subjects into being. *Agreement* (p. 15) is like a visual essay that formalises the artistic interests for which he is known: texture and surface, presence and absence, and the traces of human existence in the material world.

Dinh Quan approaches his artistic production with a reminder that the textures of everyday life may also be the makings of art. *My Red Dream* (p. 19) and *My Golden Dream* are intimate gestures of personal happiness. For Dinh Quan the embracing of such vulnerability and openness are seldom experienced in Vietnamese artistic expression. Through these two sculptures, he demonstrates that there is no end to his ingenuity and creativity, because for Dinh Quan art coincides with life.



# PLATES







**Agreement, 2010** | Lacquer and dyes on board | 244 x 122 cm



**Self-Portrait (1), 2007** | Lacquer and dyes on board | 120 x 120 cm





**Self-Portrait (2), 2011** | Lacquer and dyes on board | 120 x 90 cm



**A Duet, 2008** | Lacquer and dyes on board | 240 x 180 cm



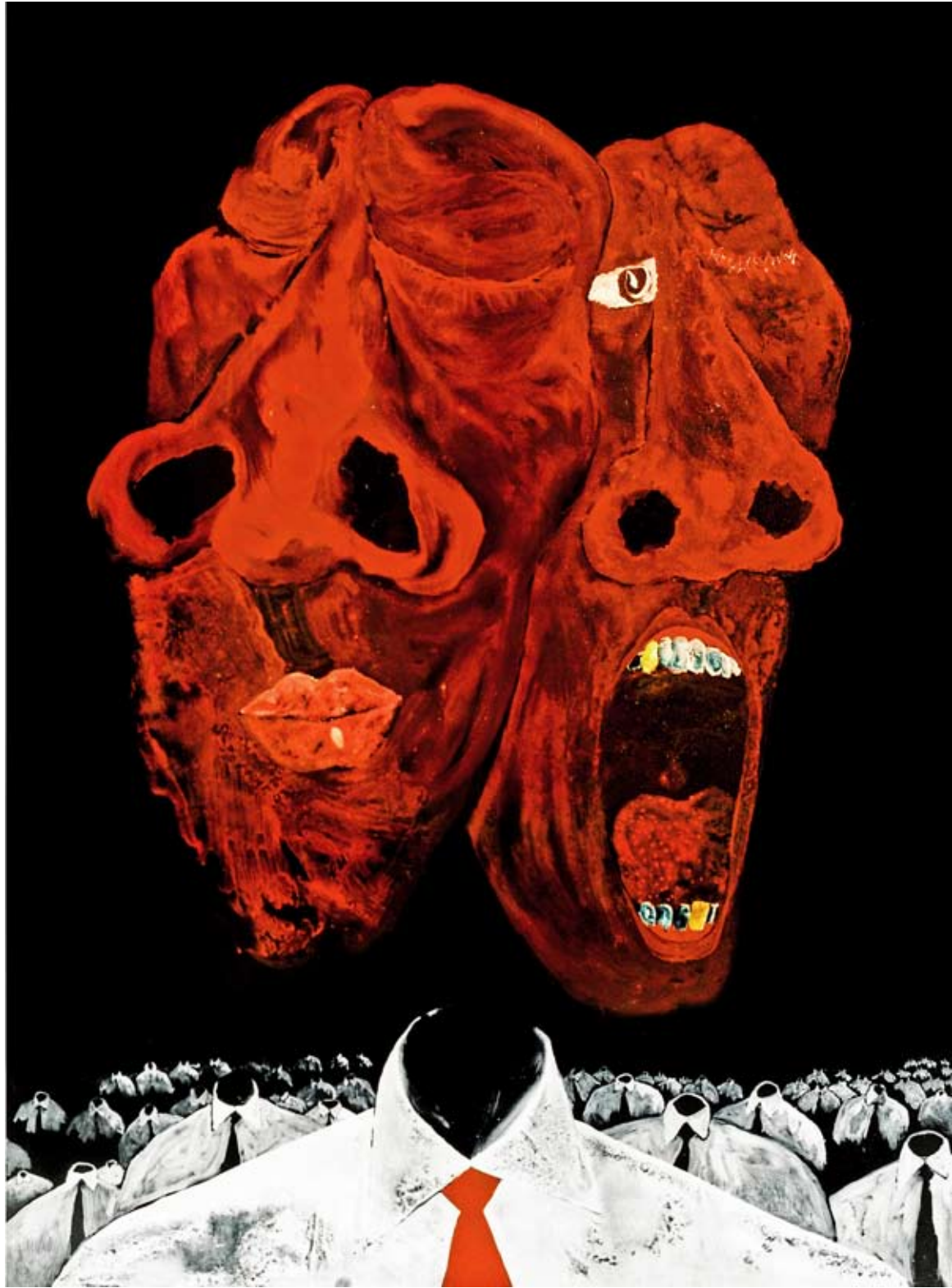
**My Red Dream, 2010** | Lacquer and dyes  
on fiberglass | 144 x 45 x 45 cm





**Follow Me, 2007** | Lacquer, dyes and gold leaf on board | 120 x 160 cm





**Eyes Wide Shut, 2007** | Lacquer, dyes and gold leaf on board | 120 x 160 cm



**Tears of Hope, 2010** | Lacquer and dyes on board | 100 x 120 cm



**Vague Hope, 2011** | Lacquer and dyes on board | 90 x 120 cm





**Red Hope, 2011** | Lacquer and dyes on board | 90 x 120 cm



**No Surprise, 2011** | Lacquer and dyes on board | 120 x 90 cm



**Don't Want to See, 2011** | Lacquer and dyes on board | 120 x 90 cm





**Still Can See, 2011** | Lacquer and dyes on board | 120 x 90 cm





**Speechless (3), 2007** | Lacquer, dyes and mixed media on board | 120 x 180 cm



**Praying, 2011** | Lacquer and dyes on board | 120 x 196 cm



# CHRONOLOGY



## Dinh Quan

Born 1964

Graduated from Hanoi Fine Arts College, 1990

Member of Vietnam Fine Arts Association

Dinh Quan was born in the coastal city of Haiphong, North Vietnam, in 1964 at the height of the American attacks on Vietnam. In 1990 Dinh Quan graduated from the Hanoi Fine Arts College, where he had studied lacquer painting. Dinh Quan is today recognised as one of Vietnam's most important lacquer artists. Through his development of the art form he has adapted the medium to include alternative techniques and other art disciplines such as sculpture.

### Selected Art Exhibitions

1990 – 1995: Participated in Vietnamese National Fine Art Exhibitions

1993: Group Show at Hang Bai Exhibition House – Hanoi, Vietnam

1994: Group Show at Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art Association – HCMC, Vietnam  
Group Show – Beijing, **China**

1995: *Fresh Paints* at Red River Gallery – Hanoi, Vietnam  
Group Show at Song Hong Gallery – Hanoi, Vietnam

1996: Group Show – Dijon and Nice, **France**  
Group Show – **Singapore**  
*Vietnam Contemporary Art* at Fujita Vente Museum – Tokyo, **Japan**  
The Year of the Dragon at Trang An Gallery – Hanoi, Vietnam

1997: Hanoi Contemporary Art – Osaka, **Japan**  
*Vietnam Express* – **Norway**  
Group Show – **The Philippines**  
*A Winding River* – Washington DC, **USA**  
*Realistic & Illusionary World in Dinh Quan's Art* (Solo Show) at Trang An Gallery – Hanoi, Vietnam

1998: Two Artists' Show at Alliance Française – **Singapore**  
*Spellbound* (Solo Show) at Thavibu Gallery – Bangkok, **Thailand**  
*With Heart & Soul & Mind* at New World Art Center – New York, **USA**  
*International Festival of Arts* – Seoul, **Korea**

Group Show at Lan Kwai Fong – **Hong Kong**

1999: *14th Asian International Art Exhibition* at Fukuoka Asian Art Museum – Fukuoka, **Japan**

Group Show – **The Philippines**

Group Show at Gajah Gallery and Alliance Française – **Singapore**

Group Show at Cork Street Gallery – London, **Great Britain**

Solo Show at Hanoi Studio – Hanoi, Vietnam

2000: Group Show at Gajah Gallery – **Singapore**

*15th Asian International Art Exhibition* – Tainan, **Taiwan**

*Nudes* (with Nguyen Xuan Tiep) at Thavibu Gallery – Bangkok, **Thailand**

*Vietnamese Lacquer Paintings* at EastWest Center – Honolulu, **USA**

*Red Dreams* (Solo Show) at Nam Son Gallery – Hanoi, Vietnam

2001: *Contemporary Art from Vietnam Part I* at The Artists' Space – Selangor, **Malaysia**

*The End of Growth* at Chiang Mai University and Silpakorn University (supported by Heinrich Böll Foundation) – Chiang Mai & Bangkok, **Thailand**

*Separate Paths* at Dragon Gallery – Hanoi, Vietnam

*Ethereal Charms* (Solo Show) at Gajah Gallery – **Singapore**

*Reflections of Life* at Exhibition Hall Gallery – **Hong Kong**

2002: *Where the Rivers Meet*; a Vietnamese Cultural Festival – **Luxembourg & Belgium**

*Vietnamese Beauties* (Solo Show) at Thavibu Gallery – Bangkok, **Thailand**

*Contemporary Art from Vietnam Part II* at The Artists' Space – Selangor, **Malaysia**

2004: *The New Adventure of Dinh Quan* (oil paintings) at the Fine Art Museum – Hanoi, Vietnam

*Dinh Quan – Lacquer Paintings* at Thavibu Gallery – Bangkok, **Thailand**

2005: Group Show *Vietnam Now* – Seattle, **USA**

2007: Group Show *Dragon and Butterfly Vietnamese cultural festival* at Museum Victoriano – Rome, **Italy**

2008: Group Show *Hello Morning* – Seoul, **Korea**

2009: *Singing in Green Fields* Solo Show at the Vietnam Fine Art Museum - Hanoi, Vietnam

2010: Group Show of lacquer paintings – Beijing, **China**

2011: *Red River Rising Solo Show* at Thavibu Gallery – Bangkok, **Thailand**

### **Museum Collections**

Vietnam Fine Art Museum

Singapore Art Museum

National Art Gallery of Malaysia



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