

HIDDEN FLOWERS

Nguyen Thi Chau Giang

Curator: Shireen Naziree



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Solo Exhibition by

Nguyen Thi Chau Giang

23 April-14 May, 2011

Curator: Shireen Naziree



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FOREWORD

Jørn Middelborg

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and exhibition HIDDEN FLOWERS by the Vietnamese artist Nguyen Thi Chau Giang (b. 1975). The exhibition takes place in Bangkok on 23 April – 14 May, 2011 and features a series of silk paintings. Silk paintings originated in China, and a handful of Vietnamese artists have adopted the art form to produce compelling contemporary art works.

Nguyen Thi Chau Giang is an established and important artist, renowned for her works on the roles of women in Vietnam's society. Through the years, she has ventured into oil paintings and also done conceptual installation works. She has participated in several international exhibitions and her works are found in the permanent collections of museums.

In HIDDEN FLOWERS, her first solo show since 2004, Giang looks back to her Vietnamese artistic roots as she explores the formal issues of traditional silk painting. In constructing her visual narratives, Giang draws on sources both classic and contemporary as she mediates on the typical Vietnamese feminine archetype. Well versed in feminist theories that impact contemporary Vietnamese society, she resists infiltrating her work with the seduction of poetic embellishments as she circumvents typical romantic narratives commonly associated with Vietnamese silk painting.

Such restraint pays off in a body of work that comprises 16 paintings in which Giang explores the contradictions Vietnamese women endure within Vietnam's advancing contemporary social environment. All of these works explore the fragility of relationships and emotions with a sensitive eye, and they are engaging for that reason. But their formal deftness is also remarkable, as is the richness of their pictorial nuance, which amplifies the psychological interest of the works without drifting into melodrama.

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

I take the opportunity to thank Nguyen Thi Chau Giang for her collaboration and Shireen Naziree for her contribution.

VIETNAMESE ART OF SILK PAINTING

When the *École des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine* was established in Hanoi in by the French colonial government 1925, the main objective was to develop the local craft industry and set new standards for artifacts that would be ultimately exported to France. Before 1925 Vietnamese painters had no particular perceptions of painting as an art form and few had any academic knowledge of the prevailing French School with Paris as the epicentre of the most eclectic period of European painting at the turn of the twentieth century.

The classical content of European painting tradition was introduced by Victor Tardieu and Joseph Inguimberty, the two principle proponents of the institution at the time. They introduced a new artistic language – one that was filled with soul and emotion as much as form and colour. The wave of artists who emerged was filled with fervent idealism, resistance and experimentation that would for years inspire future generations of Vietnamese artists.

While many of the noted artists of the period became adept at painting with oils, silk painting as a fine art form was gaining interest as they discovered that their skills in oil painting could enhance their levels of painting on silk. Amongst the prominent artists who adapted the medium at the time included Nguyen Phan Chanh, Le Pho, Mai Trung Thu and Nguyen Tuong Lan. Characterised by its smoothness, silk allowed these artists to set out articulate lines and shapes that possessed the senses of harmony and rhythm and clear tones synonymous with oriental symbolism. As they absorbed the various schools of European painting, they continued to develop techniques and experiment with pigments as they expanded their own unique Vietnamese narrative. Today within the measureless boundaries of post modernism, silk painting has gained its own momentum as contemporary artists like Nguyen Thi Chau Giang continue to follow the conventional wisdom of the old masters while creating newness within its own boundaries.



Nguyen Phan Chanh | Young Girl
Combing Her Hair (detail), 1933
Gouache on silk | 64 x 49 cm

HIDDEN FLOWERS

Shireen Naziree

In countries where the freedom of expressionism is curtailed, artists most often use philosophical inquiries of romanticism to empower their voices and to communicate how culture, social politics and individuality affect the foundations of being and meaning. Although contemporary art practice in Vietnam has become a by-product of globalisation and retains said elements, it also highlights the best part of globalisation; the ability of Vietnam's artists to retain their own distinct cultural idiosyncrasies and use them to penetrate deep into their cultural history while challenging visible limits and question artistic and social conventions. By doing so they ensure that their voices and culture lives on, regardless of what it looks or feel like in the context of other cultures.

One way or another, Vietnam's younger artists focus sharply on the specifics of place and culture as they acknowledge their identity. Vietnamese creations are often tinged with the gloss of romanticism; yet beneath that smooth surface lurks a fragile reality of a society caught up in the cycle of economic and the ultimate social change as Vietnam edges closer towards the global arena.

Nguyen Thi Chau Giang matured as an artist in the late 1990's – a decade of vibrant economic growth that followed *Doi Moi* – Vietnam's market liberalisation policy in 1986. For artists it was a time heightened by opportunity that allowed them much more room to explore, experiment as well as reflect their past histories. Graduating from the Ho Chi Minh College of Fine Art in 1998, Giang soon garnered attention in both East and West for her work as her artistic career started much earlier as she participated in a number of group exhibitions in Vietnam and in America. Despite a successful foray into multi disciplinary works, Giang never lost her appetite for traditional mark-making on two dimensional supports.

For Giang the personal has always been political as she has given a voice to women since very early in her career. In particular, she explored the status of rural women and as a result reclaimed feminism in her artworks concerning the place of women from a woman's perspective. From this vantage point, the artist developed imageries that took control of representations. She provided a vision of Vietnamese women as independent beings, not because they did extraordinary things, but because they lived lives of everyday realities.

Giang's ongoing interest in the position of women in contemporary Vietnam articulates the fundamental dimension of her work as she questions and articulates the traditional roles, the mindscapes and stereotypes of women in her social environment – while questioning their accessibility and credibility within the present. Though one cannot ignore her initial relationship with oils on canvas; it is the multiplicity of her didactical relationship with her cultural history that has allowed her to gesture backwards into the original spaces of Vietnamese modern art practices that has its beginnings with the formation of the *École des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine* in 1925 when painting on silk was developed as a fine art form. And though Giang's feminist works does not push formal principles aside in favour of ideas, medium and vibrant colours have remained key elements in her work.

In this instance, with her formally embracing the medium of silk painting in 2007, she has reached a threshold that very few of her generation dare to approach. The formality of silk characterised by its tactile delicacy but durable strength typically references the psyche of the Vietnamese woman – quiet and restrained but with determined resilience. As such, sexual and cultural politics enter Giang’s work obliquely, as if unleashed through the act of making anew issues that others may merely choose to reposition. Her recasting of nostalgia that alludes to repressions and denials may be streamlined and minimal but her work is vividly pictorial as it speaks serenely and quietly of dreams and desires.

Giang’s lyrical silk paintings are, at their best, remarkable balancing acts that choreograph expressionism as they conjure imageries that are familiar and alien as well as abject and beautiful. What sets her apart is the manner in which she generally eschews the linear rhythms and low tints of Oriental symbolism, typically associated with silk paintings; instead enhancing its richness; stylised through scholarly harmonious lines and vibrant colours.

In a sense, Giang has built her own history on creativity both as an artist and a writer – thus acquiring her own expressive and intellectual autonomy. Such independence has enabled her to realise the deepness of the creative essence of self understanding. Her *oeuvre* is very much the result of her personal search that started in her earlier attempts as she was trying to identify herself through her art and writing. Initially working predominantly with oils on canvas, Giang combined a medley of symbolism and surrealism into a very personal language that allowed her to romanticise her personal agonies. Even then the seamlessness of her artistic gestures allowed to unravel the imperatives of her creative being, to rebirth herself in order to reflect her inner meditative equilibrium.



Red Self Portrait, 2003
Oil on canvas, 65 x 65 cm
Collection of the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Born and raised in Hanoi, superficially Giang's work recalls the grace of the both rural and urban older generation women of North Vietnam as she understands that their elegance was born from the combination of Vietnam's royal past and French colonial cultural influences. Rendered in rich hues, Giang's silk paintings however have a contemporary transitory feeling that reflects the artist's own East-West experiences. Embracing the smoothness of silk, her paintings are based around a broad and liquid flourish of vibrant colours. On this base her methodology thus represents a wedding of opposites, a melding of spontaneity and precision. Giang's style is also consistent with her desire to bridge the familiar with the unfamiliar and explore the connections between generations, personal and global, happy and melancholy.

Though Giang's reputation for combining complex mark making with layered references had been established much earlier, what distinguishes this body of work from the general perception of silk painting is the artist's greater comfort with her visual vocabulary – a confidence that allows for incisive examination of her subjects and positioning them within the global nature of contemporary art. In another's hands, Giang's subject matter could become sensationalised, falling into the trap of sentimentality. However with her close observation of the nature of her subjects, her sensitive rendering of form and emotion, Giang has created a body of work that is arrestingly beautiful – painted with virtuosity and control that serves to sharpen the impact of the subject matter. Yet even more than this, they are motivated by the artist's deep compassion for the matriarchs of North Vietnam; the characteristics of whom she compares to the openness of the new generation Vietnamese women.

Giang's subject matter is intimate and personal, her visual vocabulary is broad with romanticism as she makes the banal and everyday look another way. Giang sees romantic potential as the essence of the Vietnamese psyche; historically romanticism has been a constant to the Vietnamese even in times of war and hardship. And in contemporary Vietnam, romanticism continues to traffic with the modern and the future as versions of the admiration of romance continue to capture the imagination of artists, writers and poets. And with her own melancholic and iconoclastic relationship to the position of women within her socio-political environment, she regards that choosing to be an artist is in itself a romantic choice.

In HIDDEN FLOWERS Giang has selected her pictorial references from personal experiences as she discusses the innate personal qualities of the women in Diem Village, Bac Ninh Province, north of Hanoi where she once lived and painted being inspired by the its oral history rendered in folk song by the villagers. Diem Village continues to remain relatively untouched by modernity as village women with blackened teeth still dress in traditional farmer pants and shirts in black and ochre with their heads wrapped in scarves .

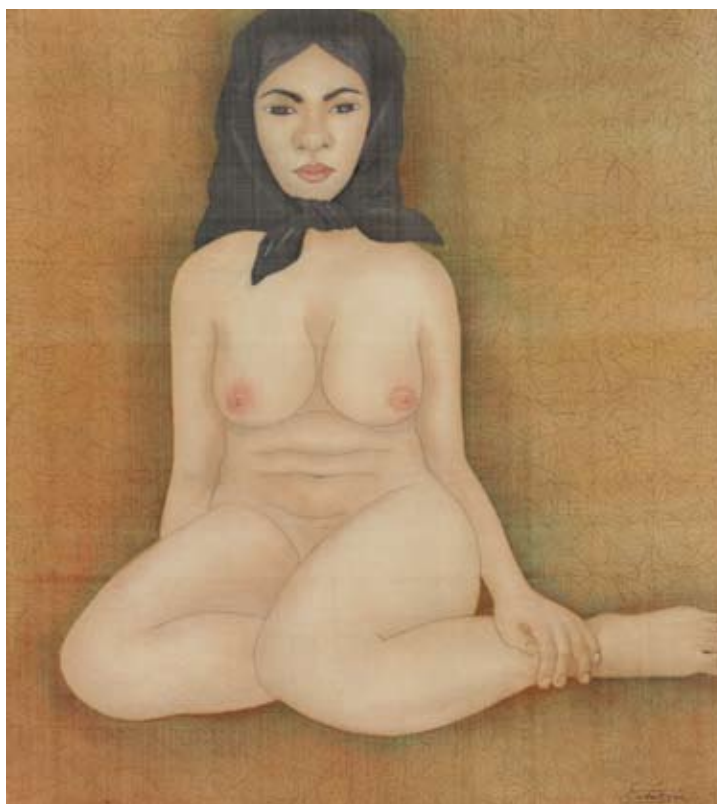
Her embrace of the vibrant quality of colour and silk removes her works from the realms of avant-garde dilemma, making claims instead for the values of a more intimate practice as they become private enquiries and vivid expressions in a fertile conjunction of feminist perception. On an obvious level, Giang's personae wear a near-neutral expression. The intensity of their situation is however provided by gestures and props that form the *mise-en-scene* into which they are inserted to suit the symbolic gravity of the scenario.

In *Nude with Black Scarf* (p. 25) the black cotton scarf typically worn by women in the countryside to protect them from harsh weather, instead serves as a shroud that hides her subjects sadness and emotional secrets. The passive pose of her nude persona determines the course of her life – one that openly displays her physical beauty and fortitude despite a life of hardship. In another painting *Beauty in Sadness* (p. 27) the scarf represents an

extension of the human spirit; it often provides a strong and positive exterior that belies sadness and uncertainty of troubled lives – weaknesses that these forthright women do not want to reveal. On another level, the subject's hand gesture touching her shoulder and her downward gaze suggests hidden meanings.

Giang has always been a pilgrim of intensity as her subjects inhabit a pictorial space that presents itself to sense embodied intelligence. *Two Faces* (p. 26) is such a translation whereby she has translated the complexities of the feminist mindscape that constantly battles paradoxes of selfishness and selflessness. Once again it is the manner in which the scarves are styled around their heads and the figurative mannerisms are the composites of the negative and positives sides to women's personalities.

But it is Giang's embrace of colour and domesticated familiarity that allows her to discuss the power of these women. *Two Generations* (p. 14) resembles the formality of a family portrait. However the vibrant red of the child's *Ao Dai* enhances her joyfulness as she looks out to the future; the expressionism of the grandmother spells hardship



Nude with Black Scarf



Two Generations

and difficulties but the most capturing is the protective manner in which she holds the child's hand. Together these forms are intended to work as a grammar of the artist's vocabulary. Similarly humanizing is *Mother and Son* (p. 20) as Giang compares a mother's endless love for her child with the fading beauty of flowers.

In many of her works Giang's subjects appear to gaze directly to the viewer. This manner of rendering her subjects draws attention to what might be going on beneath the pigment. *Green Apples* (p. 18) for example represents the freshness of youth as Giang uses apples, a traditional fruit of spring and summer as a metaphor. The simple garment suggests that she is a girl from the countryside and her relaxed posture gestures to the end of a working day. In contrast *Winter* (p. 19) and *The Red Bench* (p. 28) resurrect moments of loneliness as the works embody beauty and romance in two senses: "The romance of sadness and the quiet beauty of an ordinary Vietnamese girl, her downward gaze melancholic in *Winter*. In *The Red Bench* Giang ponders the pain of loneliness and hopelessness women often encounter as they explore questions relating to their identity within a patriarchal society. The double sided painting allows for complex readings and technically is a modernist approach to silk painting, the formality of which complements the conceptual in Giang's work.

Giang's art is one that is offhandedly elegant and airy compositional instinct, but mostly of a deftly judged voice as her art is a constant reminder of the elusiveness of beauty. In both *The Distance of Beauty* (p. 21) and *Reflections of Youth* (p. 22) Giang in a manner suggests a biographical unity and yet depart sufficiently from one another. In *The Distance of Beauty* the older women strategically placed in the background remember their younger selves while the younger women imagine their future.

“Physical beauty fades with time - but the beauty of the soul is eternal” Giang has stated. On a literal level she likens the purity and beauty of rural women to the beauty of a lotus; with the beautiful flowers thriving in mud - the lotus is regarded the ultimate symbolism of the immortality of oriental beauty. *At the Lotus Pond* (p. 24) and *The Prime of Beauty* (p. 23) offer the possibility of such representation as it is about creating a concrete connection between social reality and traditional representation as it remains a common social occurrence for village women to congregate and share stories. Giang understands that it is such camaraderie that lends substance and sensibility to these women’s stature. *Story of Three Girls* (p. 13) is a pictorial space that is annotated with a language that dictates the formulation of this world as it represents a framework of such sensibilities.



The Prime of Beauty

All the works in HIDDEN FLOWERS relate to fragile connections between tradition and the potential of feminist change. While we understand that Giang has a particularly intimate connection to tradition and that such creations sometimes present a gloss of normalcy, yet beneath that smooth surface lurks the reality of a society caught up in the cycle of rapid socio-economic change. It is important to note that such activism and has helped achieve a degree of equity amongst younger Vietnamese women – a shift away from Vietnam’s traditional Confucian ideology.

Such changes is also allowing for social boundaries to be blurred. Vietnam’s traditional dress, *Ao Dai* has traditionally functioned as a carrier of identity as in *Spring Blossoms* (p. 15). The set of two figures represent the changing world of modern Vietnam as Giang inscribes contrasts in appearances and gestures. *Red Blossoms* (p. 16), features a young woman adorned in traditional attire but she may be hiding the true essence of her humanity. That essence could possibly be approached through a deeper world of the power of social freedom. *Hidden Flower* (p. 17) is another elegant representation of such contradictions and a pictorial representation of current feminist agency in Vietnam. Giang’s paintings are engaging as she pushes the cultural clash between tradition and change with an eclectic arrangement of imagery with the risk of being viewed as purely literal. They are arrestingly beautiful – painted with a virtuosity and control that serves to sharpen the impact of the dramatic subject matter - yet even more than this, they are motivated by Giang’s deep compassion for the human condition.



A Story of Three Girls, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 116 x 78 cm



Two Generations, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 117 x 78 cm



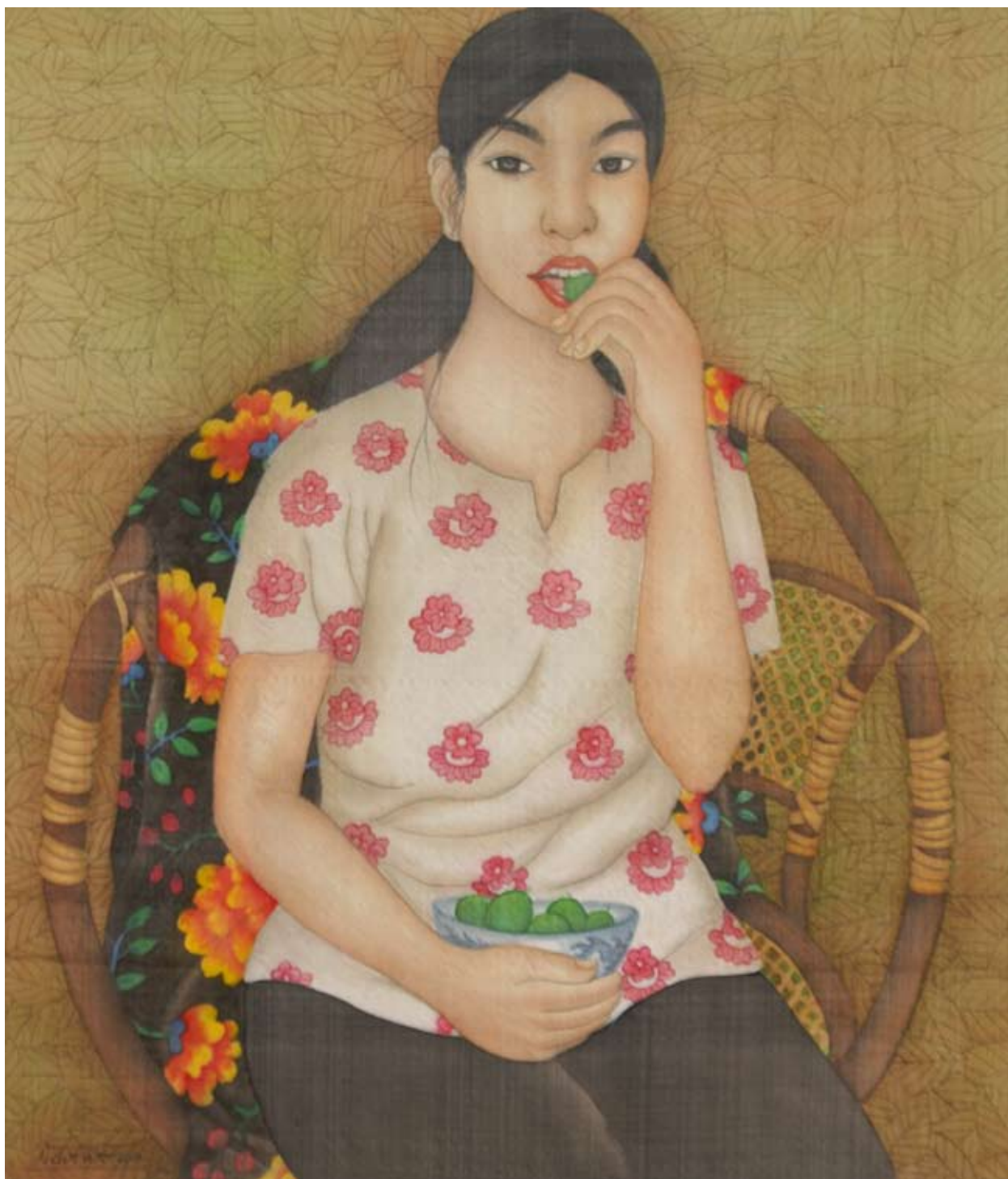
Spring Blossoms, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 88 x 74 cm



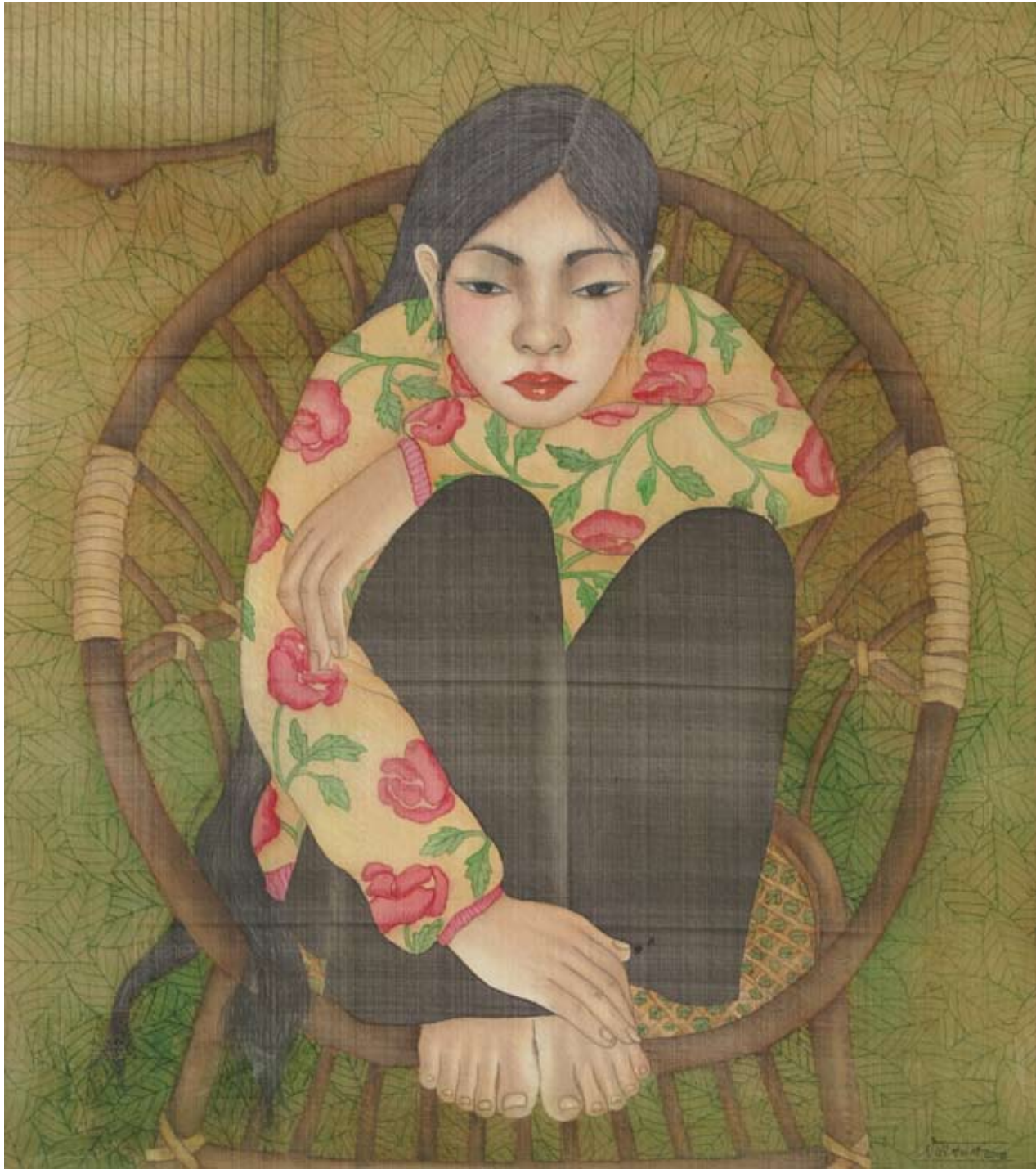
Red Blossoms, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 88 x 70 cm



Hidden Flower, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 88 x 64 cm



Green Apples, 2010 | Pigment on silk | 88 x 75 cm



Winter, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 88 x 78 cm



Mother and Son, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 117 x 78 cm



The Distance of Beauty, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 116 x 78 cm



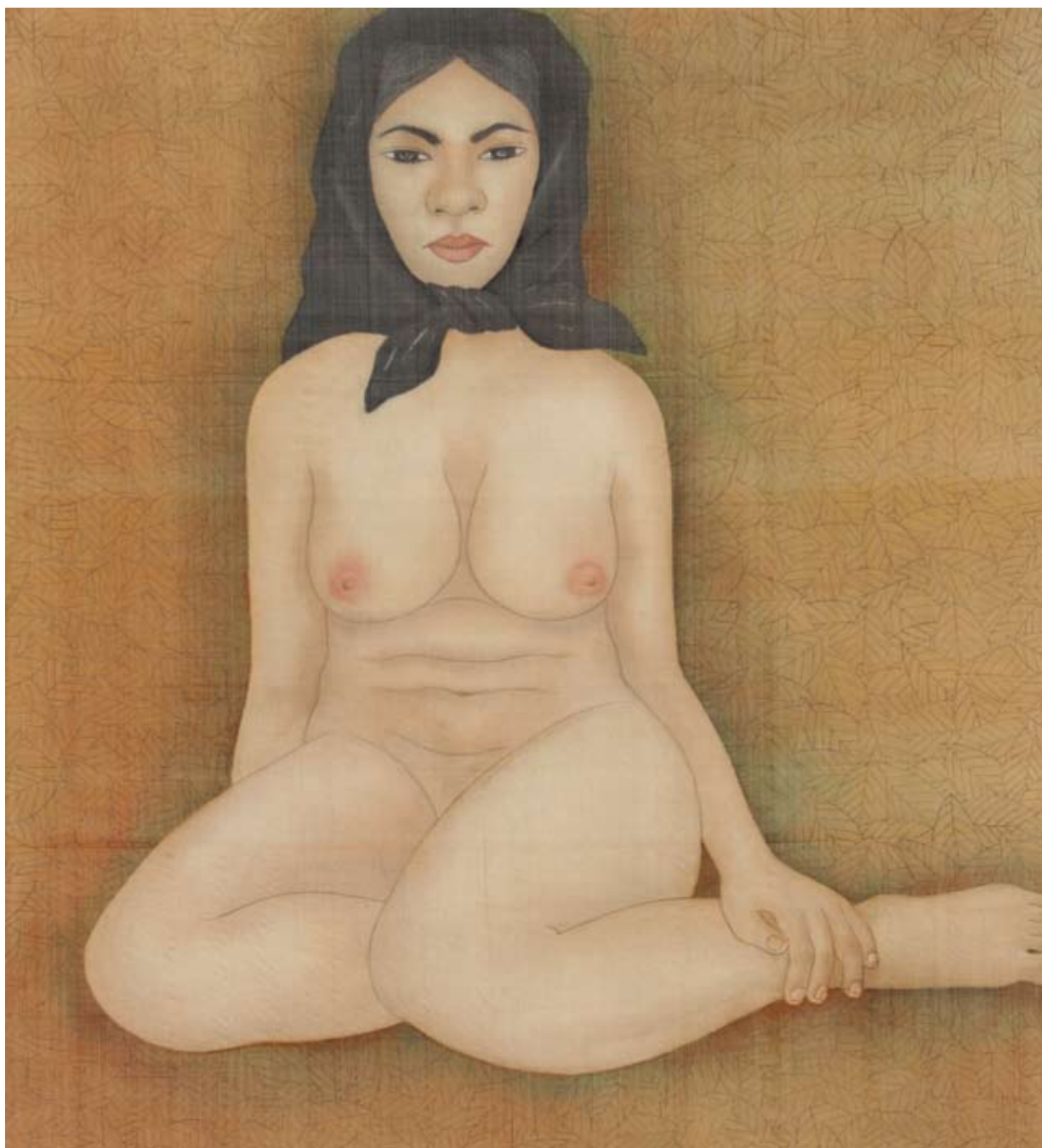
Reflections of Youth, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 116 x 78 cm



The prime of Beauty, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 146 x 78 cm



At the Lotus Pond, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 88 x 78 cm



Nude with Black Scarf, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 87 x 78 cm



Two Faces, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 106 x 78 cm



Beauty in Sadness, 2010 | Pigments on silk | 88 x 77 cm



The Red Bench, 2009 | Pigments on silk | 120 x 80 cm

CHRONOLOGY



Nguyen Thi Chau Giang

Born 1975 in Hanoi

Bachelor of Fine Art (painting) from the Ho Chi Minh City College of Fine Arts, 1998

Nguyen Thi Chau Giang was born in 1975 in Hanoi and moved to Ho Chi Minh City with her family when she was eight years old. As a child her artistic talents were not solely confined to the visual arts but also to writing, and she had her first short story published when she was eight years old. To date she has had much of her short stories published, which alongside her career as a visual artist has profiled her as one of Vietnam's most profiled new generation artists. She was twice selected, in 1997 and 1999, as "One of the Top Ten Young Artists of Ho Chi Minh City". After her graduation she spent a further four months on an art scholarship in 2001 at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. In 2004, Giang was a Resident Artist recipient of the CAVE Organisation in New York.

Selected Art Exhibitions

- 1995 *National Art Exhibition* - Hanoi
- 1996 *Women Beyond Borders* - **USA**
- 1997 *Old Villages*: Solo show at the Majestic Hotel - Ho Chi Minh City
- 1998 *Who Am I*: installation together with a French artist - Ho Chi Minh City
- 1999 *4 Young Artists* at Blue Gallery - Danang
- *Weather Report* – the **Netherlands**
 - *Womanifesto II*: Installation and performance - Bangkok, **Thailand**
- 2000 *Text and Subtext* – in Singapore, Australia, European, American and Asian countries
- *Peace* - Seoul, **Korea**
- 2001 *Faces Come from Future*: Solo show at the Moco Gallery - Vietnam
- *Jeunes Regards* - Hanoi
 - *The End of Growth* by Heinrich Boell Foundation - Chiangmai, **Thailand & Germany**
 - *Asian Contemporary Art* - London, **United Kingdom**
- 2003 *My Beauty in Love*: Solo show at Art Vietnam Gallery, Hanoi
- *Asian Art Now* - Seoul, **Korea**
- 2004 *Return to Love*: Solo show at Columbia University - NYC, **USA**
- *A Dream in my day*: Solo show at Cave Gallery - Brooklyn, **USA**
 - *Identities vs Globalization* by Heinrich Boell Foundation - Chiang Mai, **Thailand** and Dahlem Museum – Berlin, **Germany**

2008: 999 at Art Vietnam Gallery - Hanoi
- *Contemporary Vietnamese Art* at the Singapore Art Museum - **Singapore**

2007-9 *Changing Identity: Recent works by women artists from Vietnam:*
Kennesaw State University Art Galleries, Kennesaw, Georgia; Trammell
& Margaret Crow Collection of Asian Art, Dallas, Texas; Stedman Art
Gallery, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ; Utah Museum of Fine Arts,
Salt Lake City; Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, University of
Minnesota - **USA**
- *Five Changing Identities: Vietnamese Women of Today* at Fielding Lecht Gallery -
Austin, **USA**

2011 – *Hidden Flowers: Solo show* at Thavibu Gallery - Bangkok, **Thailand**

Museum Collections

Singapore Art Museum
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



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