



THERE IS NO BOX

Bui Thanh Tam

THERE IS NO BOX

Solo Exhibition by

Bui Thanh Tam

25 April – 23 May, 2015



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FOREWORD

Jørn Middelborg

Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and exhibition, **THERE IS NO BOX** with new oil paintings by the Vietnamese artist Bui Thanh Tam. The exhibition takes place in Bangkok, Thailand, on 25 April – 23 May 2015.

Bui Thanh Tam in his paintings explores contemporary society from different angles. Vietnam is a conservative society as in most of Southeast Asia, and changing rapidly. The women in his paintings often serve as symbols and may be viewed as having non-traditional Vietnamese values. The artist questions the role of women in Vietnam's society, the development of its contemporary society and also how the current society can be seen as chaotic, especially for its youth.

The artist says: "This series of paintings was created when Vietnam was in transition. The halfhearted communist regime has been on its path to change and integrate into the wider world. This sudden change without orientation makes the human psyche overwhelmed, confused and disoriented. The result is that society often develops conflicts between parts of Vietnamese culture that are Eastern and parts that have Western influences."

Bui Thanh Tam is 36 years old and one of Vietnam's most important young artists. He graduated from the Hanoi Institute of Fine Art in 2009 and has taken part in international exhibitions in Hong Kong, Netherlands, Malaysia and China, as well as in Vietnam. This is his first exhibition in Thailand.

I take this opportunity to thank Bui Thanh Tam for his collaboration, the curator/critic Nguyen Nhu Huy for contributing the essay, Nguyen Thu Hang for her assistance and Ralph Kiggell for checking the language.

Some Thoughts on Bui Thanh Tam's Paintings

Nguyen Nhu Huy

Curator and Art Critic

The Path of Vietnamese Art as a Politicized Practice

The narrative of Vietnam's fine art may be considered under the story of politicizing art.

When the French colonial government established Les Beaux-Arts d'Indochine in Vietnam in 1925, the terminology "fine art" lost some of the pure meaning by which it had been understood in the Western world. Here, within the social and cultural environment of an agrarian country [that on the one hand, in the official social and cultural context was influenced strongly by Confucianism, a theory that downgrades all art-related careers, and that on the other hand, in the underground social and cultural context was influenced by a folklore cultural spirit that has no concept of author and that uses art practice only with ritualistic and religious purpose] – the concept of Fine Art became political⁽¹⁾ as it was introduced not only as a new technique for making art, but also as a new concept for defining the role of art and artist in society.⁽²⁾

The second wave of politicizing art in Vietnam was among Vietnamese intellectuals and artists in the 1930s and was presented in the ideological polemic between two viewpoints: "art for art's sake" and "art for the sake of human life". This was the first time that a Marxist concept of art and culture publicly attacked the romanticized concept of art.

In this polemic, a romanticized concept of poetry and poets is represented by Xuan Dieu, the king of modern love poetry, in his poem "Cam xúc" (Feeling), some lines of which can be translated approximately as:

*Being the poet means singing lullaby with the wind
Dreaming to the moon
Floating with the cloud
Or sharing feelings with a thousand loves*

It was attacked by Truong Chinh, later general secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party, in his parody “Là thi sy” (Being a Poet), the lines of which can be translated approximately as:
Being a poet means singing to celebrate

*The global struggle
Against the cruel invaders in five continents
Means standing up and waving the democratic flag in the globe
And using the pen as the weapon to make revolution
Making each of line of poem as bullets and bombs to
Destroy the power^{(3) (4)}*

It is in view of the above that I would like to discuss the paintings of Bui Thanh Tam as a third wave of politicizing art in Vietnam.

The Paintings of Bui Thanh Tam

Those who are familiar with Chinese contemporary art of the 1990s may not be strangers to the Gaudy Art movement, one of three popular art movements of that time (the two others are Cynical Realism and Political Pop). The term Gaudy Art was coined by the art critic Li Xiangting for artists who appropriated bright folk art aesthetics in combination with issues of commodity culture.⁽⁵⁾

The paintings of Bui Thanh Tam display bright, pure colors whose harmony reminds us of the five-color system of Dong Ho folk paintings,⁽⁶⁾ and the intent has been clearly mentioned by the artist: “It is a parody of the absurd and ridiculous, at times sad, things that are happening in my contemporary society.” And the reason for this parody is that the artist “is fascinated by the people and their lust for luxury and appearance, for material things, for consumerism and conformity. They forget where they are from, they forget their traditions, their culture and they seem to assimilate only those aspects that make them appear rich and fabulous, trendy and fashionable and enviable.”⁽⁷⁾

Bearing in mind these two factors in his paintings, a relation between Bui Thanh Tam’s art and the Gaudy Art movement of Chinese artists of the 1990s becomes apparent. Two of these factors also make Bui Thanh Tam’s art “political”: they are the direct “texts” of Vietnam’s current social and cultural changes.

To me, the paintings reflect social and cultural issues as Bui Thanh Tam displays a two-layered change in the development of Vietnamese paintings. The first layer: by his direct and parodic view of Vietnam's reality, Tam committedly challenges the traditional painting style which is either semi-abstract (for example, Dang Xuan Hoa's works) or kitsch (for example, Hong Viet Dung or Nguyen Thanh Binh's works), the style of the famous Vietnamese painters of the 1990s. In this regard, Bui Thanh Tam paintings are political.

However, if the politicizing of art in Vietnam before was either politically modernist (in colonial times), or ideological (the polemic on art for art's sake or art for human life's sake of the 1930s, or the Intellectual Dissidence of the 1950s: The *Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm* Affair in the 1950s), the politicizing of art by Bui Thanh Tam is more complicated.

Depicted in his paintings are female figures in different poses and costumes from which we seem able to portray the current face of Vietnam, one that is globalized and illustrates the conflicts between new and old values. In this conflict, no social entity – aesthetic, political, or cultural – can be safe from each other. Traditional values are challenged by modern ones, Vietnamese-ness is challenged by global-ness, and the old is challenged by the new, etc. While all of these entities challenge each other on the surface, they are the very reason for the existence of each other as the fundament of society. In fact, they are two sides of the same chaotic movement. Understood in this way, we can see that what the painter depicts is not some kind of accusation of the new values or the defense of the old values, but only the neutral presentation – with his cold eyes – the unprecedented transition of Vietnam's current society.

In an article published in the online magazine *www.widewalls.ch*, the author Lorenzo Pereira thinks that Bui Thanh Tam's paintings also question the role of the female in Vietnam society. I totally agree with this observation. From an intertextual perspective, Bui Thanh Tam's paintings of female figures remind us of a Vietnamese traditional format for painting: *Tranh To Nu* (painting of beautiful ladies). To summarize, this traditional format of painting is part of the *Hàng Trong* style of painting, which always depicts four female figures in four separate paintings (*Tu bình*). These four figures are always depicted standing and playing different traditional music instruments to display the peaceful and gentle beauty and demeanor of the traditional Vietnamese woman.

With an intertextual context in mind, the audiences will associate Tam's paintings with traditional *Tranh To Nu*. Rather than depicting Vietnamese ladies standing in the traditional poses with musical instruments in their hands as in *Tranh To Nu*, Bui Thanh Tam depicts them in more vulgar

poses such as standing with legs stretched wide apart or lying on the floor with cigarettes or glasses of wine in their hands. Associating Bui Thanh Tam paintings with *Tranh Tô Nu* opens a more complicated message in Tam's paintings. Once again, the painter does not try to attack the new ways or defend the old ways, he only tries to present two different sides of the unprecedented transition.

Conclusion

Bui Thanh Tam belongs to the fourth generation of Vietnamese artists⁽⁸⁾ who emerged after the 1990s and who still believe in Painting – not in terms of its ability to imitate or make something beautiful, but as being of critical/political essence.

From this perspective, the influence of Gaudy Art on his art is understandable. However, may I make one thing clear: the influence mentioned here is not the copying of style, which is less creative and which should not be promoted, but a discursive one that arises from the similarities in the political, cultural and social frameworks of Vietnam and China as they open up to the Western world and its influences, and because they provide many similar critical/political issues for artists in both countries.

It is the intertextual view of these two practices, Gaudy Art in China of the 1990s, and the political paintings of young Vietnamese artists of the 2010s that will give us a deeper understanding not only about art development itself, but also about the political, social and cultural space in the two countries, which contain many conflicts of values and which, because of this, also provide many possibilities and new visions.

1. Political modernity is something that is imposed on non-Western nations by Western institutions. Read further in "Provincializing Europe", D. Chakrabarty, published by Princeton University Press (2007).

2. In a very interesting article, Phoebe Scott, curator at Singapore National Gallery, wrote about the first time the role of the artist in society was discussed in official magazines in Vietnam in the 1930s. This role was discriminated from two other roles: intellectual and craftsman. "Châm biem các họa sĩ châm biem mỹ thuật", Phoebe Scott, Tạp chí nghiên cứu mỹ thuật (April, 2008).

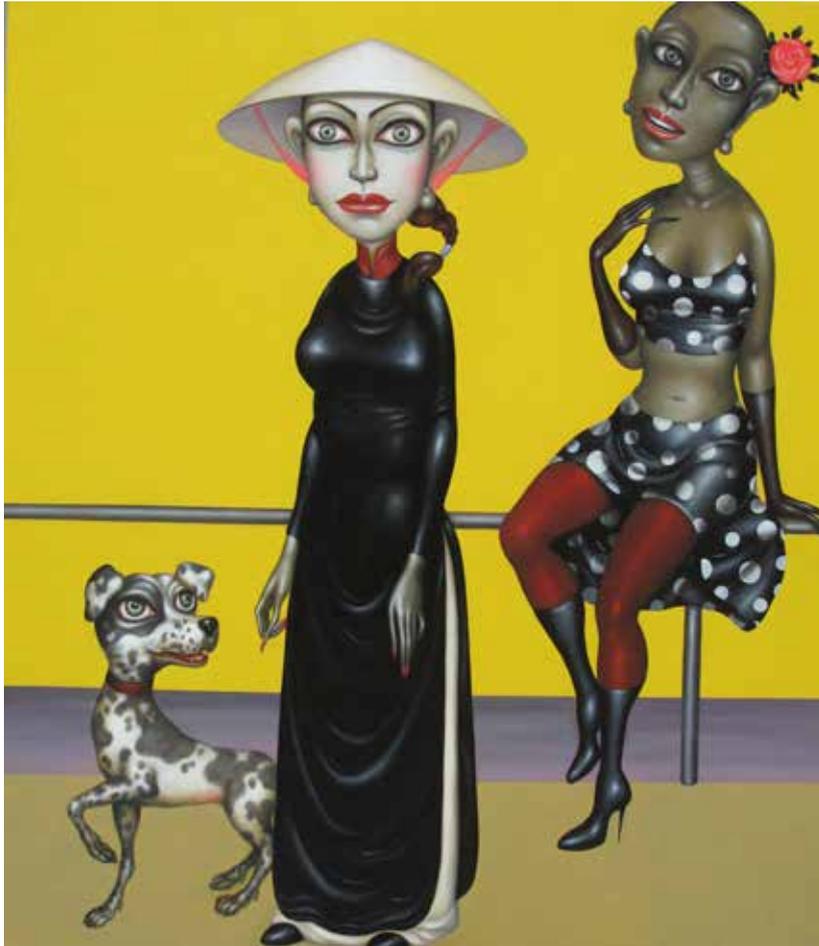
3. Read further in the article "Nhìn lại Hai Trieu và cuộc tranh luận nghệ thuật năm 1936–1939 ở Việt Nam" ("Looking back at Hai Trieu and the polemic of art in 1936–1939", published in the blog of literary critic Trần Đình Sử: <https://trandinh-su.wordpress.com/2014/09/29/nhin-lai-cuoc-tranh-luan-nghe-thuat-cua-hai-trieu-nhan-60-nam-mat-cua-ong/>).

4. Read further in the series (document of Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm movement) on Talawas website: <http://www.talawas.org/?cat=314>
5. "Oh La La Kitch". Liao, Wen and Li, Xianting, Wuhan. Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House (1999).
6. "...Dong Ho artisans use only five colors in their pictures but the colors are strong and lively..." (quote from the introduction of Dong Ho Wood Block Painting Village from the website: <http://www.vktour.com>).
7. From a private document provided by painter Bui Thanh Tam.
8. The first generation includes the Gang of Five (Đặng Xuân Hoà, Hồng Việt Dũng, Hà Trí Hieu, Trần Lương, Phạm Quang Vinh); the second generation includes the painter Lê Quang Hà; the third generation includes the painters Hà Mạnh Thang, Phạm Huy Thông, Lê Kinh Tài.

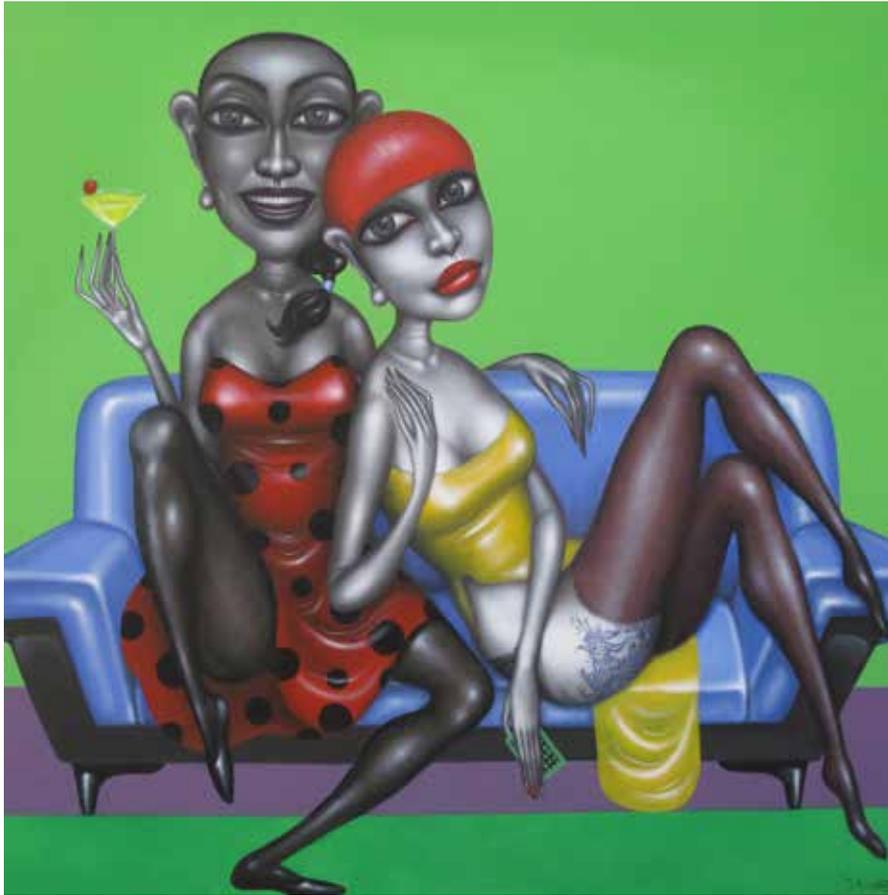
PLATES



Confusion, 2014 | Oil on canvas | 80 x 80 cm



Culture Clash, 2014 | Oil on canvas | 128 x 145 cm



Tipsy Time, 2014 | Oil on canvas | 120 x 120 cm



Temptation, 2014 | Oil on canvas | 130 x 120 cm



Merlot and My Pets, 2015 | Oil on canvas | 120 x 123 cm



Girly Gossip, 2014 | Oil on canvas | 130 x 120 cm



Playing Games, 2014 | Oil on canvas | 120 x 120 cm



Forbidden Fruit, 2014 | Oil on canvas | 130 x 120 cm



Buddha and Me, 2014 | Oil on canvas | 145 x 128 cm



Drunken Gals, 2015 | Oil on canvas | 145 x 155 cm



Passion, 2015 | Oil on canvas | 145 x 128 cm



Lady in Black, 2014 | Oil on canvas | 180 x 120 cm



What are you looking at?, 2015 | Oil on canvas | 80 x 80 cm

CHRONOLOGY



BUI THANH TAM

1979: Born in Thai Binh, Vietnam

2009: Graduated from Vietnam Fine Arts University

Selected Art Exhibitions

Solo Exhibitions

2015 *There Is No Box* at Thavibu Gallery – Bangkok, **Thailand**

2012 *Crazy People* at Craig Thomas Gallery – Ho Chi Minh City

2010 *Monalisa* at Viet Art Center – Hanoi

Group Exhibitions

- 2014 *Vietnam's Changing Society* at Canvas International – Amsterdam, the **Netherlands**
Group Show at Asia Contemporary Art – **Hong Kong**
- 2013 Group Show at Asia Contemporary Art – **Hong Kong**
Group Show at Art Expo – Kuala Lumpur, **Malaysia**
- 2012 *Parcours* at Craig Thomas Gallery – Ho Chi Minh City
- 2011 National Young Artist Festival – Hanoi
Hello Tuan, Hello Tam at Viet Art Center – Hanoi
- 2010 *National Fine Arts Exhibition* at Vietnam Exhibition Center of Culture and Arts – Hanoi
- 2008 International Fine Art Exhibition – Van Nam City, **China**
- 2007 *Beijing – Vietnam Fine Art Exhibition* at Beijing Arts Academy – Beijing, **China**
Red River Delta at Korean Cultural Center – Hanoi
- 2004–09 *National Fine Art Exhibitions* at the Military Museum – Hanoi



B1G1 - Thavibu Gallery has partnered with Buy 1 Give 1, which implies that when you buy an artwork from Thavibu Gallery you will automatically give a donation to a charity in the B1G1 network. Donation from one painting purchased provides one blind person with accommodation and shelter for one month. www.b1g1.com



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